

2 factories closed after cracks found

A CORRESPONDENT, Gazipur

Two RMG factories in Gazipur sadar and Kaliakoir upazilas suspended their operation temporarily after cracks were detected in the factory buildings yesterday.

Workers of Garib and Garib Factory at Bhogra in sadar upazila and Knit Asia in Shafipur traced the cracks during their lunch hour, sources at Gazipur Industrial Police said.

After the cracks were found on the fifth floor of Garib and second floor of Knit Asia, workers of the two factories denied continuing their duties inside the factory buildings.

As the workers began agitation over demanding their security during working hours, the owners shut down operation in their factories.

Mosharrof Hossain, assistant superintendent of Gazipur Industrial Police, said they have ordered the owners to resume operation after conducting inspection at their factory buildings by engineers.

Habibur Rahman, upazila nirbahi officer of Kaliakoir, said the authorities of the factories have been asked to keep their units shut before the inspection.

A devastating fire on February 14, 2010 killed at least 21 workers of Garib and Garib Factory and damaged its building.

Six killed in Thai south shooting

AFP, Pattani

A three-year-old boy was among six people shot dead when gunmen opened fire on a village grocery shop in Thailand's restive south, a Thai security official said yesterday, vowing tentative peace talks would continue.

Four men dressed in similar uniforms to the Thai security forces sprayed bullets at a group of villagers gathered outside a local shop in Pattani province on Wednesday evening, said National Security Council chief Paradorn Pattanatabut.

More than 5,500 people have been killed in near-daily bombings and shootings in three Muslim-majority provinces near Thailand's southern border with Malaysia since 2004.

First ODI

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the Queen Sports Club in Bulawayo, the Tigers will start favourites. The match will begin at 1:00pm Bangladesh time and will be telecast live by Maasranga TV.

The Last time they played here, in 2011, they had come to the ground having already lost the first three ODIs in Harare and with them the series, but went away with two wins here. That took their tally in Bulawayo to six wins out of eight -- making it one of the Tigers' more favoured hunting grounds.

There will be some changes to the Bangladesh team that won their last ODI against Sri Lanka in late March. Because of Rubel Hossain's bout with chicken pox the man-of-the-series in the Tests, Robiul Islam, is in line for an ODI debut. Shamsur Rahman Shuvo might also make his debut sometime in this series but today Jahurul Islam is in line to open with Tamim Iqbal. The team management will decide this morning if three or two pacers will play, and the opening spot may change depending on that. The pacers will be chosen from the group of Robiul, Sajidul Islam, Shafiqul Islam and Ziaur Rahman. The middle order will consist of Mohammad Ashraful, Mushfiqur Rahim, Shakib, Nasir Hossain, and today will likely see a return for vice-captain Mahmudullah Riyad, who was dropped from the second Test. The spin line-up, apart from Shakib, will feature Abdur Razzak and Shohag Gazi.

Wash blood off

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they generally operate on slim profit margins.

REAPING BARGAINS

So who's left? At this point, Western retailers and consumers, who have the immediate wherewithal to effect change. First-world consumers have been the chief beneficiaries of the growth of garment manufacturing in Bangladesh and other developing countries. Americans are reaping bargains by importing more than 97 percent of what they wear. Since 1998, women's clothing costs have fallen 7 percent, and men's have fallen 8 percent. In the UK, costs have dropped 20 percent since 2005.

Creating safe work conditions in Bangladesh wouldn't put much of a dent in those savings. The Worker Rights Consortium, an independent labour rights monitoring group, estimates that it would cost \$600,000 on average to elevate each of the country's 5,000 factories to Western safety standards, for a total of \$3 billion. If the \$3 billion were spread over five years, it would add less than 10 cents to the factory price of each of the 7 billion garments that Bangladesh sells each year to Western brands. If the factory owner passed on that cost to the retailer and the retailer passed it on to the consumer, with mark-ups, this could mean, perhaps, a 25-cent increase for the final buyer per item.

These changes would hardly price Bangladesh out of the market. Its garment workers are guaranteed a minimum wage of only 18 cents an hour, less than half what the next cheapest competitors, in Cambodia, earn.

For global brand retailers, ensuring factories are safe is not only right but also smart. Remember the consumer backlash over conditions in Vietnamese factories that made Nike products? During the 1990s, that cost the company sales and share value. Major retailers caught up in the Rana Plaza collapse include Associated British Food Plc's Primark and Loblaw Cos.' Joe Fresh. Wal-Mart Stores Inc. was supplied by Tazreen. More catastrophes could expose these companies to harsh scrutiny. Certainly these tragedies are already pro-

voking unusual labour unrest that is disrupting production and hurting the bottom line.

On the other hand, global brands that take steps to improve working conditions can potentially charge a premium for their wares: A 2009 study undertaken at a major retail store in New York suggested that companies could use "social labelling" to charge from 10 percent to 20 percent extra and still expect sales to rise.

Retailers can ensure factory improvements are made by signing on to the Fire and Building Safety Agreement for Bangladesh, a program promoted by workers' rights advocates. The agreement would establish a chief inspector -- independent of companies, trade unions and factories -- to execute a safety program. Audits of hazards would be made public. Corrective actions recommended by the inspector would be mandatory.

Retailers would agree to pay factories enough so that they could afford renovations, and retailers would be forbidden from doing business with noncompliant facilities. These obligations would be enforceable with the courts in retailers' home countries.

The inclusion of labour representatives on the task force overseeing the agreement would build employee confidence in factory safety. So would a clause establishing that workers make up at least half the members of factory health and safety committees.

So that the program will have sufficient leverage over factories, it is to go into effect only after four retailers have signed on. The German retailer Tchibo GmbH and PVH Corp. have agreed so far. PVH did so only after it came to light that its brand Tommy Hilfiger had resumed business with a Bangladesh factory where 29 people were killed in a fire.

For the retailers that have held back, signing now offers protection for Bangladesh's workers and against such scandals. Failing such reforms, the "Made in Bangladesh" label seems likely to turn into a scarlet letter.

EU warns

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director of the Centre for Policy Dialogue.

If the EU withdraws the GSP facilities on garment imports from Bangladesh, the exporters will have to pay 12.50 percent duty on apparel items. It will lead to the country's competitiveness waning, and a large number of workers will lose their jobs, he said.

And the "Made in Bangladesh" brand will suffer another blow worldwide, said Rahman.

He suggested taking action against non-compliant factories and a zero-tolerance approach by the BGMEA, a platform for garment makers, to ensure the safety and security of workers.

"The international buyers need to play their part as well. They should pay more so that the garment makers can improve factory standards and avoid sub-contractors," Rahman said.

The EU decision may also influence Washington at a time when Bangladesh awaits a verdict from the US trade representative on the continuation of GSP facilities in the US.

In January, the European parliament adopted three separate resolutions, cautioning Bangladesh on the issue of fire safety after the Tazreen fire incident in November last year.

BGMEA President Atiqul Islam fears many of the country's 3.6 million garment workers may lose their jobs if the EU takes trade actions against Bangladesh.

"We are taking steps to improve fire and building safety to avoid a recurrence of such tragic incidents. In such a crucial time, the EU should also work with us to help overcome the crisis."

Commerce Secretary Mahbub Ahmed said the EU wrote to the ministry after the Rana Plaza collapse, inquiring about the incident. The ministry sent its reply to the EU two days ago.

He said the ministry would

send another letter to the EU today with more information on the Savar incident.

In Germany, nearly 30 western retailers, labour groups and non-governmental organisations plan to set up a clearing house that will collect information on factory inspection, according to The Wall Street Journal.

Wal-Mart and JC Penney representatives were among the retailers, according to a Bloomberg report.

The talks, organised by Germany's international cooperation service known as GIZ, were aimed at winning support from companies, labour unions and non-governmental groups for Bangladesh's national action plan and for supplier assessments of fire and building risk.

A document on the talks will be published on May 15.

It's slave labour

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... And this is called 'slave labour'," he said during a private mass on Wednesday at the Vatican, the Guardian reports.

"Today in the world this slavery is being committed against something beautiful that God has given us -- the capacity to create, to work, to have dignity.

"Not paying a fair wage, not giving a job because you are only looking at balance sheets, only looking to make a profit that goes against God," he was quoted as saying by Vatican radio, BBC adds.

Five garment factories were housed in the illegally constructed, eight-storey Rana Plaza that collapsed in Savar, a Dhaka suburb. Five months after a fire killed 112 people at another clothing factory, the collapse again highlighted safety problems in the country's \$20bn (£13bn)-a-year garment industry, which supplies retailers around the world.

Savar mayor suspended

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asking him to explain his stance. Further action would be taken after getting his reply.

In another development, the Savar Upazila Nirbahi Officer, Kabir Hossain Sarder, was withdrawn over his controversial role ahead of the collapse.

An official notification yesterday he had been sent to the public administration ministry as an officer on special duty.

Rana Plaza, housing five readymade garment factories, caved in on the morning of April 24, leaving at least 446 dead.

The building owner, Soheli Rana, two engineers and four factory owners have been arrested in connection with the incident.

Talks hope in sight

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hartal. So, whatever demands you [Khaleda] have, put them on the table and we can discuss them. We will meet your demands and see what is good for the country and possible for us," said Hasina, also president of the AL.

Parliament is the best and neutral place for a dialogue and the opposition leader could place her demands there anytime, she mentioned.

The prime minister thanked Khaleda for withdrawing yesterday's (May 2) hartal to facilitate the rescue operation at the Rana Plaza collapse site at Savar.

Calling off the hartal, BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia on Tuesday hoped that the premier would take the initiative for holding a dialogue on the formation of an impartial caretaker poll-time government.

BNP's REACTION Addressing a press conference at the BNP's Nayapaltan central office in the afternoon, BNP spokesperson Shamsuzzaman Dudu said the opposition party was ready for a dialogue but the government must extend a formal invitation to hold talks on a revival of the caretaker government system.

He also said the prime minister should first mention the issues she wanted to discuss with the BNP.

"If you [the government] have any objection to the phrase caretaker government, we can discuss a non-party interim poll-time government," he added.

He called upon the government to free the jailed BNP leaders as a sign that it wanted to sit down for a dialogue with the opposition.

Talking to The Daily Star, BNP standing committee member Moudud Ahmed welcomed the premier's initiative.

There has to be an agenda to make the dialogue fruitful, he mentioned, adding that the government would have to agree in principle that the next general election would be held under a non-party caretaker government.

"We don't want to walk into a trap in the name of a

dialogue when the anti-government movement demanding a restoration of the caretaker government system is gaining pace," said the BNP lawmaker.

ASHRAF Talking to journalists after a programme at the Officers' Club in the capital, Syed Ashraf, also AL general secretary, said, "The prime minister has urged the opposition leader to sit for a dialogue. We are waiting for a positive response from her. We hope we will reach a consensus on all issues to hold the next election in a free, fair and neutral manner."

Queried if the caretaker government system would come back, he replied in the negative but said, "It wouldn't be difficult to find a solution over an election-time government if we sit for talks."

GONO BHABAN MEET At the view-exchange meet at Gono Bhaban, Hasina called upon Khaleda to join parliament. She said, "We have set an example. The speaker, prime minister, opposition leader and deputy leader of parliament -- all are women."

"If you [Khaleda] come to parliament, there might be at least one picture of us together so that everyone can see the unprecedented example of empowerment of women we have set."

She added that Khaleda could even appoint a woman deputy opposition leader.

Hasina criticised the opposition leader for bringing up false allegations against the government of concealing bodies recovered from the collapsed building site at Savar.

"The government is doing its best in the rescue operation. Hundreds of people along with television cameras and journalists have been there all the time and they can say whether the allegation is true," she added.

About Khaleda's complaint that the government delayed launching the rescue operation, the prime minister said the government had sent rescue teams just 20 minutes into the incident.

About why the parliament session was not adjourned and the newly elected president took the oath of office after the nine-storey building caved in on April 24, Hasina said there should not be any disruption to state affairs.

AL leaders Amir Hossain Amu, Abdul Latif Siddiqui, Alauddin Ahmed, Mahbubul Alam Hanif and AFM Bahauddin Nasim were present, among others.

Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe said his country will sign a nuclear treaty with the UAE yesterday as he stressed Tokyo's cooperation with its Middle East partners.

Abe, making his second visit to the Gulf country as prime minister, arrived late on Wednesday in the United Arab Emirates, Japan's eighth largest world economic partner, to take part in a Japan-UAE Business Forum.

At the forum, he said his country will sign a nuclear treaty with the UAE, without elaborating.

"This time, Japan and the UAE will sign a nuclear treaty," he said, according to a translation from Japanese. "Japan can contribute to UAE energy supplies by means of nuclear energy conservation and renewable energy."

Sources close to Abe said the treaty will be signed in Dubai during Abe's meeting with its ruler Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid al-Maktoum.

For his part, UAE Energy Minister Suhail al-Mazrouei, called for stable world oil prices at the forum.

"We seek as an energy-producing country stability in world prices, to enable exporting and consuming countries to steadily develop and build their economies," he said.

Nearly a third of the UAE production of crude oil and petrol derivatives go to Japan while the oil-rich country's liquefied natural gas production has been used to generate electricity in Tokyo since 1977, according to Mazrouei.

He added.

As on the first day, hundreds of relatives are still running from one place to another in desperate search for their loved ones. Many of them said they would not leave the site until they had received the dead bodies.

Meanwhile, at a separate press briefing, GOC Hasan Suhrawardy yesterday refuted allegations that bodies were secretly being taken away from the building. He blamed some vested quarters for spreading such rumours.

He also alleged some rowdy people, misled by rumours, were disrupting the rescue effort.

"Don't listen to any rumour. We would like to assure everyone that we won't leave the place until we have retrieved the last body," he told reporters near Rana Plaza.

Replying to a query, he said they were not yet sure when the rescue operation would end.

April 23.

Later, the authorities of the factories shut their factories by cutting short the duty hours of the workers.

On being informed, UNO Kabir rushed to the spot and declared the building risk-free after visiting the building.

Yesterday's notification, however, said the order making him OSD had been issued in the public interest.

Another allegation against Kabir is that he along with the local OC rescued Soheli Rana, now in jail, from the collapsed building and helped him flee the scene.

Earlier, Kabir was dropped from the probe committee formed by the home ministry to look into the building crash.

Japan to sign nuclear treaty with UAE: PM

AFP, Abu Dhabi

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Problems there

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trying our best to improve the situation."

Asked about reports that only 18 inspectors are responsible for overseeing safety conditions in more than 100,000 garment factories in and around the capital city, she said, "We don't depend on only ... those inspectors."

Steps to improve conditions were taken before the collapse of the building in Rana Plaza in Savar, she said, citing passage by the Cabinet of a labour law that will be sent to parliament.

Hasina noted that workplace disasters have occurred in the United States, too; she cited last month's explosion of a fertiliser plant in West, Texas, in which 14 people died.

"Anywhere in the world, any accident can take place," she said. "You cannot predict anything."

Amanpour, CNN's chief international correspondent, pointed out that local officials predicted that the building could collapse after cracks appeared on its walls on April 23, and they urged workers not to re-enter it.

"You are very correct," Hasina said. "Unfortunately, in the morning, the owners of the factories put pressure to labour to enter."

She praised government officials for trying to prevent the workers at the five garment factories in the building from re-entering it on April 24, the morning of the collapse. "It is not true that the government hasn't taken any steps," she said.

She blamed the owners of the five factories as well as Soheli Rana, the building's owner, and disputed the suggestion that their political connections could protect them.

Rana is under police investigation in relation to the deaths and has had his assets seized. Protesters have called for him to be hanged.

"The law will take its own course," she said. "Criminal is criminal. They will get all the necessary action; that we can assure you. It is our promise to the people."

Hasina added, "Any business person, if they commit any kind of crime, our government always takes action."

She pointed to the companies that source their

products from such factories, saying they should pay well enough that factory owners can pay good salaries and ensure the business is safely run. "They're partly responsible for it," she said.

And she urged that the disaster be considered in context. "You cannot blame the whole business or whole industry just for one incident," she said.

Hasina said officials in her government "are in favour of labour," having increased the minimum wage by 82%, built dormitories and seen to the health care needs of workers.

But the collapse of the building is only the latest in a string of fatal incidents that have beset the industry in recent years. A fire five months ago at a garment maker in another suburb of Dhaka killed at least 112 people.

Hasina expressed little fear that international companies would stop doing business in Bangladesh as a result of the disaster. Investors have tapped into the Bangladeshi market not just because of its high-quality workers, she said. "They get cheap labour," she said. "That's why they come here."

Hasina denied that the killing last year of a labour leader signified that her government is hostile toward unions. Aminul Islam's body, bearing signs of torture, was found four days after he disappeared in April 2012.

"Nobody knew that he was a labour leader," she said. It was only after his body was found, she said, "that we came to know that he was a labour leader and he was assassinated."

More than a year later, she said, the case remains under investigation.

The interview was carried out via satellite by Amanpour in New York and the prime minister in Dhaka. CNN has been unable to gain visas from the Bangladesh government that would allow the network to send reporters to cover the country first-hand.

That assertion was corroborated by a CNN executive, but the prime minister disputed it. "It is not true," Hasina said. "We never stop any media to come to Bangladesh."

Asked about restrictions on coverage imposed by the visa office, she said, "Every country has these rules and regulations."

Quick action

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The UN agency expressed deep sorrow at the horrific deaths and injuries caused by the collapse and offered sympathy to the bereaved families.

During the meeting, Hounbo appreciated Bangladesh's rescue efforts, which pulled out over 2,500 people alive from under the rubble, said Azad.

The press secretary quoted Hasina as saying those responsible for the loss of lives were facing justice.

Hasina told Hounbo that soon after the building caved in, the government took measures to rescue the victims, provide them with proper medical care and rehabilitate them.

The ILO sent the mission to offer its support and expedite action by all parties in the aftermath of the collapse of Rana Plaza.

Although details of the letter could not be known, Guy Ryder had earlier said he was writing to Hasina, urging immediate action to prevent a recurrence of entirely avoidable workplace tragedies.

"Horror and regret must translate into urgent, firm action," Ryder noted, according to the agency's website.

"Action now can prevent further tragedy. Inaction would mean that the next tragedy is simply a matter of time."

"The ILO urges the government of Bangladesh and its employers and trade unions to make use of its support and ensure that the Rana Plaza tragedy is the last of its kind."

Hounbo earlier said a

comprehensive programme must include: dealing with unsound factories, including through relocation and infrastructure improvement; establishing credible labour inspection; political commitment to enforcement of laws and regulations; encouragement of social dialogue on safety and health; and the adoption of labour legislation guaranteeing, among other things, rights of organisations and collective bargaining in line with ILO standards.

Hounbo also met the heads of the UN organisations in Bangladesh, the EU delegation here and a number of embassies, including that of Canada.

He would sit with workers and employers' organisations today, an official of ILO in Dhaka said yesterday.

Waiting

FROM PAGE 20 later. Will they come by the body of the woman who gave birth to them? Surely they would want her remains. But they would not want any unclaimed or unidentified corpse to be passed off as their mother's.

And that is where this huge sense of tragedy comes in -- unmitigated, unimaginable yet very much tangible. What does the world of the living tell these boys? What consolation is there for so many scores of other children like them, those who have lost a parent? Or both parents?

The answer is baffling silence --- all across a cloudless, sun burnt Baishakh sky.