

Impact of

FROM PAGE 1
three illegal floors to the eight-story structure. The building owner was arrested earlier.

The government appears to be attempting to fend off accusations that it is in part to blame for the tragedy because of weak oversight of the building's construction.

During a visit to the Indian capital New Delhi, Muhith said the disaster would not harm Bangladesh's garment industry, which is by far the country's biggest source of export income.

"The present difficulties ... well, I don't think it is really serious — it's an accident," he said. "And the steps that we have taken in order to make sure that it doesn't happen, they are quite elaborate and I believe that it will be appreciated by all."

When asked if he was worried that foreign retailers might pull orders from his country, Muhith said he wasn't: "These are individual cases of ... accidents. It happens everywhere."

The April 24 collapse is likely the deadliest garment-factory accident in world history. It surpassed both long-ago disasters such as New York's Triangle Shirtwaist factory fire, which killed 146 workers in 1911, and more recent tragedies such as a 2012 fire that killed about 260 people in Pakistan and one in Bangladesh that same year that killed 112.

Muhith calls

FROM PAGE 20
His suggestion came after former CII president Shekhar Datta said at least Bangladesh and India should think of introducing a common currency for boosting trade and investment between the two countries.

Muhith also stressed the need for greater integration among sub-regional economies for further expansion in trade, as the current intra-regional trade accounts for less than five percent.

"Particularly, if we had an intra-regional market during the last financial crisis, perhaps we would have been protected in a better way, the way the ASEAN and Latin America have been protected," he mentioned.

"This is a lesson we must learn from the last financial crisis and we must move towards much better integration of regional economy."

On providing transit facility to India, Muhith identified Bangladesh's insufficient infrastructure as a key bottleneck. "It [transit] is an accepted issue in Bangladesh, but the infrastructure deficit is now a major problem," he added.

Bangladesh Bank Governor Atiur Rahman urged the Indian entrepreneurs to avail the lucrative investment opportunities in Bangladesh.

"Bangladesh's FDI [foreign direct investment] policy regime is among the most liberal ones in South Asia; both the Bangladesh Bank and the government remain positive in promptly addressing new issues as they arise," he told the seminar.

Given that the East Asian investors are flocking to Bangladesh to relocate their manufacturing facilities from costlier locations, Indian investors might be missing out on significant opportunities to invest in Bangladesh's infrastructure, toll bridges, hotels and tourism facilities, tertiary health care hospitals, developing land port, seaport and airport facilities.

Mahbub Hassan Saleh, acting high commissioner of Bangladesh to India, called for a healthy growth momentum in the South Asian countries.

Abdul Matlub Ahmed, president of the India-Bangladesh Chamber of Commerce and Industry, suggested that the Indian authorities should look into the issue relating to its transit facility for Bangladesh's trade with Nepal and Bhutan.

Canadian buyer

FROM PAGE 20
buildings that house these garment factories.

He also said Loblaw, which owns discount clothing chain, was trying to figure out what more it could do to improve workplace conditions, according to the CBC News website.

Weston made the comments while addressing the press along with Joe Mimran, the fashion retailer who founded Loblaw's Joe Fresh line, on Thursday to discuss the Rana Plaza tragedy.

"I'm very troubled. I'm troubled by the deafening silence from other apparel retailers on this. Thirty companies were having goods manufactured, but only two have come forward to speak publicly," Weston said.

He said Loblaw has always ensured all facilities in its supply chain adhere to rigorous standards in areas including local labour laws and work conditions.

"Nothing in those reports suggested a problem, but the scope of the audits does not cover structural integrity," he added.

Mimran said Joe Fresh has no plans to leave the country, arguing more can be done to make the apparel industry "a force for good" in the world by working with local authorities to improve conditions.

"Properly inspected, well-built factories play an important role in countries like Bangladesh," Mimran said, adding, "Recent events have shown we should be auditing for building standards, something that has never been done before."

"The apparel industry can be a force for good," Weston said, adding, "They can help lift people out of poverty in countries like Bangladesh."

Their comments came when international firms

such as Disney, the world's largest entertainment company, had already announced its intentions to withdraw from Bangladesh.

Disney, based in California, USA, removed Bangladesh in March from a list of countries where it authorises partners to produce clothing and merchandise, according to Bloomberg.

It has asked licensees to end production in those places by March 2014. Belarus, Ecuador, Pakistan and Venezuela were also taken off the list, Disney said.

Disney's contractors had less than one percent of the company's production in Bangladesh.

Safety standards in Bangladesh have been in the spotlight over accidents including the Rana Plaza collapse in Savar on April 24 that killed more than 500 people and a November factory fire last year that claimed at least 112 lives.

Earlier, British retailer Primark vowed to improve working conditions in Bangladesh.

Ten dead in Mauritius bus crash

AFP, Port Louis

Ten people were killed and 40 injured when a bus overturned on the Indian Ocean island of Mauritius yesterday, police said.

Nine of the victims were Mauritian, while one was Chinese, police said.

The bus was travelling from Vacocas in the centre of the island to the capital Port Louis.

Generators

FROM PAGE 20
committee probing the Savar tragedy.

Main Uddin Khandaker, additional secretary to the Ministry of Home Affairs, heading the investigation team, said a vicious circle of culprits had formed surrounding the construction of Rana Plaza, according to a Channel report.

"The cement supplier provided second-hand cement. The masons who built it also resorted to similar unfair means because they knew they would not be paid. He [Rana] acquired his wealth cheating others," he added.

He also said the workers had been forced into the building ignoring the warning signs of the day before. "Half an hour or two hours later, when four to five generators started simultaneously following a power cut, the vibration caused the whole structure to crash," he said.

The five-member investigation team had talked to injured workers, doctors, rescuers, army officials, fire service officials and environmental activists. They will also talk to the owner of the building, Sohel Rana, factory owners, mayor of the municipality and engineers concerned.

Even though the committee was supposed to submit its report within seven days, it sought more time after collecting information and evidence for five days.

18-party rally

FROM PAGE 20
Star that it was obvious many people would not be able to leave the capital after the rally. These people would join the Hefajat programme.

The party has directed all its units to bring a large number of people for the rally.

BNP had already held meetings of district and divisional leaders at the party office and made the grassroots-level leaders aware of their duties to make the rally successful.

"The government may create obstacles once it comes to know about our plan for holding a huge rally. That is why, we are calling the gathering just a rally," said a BNP standing committee member, adding that the government had proposed dialogue with the opposition in the wake of series of anti-government programmes, such as hartals.

"We want to ensure a huge gathering to put further pressure on the government," said Abdul Latif Nijami, chief of Islami Oikya Jote (IOJ) and Nejame Islami Party, two components of the opposition alliance.

The BNP high command has also instructed leaders of its associate bodies, especially Jaiyatabadi Chhatra Dal, Jubo Dal and Swechchhasebak Dal, to make sure that all their leaders and activists are present in the rally.

Wishing anonymity, a top leader of the BNP Dhaka district unit told The Daily Star that they had been asked to gather at least one lakh people for the rally.

Rajib Ahsan, organising secretary of Chhatra Dal, said they were working to ensure presence of at least one lakh activists of the pro-BNP student body.

Disappointed by Hefajat's April 6 decision of not to linger its rally for one or two more days at Motijheel Shapla Chattar, BNP was now trying to rebuild its relation with Hefajat so that it comes up with tougher anti-government programmes to realise its demands, said sources.

A BNP standing committee member said IOJ chief Abdul Latif and Khelafate Islami chief Abul Hasnat, son of former IOJ chief Fazlul Haq Amini, were coordinating between the opposition and Hefajat leaders.

A key component of the alliance, Jamaat-e-Islami, which is going through a tough time with most of its top leaders facing crimes against humanity charges, would also join today's rally, said party sources.

LABOUR STANDARDS

ILO to roll out roadmap

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The International Labour Organisation (ILO) will today come up with a roadmap to help improve Bangladesh's labour standards and make its factories safer for workers.

Gilbert Houngho, the UN agency's deputy director-general for field operations, who is leading a high-level mission to Bangladesh, said this while speaking at a meeting with members of Bangladesh Employers' Federation (BEF) at its office in Dhaka yesterday.

The mission will hold a joint press conference in Dhaka today where the roadmap will be unveiled.

Since May 1, Houngho has been leading the ILO mission here, offering its support and expediting action by all parties in the aftermath of the Rana Plaza disaster, which left more than 500 people dead and scores injured.

He said, "It is very clear to us that the situation has become a cause of great concern. It is clear for the ILO and all over the world that we have to consider this tragedy as a new beginning and have to use it as a positive catalyst to say 'never again'."

Houngho, the former prime minister of Togo, underscored the need for ensuring workers' rights in order to fight inequalities and improve working conditions in all industries.

The ILO deputy chief said Bangladesh should take into account the workers' rights sincerely when the country passes a new labour law.

He also called for cooperation all stakeholders to

salvage the country's image following the Rana Plaza tragedy.

"We need to work together to minimise the impact on the overall image. We can minimise the idea about boycotting the products that are being made in Bangladesh. If we have those sorts of problems, it will be a disaster..."

"Let's not kill the whole economy. We need to adopt a balanced approach," he noted.

Fazlul Hoque, president of BEF, said employers must chalk out an action plan to start addressing the labour rights' violations and owners' irresponsibility, and find out a way to make people accountable.

He requested the ILO mission to start a specialised programme in Bangladesh, targeting the rehabilitation of the workers seriously injured in the Savar building collapse.

Hoque also urged the government to strengthen the capacity of the Department of Inspection for Factories.

He also said there is also a need to hold buyers accountable as they want five-star services cheaply.

Atiqul Islam, president of Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association, said the country's image as a garment exporter has been damaged after the Savar tragedy.

"We need to have an action plan to overcome the current crisis so that this kind of incident does not occur in future," he said, calling on the ILO to help the plan become effective and credible.

Anis Ud Dowla, a former president of Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce and Industry, said: "This is not a time to blame each other. The country's image has been tarnished and we all have to play roles to restore the previous image."

Myanmar leader plans landmark Washington visit: source

AFP, Washington

Myanmar's leader plans a landmark visit to Washington this month, a source said Thursday, as the United States eased visa restrictions in a sign of support despite a surge in anti-Muslim violence.

President Thein Sein, who would be the first leader of the country to visit in half a century, is planning to be in the American capital around May 20 or May 21, a staff member at the US Congress told AFP on condition of anonymity.

The trip would include a summit with President Barack Obama at the White House. Administration officials said they had no announcement to make but have previously said that they were studying a visit by Thein Sein.

In another step towards thawing relations, Secretary of State John Kerry on Thursday ended a 1996 ban on US visas to Myanmar nationals accused of hindering democracy during the country's decades of harsh military rule.

Withdraw blockade

FBCCI asks Hefajat

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The FBCCI yesterday urged Hefajat-e-Islam to withdraw its Dhaka blockade programme slated for tomorrow taking into consideration the sufferings of the Savar victims and the country's political and financial stability.

The apex trade body made the call at a press conference at its office in the capital.

Kazi Akramuddin Ahmed, president of the Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industry, read out a statement at the press conference.

He said the ongoing rescue operations at the site of the collapsed Rana Plaza as well as treatment and rehabilitation of the victims would be hampered if Hefajat enforced its Dhaka blockade programme.

The FBCCI chief said the economy had already suffered a serious setback due to political crisis, hartals and blockades over the last several months.

Besides, he continued, the image of the readymade garment sector had been dealt a huge blow due to the Savar tragedy.

Kazi Akramuddin observed that a new dimension had been added to the country's politics after the opposition called off its May 2 hartal in response to the prime minister's request.

Now, when there were attempts at national unity, Hefajat's Dhaka blockade could hurt the existing political environment.

The Islamist group declared the blockade programme on April 6 to press home its 13-point demand, including punishment to bloggers for "demeaning Islam and Prophet Muhammad (pbuh)".

Make joint

FROM PAGE 20
Houngho, who is leading a high-level ILO team, adding that the positive thing was that after the Savar tragedy everyone concerned wanted to fix the issue.

If the right to trade union was given to workers, it would make a major difference in the sector, he said.

"The difference would not only be in improving the work environment but also in avoiding such incidents," he continued, "And if you don't do it, you would have frustration and inequality growing up, and then one day there will be a huge blow. And when it blows, there is less control."

ILO officials would work with the government in the coming weeks and propose it to revise the existing labour law, if necessary, said Houngho.

Asked about the responsibility of Western consumers for this kind of accidents, he said they were very sensitive about workers' safety.

"If those consumers stop buying products made in Bangladesh that would cause a serious problem to Bangladesh's economy. It would not be wise to invite another problem to solve one problem," Houngho said.

The Bangladesh Garments Manufacturers and Exporters Association and Bangladesh Knitwear Manufacturers and Exporters Association are seriously thinking about fixing the issue and working with the government to detect faulty factories.

On the owners who do not comply with the law, he said, "If only 10 percent apples of a basket are rotten, people might think that the whole basket of apples is rotten."

He also reminded that the western buyers were doing their business. But they have to respect local laws and international conventions and ensure workers safety and security. "For me, the safety and security issue is not negotiable."

But obeying the law and ensuring workers safety does not mean that the buyers were ready to pay higher price, he said, adding that the buyers were here for business.

Regarding Walt Disney Company's decision not to source merchandise from Bangladesh, Houngho said he would not judge whether the decision was fair, rather would look into the problem and try to solve it.

Asked about the meeting with Sheikh Hasina, he said the prime minister has taken the issue very seriously, felt it by heart and wanted to solve it.

Rana's pistol, ammo found

FROM PAGE 1
Detectives Branch of police.

Shahin is also the investigation officer of the cases filed in connection with the collapse of the building at Savar on April 24 that killed more than 522 people.

Rana said he had obtained the arms licence from Manikganj district authority. Police were verifying whether his claim was authentic.

"Rana fell sick as he was diabetic and also due to

withdrawal of drugs like phensidyl and alcohol. Saliva was coming out of his mouth," said an interrogator preferring not to be named.

He, however, said they had started verifying the information related to the building collapse and Rana's wealth, his friends and patrons.

RAZZAK REMANDED
Engineer Abdur Razzak, who was detained earlier, was shown arrested yesterday in the killing case filed in connection with the

building collapse.

Police produced Razzak before a Dhaka court, seeking a seven-day remand. The court granted him a four-day remand.

Earlier, owners of the building and the garment factories it housed said Razzak had assured them of the building being safe for business as usual after inspecting the complex.

After getting the assurance, they asked the workers to continue their work, the owners claimed.

PM responds to Hefajat

FROM PAGE 1
The PM also mentioned that Islam is now the state religion.

The Hefajat-e-Islam, a Chittagong-based Islamist organisation, at a rally in the capital on April 6, gave the government three weeks to meet its demands.

Otherwise, the group threatened, it would lay siege to the capital tomorrow.

The demands include a law providing for capital punishment for maligning Allah, Islam and Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) and engaging in smear campaigns against Muslims.

Speaking on the subject, the prime minister said the Information and Communication Technology Act, 2009 and Code of Criminal Procedure (CrPc) contained the provision of punishment for the offence.

The PM then tuned to the Hefajat's third demand -- stop all propaganda and "derogatory comments" against Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) by the "atheist leaders" of Shahbagh movement, bloggers and other anti-Islamists; arrest them and ensure stern punishment to them.

She said the government had already arrested four bloggers for making "derogatory comments" against Prophet Muhammad and they would be prosecuted if found guilty.

On the fourth demand, "Stop attacking, shooting, killing and persecuting the Prophet-loving Islamic scholars, madrasa students and people united by belief in Allah," the PM firmly said no such oppressive action has been taken.

Discussing the Hefajat's fifth demand for the release of "all the arrested Islamic scholars and madrasa stu-

dents", Hasina said individuals, including Jamaat-Shibir elements, engaged in anti-state activities, had been arrested.

"If you have any knowledge of the arrest of any innocent person, give us the list. The government will release them with the highest priority."

On the Hefajat's sixth demand, "Lift restrictions on mosques and remove obstacles to holding religious programmes," the PM said everyone had the right to practise religion and the government never obstructed anyone from offering prayers.

The Islamist organisation also demands that the government stop foreign cultural intrusions, including free-mixing of men and women and candlelit vigils, and put an end to adultery, injustice, shamelessness, etc, in the name of freedom of expression of the individual.

Hasina said measures would be taken in this regard as per law.

The Hefajat also demands that turning Dhaka, the city of mosques, into a city of idols, and setting up sculptures at intersections, colleges and universities has to be stopped.

Mentioning that there are sculptures in many Muslim countries, the prime minister said the sculptures were created in accordance with the country's heritage and culture. She asked the Hefajat not to confuse sculpture with idolatry.

with Islam.

Talking about the Hefajat's demand, "Stop threatening and intimidating teachers and students of Qawmi madrasas, Islamic scholars, imams and khatibs," the prime minister said the government would take steps if there was any specific allegation.

On another demand, "Stop creating hatred among young generations against the Muslims by misrepresentation of Islamic culture in the media," she said a monitoring committee would be formed under the information ministry to look into the matter.

If necessary, she added, Islamic scholars would be included in the committee.

The Hefajat also wants action against the activities of "Qadianis" and NGOs working against Islam, and religious conversion by Christian missionaries.

Sheikh Hasina said forced conversion of religion was a crime and the law enforcers were keeping watch on NGOs.

The Hefajat-e-Islam has taken centre stage in recent days as a force opposed to the Shahbagh Gonojagoron Mancha from where youths have been demanding the death penalty for war criminals.

It, however, was not on the scene when the Shahbagh movement started on February 5. Its presence was felt with the killing of a blogger, who was branded as an atheist.

The April 6 rally was the culmination of a propaganda campaign, orchestrated by the Jamaat-e-Islami, that the organisers of the Shahbagh movement were atheists. The alleged defamation of Islam was at the heart of the campaign.