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Hunt for cheap garments leads to workers' plight German envoy stresses safety

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, Ctg

German Ambassador Albrecht Conze yesterday blamed the sufferings of readymade garment workers partly on the international buyers' tendency to get products at excessively cheap rates.

The German media covered the fire tragedy at Tazreen Fashions in Ashulia extensively, he said. "Our first criticism in Germany is against ourselves."

"First culprits are the German customers who want a pair of jeans for 5 euros, which is Tk 500. You cannot have a pair of jeans without someone suffering down the line, some workers in bad condition," Conze said quoting the German media.

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Fire survivors tell stories of utter neglect

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

The officials of Tazreen Fashions Ltd in Ashulia, where more than 100 workers died in a fire on Saturday night, played music to suppress the sound of the fire alarm, a survivor alleged at a discussion yesterday.

Maria Akhtar, who miraculously survived the inferno, said the fire alarm rang at 6:50pm and the workers on the sixth floor ran to the staircases for exit.

But the production manager on duty asked them to go back to work, saying there was no danger. They later managed a makeshift bamboo bridge to escape to a nearby building with life risk, she said.

The discussion on how to stop deaths in fire at garment factories was organised by the Prothom Alo at its office in the city.

Maria said Delwar Hossain, the owner, visited the factory 15 minutes before the raging fire started to engulf the eight-storey factory building.



Discussions, including the survivors of Saturday's factory inferno, attend a roundtable on how to stop deaths in fire at garment factories, organised by the Prothom Alo at its office in Dhaka yesterday.

Normally, workers are asked to remain disciplined and well-clad prior to the owner's visit but that day he came silently, Maria said.

Syed Ashraf Zaman Kallol, another survivor who worked on

the fifth floor, said production managers Dulal and Ranju and factory manager Razzaq all obstructed the workers' escape immediately after the alarm rang.

"There would have not been such

phenomenal losses of lives had they allowed us to leave the factory," said Kallol, who later escaped, breaking open a fourth-floor window, to the nearby building.

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Helpline for Tazreen victims

STAR BUSINESS DESK

The workers injured in a fire at Tazreen Fashions in Ashulia may contact Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association.

BGMEA urged them to call its additional secretary, Md Zaglul Hayder, on 01817044677 or 8140310 (hunting) to get any help regarding their treatment.

BGMEA will bear all treatment costs for the injured workers, it said in a statement yesterday. The workers will be paid their outstanding salaries on December 1.

The workers and relatives of the victims were also urged to contact nearby garment factories where they will be given jobs on a priority basis.

Power crisis to end by 2017: Muhith

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

The power and energy crisis will be solved by 2017 thanks to the various steps taken by the government, Finance Minister AMA Muhith said yesterday.

Furthermore, Muhith signalled that a mechanism would be introduced that would adjust gasoline prices in line with the international market price automatically.

"We are implementing a number of projects for power and energy sector," said Muhith, adding efforts are underway to diversify energy production and increase power supply from renewable sources.

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Two new banks get more time to submit documents

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

Bangladesh Bank (BB) has extended the deadline for submitting supporting documents for licence application for NRB Global Bank and Madhumati Bank.

Madhumati Bank's deadline has been extended to March 31 of next year, while NRB Global Bank's to December 31 this year, by the BB board upon appeal from the sponsors of the two proposed banks.

In April, BB gave the go-ahead to nine new private banks, all linked with either lawmakers of the ruling Awami League or Jatiya Party or influential persons, despite opposition from different quarters.

Awami League lawmaker Sheikh Fazle Noor Taposh is a sponsor of Madhumati Bank, while Nizam Chowdhury, an expatriate Bangladeshi, is the chairman of the proposed NRB Global Bank.

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Break-up with Walmart may send Tazreen to bankruptcy BGMEA president says the retailer's decision to end ties with the garment maker is deceitful

REFAYET ULLAH MIRDHA

The Walmart's decision of cutting ties with Bangladeshi garment supplier Tazreen Fashions is 'deceitful', said BGMEA President Shafiul Islam Mohiuddin yesterday.

Such a unilateral decision might push the garment maker to bankruptcy, he said.

The US retail giant terminated its relationship with Tazreen after at least 111 workers were killed in a deadly fire in the garment maker's factory in Ashulia on Saturday night, mainly due to lax safety measures.

"The Walmart met neither the BGMEA leaders nor the government high-ups, and took the decision unilaterally. It is a deceitful one," Mohiuddin told The Daily Star by phone.

"But I hope the orders placed by Walmart with other factories in Bangladesh will not be affected for cutting the ties with the affected Tazreen Fashions," he said.

Being one of the topmost buyers, Walmart purchases more than \$1 billion worth of garment items from Bangladesh every year.

Mohiuddin said Walmart should have taken the decision after an in-depth analysis of the incident.

"We will contact Walmart officials soon to discuss all the related issues,"

said the chief of BGMEA (Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association).

"I heard a senior official of Walmart is in Dhaka now, but did not communicate with us until now," he added.

When contacted, Delwar Hossain, managing director of Tuba Group, the owning company of Tazreen Fashions, said Walmart was yet to communicate with him.

"Recently Tazreen Fashions was in talks with Walmart to become a supplier, but there was not any final agreement yet," Hossain added.

Walmart on Tuesday said Tazreen had been making clothes for the retailer without its knowledge.

In a statement released on Monday, the US retail giant said Tazreen was no longer authorised to produce merchandise for Walmart. "Our thoughts are with the families of the victims of this tragedy."

"A supplier subcontracted work to this factory without authorisation and in direct violation of our policies. Today, we have terminated the relationship with that supplier," the retailer said.

"The fact that this occurred," Walmart said, "is extremely troubling to us, and we will continue to work across the apparel industry to improve fire safety education and training in Bangladesh."

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ADB's \$1b loans for power, stockmarket

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

The Asian Development Bank (ADB) has approved \$1 billion as loans to give a boost to Bangladesh's power supply system and to develop the country's capital market.

The lender will give \$700 million for the power supply system, which will reduce outages and power shortfall.

ADB is expected to sign a deal at the Economic Relations Division today to give \$300 million loan under the Second Capital Market Development Programme.

"Supply shortages are putting a severe strain on businesses and undermining quality of life, with poor communities suffering the most," said Herath Gunatilake, lead energy economist in ADB's South Asia Department.

"Providing more electricity more reliably is absolutely critical for Bangladesh's growth and development."

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Govt still undecided on internet regulation

ABDULLAH MAMUN

With four days to go to the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) conference in Dubai, the government is yet to decide on its stance over the case of monitoring internet usage suggested by some ITU member states.

The proposal, put forward by some countries in Europe, Asia and Africa, would be decided via a voting process at the conference set to take place on December 3 to 14.

Sunil Kanti Bose, chairman of Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (BTRC), said Bangladesh's stand would be taken after consulting with the stakeholders.

"The UN should have an authority on internet," he said, adding that the current internet culture "cannot go at it".

"We want the internet rules to complement the country's laws."

At the Dubai conference where member countries will place their stand, the ITU is supposed to revise the International Telecommunications Regulations.

Bangladesh is a council member of the ITU.

Nazrul Islam Khan, the ICT secretary, said internet regulation is needed to ensure universal access and empowerment of people -- and not to control the internet.

"But constitutional or legal transfor-

mation is not required," he said.

According to a statement of the ITU on July 13, Hamadun Touré, ITU secretary general, asked all member states to hold open consultation as the members have full access to the documents of the conference.

Mustafa Jabbar, the president of Bangladesh Computer Samity, said, officially he did not hear of any consultation initiative on the revision of International Telecommunications Regulations (ITR) that would lead to moderation of internet usage.

He hopes the government will not take any decision on the issue on its own, while adding that some initiatives are needed to prevent misuse of internet.

Abu Saeed Khan, a senior policy fellow of Colombo-based think tank LIRNEasia, said the Bangladesh government has ignored the ITU's directive that instructed it to consult the ITR issues with its citizens.

"Rather, it [the government] has been highly secretive and the nation remains in the dark about the government's standpoint on the issue. Even the ICT ministry is equally unaware about this issue. It is unacceptable and alarming."

Khan urged Sajeeb Ahmed Wazed, the Prime Minister's ICT adviser, to immediately intervene and ensure that Bangladesh does not vote in favour of internet regulation.

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