The Aftermath of GSP Hearing

Get Your Act Together

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Human tragedy seems to have become a regular feature plaguing the highest export earning ready-made garment (RMG) industry, putting this sector at risk in terms of losing business.

The nation's most tragic building collapse at Rana Plaza on April 24 happened only after five months of another deadly fire at an Ashulia based garment factory Tazreen Fashions, where 112 workers were burnt alive November 24. The death toll at Rana Plaza has crossed 648 (May 6). The number of injured is innumerable. Between, Rana Plaza collapse and the Tazreen fire incident, eight workers died in another fire incident at Smart Export Garment Ltd in Mohammadpur area December 26 last year.

If the smaller fire incidents at Swan Garment and Sir Denim, in November last year at the city's Uttara area are included, the list of such untoward incidents will just lengthen. This is just a simple calculation of disasters in the garment sector over the last five months.

Hundreds of poorly paid garment workers have lost their valuable lives in such a short span of time. The mysterious killing of labour leader Aminul Islam in April last year has put another blemish on the RMG sector.

Such recurring tragedies due to negligence have put Bangladesh, the second largest RMG supplier after China, in a precarious position. International consumers, retailers, along with global rights groups, started raising their voice against the death incidents in garment factories in Bangladesh.

Following the Tazreen fire incident, Bangladesh had to attend an emergency hearing at the United States Trade Representative's (USTR) hearing March 28, to convince the US government for continuation of GSP (Generalised System of Preferences), a duty waiver scheme by the US government for the least developed countries (LDCs) for some selected goods facility, to Bangladesh.

The country was asked to attend the hearing while America's largest trade union American Federation of Labour and Congress of Industrial Organisation (AFL-CIO) lodged complaints for cancellation of GSP on the grounds of poor labour rights and poor occupational safety in the factories.



PHOTO: STAR FILE

Bangladesh, for the first time attended the USTR hearing for continuation of GSP, in 2007 and the second time in 2009 while a third hearing was held in January 24 last year.

A 14-member delegation attended the hearing, led by commerce secretary Mahbub Ahmed.

Since the garment trade is an international one, it goes without saying that the manufacturers should listen to the concerns of the international community. Having faced a barrage of tough questions at the USTR hearing, Bangladesh committed to a lot of reforms in industrial laws and welfare for the garment workers.

After returning from the hearing, the Bangladesh government has taken the initiative to amend Bangladesh Labour Laws of 2006 to accommodate more benefits for the garment workers, especially allowing trade unionism in the factories.

The cabinet has already approved the proposal for amendment of the labour law 2006 last month, mainly to persuade the US government to continue giving the GSP facility.