

After Rana Plaza collapse, bleak struggle for survivors

THE NEW YORK TIMES

Inside the single room he shares with his wife and young child, Hasan Mahmud Forkan does not sleep easily. Some nights he hears the screams of the garment workers he tried to rescue from the wreckage of the Rana Plaza factory building. Or he dreams the bed itself is collapsing, sucking him down into a bottomless void.

A few miles away, at a rehabilitation centre for the disabled, Rehana Khatun is learning to walk again. She lost both legs in the Rana Plaza collapse and worries that she is not improving because her prosthetic replacements are bulky and uncomfortable. She is only 20 and once hoped to save money so she could return to her village and pay for her own wedding.

"No, I don't have that dream anymore," she said, with a cold pragmatism more than self-pity. "How can I take care of a family?"

Eight months ago, the collapse of Rana Plaza became the deadliest disaster in the history of the garment industry, and many of the survivors still face an uncertain future. The shoddily constructed building pancaked down onto workers stitching clothes for global brands like Children's Place, Benetton, C & A, Primark and many others. Workers earning as little as \$38 a month were crushed under tonnes of falling concrete and steel. More than 1,100 people died and many others were injured or maimed.

But while the Rana Plaza disaster

stirred an international outcry — and shamed many international clothing companies into pledging to help finance safety improvements in other Bangladeshi factories — the people most directly affected are still living without any guarantees of help or financial compensation. Families who lost the wages of a son or daughter, husband or wife, are struggling.

Those who lost limbs, like Khatun, are uncertain if they will ever walk or hold things again. And many volunteer rescuers like Forkan and survivors are struggling to deal with debilitating emotional scars.

Today, Rana Plaza no longer exists. It is a gaping hole in a busy commercial street, mostly cleared of rubble, where rainwater has pooled into a small black lake. But the vacant space still exerts the potency of memory and loss. Banners demanding justice face the street. Sit-ins or small protests are sometimes held. Leftist parties have built a crude statue of a hammer and sickle.

There are also people, often hovering near the periphery, clutching official documents, proof of their loss, evidence of their claims for compensation.

In a poor country like Bangladesh, a job in a garment factory, despite the low wages, is a financial toehold for many families. A daughter is sent to work to support her parents, or to pay to school her siblings. Now it is the parents or siblings who come to the Rana Plaza site, trying to get attention and, they hope, financial assistance.

"We are a poor family," said Monju Ara, 40, whose daughter Smriti, 17,

died while working on the third floor of Rana Plaza. "That is why my daughter had to start work. Her wages helped us educate our younger children. Now we had to stop educating them."

Monju Ara stood in a dirt alleyway beside the Rana Plaza site on a recent afternoon, as others soon appeared. One girl, Rahima, 9, was still carrying a "missing" poster for her brother.

Another child, Smriti Mahmuda, 7, had lost her father, and her 15-year-old brother had taken a job in an embroidery factory to support the family. A rickshaw driver with the single name of Alauddin, 43, is now struggling to support his young daughter after his wife died in Rana Plaza.

"They always say I will get compensation," he said, "but they don't say when."

Compensation remains a complicated and contested issue. Bangladesh's government has made some modest short-term compensation payments to some victims. Families were given a one-time payment of \$257 when they collected the body of a relative in the days after the collapse, and the government has established annuities for survivors who lost limbs — Khatun gets about \$206 a month in interest, more than most others.

But much of the money donated to the government for the survivors and the families of the dead has not been released. Many of these claimants have been told that full compensation packages will be provided after the process of identifying all the dead is completed.

A special committee appointed by

the Bangladesh High Court has suggested individual compensation packages of roughly \$25,000; lobbyists for factory owners are proposing a far lower figure. The final decision is expected to rest with the high court.

For now, most of the short-term compensation has come from the British chain Primark, which has been paying salaries for survivors and families of those who died. More recently, Loblaw, a Canadian retailer, announced that it, too, would step in to help with compensation.

The Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association, the powerful industry trade group, has also provided compensation, according to some survivors who received a few months' salary.

But the long-term picture remains muddled. Other companies have so far refused to participate in a long-term compensation package, including all of the American brands, but for many Rana Plaza survivors, the short-term compensation is already running out. Shukrani, who survived the collapse but lost a daughter, who was working on a different floor, is almost out of money.

"My other daughter had appendicitis," she said. "I had to spend part of my money for her operation. Now I don't know how I'll survive."

Down the road from Rana Plaza, at the Centre for the Rehabilitation of the Paralysed, Khatun and others spend their mornings trying to learn how to walk or hold a pen with prosthetics. The nonprofit organisation has a long history of helping the disabled and is

now helping several Rana Plaza survivors learn how to use the prosthetics provided by another donor.

But the prosthetics are a problem: One man, Saddam Hossain, 27, who was a salesman in a building adjacent to Rana Plaza, lost his right arm. He had been studying for a graduate degree in economics and, after his amputation, still took the test in June, with someone else writing his answers for him. Now he is trying to adjust to his mechanical prosthetic arm, which is clumsier than Western models.

"I'm an educated man," he said. "I want to do a job."

Khatun is grateful for her prosthetic legs but is also struggling with them. She has practiced for two months but finds them painful. Her legs were amputated above the knee, making it more difficult. She will need walking sticks, and she has decided to leave the chaos of the city and return to her village. There, though, the roads are muddy and difficult to traverse.

She had left the village after her mother tried to arrange her marriage. The cost of a wedding would have bankrupted her family, so she came to Savar and found work in Rana Plaza. She thought she could save up to pay for her own wedding and also educate her younger brothers.

"I dreamed that I could see my mother smiling," she said. "Now it is meaningless to talk about what my dreams are. I cannot lead a life like normal people. I will have an unusual, different life."

Before the Rana Plaza disaster, many of the workers were already

living on the margins. Few had much education and most struggled to get by on the low wages. They were not qualified to do much else but work in a sewing factory. But now, for many, merely stepping back into a factory incites anxiety.

Mohammad Ujjal Hossain, 30, spent three days trapped under a wall of fallen concrete. When rescuers found him, he handed them his cellphone and told them to call his mother to tell her he was alive. "Now I'm not doing anything," he said.

"I went to a factory to work as a line chief. I worked for a day, but I was filled with fear when I was inside the building. I worried that this building would also collapse. I quit after that day."

And of all those, whose lives are now entwined with Rana Plaza, it is the volunteer rescuers, ordinary people who rushed forward in a crisis, who have received no financial help at all. Forkan, 37, spent three weeks helping fire-fighters and soldiers pull bodies out of the rubble. He crawled into the wreckage and freed one woman by cutting an iron rod that pierced deep into her leg.

But when it was over, Forkan found it difficult to return to his ordinary life.

He is an electrician and regularly works in dangerous situations. But he finds it difficult to concentrate. He deliberately avoids the Rana Plaza site, detouring around it, and his wife often has to wake him when he shouts in his sleep.

"We need proper treatment to return to a normal life," he said, expressing



Mohammed Roshangir, deputy managing director of Bank Asia, inaugurates the 82nd branch of the bank at Lichubagan of Rangunia yesterday. Nasirul Hossain, senior executive vice president, was also present.



NI Khan, ICT secretary, attends the launch of Grameenphone's new account recharge mobile application for the star subscribers of the mobile operator recently. Rajeeb Bhattacharjee, head of marketing at Grameenphone, was also present.

S Alam Group teams up with Chinese firm for coal power plant

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

S Alam Group, one of the fastest growing local companies, yesterday struck an agreement with SEPCOIII Electric Power Construction Corporation of China to set up coal-fired power plants in Chittagong with capacity of 1,320 megawatt.

Mohammed Saiful Alam, chairman and managing director of S Alam Group, and Zhang Hongson, executive president of SEPCOIII, signed the deal at the Westin Hotel in Dhaka.

Under the deal, a separate company will be formed within two months to initiate the process of setting up the power plant with an estimated initial cost of \$1.8 billion.

Officials said the new company would sign a separate agreement with state-run Power Development Board, which will mandate the joint venture to complete the construction work in 45 months.

The price of the electricity will be Tk 6 per kilowatt-hour, according to Subrata Kumar Bhowmuck, executive director of S Alam Group, adding that the coal might come from Indonesia.

SEPCOIII, a power generation company in China, operates in coal, oil, gas-fired thermal power, hydropower, solar, wind, and biomass-based power generation.

Since its inception in 1985, SEPCOIII has an aggregated installed capacity of 29,000mw, with single unit capacity ranging from 12mw to 1,000mw, according to its website.

The company has set up coal-based power plants in India, company officials said.

S Alam Group, which has investment in commodities, transport, banking, leasing, insurance, stock broker houses and merchant banking business, is however a new player in the country's power sector.

Airtel expands 3G network in Sylhet

STAR BUSINESS DESK

Airtel Bangladesh yesterday announced the enhanced coverage area of the company's 3G network over considerable parts of Sylhet as part of their 3G roll-out plan.

Shahjalal University of Science and Technology will be covered by December, Airtel said in a statement.

Nearly 700 base transceiver station towers have been activated with the 3G network.

Airtel customers can check the list of 3G available areas by dialling *121*7*4# or at the official website of the mobile operator.

"We are very excited to expand the 3G services to our valued customers in Sylhet in line with our commitment," said Chris Tobit, chief executive and managing director of Airtel Bangladesh.

"We have been working hard to cover significant areas of Sylhet and will always take the necessary steps to develop the industry."

Unrest to weigh on GDP growth

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It said though the services sector data is available only on an annual basis, a number of proxy indicators such as trade financing and bank advance to transport and communication sector reflect slower services sector growth during the first quarter.

Data on bank advance shows that the growth of credit to the trade sector declined to 12.93 percent in the first quarter of the current fiscal year, from 24.68 percent in the same period last year.

The BB report said bank credit to the transport and communication sector registered a negative growth of -43.54 percent as against a positive growth of 85.68 percent in the same period of the previous fiscal year.

Retail and wholesale trade, hotel and restaurant business and tourism are facing a sluggish demand due to frequent shut-downs during the quarter under review.

The report also said low growth in cement production (3.61 percent) and negative growth in iron and steel production (-8.72 percent) indicate slowing growth in the construction sub-sector.

It said one positive indicator is the growth in the number of mobile phone subscribers, which rose by 18 percent to 110.68 million at the end of September

2013 from 93.78 million at the end of September 2012.

The telecom services sector is likely to remain buoyant particularly following the introduction of 3G services in September, the report said.

The sluggish services and construction sector data and negative growth in remittances (-8 percent) suggest that the aggregate demand will be lower than in fiscal 2013.

Hussain of the WB also agreed that the services sector was being affected severely by the political turmoil. He said the losses in the sector are not recoverable.

Some of the losses in the industrial sector may be recovered later but the loss in the garment factories could not be recovered, Hussain said. In the agriculture sector, both production and income are being affected by the unrest.

Though the government plans to contain inflation within 7 percent in the current fiscal year, the central bank sees a number of risks.

Wage increases in both the private and public sectors and the decision to set up a public sector wage board will create aggregate demand pressures, the BB report said.

Another risk to food inflation in particular stems from possible supply-side disruptions due to prolonged nationwide strikes.

Finally, the recent rise in inflation could

Forex reserves cross \$18b

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Rahman said exports grew by over 18 percent and remittances nearly 10 percent during July-November period of this year. Import growth

was only 8.5 percent for the same period.

Bangladesh has the second highest reserves after India in South Asia, according to the central bank.



Mohammed Saiful Alam, chairman of S Alam Group, attends a programme at The Westin Hotel in Dhaka yesterday when the company signed a deal with SEPCOIII of China for a new coal-based power plant of 1,320 megawatt.



Jahangir Bin Alam, secretary of India-Bangladesh Chamber of Commerce and Industry, speaks at the Business Banking Rendezvous organised by ICICI Bank in Kolkata on Wednesday.



Mahtabuddin Ahmed, chairman of Agricultural Marketing Company Ltd (AMCL), attends the company's 28th annual general meeting in Dhaka yesterday. AMCL, owner of Pran brand, declared 31 percent dividend for 2012-13. Amjad Khan Chowdhury, managing director, was also present.