

Industry and human rights

NAVI PILLAY

LAST week, thousands of mourners gathered at the remains of the Rana Plaza factory complex in Bangladesh to pray for the 1,127 people who died when it collapsed on April 24.

The poignant remembrance of the victims of this dreadful tragedy came amid a succession of actions and reforms announced by the Bangladesh government, local factory owners and some international clothing chains whose products were being stitched by the largely female workforce crammed into five factories inside the Rana Plaza building.

The reforms announced so far include the immediate voluntary closure of a number of other factories believed to be unsafe; a lifting of restrictions on forming trades unions in most industries; the establishment of a new mechanism to guarantee a reasonable minimum wage for garment industry workers; and the decision by a number of major names in the international fashion and clothing industries to sign, by May 15, a binding agreement to improve fire and building safety conditions in their Bangladesh contractors' workplaces.

These welcome reforms showed a belated realisation, both locally and internationally, that this was a catastrophe that was totally preventable. Building regulations, worksite safety regulations -- a whole web of protective rules have been routinely violated in Bangladesh's garment sector, despite public knowledge and debate.

There have been plenty of advance warnings about worker safety in Bangladesh's garment industry as a whole, with over 120 lives lost in separate factory fires just in the past six months.

Together with their civil and political rights, all human beings, no matter where they live, have economic, social and cultural rights. These are recognised and protected in international human rights instruments, and they include the right to life, to a standard of living supportive of a life in dignity, and to a range of workers' rights, including the right to fair wages, to safe and healthy working conditions, to join and form trade unions, and to strike.

The measures taken so far are encouraging, and may mark a turning point for protection of Bangladesh's garment workers. But they should be seen as the beginning, not as an end result.

It is vital that swift action is taken to empower trade unions and overhaul the garment sector, with factory

upgrades and a far more stringent and corruption-proof approach to oversight and inspection. If the changes turn out to be cosmetic attempts to appease public anger, an effort to buy time until the impact of the disaster fades and the cheap-as-possible approach can be resumed, then more disasters will inevitably occur.

By the midnight deadline on May 15, 37 international companies, the majority of them based in Europe, using more than 1,000 Bangladeshi garment factories had signed the Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh. This is an important and in many ways unprecedented agreement that includes strong governance and accountability elements which mean the accord can be legally enforced in the countries where the international companies are based.

It also provides for inspections and other oversight mechanisms, including regulated remedial actions to bring factories into compliance with building, fire and electrical safety standards and fire safety training, health and safety committees with trade union representatives, and public reporting.

Some major retailers, especially in the United States, have chosen not to sign the Accord, but have pledged to perform their own inspections. The spotlight will be on them to ensure that they carry out these pledges in a credible manner.

These issues are not solely linked to Bangladesh -- as we were reminded just this week when the roof of a shoe factory in Cambodia collapsed, killing three workers. They are also not exclusive to the garment industry. Two years ago, the UN agreed on a series of Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights that provide a clear framework for what needs to be done by businesses and governments everywhere: government must take appropriate steps to prevent, investigate, punish and redress abuse of workers' rights through effective policies, legislation, regulations and adjudication.

Corporations must do human rights due diligence to prevent and address human rights abuse. Victims of abuse must have access to effective remedy. Perpetrators must be prosecuted. And the processes of supervision and oversight must be freed from unhealthy and ultimately toxic and dangerous ties to special interests.

What happened in Bangladesh has now shocked the world to say enough is enough. The best way to honour the victims of Rana Plaza is to ensure that such a tragedy never happens again in any industry anywhere.

THE WRITER IS THE UNITED NATIONS HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR HUMAN RIGHTS.

LIVING WITH RISKS:

An upshot of Cyclone Aila

CHOYON KUMAR SAHA

ACCORDING to a 'World Risk Report-2012,' Bangladesh is considered as the top 5th risk-prone country among 173 nations for severe exposure (31.70%) to the natural hazards such as tropical cyclone, storm, flooding, and tidal surge etc. The report identifies Bangladesh as one of the top most vulnerable (63.78%) nation because of not just increasing susceptibility (43.47%) of elements at climate risk alone, but also due to a lack of adaptive capacity (61.03%) to resist the adverse effects of climate change.

Recent studies demonstrate that 8.06 million residents in low lying coastal Bangladesh are exceedingly exposed to the vulnerability to storm surge related deluge, and this number will raise 110% with current population growth by 2050, if no adaptive measures are taken soon.

Under this circumstance, southwestern Bangladesh stands top in future exposure to tropical storm surge and 33% of its coastal area will be added to its current (35%) inundation zone.

This writing, however, presents the dynamics of disaster risk resulted from category-1, Cyclone Aila, that struck southwestern coastal Bangladesh on May 25, 2009 that killed 190, and affected over 3.9 million (with 77,000 acres of farmland destroyed or severely damaged).

Padmapukur union of Shyamnagar Thana was the top most affected region during Aila, where many residents still live with extreme risks of being affected by more natural hazards like Mohasen.

Vulnerability of any system is framed not just by the state of a susceptibility to, or extent of harm from exposure to hazard alone, but also resides in the sensitivity of that system to hazardous events, and directly affects the capacity to recover, adapt or cope with adverse effects of climate change.

People living with extreme risk

Disaster risk emerges when the hazard interacts with people's vulnerability to adverse effects of climate change. People's perception to hazard characteristics (likelihood, speed of onset, intensity, duration, consequences, etc.) signify the critical state of natural hazards, and the contribution of these characters in framing the dynamic process of vulnerability and disaster risk.

Results reveal that Aila-affected people has poor capacity to adapt with the profound consequences of disaster risk -- likewise, different kinds of vulnerability factors entail that the Padmapukur residents who were affected during Cyclone Aila still live with critical vulnerable conditions.

Different kinds of people's vulnerability to potential hazard risk are briefly illustrated here:

Economic vulnerability: Cyclone Aila not only damaged household assets but also destroyed community infrastructures that enervated adaptive capacity to deal with potential effects of climate change alone, and also fostered the sensitivity to be affected by future climate stimuli.

After the cyclone many people were left homeless, and were compelled to reside on the strand of the Kholpetua River, embankment sides, under open sky and shanties. Coastal fishing communities were badly affected as they lost all their fishing apparatuses (e.g. trawlers, boats, etc.), and had little safety equipments, and may even not receive future warnings.

Ravenous cyclone also shattered almost all for sources of income options and drastically lessened the per capita households' income.

Social vulnerability: The community perceived that the insecurity rose as more than two-thirds of affected residents were still dwelling on the river strand and through water-logs or under open spaces.

Additionally, continued erosions of coastal defenses, seldom access to endowed resources, inadequate relief, scarce livelihood options and lacking resilient houses/infrastructures also accelerated the vulnerability dynamics at a large scale.

Leaving the people jobless meant that the dissociation from workplace also resulted in a deep sense of separation, waning social togetherness, feeling helplessness and weakening mutual support among residents.

Environmental vulnerability: During the storm, coastal plantation where wildlife could build their sanctuaries, had been damaged. Consequently, it resulted to eroding top-soil fertility, reducing absorption of heat and water retention capacities of trees, disappearing wild species, flora and fauna, and also dying indigenous plant species etc.

Besides, destroying coastal vegetation also not just reduced the potential for natural protection to reduced wind velocity during cyclone alone, but also altered the coastal bio-diversity and severed the prospect of additional earning sources of the forest dependent people.

The aftermath of adverse climatic conditions is still evident in the declining the growth of plants, shrimps, fisheries, wild species, micro-organic nutrients, and in the increase of infectious diseases.

Institutional vulnerability: The affected residents had seldom access to community clinics, cyclone shelters, police stations, markets, trawler ports, water reservoirs, and electricity etc. Additionally, they explored some loopholes in emergency preparedness programmes such as inaccurate early warnings, misconception to warning message, poor risk-reduction initiatives, insufficient rescue teams, seldom preparedness knowledge and awareness raising program etc.

Simultaneously, there are also some constraints associated with cyclone shelters including insufficient accommodation, lacking sanitation, clean water, electricity, food storage facilities, and no provision of separate rooms for women and people with disabilities etc.

Besides, the shelter places were located at the farthest corner from their dwelling houses more than 4 kilometres, which often deters the residents to safe mobility during emergency.



Geographical vulnerability: The coastal Padmapukur is geographically vulnerable and very proximate to the Bay of Bengal and Sundarban that is well recognised as breeding places of tropical cyclones. The affected villages thus stand like an island enclosed by the Rivers Kholpetua and Kopotakkho, and sheer apart from the districts or upazilas.

This geographical estrangement increases the exposure to the risk of natural hazards. They are also being frequently immersed by the saline water during ebb and tide that causes the gradual corrosion of levee's bank and top-soil fertility, and decomposes green plants.

The interaction between a hazard and vulnerability therefore demonstrates that the residents of Padmapukur live with a higher level of risk, worsening by predominant factors including a lack of resources, relief dependencies, livelihood options, and declining individual income with poor adaptive capacities.

The high magnitude of disaster-induced risk presents strong evidence in support of taking rapid actions to reduce profound effects of environmental hazards through mitigating root causes and dynamic pressures resulting to vulnerability.

[This write up is an abridged version of a paper under review for publication in a scientific journal.]

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Declaring 'climate change' a planetary emergency

SALEEMUL HUQ

THE passing of Cyclone Mohasen through the Bay of Bengal and hitting the coastal areas of Bangladesh once again brings to our notice the devastation that such cyclones can bring. Fortunately due to the timely actions of all concerned, as well as the path of the cyclone, the damage was not as great as might have been expected.

Part of the preparation in tackling such events around the world is the declaration (or not) of an "emergency." At the international level such an official declaration by a government automatically triggers international relief efforts which are primarily coordinated by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA).

Such declarations of "emergency" are often also required at national level by their authorities

in order to trigger support from central government authorities. A good example of this was the contrast between the effects of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans and Louisiana, where the city and state authorities took a long time to declare an emergency and thus trigger support from the Federal Emergency Management Authority (FEMA), and the

immediate declaration of emergency by the city of New York and states of New York, Connecticut and New Jersey when Hurricane Sandy struck, which enabled President Obama to provide immediate help from the federal authorities.

Of course the declaration of an emergency to face a natural calamity such as a cyclone or hurricane is not the same as the "declaration of emergency" in the governance context, which is a cause for suspension of habeas corpus and other civil liberties (very often invoked by militaries to take over power from civilian authorities).

A case can be made that on a planetary level, the forthcoming impacts due to human-induced climate change can be treated as "slow emergency" and by declaring it as such we may be able to trigger more concerted and pro-active planning and preparedness in dealing with such calamities globally.

In the context of Bangladesh, given its high vulnerability to climate change impacts, it might be worthwhile declaring climate change to be an "emergency" and start taking precau-

tions accordingly.

Loss and damage

Another aspect of this issue is the link between the loss and damage from such catastrophes. This is a new and emerging issue in the context of climate change (although it is well understood in the context of traditional disasters). We will need to find ways of anticipating potential physical as well as economic impacts and then for delivering relief and rehabilitation (or compensation) to the post-disaster victims.

This issue of assessing and disbursing funds after such events is valid in developed countries as well as developing countries. After Hurricane Sandy, for example, the three states and city of New York sent a loss and damage assessment and requested the US Congress for US\$180 billion (to which Congress responded by allocating only 50 billion).

At the last conference of parties (COP18) of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) a collective decision was taken to look at the possibility of setting up an "international mechanism" for loss and damage. The Bangladesh delegation and the Least Developed Countries (LDC) Group played a vital role in negotiating this decision.

Bangladesh thus has an opportunity to develop some pioneering national level thinking, policies and pilot activities on this issue.

The following are just a few ideas on how this might be done:

- Declare climate change to be a 'national emergency' for the purposes of activating all the agencies of government as well as Red Crescent and NGOs to gear up to tackle climate change impacts;
- Explore the institutional aspects of setting up a "National mechanism for Loss and Damage from Climate Change," perhaps with the Ministry of Disaster Management and Ministry of Environment together;
- Develop procedures for triggering the utilisation of the one-third "reserve funds" in the Bangladesh Climate Change Trust Fund (BCCTF) for such loss and damage;
- Use the assessments of loss and damage from cyclone Mohasen as a pilot scheme for the above ideas; and
- Explore the possibility of a climate (or weather) index based insurance and micro-insurance programme.

Bangladesh needs to turn adversity into opportunity and the example of cyclone Mohasen may well provide us with such an opportunity to explore institutional and practical ways to anticipate and deal with such calamities in future, while also sharing our experience and knowledge with the rest of the world.

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ACROSS

1 Bread choice

4 Ignore

8 Platter

12 — the fields we go"

13 Watergate evidence

14 "Do — others ..."

15 Succumb to gravity

16 Blood-hound's clue

17 Poker variety

18 Half an aphorism

21 Atmosphere

22 Spring time

23 Counterfeit

26 Festive

27 Kreskin's claim

30 — Lang Syne"

31 Tenor

32 Peerce

33 Tolerate

34 Follow relentlessly

35 Linger

36 Old French coin

37 Scale member

38 18-Across' other half

45 PC operator

46 Requisite to Martini

47 Ingredient

48 Stead

49 Figure-skating jump

50 Genetic stuff

51 Mary's follower

52 Muse's music-maker

53 Early bird?

DOWN

1 Parks or Bonheur

2 Calendar quota

3 Therefore

4 Impassive

5 Bottom

6 "Once — a Mattress"

7 "The Seventh Seal"

8 Failing the white glove test

9 Grooving on

10 Phaser setting

Solution time: 27 mins.

PLAY DOWN ELUDE LIE ARE LASER URE NOT SUBIDE MET STAGE BRAG ENE SKEW HIDE CROSS DIAMOND LID TO T GARBIDE DAMSEL GAR SWAT BUENO FOAL DAMNATION TUB ORION GMT EBB MADRE NEO NAY

Yesterday's answer 4-13

11 "The Da Vinci —"

19 Praise highly

20 Put into words

23 "Terror"

24 Wish

25 Hearty quaff

26 Joke

27 Wet wriggler

28 "Erie Canal" mule

29 Use a crowbar

31 Blog

32 Ointment

34 Fawn's mom

35 Random drawing?

36 Bush

37 Villain's look

38 Sea flier

39 Largest of the seven

40 Abound

41 Alluring

42 Shrek e.g.

43 Croon

44 Hosiery mishap

CRYPTOQUIP

MTT R K V Y L V Y L V Y R C B K R

Z M J X I J R F C B V M T S C M J Y V Y L

H C R V J C R . K Z C S M J C K Z C V J

F C J R I Y M T X C C T I Y L V Y L R .

Yesterday's Crptoquip:
WHEN AN OPTOMETRIST WANTS TO LISTEN TO MUSIC ON HIS COMPUTER, HE REALLY SHOULD USE EYE-TUNES.

Today's Cryptoquip Clue: T equals L

BEETLE BAILY

WHAT'S THE MAT FOR?

YOGA

10-3

GREG+ MORT WALKER

HENRY

PICTURE FRAME DEPT.

IF YOU ASK ME, IT'S JUST A SHORTER NAME FOR GOOFING OFF!

10-3

QUOTABLE Quotes

One of the penalties for refusing to participate in politics is that you end up being governed by your inferiors.

Plato