

# Never again

SUJAUL KHAN

**A**S the clock ticks away tonight, the prospects for the survival of those 600 souls missing at Rana Plaza get dimmer. Let us say never again. Let us treat this as a human tragedy that can be prevented, not a natural one which is beyond our means of control.

The catastrophe of the Spectrum Garments in 2005 was mostly a failure of the building itself. The investigation report conducted by BUET had found that the owner made changes from the design done by the structural engineers. He had made the roof slabs thicker and columns thinner; inducing a sandwich effect.

One pile cap -- a cap of the slender long columns which extend down to the layer of firm soil underground and carries the base of the main columns that carry the load of the floors at the foundation level -- failed owing to faulty construction (rain-water seeped in the pile cap before the concrete settled).

The Tazreen tragedy had its roots in human failure. The workers were trapped in the inferno by gross human negligence. As the fire alarms rang, workers were told by the supervisors that the alarms were not working properly. When all hell broke loose, the situation got out of control. Workers are generally put under lock and key to prevent pilferage. Almost 200 people were roasted alive.

The Rana Plaza mayhem (till now 600 people missing, 350 dead, 1,000 people injured, many maimed for life) is a combination of two failures. One is the failure of the construction of the building, which is due to its design that had been set for five stories but four more had been built.

It was also designed as a commercial building; this is a gross failure of the administration to ensure public safety.

This article aims to highlight two contexts of such calamities:

- Building issues: Safety aspects of buildings and premises; and
- Structural aspects

Most buildings which are used as factories are not designed as RMG factories. They are designed as commercial buildings and rented out.

Factory buildings are designed with a higher factor of safety than commercial buildings. Generally, commercial buildings are designed with a factor of safety of 2. Garment factory buildings are designed with factor of safety between 3 to 5.

The 'live loads' (weight of moving/moveable objects) of storage areas/warehouses are designed with due consideration. The live load of such areas may be up to 5 times more than that of ordinary office buildings. The machines also produce vibrations which are taken into consideration.

**Fire safety:** The garments industry is labour intensive. Provisions are made for emergency egress in case of fire or earthquake. Emergency routes and especially stairs are of crucial importance given the fact that the raw materials are highly flammable.

**Electrical safety:** The electrical systems are designed to adjust to the changing requirements of the production floor. Properly designed electrical systems and proper components are crucial to prevent failure which may lead to fire hazards.



**The government has failed to ensure that the building owners adhere to the approved plans. The local municipality has little power to ensure that the influential elite of the area stick to them. This is true to almost all planning/permission agencies from the capital to the suburbs.**

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The dearth of competent town planners/code enforcers/ inspectors all add to the nexus of undue politicking and corruption. The rescue efforts also show the complete inadequacy of the disaster management agencies. The efforts of the common people show us once again who the real heroes are.

**Administrative systems: Role of the building owners and factory management**

The workers were forced to work on that fatal day despite the cracks which appeared on some columns on the preceding day. The culture of asymmetric impunity prevailed. After the building collapsed the owner was rescued by the local lawmaker himself.

The catastrophes of Spectrum, Phoenix, Tazreen have a common thread: the blanket impunity of the management.

What makes the Rana Plaza tragedy more disturbing is that its owner felt that he could get away with whatever he liked as he is an active member of the ruling party and the fact that in the recent past the owners of Spectrum, Phoenix or Tazreen simply got away with man slaughter.

The owners association of the prized \$13 billion industry, the BGMEA also act with almost similar impu-

nity of the owners of the buildings which failed. The workers simply do not have a voice. Bangladesh is the poster child world of Wal-Mart-economics.

Ensuring factory safety in this context is not an easy task. Yet it must be remembered that the situation in developed countries were essentially the same in the early phases of mass industrialisation.

The fire at the Triangle Shirtwaist factory at New York in 1911 essentially bore the same hallmarks of the Tazreen fire. However what made a difference over the next decade was the activism of the civil society, well intentioned reformist lawmakers, politicians, human rights activists, journalists etc.

The situation in Bangladesh is compounded by the fatalistic nature of the simple minded masses, all too convenient for the ruling elite and owners.

But all is conspicuously not well now. The system is crushing under its own weight. This is not business as usual. This industry is bursting at its seams with dissent. The goose with the golden eggs appears to be quite ill.

This writer would like to place some suggestions which might help to bring some change.

There should be a body comprised of workers and owners and BGMEA to ensure safety in each factory to monitor situations, perform fire safety drills and evacuation procedures once a month in the presence of responsible agencies.

Make all building permits, fire permits, factory permits with plans available online on the agency websites and in the building for public display so all stakeholders especially the users and tenants may see the original number of stories, intended purpose, road widths, setbacks, fire exits etc.

Such transparency will ensure accountability of all parties. The general public may be shown how to understand measured technical drawings by students of engineering and architecture.

Engineers and architects, especially safety experts, must voluntarily check the fire safety and structural integrity in the post construction phase of buildings which were not designed as factories. Equipment for testing structural integrity in the post construction phase is available at BUET and PWD. Such testing equipment may also be provided by the professional trade bodies.

The government planning agencies must devise plans to shift the bulk of the industry into designated industrial zones.

The success of any such measure will depend on how far public awareness and a sense of collective justice challenge the prevailing culture of asymmetric impunity. And in terms of the fate of any alternate course, the less discussed the better.

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# The future is connected

ANASHUA

**A**t the turn of 2011, Sheryl Sandberg, Facebook's chief operating officer, wrote an article for the Economist's special issue of predictions about how the world will be in 2012. It was at a time of revolutions; the Arab spring was sweeping through Middle Eastern countries, and the role of social media in the revolutions was the hot topic.

In the article, Sandberg talked about two things that would be of increased interest in the year to come: Zuckerberg's law of sharing, and the corollary of caring.

Most people probably don't know that Zuckerberg has his own law. It is a social network equivalent to Moore's law about the geometric increase in computing power. Zuckerberg says that every year, the amount of information shared on social networks will double. And this is where the corollary of caring fits in. In Sandberg's words, "corollary of caring asserts that as we increase the amount of social information online we will also increase our response to that information in both words and actions." When we share more news, we care more about what is going on, we react more readily.

In 2013 we see the implications of this law gripping Bangladesh.

February saw the biggest secular youth uprising in recent Bangladesh history at Shahbagh. How it started is unthinkable in a country like Bangladesh, where only 5% of the population has access to the internet. The Shahbagh movement was born online, through some bloggers calling for protests. What started with a small group's protest quickly spread through Facebook. In the days that followed, thousands of people gathered together. A connection had been made, people knew that there were others who cared.

The random person sharing memes all day was suddenly part of it, the middle-aged uncle with the passport sized profile picture was part of it, and they all reached out together.

For those who thought that was the end of it, there was more to come. Just a month after the youth surprised everyone with their sudden awakening, Baridhara Housing Society surprised the nation by banning rickshaw-pullers from wearing *lungis* inside Baridhara.

The news reached the national papers, everyone was outraged. But this time, instead of forgetting about it, the Facebook page with more than 100,000 likes, Moja Loss, created an event where everyone would march to Baridhara Park wearing a *lungi*.



It was a simple act organised online, but the response was strong. Most of the protesters themselves would not wear a *lungi* at home, but what they all shared was the same concern for human rights. The high court eventually issued an order to the Baridhara Housing Society asking them to justify their reasons behind banning the *lungi*.

But the most overwhelming reaction of all was the most recent one, after the Savar tragedy, where a garments building collapsed and killed more than 350 workers, injuring thousands. Before the government got there, before the medical supplies had reached them, there were posts popping up on Facebook and twitter, asking for blood donations. Makeshift blood collection stalls were put up at Shahbagh, this caused other donation drives to set off, and soon so many litres of blood had been donated that there was an excess.

One just had to log on these social networking sites to see a list of supplies that were still needed. Oxygen cylinders, torches, gloves, suture threads, everything was being provided through a collective initiative. Pharmaceutical companies were sending carloads of medical supplies, and medical interns from all over the city flocked to Savar to help.

A nation was in mourning, and this feeling of gloom was turned to strength. The more people saw photos of locals digging through dirt, risking their lives to save others, the more they wanted to help.

Such action had not been there when the Spectrum garments factory collapsed a few years back. But had social networking been as strong as now, the situation would certainly have been different.

Furthermore, the news of the garments collapse had reached throughout the international world and fashion conscious teenagers in America are now tweeting about the disaster in Savar.

Through all the depressing news, knowing that we have grown stronger as a community offers a glimmer of hope. The vitality of social networks can also be used negatively to incite mindless hate. But our generation has finally reached political consciousness through the Shahbagh movement, and now is the time to remember the corollary of caring. Seeing, we must act.

# Could financial institutions have played a role?

DR. AFIFA RAIHANA

**M**EDIA in the past few days have looked at the Savar tragedy from numerous possible angles. Discussions about who is responsible for the death of the 350 workers have been the main topic of talk shows and print media. Starting from the building owner to the RMG factory owners to the political parties to the engineers and construction companies, all have been blamed to a certain extent for this tragedy.

But who exactly is to be blamed is subject to proper investigation, so I am not going to speak about it.

My point is, in a country where rules don't work and results into death of hundreds regularly, what options do we have?

Industrial casualty related death is one of the highest in our country. In setting up an industry, starting from building design approval to getting a Department of Environment (DOE) clearance certificate, everything can be managed by paying bribes -- to put it in plain language.

The person who provides the certificate for money has nothing to lose if the building comes crashing and hundreds are killed. For him it is an absolute monetary benefit. Now in an ideal situation a regulator would not provide clearance until and unless the plan is sound but we don't live in an ideal world where systems work for the benefit of the people.

In order to regulate such mechanisms, someone would need to face severe consequences if the planning proceeds poorly, if the business collapses, if there is death and if there is loss of lives. That stakeholder is clearly not any of our public institutions, however, this role can be played by the financial institutions, and in many countries it works very well.

There were five garments factories operating in the Rana Plaza, some exporting to the US and European

markets. They for sure have a banking relationship with the banks in Bangladesh. Now that their business has gone down, it is the bank's money that has been jammed. Most likely they will have to write it off as debt, at least in the short-term. Before the loan was sanctioned (be it working capital loan or for capital expenditure), the bank definitely did its due diligence. They looked at the balance sheet of the company, they looked at past track records, they looked at future orders and so on. Based on their due diligence they decided to finance this RMG factory.

In the due diligence form there is always a question

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on whether the business is environmentally and socially compliant; most of the banks have this in their forms. We can be rest assured that the relationship manager just quickly ticked the box next to the question.

The Department of Environment has a list of high-risk sectors categorised as 'red,' and the RMG sector does not fall into that category. So why bother asking questions about the environmental and social issues? If you ask a financial institution on what percentage of their "Non-Performing Loans (NPL)" have resulted from environmental and social (E&S) issues? The answer would be "none."

If the bank was actually serious about the environmental and social due diligence, they would have asked questions about whether the building was established in a legal piece of land (pond or land-filled water bodies

are risky at the same time might not have legal documents), fire exit/ alternate exit, worker to space ratio, proper ventilation, clean drinking water provision for every 20 workers -- the typical parameters international buyers look for in compliant factories.

Now one might ask that since the bankers provide money why they should ask these questions. It is not a banker's job to get into details about the E&S compliance. In order to safeguard the bank's finances and reduce the NPL, the bankers will have to ask these questions whether they would like to do it or not. At the end of the day, it is the bank that is writing off the debt.

When a business would fail to repay the loan, there would not be much point in looking for who approved the building plan or why so many workers were forced into that building, etc.

In this regard, the Bangladesh Bank is taking some radical steps in collaboration with the development partners to ensure that the E&S risk management by the banks is not a mere box-ticking exercise. The banks will need to include the 'E&S risk' as one of their core credit risk and should reflect it in their credit policy. They will have to have a process in identifying and managing these risks; there should also be a proper monitoring and reporting framework.

In order to make this a reality, a lot of awareness raising and skill development of the bankers would be required so that they can be equipped to identify and manage the E&S risks. In a country where rules don't work and the safety of workers can be jeopardised by petty bribes at multiple levels -- the financial institutions can take a pragmatic role in saving their bottom line at the same time saving the lives of hundreds of misfortune workers.

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