

Shame!

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said, adding that unsafe workplaces must be abandoned.

Hanna also said the European Union, being the biggest importer of Bangladeshi garments, has a special responsibility to act. The EU is ready to assist but Bangladesh also has to take its responsibility.

"We will stay engaged. We expect you to be engaged," he said. "Let's not talk about conspiracies. Let us talk about working together to safeguard workers' lives, safeguard the industry."

US envoy Dan W Mozena said it's time to recommit to ensure that Bangladesh will never again experience anguish like the Rana Plaza building collapse.

Md Zafrul Hasan, chairperson of National Coordination Committee for Workers' Education, said compensation should not be paid in phases. "It should be paid in one go so that workers can do something [with it] for their life."

The worst-ever apparel industry disaster, which took place less than five months after 112 workers died in the Tazreen Fashions fire, led to a huge outcry at home and abroad over poor safety and working conditions in the RMG sector.

Since then, various initiatives, including inspecting 1,055 factories, upgrading factory inspection offices and hiring more inspectors, were taken to improve labour standards in the \$20 billion export earning industry.

Of the factories, 16 were temporarily closed due to safety risks, said Labour and Employment Secretary Mikail Shipar at the discussion.

He noted the government had

amended labour laws, making safety measures mandatory and relaxing rules to enable the formation of trade unions in garment factories. The cabinet approved the National Occupation and Safety Policy in this regard.

A Rana Plaza Trust Fund, an initiative of the government, buyers, BGMEA, trade unions and NGOs, was also formed to compensate the victims.

However, a total of \$15 million has been collected against a target of \$40 million under the trust fund.

From the prime minister's relief fund, the government has so far distributed Tk 23.55 crore out of Tk 127 crore raised for the Rana Plaza victims.

"We have seen unprecedented commitments which must be fulfilled," said ILO Country Director Srinivasa Reddy. "We have to continue the momentum, fulfil the commitments and ensure a safer workplace in Bangladesh."

Speaking at the programme, Canadian High Commissioner Heather Cruden said if commitments are not maintained and reforms do not continue, Canadian consumers will demand buyers source elsewhere.

She stressed the need for coordination for continuation of reforms.

Gerben Sjoerd de Jong, ambassador of the Netherlands, said the Rana Plaza disaster underlined the pressing need for significant reforms in the RMG sector worldwide as well as in Bangladesh.

Many initiatives toward reforms have been taken, he said. However, compensating victims is one important job that needs to be done.

British High Commissioner Robert W Gibson praised Bangladesh's RMG sector and said, "It remains vital to poverty reduction, economic empowerment of women. We want to see the RMG sector of Bangladesh thrive and prosper safely and not at the expense of human lives."

"I disagree with those who see conspiracies and claim we are creating a labour crisis... We are not. What we are trying to do is help improve and develop a vital industry."

Roy Ramesh Chandra, secretary general of IndustriAll Bangladesh, said, "Compensation is a right, not charity." He said a lot of seminars, symposiums and workshops are being held, but families of deceased workers and survivors are still suffering.

Brands have failed to continue their contributions for compensation to the victims till today, he said. The 29 brands that sourced from Rana Plaza have a combined annual profit of \$22 billion. Only 0.2 percent of their profit makes the \$40 million targeted for the Rana Plaza Trust Fund.

B a n g l a d e s h G a r m e n t Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) President Md Atiqul Islam said the industry needs time to improve safety standards in factories as huge investment is required.

"This is a real challenge for us," he said, adding that the trade body has taken a "zero-tolerance" approach for building safety. He called upon apparel brands to pay better prices to help improve labour conditions.

Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment Minister Khondker Mosharraf Hossain also spoke on the occasion.

Lone Chinese

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10 and 11 weeks.

Talking to newsmen, Communications Minister Obaidul Quader yesterday said the appeals by the two firms were rejected as the Maunsell AECOM and the technical committee have opposed extending the deadline further.

International consulting firm Maunsell AECOM and the technical committee will now scrutinise the financial proposal of the lone bidder, he added.

The next decision in this regard will be made on the basis of their opinion, mentioned the minister.

Asked whether the government can award the contract to the lone Chinese bidder, renowned civil engineer Prof Jamilur Reza Choudhury told The Daily Star that he could not make any comment on the issue without going through the procurement rules.

In June last year, the government asked the four pre-qualified bidders to submit their technical proposals by September 9.

On request from the bidders, the deadline for filing the technical proposals was revised four times. The last date was fixed at January 9 this year.

Later, the three companies submitted their technical proposals.

Teesta water

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Mainuddin Mandal, sub-divisional engineer of Water Development Board at Daliya, said underground water level in the river was 18-20 feet deep this year and the situation had continued for the last three years. The level was within eight to 10 feet in 2000 to 2005, he added.

"If the present situation continued, the underground water level in the river will fall sharply in near future," he added.

Sabuj Khandaker, coordinator of Teesta Putro, a local movement to save the river, said the underground water level in the river had gone down to 20-30 feet.

"The level has gone down to 20 feet on the main riverbed and 30 feet in the adjoining villages," he added.

Nazir Ali, 58, a farmer at Goddimari village of Hatibandha upazila, said, "I hit the water after setting up a tube-well with 25-foot pipe underground on the bank of the river on April 2 this year. In 2012, I got water using 20-foot pipe on the same spot."

"I used to get surface water for irrigation from the river till 2006. We have been facing water crisis after the Teesta Irrigation Project was launched the same year," he added.

Tube-well maker Keramot Ali, 50, at Mahipur char village said he was hired to set up at least 50 tube-wells at different shoal villages in last two months.

"I reached water 18 to 23 feet deep on the riverbed. Water was found at 23 to 28 feet deep at the river basin villages," he said, adding, the underground water level was falling sharply this year.

Obama gets a kick out of footballing robot

AFP, tokyo

Barack Obama yesterday came face to face with Japan's newest sporting phenomenon -- an eerily realistic humanoid robot which can run, jump and enjoy a kickaround with the president of the United States.

The US leader marvelled at ASIMO, a robot developed by Honda, as he highlighted Japanese technology and the potential for joint projects with US universities and firms on the first full day of his Asian tour.

He encountered ASIMO, a robot which is about the size of a 10-year-old child in an astronaut suit, as he toured the National Museum of Emerging Science and Innovation in Tokyo.

"It's nice to meet you," the robot cheerily hailed Obama, prompting the amused president to reply "It's nice to meet you too."

ASIMO then went through its paces for the president, showing off its realistic but somewhat spooky range of movements, before telling the US leader in its metallic voice: "I can kick a soccer ball too."

"OK, come on then," Obama said, bracing for a pass as the robot backed off to line up his shot before coming in and delivering a sharp kick, sending the ball towards Obama. He deftly controlled it with a shiny dress shoe.

"How about that? That was pretty impressive," Obama said, before the robot showed off its newest trick -- jumping around the room.

Moments later, talking to students, Obama admitted: "I have to say the robots were a little scary, they were too lifelike."

3 hurt in attack by stick-wielding men

Shops, homes vandalised; locals blame air force; officials deny

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, Ctg

At least three people, including two women, were injured when around 100 men armed with sticks and iron rods attacked a neighbourhood in Maizpara area of Chittagong early yesterday.

Locals alleged members of air force stationed at Zahurul Haque base in the port city were behind the attack, as they had a dispute over the ownership of a key road in the area with the villagers.

The attackers, some in plainclothes and some in air force uniforms, swooped on the locality around 12:30am, they said.

At least 14 shops were vandalised and looted and several houses were damaged in the attack, said Zahidul Islam Durlobh, a local youth.

The attackers beat up anyone who came out of their houses.

Ruhul Amin, sub-inspector of Patenga Police Station, said he went to the area after air force officials

informed him that locals were occupying a piece of government land. "But when I reached the spot, I found that air force men rampaged through the area."

The injured are Arju Begum, 65, Amena Begum, 34, and Sujan, 14, police said.

Initially, locals tried to flee but later they organised themselves and chased the attackers into the barrack, said the SI.

Later, police and Rab-7 members brought the situation under control.

The air force and the locals have been fighting a legal battle over the ownership of a road in Maizpara area of Patenga since 2007.

Contacted, Group Captain Badrul Amin, also in-charge (administration) of the base, denied they were behind the attack.

But he claimed the area and the road belonged to them.

Badrul, however, would not comment if there was any case over the ownership of the road.

Workers Party's

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observers from across the country and 15 like-minded political parties from five countries joined the inaugural session.

Left political parties of 56 other countries have expressed solidarity with the congress.

In his inaugural speech, Workers Party President Rashed Khan Menon said Bangladesh will be a middle income country soon but the process of reaching such a stage would be hampered if the country is not free from the threats of communal forces.

Menon, also civil aviation and tourism minister, warned of US aggression, citing examples of the withdrawal of the GSP facility and the hindering of the Padma bridge project implementation.

He also demanded Bangladesh's due share of water from the Teesta and Padma rivers.

Workers Party lawmaker Fazle Hossain Badsha delivered the welcome speech.

Health Minister Mohammad Nasim, also representative of the 14-party alliance, attended the inaugural session.

He called upon all to join hands with Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to build a non-communal Bangladesh.

Workers Party General Secretary Anisur Rahman Mollik, politburo member Bimol Biswas, former Rajshahi city corporation mayor AHM Khairuzaman Liton, Parbatya Chhattagram Jana Sanghati Samity President Santu Larma and Communist Party of Bangladesh General Secretary Sayed Abu Jafar, among others, were present on the occasion.

In the morning, Menon led a 13-member politburo to pay tribute to the historic Khapra Ward martyrs in Rajshahi Central Jail where seven communist leaders were killed in 1950.

On the second day of the congress today, an international seminar will be held on "threat of fundamentalism in South Asia."

The congress will end on Sunday with the formation of a new committee of Workers Party for 2014-15.

Depositions conclude

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and Jatiya Party Chairman HM Ershad and three others.

Judge Abdur Rashid of the Special Divisional Court, Dhaka passed the concluding order on completion of cross-examination of Abdus Sattar Sarkar, deputy director of the Anti-Corruption Commission and also investigation officer in the case.

The other accused are former air chiefs Sultan Mahmud and Mamtazuddin Ahmed and AKM Musa, director of United Traders Ltd.

Of them, Musa has been absconding since the case was filed. Sultan and Mamtaz, now on bail, were present at the court yesterday, while advocate Sheikh Serajul Islam represented Ershad.

The High Court cleared the way for trial of the case on August 8, 2006 after proceedings had been stayed for a long time. The trial resurfaced on November 2, 2010 after the case had been filed 22 years ago.

The now-defunct Bureau of Anti-Corruption filed the case against Ershad and four others with

Cantonment police on May 4, 1992. Abdus Sattar Sarkar, a former BAC official, pressed charges against Ershad and four others on October 27, 1994.

According to the prosecution, Ershad in collusion with others had allegedly caused a loss of Tk 64.04 crore to the state exchequer by purchasing radars from the US instead of France for the air force while he was in power.

The court framed charges against Ershad and three others on August 12, 1995.

The government later withdrew charges against another accused Shahazad Ali, a director of United Traders Ltd.

Ershad was accused in 21 cases including several graft cases after he was ousted from power in 1990.

He has so far been acquitted and discharged from 18 cases as the prosecution failed to prove the charges brought against him.

Three other cases including the one for murder of Maj Gen Manzur are still pending with the court.

Dhaka huffing

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Unlike an average month of April, when people get a respite from the sweltering heat due to short-lived nor'westers, the country has hardly seen any such storms this month.

For the last few days, the city dwellers have been feeling the pinch of sultry weather, with the mercury creeping up mercilessly to over 37 degrees without any break.

The Met office, however, said temperatures might go down in a couple of days as the country could experience rain from Sunday.

"But the rainfall will not last more than three days and the hot spell will start again," Shah Alam, director of Dhaka Met office, said yesterday.

Though Dhaka saw record high temperature in the last 54 years yesterday, it was not the highest in the country. The highest, 42.4 degrees Celsius, was recorded in Jessore yesterday.

The normal maximum temperature in April is 33.7 degrees Celsius in Dhaka and 35.6 degrees Celsius in Jessore.

The Met office did not have a record of more than 2 mm rainfall in the last 15 days.

The rainfall will be less than normal in this monsoon, according to Shah Alam's forecast.

A forum of global weather experts on Wednesday said India and its South Asian neighbours are expected to see below-average to average rains this year if the El Nino weather pattern gains strength during the four-month monsoon season, reports Reuters.

"There is a strong consensus about the possibility of evolution of an El Nino event during the summer monsoon season," said DS Pai, the lead forecaster of the Indian weather office.

Pai made the comment while releasing the consensus forecast of the South Asian Climate Outlook Forum, a group of global weather experts affiliated to the World Meteorological Organisation (WMO).

Rains could be below average in Sri Lanka, Bhutan and some parts of Pakistan, while an average monsoon is expected in Bangladesh, Nepal and Afghanistan, Pai said.

Overheated cylinder goes up in air

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seeped into homes.

Kazi Gas Company, a retailer that supplies ammonia, left three cylinders of compressed ammonia gas on the footpath in the scorching heat, causing one to explode around midday, fire service officials said.

The metal cylinder weighing 70 kilograms blew up in the sky and crashed down onto a nearby shop, leaving its roof and shutters crumpled.

It contained 50 kilograms of gas, staff of the store supplying the gas said.

The explosion prompted people around to run in all directions to escape harm from the gas while some splashed water on their burning eyes and gulped water from a communal tap to get relief from the burning sensation in their throats.

At least six people who sustained severe inhalation injuries received treatment at the burn unit of Dhaka Medical College Hospital.

Azizul Haque, an employee of a transport service counter next to the chemical store, got full exposure to the blast, resulting in the burning of his skin on the back.

The fire service arrived at the spot 20

minutes later, but by that time the major damage had been done by the gas that takes no time to spread.

However, the impact could have been worse, local people said, as the ammonia-filled cylinders were usually stored in a place right above which had been an electric transformer. The transformer was removed two days ago.

"Compressed gas should never be kept near heat or in sunlight, since the gas expands and can make the cylinder explode," said Masudur Rahman Akand, deputy assistant director of the fire service and civil defence.

"I was pulling my rickshaw and had passengers when the incident took place," said Ripon, a rickshaw-puller.

"Suddenly I could not breathe any more. I felt like something was constricting my throat, and I fell off my rickshaw," he added.

Parul Begum was cooking inside her house made of corrugated tin when suddenly a noxious gas filled up her tiny home. "I could not breathe and I do not know what happened next," said the 40-year-old housewife.

Kazi chemical store was loaded up to the ceiling with barrels of liquid

ammonia.

Contacted, the shop owner, Kazi Lear Hossain, told The Daily Star that the cylinders had been kept there in the morning because those were scheduled to be supplied yesterday.

When asked why they were left in the open, he said, "I told my staff not to keep those under the sun but they don't listen to me."

The store supplies ammonia to cold storages and paint factories, local people said.

The proprietor of the chemical shop was not present on the spot when police went there, said the officer-in-charge of Chawkbazaar Police Station, Azizul Haque. "We have sealed off the shop."

On April 10, a combustion of gas spewing from an open 200-litre paint thinner barrel killed five people and injured six others.

At least 123 people were killed in 2010 in a chemical inferno at Nimtoli in Old Dhaka, triggering a public outcry and demand for relocation of the chemical warehouses and stores from the area.

Nightmares haunt them

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2010. His wife Jhuma Das worked in the same factory and she too was injured.

Sajal was injured in his waist while his wife suffered injuries to the head and waist.

"I did not resume work because it is too difficult," Jhuma said.

The couple, who went to the site yesterday on the eve of the first anniversary of the disaster, received Tk 90,000 from foreign retailers.

"Now I want to run a grocery shop, but I don't have the money needed for the start up. I could only save Tk 50,000 so far," said Sajal.

The situation of Sumi Akter, who was rescued 12 hours after the collapse, is

pretty similar.

"Now I can't work due to my injuries in the chest and left leg. I stay home," she said. "My siblings are still kids."

Hailing from Tangail, Sumi went to the site yesterday with the hope of getting some financial assistance.

"The sound of sewing machines, steam gushing out and metal clinking frightens me. Sometimes at night when I close my eyes I see the horrors inside the debris. I have trouble sleeping," she said.

Sumi said she heard that many survivors got compensation from different organisations. "I had also submitted my particulars to many but got no response," she said.

Cops foil workers' march to BGMEA

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Garments Sramik Trade Union Kendra held a rally in front of the capital's Jatiya Press Club. Later, they marched towards the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) building to encircle it.

But law enforcers cordoned off them on the road, halting vehicular movement for about 40 minutes before the marchers left the place.

"We prevented them suspecting that they might create chaos on the road," said Ramna zone petrol inspector Shahidul Islam.

Addressing the rally in front of the Press Club, Manjurul Ahsan Khan, adviser of the Union, said the government was trying to protect the interests of the owners, not the workers.

"We demand publications of the list of donations to the prime minister's fund that the government received to assist the Rana Plaza victims so far," he said. "We want transparency and accountability of the fund to ensure adequate compensation for the victims."

Advocate Mantu Ghosh, president of the Union, said while the victims were

leading miserable life and not getting treatment money, the PM's fund was yet to be distributed.

Meanwhile, some garment workers and relatives of the victims blocked the Dhaka-Aricha highway in Savar for four hours yesterday, demanding capital punishment for Rana.

Earlier, several thousand workers of at least 20 pro-workers organisations and victims' relatives staged a sit-in in front of the Rana Plaza site with the same demand.

Meanwhile, pro-BNP Bangladesh Jatiyatabadi Karmajibi Dal held a rally and offered prayers for the victims and distributed food among the destitute in front of the Press Club.

At the programme BNP standing committee member Rafiqul Islam Mia said if the prime minister's fund was properly distributed, the victims did not have to suffer any more.

He demanded disclosure of the probe report on the tragedy soon.

Our Savar correspondent reports: Several organisations yesterday held different programmes in Savar to mark the first anniversary of the tragedy.

These include Rana Plaza Garment Sramik Trade Union, Sammilito Garment Sramik Federation, Garment Sraomik Oikya Forum, Bangladesh Garment Workers Solidarity, Bangladesh Garments and Industrial Workers Federation, Garment Sramik Shongram Parishad.

Socio-cultural and professionals' organisations including Jatiya Mukti Council, Association for Law Research and Human Rights, German Development Cooperation, Gonoshasthya Kendra, and Bangladesh Textile and Garment Workers Federation also held programmes.

These organisations placed wreaths at the monument "Protibade Protirodhe" erected for the victims near the Rana Plaza and held demonstrations. Dhaka district administration and Dhaka district police also placed wreaths there.

On the occasion, Bangladesh's first Prosthetics and Orthotics (P&O) School was inaugurated at the Centre for the Rehabilitation of the Paralysed (CRP). It will provide assistances to the maimed Rana Plaza victims.