

# Fire highlights harsh lives of workers

AP, Dhaka

**C**LOTHING is king in Bangladesh, a country that exports more garments than any other in the world except China. It is responsible for four out of every five export dollars and has turned factory owners into members of parliament and leaders of sports clubs.

That strength has often been turned against the workers in those factories, especially those who complain about poor working conditions and pay that can be less than \$40 a month. A law-enforcement agency called the Industrial Police is specifically assigned to deal with unrest in factories, and labour activists accuse government forces of killing one of their leaders. Employees are barred by law from forming trade unions, even though Bangladesh allows workers in other industries to unionise.

Workers hope that could change following the industry's latest tragedy, a fire Saturday that killed more than 100 people at a factory that made T-shirts and polo shirts for Wal-Mart and other retailers around the world. But they have their doubts.

"The owners must treat the workers with respect. They should care about their lives and they must keep in mind that they are human beings. They have families, parents and children," said Nazma Akhter, president of Combined Garment Workers Federation. "Is there anybody to really pay any heed to our words?"

There have been many garment-factory fires in Bangladesh -- since 2006, more than 300 people have died. But Saturday's was by far the deadliest, and has drawn interna-



People look at a one-day closure notice at the factory gate of Irish Fashion Ltd in Zirabo, Ashulia yesterday. All garment factories remained closed yesterday on the occasion of a national mourning day declared by the government after more than 100 workers died in a factory fire in Ashulia on Saturday night.

tional attention to labour practices as the government tries to encourage Western countries and companies to expand their relationships here.

The Tazreen Fashions factory had no emergency exit, and workers trying to flee found the main exit locked. Fire extinguishers were left unused, either because they didn't work or workers didn't know how to use them. One survivor said that after the fire alarm went off, managers told workers to get back to work.

In an interview published Tuesday in Dhaka's Daily Star newspaper, the managing director of Tazreen Fashions expressed concern -- about possibly losing foreign buyers. "I'm

concerned that my business with them will be hampered," said Delwar Hossain. But there was no mention in the article of concern for victims or their families.

Bangladesh's \$20 billion-a-year garment industry accounts for 80 percent of its total export earnings and contributes a major share of the country's \$110 billion GDP. This from an export market created only in 1978, with a consignment for 10,000 men's shirts.

By 1982, the country had 47 readymade garment factories. In three years the number rose to 587. Now it has more than 4,000.

The factory owners are a power-

ful group, holding parliamentary posts in both major parties. The head of the prominent Dhaka sports club Mohamedan is in the business; so is a former president of the national cricket board.

An important reason for their success is cheap labour. Almost a third of the South Asian country of 150 million lives in extreme poverty.

The minimum wage for a garment worker is 3,000 takas (\$38) a month, after being nearly doubled this year following violent protests by workers. According to the World Bank, the per capita income in Bangladesh was about \$64 a month in 2011.

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## French annual gala held at Radisson

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

**T**HE France Bangladesh Chamber of Commerce and Industry organised the French annual gala on Saturday at Radisson Water Garden Hotel in Dhaka.

The gala evening, with spell-binding cultural performances from both France and Bangladesh followed by dinner with French menu and the chic ambience of the evening, was well appreciated by the business community and the invited guests.

It was attended by French Ambassador Michel Trinquier and the president of the chamber, Humayun Rashid, among other dignitaries of the business community.

The chamber was among the first joint European chambers of commerce in Bangladesh. It was formed 15 years ago with 40 members and today they have 120 members.

The main objective of the chamber is to enhance trade and com-

merce between France and Bangladesh by providing services to both French and Bangladeshi companies as facilitator.

"I feel privileged and honoured to attend for the first time, this traditional 'Soirée de Gala' organised by the France Bangladesh Chamber of Commerce and Industry," said Trinquier.

The ambassador also said, from early next year, the chamber will be called upon to take on a new role.

After the reorganisation of the French trade and commercial services in the region, which are currently based in New Delhi, this chamber will become the natural partner, correspondent and consultant of these services in Bangladesh, Trinquier said.

This new role will entail an increased workload and more responsibilities on which the chamber will be precisely briefed by the Director of the French regional trade promotion office himself when he visits Dhaka next month.

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A dance drama, Fireflies, was performed in the second half of the cultural evening.

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