

# Major retailers

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Ever since the collapse of the Rana Plaza building on April 24, H&M, Wal-Mart, Gap and other companies have faced intense pressure to sign the agreement.

"In order to make an impact and be sustainable," the agreement "would need a broad coalition of brands," H&M said in a statement.

The agreement committed a company to the goal of a safe and sustainable garment industry in Bangladesh "in which no worker needs to fear fires, building collapses or other accidents that could be prevented with reasonable health and safety measures," according to the statement.

"Fire and building safety are extremely important issues for us and we put a lot of effort and resources within this area," said Helena Helmersson, head of sustainability at the retailer.

H&M and Gap were the target of an online petition that obtained more than 900,000 signatures and was sponsored by Avaaz, a human rights group. The petition said, "Your companies and other multinationals profit from cheap labour, and can do much more to reduce the dangers of the places where your products are made."

"H&M's decision to sign the accord is crucial," said Scott Nova, executive director of the Worker Rights Consortium, a Washington-based factory monitoring

group backed by 175 American colleges and universities. "They are the single largest producer of apparel in Bangladesh, ahead even of Wal-Mart. This accord now has tremendous momentum."

PVH also said yesterday that it would contribute \$2.5 million to underwrite factory safety improvements as part of the new plan.

Gap has resisted signing on, objecting to its legally binding nature and saying it was already doing a lot on its own, having hired a fire inspector and promised \$22 million for factory improvements.

Bangladeshi labour groups that have sifted through the Rana Plaza rubble have not found any evidence that H&M or Gap had garments made at any of the five factories in the building.

But numerous investor, religious, consumer and labour groups are pressing other companies known to have obtained apparel from the factories there -- Benetton, Cato Fashions, the Children's Place, el Corte Ingles, Loblaws and Primark -- to sign on to the safety plan.

Primark, which had acknowledged that one of its suppliers had occupied the second floor of the nine-storey building, had already pledged to compensate victims who worked for its supplier and their families.

*With details from The New York Times and Bloomberg.*

# Witnesses

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Alim's counsel Ahsanul Huq Hena said, "The prosecution witness [in Alim's case] told the truth. I don't think he [witness] told [the truth] after being pressurised [by someone]."

Yesterday, Abed Hossain, the 19th prosecution witness in the case against Abdul Alim testified before the International Crimes Tribunal-2.

Abed, of Chakbarkat Sonarpura village in Joypurhat, said the Pakistani army picked him up along some others from the yard of a mosque in his village on June 18, 1971. The army men tortured and hacked them in a nearby village. At least 22 people were killed but he narrowly survived.

On April 10, Mozammel Hossain, a survivor of the incident and the 15th prosecution witness in Alim's case, gave a similar description of the incident and said the Pakistani army had killed at least 22 Awami League supporters, according to a list prepared by Abdul Alim, a former mem-

ber of late president Ziaur Rahman's cabinet.

But, yesterday during his 36-minute testimony, Abed did not mention Alim's name once.

After his deposition, Prosecutor Rana Dasgupta prayed for declaring Abed a hostile witness and as the tribunal allowed it, Rana cross-examined him for 10 minutes.

Rana suggested that when Pakistani army separated 28 people from the bunch, Riaz Mridha was present there.

"I didn't see him," said Abed, 65.

Pakistani army separated the 28 people following the list of Alim given by Riaz Mridha, suggested Rana, but Abed replied in the negative.

"You have concealed the truth after being persuaded by Alim Shaheb," suggested Rana but Abed said, "It is not true."

Afterwards, Hena declined to cross-examine Abed.

The tribunal adjourned the case proceeding until May 20.

# SQ CHY'S TRIAL Witness skips name of accused

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

A prosecution witness in the war crimes case against Salauddin Quader Chowdhury yesterday gave deposition of genocide committed by Razakars, Al-Badr and Pakistani occupation forces on April 13, 1971 without mentioning the accused.

In another war crimes case against AKM Yousuf, who was sent to jail on Sunday, the International Crimes Tribunal-1 fixed today for passing an order on bail plea filed by the accused.

Witness Dijoy, who was 15-16 years old in 1971, said he had been with his parents at Jagotmollapara of Rajuan in Chittagong during the Liberation War.

The witness said he had heard sound of gunshots from the west at around 9:00am on April 13, 1971.

"Fearing risk of life, we including my parents, brother and brother's wife set to go to Dabua," he said, adding, on the way they had heard further gunshots near their house.



UN Special envoy Oscar Fernandez-Taranco calls on BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia at her Gulshan residence yesterday. PHOTO: COURTESY BNP

## BNP ready

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Earlier on Saturday, the delegation met Khaleda and gave her UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon's letter.

At yesterday's meeting, the BNP chief welcomed the UN initiative for helping the political parties in Bangladesh reach a consensus.

The five-member delegation led by Oscar Fernandez-Taranco, UN assistant secretary general for political affairs, held talks with a BNP team led by the party chief at her Gulshan residence yesterday afternoon.

A one-to-one meeting between Khaleda and Fernandez-Taranco for over an hour preceded the talks between the two teams.

Replying to a query, a top BNP leader said the chairperson had told the UN delegation that her party was not attaching any condition for talks with the government.

Briefing journalists after the meeting, BNP Vice-Chairman Shamsher Mobin Chowdhury said, "The party chief hopes an amicable solution will be found and the problems will be resolved as well."

Meanwhile, a leader who was present at the meeting told The Daily Star, "The chairperson explained to the UN team that the opposition was not giving any precondition for the dialogue as claimed by the government."

Khaleda also informed the UN team about the "government's oppression and filing of false cases" against opposition leaders, and expressed doubt about the government's sincerity about the dialogue, he said.

In reply, the UN team told Khaleda that the government had assured it of releasing the opposition leaders now behind bars, the BNP leader added.

**AL ALSO HOPEFUL**

The ruling Awami League is hopeful about reaching a consensus with the BNP over a polls-time government through talks.

"I think the ice will begin to melt once the dialogue kicks off," a senior minister told The Daily Star, preferring not to be named.

"Both parties will have to budge from their rigid stance, and only then things will start changing for the better," added the minister.

Contacted, Agriculture Minister Matia Chowdhury said they are sincere about holding the dialogue as early as possible, and a formal initiative in this regard would be taken soon.

"We are taking the UN envoy's call for an immediate dialogue with utmost urgency," said Matia, a top policymaker of the AL.

She, however, said the government would follow the constitutional framework in holding the next election.

# Ensure fair wages for RMG workers

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have to perform it right," he said.

Yunus's comments came at a dialogue on the steps to take following the Savar tragedy, organised by Power and Participation Research Centre (PPRC) at the capital's Lakeshore Hotel.

Rana Plaza, a nine-storey multi-purpose building in Savar collapsed on April 24, killing 1,127 and injuring thousands, to make it the worst ever industrial accident in the history of the nation.

A tragedy of this magnitude should be an eye-opener for the nation and all should unite to decide on the corrective measures to take to prevent recurrence of such incidents, he said.

"If our realisation does not come after such a big incident then it is a shame for our national life."

The Nobel Laureate called for self-criticism to find faults and put an end to the blame game, which does "no one any good."

"We have learnt a lot. If there is anything wrong, we will rectify that. But we should not forget the core -- we want to protect the workers, the industry and Bangladesh. We have to address them all together."

Yunus said the 40 lakh females who work in the garment industry do not only bring about improvement in their lives but also contribute to the nation's advancement.

"I think these workers have established the foundation of modern Bangladesh. Let us make the base of modern Bangladesh stronger -- not weaker."

He said the immediate task should be to consolidate its current position as the second biggest apparel exporting country in the world. "The first target should be to retain the current position and become the number one in the shortest possible time."

The Nobel laureate also called for contribution from the buyers to ensure a decent wage for the workers.

"We have to remind our business partners that we have become connected with global capitalism through them. Hence, our workers are the workers of

global market, not just of Bangladesh. They deserve to get wages in line with the global market standard."

"It is our duty to remind them about this and try to realise that demand. I believe we can gradually achieve it if we remain firm on our principles."

Yunus said he has already contacted with the founder of Transparency International to see if there is scope to set up a transparency index for the garment industry, focussing on the minimum wages of the workers the world over.

"The index will not be just for Bangladesh but for all apparel producing nations. This minimum wage will be the base, and those who come to do business with us can not pay less than that. It will be non-negotiable."

He hopes the idea will be materialised soon.

Dan Mozena, the ambassador of US to Bangladesh, said the recent accidents and death of workers have created grave concerns for his nation.

"This must be a moment of transformation for Bangladesh," he said, while calling for workers' rights to form trade unions, ensure fire safety and structural soundness of factories."

Prof Rehman Sobhan, chairman of Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) said the building collapse was an outcome of serious governance failure. "We the civil society was not serious about the crisis of the RMG [readymade garment] sector. We should be realistic to solve the problem; rather than be romantic."

Prof Jamilur Reza Choudhury, vice-chancellor of University of Asia Pacific, said there are laws and policies relating to building construction, but there is lack of implementation.

"Even the government is not following the directive of the High Court," he said citing a High Court directive in 2005.

Andrew Barnard, first secretary of the European Union Delegation in Bangladesh, read out the message of Ambassador William Hanna.

"The Ashulia fire and the

Savar disaster are too high a price to pay. The sort of development which does not respect basic human rights is unsustainable, and the EU wants to play its part in putting an end to it."

He warned that the EU is considering punitive actions through the generalised system of preference.

"It is up to Bangladesh to come up with the solutions. We are ready -- and will always be -- to assist you in this."

Mustafizur Rahman, executive director of CPD, called for an end to the "hypocrisy" between ethical buying and ethical sourcing. "Representatives of sourcing firms do not want to pay higher for clothes when entrepreneurs demand higher price."

"It is not time to be defensive from the owners side;

rather we should carry out our responsibilities," said Rubana Huq, managing director of Mohammadi Group, while suggesting either relocation or closure of the 1,200-odd non-compliant factories.

Nazma Akter, president of Sammilito Garment Workers' Federation, urged responsible buying from global apparel companies.

"The multinationals can provide 'buy one get one free' offers for their consumers due to the competitive wage in Bangladesh. They ask us to ensure ethical business, yet they insist on price cuts from us -- it should not be like that."

Hossain Zillur Rahman, executive chairman of PPRC, said follow-up actions are needed for all the steps the government is currently taking.

# All factories

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"no work, no pay" policy, said former BGMEA president Abdus Salam Murshedy, who was present at the briefing.

"We hoped the workers would resume work peacefully after the government had announced wage board for them on Sunday. But even today [Monday], they [workers] vandalised many factories in Ashulia," said Atiqul Islam.

The closure would lead to a direct loss of around Tk 50 crore a day, he added.

The indirect loss, he said, was enormous as the garment makers would have to ship their produce by air and bear the additional fare from their pockets. Besides, the owners might face order cancellations and delayed payments by buyers.

The workers, he said, were demanding a minimum wage of Tk 8,000, higher bonuses, and allowances for tiffin and transportation. "They [workers] should raise such demands after the formation of the wage board."

All incidents of unrest occur at Ashulia, where all the state-of-the-art factories are located, said Atiqul. "This indicates that

a vested quarter is trying to vandalise the most modern garment factories."

Ninety-nine percent workers joined their works and want to work peacefully; only one percent was not interested in joining work, he said adding that this one percent was damaging the sector.

Contacted, former BGMEA president Murshedy said it was difficult to calculate the exact amount of loss for one day's production suspension in Ashulia, but it was huge.

"Of the total \$ 20 billion yearly export of garment products, Ashulia-based factories supply 15 percent, he noted.

Murshedy said this time the unrest was different, as workers had vandalised factories even after the announcement of the wage board.

In July last year, garment makers at Ashulia and Savar areas kept their factories closed for two weeks due to a massive labour unrest.

The trouble followed a rumour that a worker had died at an Ashulia-based factory of Ha-Meem Group, a leading garment exporter.

## BNP rally

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hold the rally tomorrow at the same venue at 3:00pm.

The alliance was expected to announce its next course of action from the rally, as BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia's May 4 ultimatum to restore the caretaker government system within 48 hours was not met.

DMP media centre Deputy Commissioner Masudur Rahman told The Daily Star that the permission for yesterday's rally could not be granted due to security problems.

A senior leader of the alliance, seeking anonymity, said the alliance does not want to organise the rally without the police's permission so as not to give the government a chance to accuse the opposition leaders and file cases against them.

This precautionary step was thought of as Jamaat-e-Islami -- the key component of the alliance -- might stage occurrences after the rally, in support of today's country-wide shutdown.

Besides, a United Nations team in Bangladesh called upon the political parties to sit for dialogues to resolve the current political mayhem.

The anonymous leader added, should any occurrences take place after the rally, it would hamper the image of the opposition in the eyes of the delegates. But, if the permission by the police is not granted, the UN team would be shown how the government set embargoes on the opposition.

## HC clears

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In the petition, it was alleged that the procedure required for the elections has not been completed.

In response to the petition, the court ruled that the EC must update voter lists of the DCC (north and south) complying with the electoral rules and the government authorities have to determine the number of wards and councillors three months before holding the polls.

In their reply, the EC and the government recently told the court that they have updated the voter list and delimited the areas of Dhaka City Corporation (DCC) wards according to the Local Government (City Corporation) Act-2009.

"There is no legal bar to holding the polls as both the government and the Election Commission have completed the legal procedure," Manzill Murshid, who had filed the writ petition, told The Daily Star.

The tenure of the unified DCC expired on May 14, 2007. But the election could not be held due to the state of emergency at that time.

The past EC led by ATM Shamsul Huda had also moved to hold the polls on May 31, 2010. But the then government did not let them do so.

Later, the government split the DCC into two on November 4, 2011 and appointed administrators to run them by removing mayor Sadek Hossain Khoka, who was elected in April, 2002.

## Bismillahir Rahmanir Rahim

## HABIDI'S 11TH DEATH ANNIVERSARY



Today, the 14th of May, is the 11th death anniversary of our only daughter Fatima (Habidi) Rahman. Our beloved Habidi passed away on this day in 2002 at St. Mary's Hospital in London. Habidi is no longer with us but her sweet memories remain in our hearts forever.

Relatives, friends and well-wishers are requested to pray for the eternal peace of her departed soul.