

Two years of denial and betrayal

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THE families of Rana Plaza victims have passed two years crying for their dear and near ones, suffering in their daily lives and waiting for due compensation and jobs. In spite of tall promises, the government and the parties responsible for the disaster and corporate homicide have done little to heal the collective wound. There is no visible end to the uncertainty and suffering of thousands of families.

If we pinpoint the responsible parties for the death traps in garment factories of Bangladesh in general and Rana Plaza in particular we find at least three groups from home and abroad. They include: (1) owners of factories, buildings and the BGMEA, (2) international buyers and brand retailers, and (3) the government and its relevant agencies.

Despite cracks in the complex, the five garment factories situated in Rana Plaza, owned by Sohel Rana who was associated with the ruling party, were kept open to fill overdue orders from international buyers. Factory authorities forced workers either to come to work or face punishment. When generators were restarted after a power blackout, the building collapsed immediately with nearly five thousand workers working in the factories. Therefore the owners of the factories and the building bear the prime responsibility of the mass killing.

Secondly, as an umbrella organisation of garment owners, BGMEA has the responsibility of monitoring compliance and advocating for high industrial standards. They have a lengthy failure record in this regard; even the scale of the Rana Plaza disaster could not change their attitude. On the contrary, this organisation appears as the collective muscle of the owners to protect them from the law. That has always encouraged owners to ignore safety rules.

Thirdly, things on the ground are not supposed to be unknown to the international buyers and retailers. Factories often accept abnormally low prices in an effort to attract buyers and grab orders. In turn, and in order to maintain a profit rate, low cost suppliers often ignore safety measures and reduce workers real wage. Such cost cutting measures make the workers more vulnerable.

A chain of subcontractors and agents work beside global brands and approved factory owners are also responsible for these disasters. Research on the sector found the largest factory groups in Bangladesh as featuring 'showcase' factories with 'less compliant facilities as the productive engine of their operations'. It is also found that some of the largest multinational companies are heavily reliant on agents, 'matchmakers' between buyers and factories, to source their products. There are in fact many parties, local and global, to extract



PHOTO: STAR

profit on the value created by garment workers. But they always skip responsibility.

Finally, only the government has the legal authority and obvious responsibility to ensure safe environment in factories, job security of the workers; to carry out regular monitoring and when necessary bring parties to justice when they fail to follow the rules. If any disaster happens, the government as the sovereign authority must bear responsibility to find out wrongdoers, ensure compensation and work for necessary reforms. In practice, the government has played very little to change its callous and irresponsible attitude towards workers, to punish corrupt officials, owners and even failed to formulate a reasonable compensation policy.

The long delay in compensation payment for thousands of Rana Plaza victims has caused unbearable sufferings for the victims and provided a lot of opportunities for the touts and rent seekers to get benefits by cheating victims' families.

INTERNATIONAL INITIATIVES

After the Rana Plaza disaster, citizens around the world demonstrated their discontent and anger on the conditions of workers in Bangladesh. In response to citizens' protest we see some initiatives by global brands and retailers in garments importing countries. Most important are the formation of the Accord and the Alliance. Both initiatives were planned for five years.

The Accord of Fire and Building Safety (Accord) was established on May 15, 2013.

While the vast majority of Accord signatory

companies are European, some North American brands also joined the agreement. The American Apparel and Footwear Association and several US senators took initiatives to establish a non-binding programme, the Alliance that was formed in July 2013. Unlike Accord, the executive leadership of the Alliance consists of industry heads and company representatives.

While the Accord is a legally binding agreement between companies and trade unions, the Alliance is not legally binding and has no role for trade unions and workers and worker representatives. However, the Accord and the Alliance serve very similar functions in Bangladesh: they create a short-term inspection and monitoring system among some selected factories, 'conduct training for management and workers on fire and building safety, and provide some level of resources to their primary suppliers for remediation efforts'. It is interesting to note that, supplying companies of these facilities are already having sales show in Bangladesh!

These initiatives, however, do not cover the issue of compensation. In September 2013, representatives from the government, the garment industry both locally and internationally, trade unions and non-governmental organisations, formed the Rana Plaza Coordination Committee, with the International Labour Organisation (ILO) acting as coordinator. Based on the compensation estimates for the victims of Spectrum Garments using the benchmark of ILO, an approximate total of US \$74.5 million has been estimated to be

required to compensate the victims of Rana Plaza. That is far from being realised.

ILO, while coordinating Rana Plaza donor funds, is struggling to mobilise necessary funds to pay the compensation. It continues circulating appeal for donation from people around the world, when many of the parties responsible are escaping their responsibility.

It is important to note that all funding from the brands are still voluntary, no legal system has been formulated to force brands to fund as compulsory liability. When thousands of families of workers are living in permanent trauma, national and multinational enterprises have failed to uphold their responsibilities. No wonder that they make ways to increase their profit more than before.

GAINERS REMAIN GAINERS

Several studies show that with some of the world's lowest wages and no job security for its workers, the RMG industry of Bangladesh maintains one of the highest profits for owners, buyers and global retailers. Inhuman working conditions, low wages, verbal and physical abuse, irregular or non-payment of dues and the inability to organise are still common in many of the factories supplying world-class garments.

In the two years following the Rana Plaza disaster, the US government has earned more than US \$1 billion as duty imposed on imported garments from Bangladesh, but it did nothing to make US brands accountable! On the other hand, it suspended GSP services from Bangladesh 'to punish BD garment owners' where garments have never enjoyed the GSP facility!

As discussed earlier, the government of Bangladesh did little to protect workers interest, but the owners have succeeded to increase their benefit from public fund. Those include more export incentives, less duty on source, etc. Duty on source was reduced from 0.8 percent to 0.3 percent. Although the government provided benefit of nearly BDT 20 billion for the owners in this period, it failed to hand over donation money of BDT 1.2 billion to the workers, deposited to the Prime Minister's fund by different individuals and groups for the victim workers in the same period.

The global net of injustice allows factory owners, BGMEA, agents and global retailers to avoid responsibility, even after the murder of thousands. The government remains indifferent to its responsibility to take care of its own citizens. This shows a failed system of accountability at home and on a global scale.

The writer is member secretary of the National Committee to Protect Oil, Gas, Mineral Resources, Power and Ports.

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Let there be light

Two years after the Rana Plaza collapse, proper compliance standards are yet to be ensured.

ANANTA YUSUF

AT the beginning of the industrial revolution, a farmer was also able to make shoes, and the women spent their days making handmade pottery and spinning yarn or cloth. In a way industry developed from small farming families which eventually turned into big companies and introduced the use of machinery for production. The primary motive of an early capitalist was to have more goods produced at a lower cost. Five hundred years have passed, in third world countries like Bangladesh many companies still want to thrive on over-exploitation of cheap labour and low production cost.

Three major industrial disasters between 2005 and 2013 claimed nearly 2000 lives and yet it failed to wake us up. The garment owners still retain the mindset of those farmers who feared that crops might fail and so they needed to maintain low production costs. This archaic attitude has resulted in consecutive industrial disasters in the last ten years. We need to change this attitude since the small-scale apparel business has turned into an industry.

Bangladesh is yet to take proper measures to ensure a better environment inside factories and improved disaster management by procuring high quality rescue equipment and ensuring training sessions for efficient rescue work.

The 23rd meeting of the Social Compliance Forum for RMG at the

secretariat has revealed that faults related to workplace safety and other compliance issues were found in at least 700 export-oriented apparel units out of 2,400 factories that were inspected in Dhaka and Chittagong in 2013.

In fact, the Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishment (DIFE) is not serving its task to fight for the compliance issue. Two years after the Rana Plaza collapse, the department is yet to get the promised support of vehicles, trained workers and proper budget from the government to carry out inspections in factories. Though the National Labour Policy 2012 makes it obligatory for effective application of decent work, occupational safety and health within the general framework of rights of workers, the mushrooming of factories all around the country makes it impossible to maintain. Due to a lack of trained manpower and support, the DIFE failed to employ its first mission statement of 'implementing labour laws and regulations'.

National human rights commission (NHRC) in a research paper published in June last year asked the government to form the Special Approval Authority (SAA) to ensure improved factory infrastructure. Suggestions that came out of the research paper are lurking in the dust of the depositary of the Labour and Employment Ministry. The amendment in 2013 of the Bangladesh Labour Act 2006 has eased many complexities but it did not add any provision for compliance. This has only served to encourage factory owners to overlook such an important matter.



PHOTO: STAR

Besides compliance, one of the biggest threats to our apparel industry is abduction and torture of labour leaders. Labour activist Aminul Islam is one such labour leader who was tortured to death in April 2012. Like him Golam Azam, a former elected workers representative of the Ring Shine Textile Mills was allegedly tortured by law enforcers, after he led a workers protest, demanding their due payment. Two years after the massive Rana Plaza collapse, the CID has yet to file a charge sheet. These incidents indicate a tendency of the government to ignore these crimes and

punish those responsible. We should not forget that the "Made in Bangladesh" tag brings glory and economic prosperity for our country. We do not want to lose the existing market to Vietnam, India or China. So it is now the government's responsibility to ensure a proper environment and amend the Labour Law by adding a special provision for industry compliance. The international buyers also have to stop the unethical practice of collecting apparels at the lowest possible

price while ignoring possible non-compliance. Instead they should have proper information about the factory before providing any orders.

Rana Plaza is a lesson for us. It should always remind us that we struggled to rescue victims from a single building. Thus it's not difficult to understand what will happen in the case of large scale disasters such as earthquakes if we do not follow proper compliance standards.

The writer is a journalist of The Daily Star.

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QUOTABLE Quote

The most difficult thing is the decision to act, the rest is merely tenacity.

Amelia Earhart

CROSSWORD by Thomas Joseph

ACROSS

- Cloth fold
- An arm and a leg
- Walker's line
- "Cats" poet
- Losing, league-wise
- Summer, in Paris
- Mournful
- "Give -- rest!"
- Cart pullers
- Pewter component
- Greek letters
- Tough spot
- Ohio tribe
- Is boastful
- Single
- Phone bill addition
- Chopping tool
- R&B love song
- Road goo
- Highway rescue
- Punk rock offshoot
- Poor and homeless
- Leek's cousin
- Legal claims
- "Keen!"
- Composer Grofe

DOWN

- Worked, as a trade
- Slow, in music
- Consumed
- Fireplace bit
- Minotaur's slayer
- Yorkshire city
- Under the weather
- Armed group
- Lake activity
- Maroons
- Coral isles
- Leg bend
- Make tea
- Great joy
- Steve Martin film
- Resistance to change
- Grendel's slayer
- Whip
- Shorthand pro
- Baseball's Derek
- Improve, in a way
- Code creator
- Very popular
- Suit accessory

CRYPTOQUOTE

RS RD XEOF RE KMZAESQGA SBKS DXUA WAXWOA DQNNAM RE JEXLRECSBAUDAOZAD.

-- KEMGA CRMA

YESTERDAY'S CRYPTOQUOTE:

A MAN IS RICH IN PROPORTION TO THE NUMBER OF THINGS WHICH HE CAN AFFORD TO LET ALONE.

-- HENRY D. THOREAU

Yesterday's answer

SCATS GODS
PALIN INEPT
INANE LEVAR
TOM END IRA
SNOOZEALARM
BEE ATOP
BORED SPEWS
ARES APE
SILENTALARM
TOE YEN WAY
ELATE IMAGE
RESET SORER
SEAS HEEDS

A XYDLBAAXR is LONGFELLOW

One letter stands for another. In this sample, A is used for the three L's, X for the two O's, etc. Single letters, apostrophes, the length and formation of the words are all hints. Each day the code letters are different.

BEETLE BAILEY by Mort Walker

I KNOW YOU'RE A NEAT FREAK, JULIUS

BUT DO YOU HAVE TO STOP AND CLEAN THE WINDSHIELD EVERY TIME WE HIT A BUG?

HENRY by Don Trachte

SCHOOLS RE-OPEN NEXT WEEK

ICE CREAM

SODA FOUNTAIN