

PUTTING A PRICE TAG ON HUMAN LIVES



NO OFFENCE
NAHELA NOWSHIN

As of September of this year, the Rana Plaza Donors Trust Fund finally reached its target of \$30 million. In the aftermath of what was one of the worst industrial disasters in human history, it took more than two years for the fund to reach its target of \$30 million which was actually reduced from the original goal of \$40 million due to lacklustre response from brands and retailers. Despite immense international pressure and demands by activists all around the world asking brands to do their part, as of April of this year, about a third of the 32 companies that campaigners claim had business dealings with the Rana Plaza complex hadn't paid a penny towards compensation.

Walmart, the world's largest retailer raking in hundreds of billions of dollars in annual revenue, gave just \$3 million to BRAC USA, of which \$1 million will go directly to the victims and their families. Benetton had paid \$500,000 immediately after the collapse of Rana Plaza but the Italian apparel company that often produces adverts focusing on "social causes" announced it would contribute \$1.1m more after its failure to pay into the trust fund was highlighted. Its contribution of \$1.1m was way short of the \$5m that activists had been demanding. Inditex, the biggest fashion group worldwide founded by Amancio Ortega, the third richest person in the world, contributed \$1.6m to the fund... It doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out that even the brands doing "their part" are not doing nearly as much as they could to compensate victims and their families.

Although most of the Rana Plaza victims are said to have been compensated, the details of the payment scheme are hardly ever talked about, and media coverage is partly to blame for this. The question remains: are the victims and their families finally



A worker holding a placard in front of Tazreen Fashions factory in Ashulia

seeing the light of justice? Will these compensations suffice?

The Rana Plaza Arrangement was set up to provide medical care and compensate victims, their families and dependents. The claims system under the Arrangement designed for beneficiaries to claim compensation follows a general framework in accordance with ILO Convention No. 121 which deals with employment injury benefits. Its objective is to "provide lifetime benefits to Rana Plaza workers who are disabled as a result of

would have likely doubled.

In the case of the lesser talked about Tazreen fire that took place five months before the Rana Plaza incident, compensation for victims has been much poorer (averaging one to two lakh only including insurance) given that the Tazreen factory fire didn't garner nearly as much attention as Rana Plaza did. Many victims of the fire are yet to be compensated. Spanish department store El Corte Ingles, US brands Walmart, Disney, Sears, Dickies and Delta Apparel, Edinburgh Woollen Mill (UK), Karl Rieker (Germany), Piazza Italia (Italy), and Teddy Smith (France) have not paid a dime towards compensation. Now three years later, the Tazreen Claims Administration Trust (TCA) has finally been set up and will replicate the model of the Rana Plaza Arrangement which means that compensations handed out will be less than what they would have been if ILO Convention No. 121 were entirely followed. By and large, whatever compensation has been given out thus far to families of the affected of both industrial disasters has proved to be insufficient as confessed by these families themselves.

Sadly, the complex case of compensating the families of missing victims of both Rana Plaza and Tazreen has stayed under the radar, and there are a couple of things to be noted. First, the reliability of the primary source of identification that is DNA profiling was questioned when DNA tests could not identify the "missing 16" in the Tazreen fire. Activists blamed poor forensics and procedural errors, and although the government denied accusations of mismanagement, it did admit that procedural errors may have been made. As a result, some families of missing victims were compensated disproportionately. Second, the lack of formal papers and IDs of workers made things even more challenging for these families. BGMEA has been accused of denying that some of the missing workers ever worked at the factory even though the latter's relatives produced IDs as proof. BGMEA's refusal to compensate is hardly surprising given

its shameful role in enabling the systematic disappearance of garment workers (no digitalised records of workers, no legal documents).

Local factory owners often claim to be "sick and tired" of the stories of these industrial "accidents" constantly being told and retold. Businessmen, businesswomen and lobbyists tend to feel victimised by the international spotlight the RMG industry is under. Why should they pay the price for being part of an industry that's always under attack because of a "few bad apples," they ask. Aren't the media, writers and activists being a little too harsh? Doesn't this endless scrutiny serve to trivialise the leaps and bounds being made by the RMG industry and belittle "success stories" of women's empowerment and alleviation of poverty?

But can we really talk about "success stories" whilst wishing away instances of corporate homicide and turning a blind eye towards the dismal state of enforcement of labour rights? Despite labour law reforms, trade unionists continue to be intimidated and threatened with physical violence. Although Bangladesh has ratified ILO Convention No. 98 which recognises workers' right to organise, only ten percent of factories have unions of which only a minority has collective bargaining rights.

We have a long way to go before we can truly "celebrate". Tragically, industrial "accidents" have been reduced to a poster child for "corporate ethics" by money-hungry corporations tirelessly advertising their ethical products/supply chain.

We would do well to remember that the pain and the suffering of the affected do not end with compensation; the obsession with cheap fashion inflicts wounds that money can't heal. The incessant glorification of the RMG industry in the name of economic growth and job creation must stop because "cheap" labour comes with a far greater price tag and it's just not worth it.

The writer is a member of the Editorial Team at The Daily Star.

The ILO Convention No. 121 is only partly followed since Bangladesh has not ratified this Convention. The claims system does not take into account things such as the deceased's or injured's children's future education, and the gravity of injuries.

In Memory of Dr. Mohammed Abdul Aziz A Trailblazer in Medicine

LEEDY HOQUE

Few people in Bangladesh will have heard of onchocerciasis or river blindness, a devastating parasitic infection that claims the sight of millions of people worldwide. The parasite *Onchocerca volvulus* is transmitted by the blackfly which breeds in rivers. Larvae of the parasite mature into adult worms which in turn release microfilariae that eventually infiltrate the eye, causing blindness. It was a zealous Bangladeshi doctor based in the US who spearheaded the clinical trials back in the 1980s that eventually led to the discovery of a treatment for this illness, namely ivermectin, which is still considered the drug of choice for onchocerciasis. That doctor happened to be my father Dr. M A Aziz. This is the story of his endeavours. Sadly his life was cut short by terminal illness just as he reached the peak of his career. However, his work was taken over by another scientist by the name of William C. Campbell who, jointly with two other scientists, won this year's Nobel Prize in Medicine. I feel confident that this honour would have also been bestowed upon my father had he survived.

The Nobel Committee in their citation accompanying the announcement of the 2015 Nobel Prize in Medicine describes the scientific background of the discovery of ivermectin. "In 1981-1982 Dr. Mohammed Aziz at MDRL, an expert in River Blindness, conducted the first successful human trial (Aziz et al 1982). The results were clear. Patients given a single dose of ivermectin showed either complete elimination or near elimination of microfilariae load, while the adult parasites were untouched." The results of this study carried out in Senegal were published in the Lancet in 1982. An extensive study was also carried out with patients in Senegal, Ghana, Mali and Liberia. This time it was a double-blind study comparing the efficacy and safety of ivermectin,

DEC (diethyl carbamazepine, the drug previously used) and placebo, involving elaborate clinical, laboratory, parasitological and ophthalmological (fundus photography and retinal angiography) examinations. One single dose of ivermectin was effective in reducing the microfilariae even after 12 months and the side effects were considerably milder compared to DEC. These results were published in The New England Journal of Medicine and Lancet in 1985.

When my father was conducting these clinical trials, I was studying Medicine at Somerville College, University of Oxford in the UK. Whenever I saw my father he would talk to me with such passion about ivermectin, a drug that could transform the lives of generations of villagers in Africa where the blind literally led the blind. His enthusiasm for his work was infectious, so much so that I decided to write my final year dissertation on onchocerciasis.

I recall how keen my father was to have me join his research team upon completion of my clinical training. However, that was not to be. In 1986 his health began to fail. In the autumn of 1987 after receiving a call from my brother Tipu with the news that my father was desperately ill with cancer of the stomach, I flew to the States to see him.

He was out of hospital when I arrived and even then he was so positive, harbouring the desire to return to his research. He confided in me that his last wish was to see ivermectin distributed free to those affected by onchocerciasis. He succeeded, too, in this, persuading the pharmaceutical company to freely distribute the vital drug. In recognition of his efforts, Senator Edward Kennedy was to honour my father in a ceremony in Washington DC. As my father was too frail to travel independently, arrangements were made for a helicopter to airlift him to and from the award ceremony. Unfortunately I was not able to witness this as I



Dr. Mohammed Abdul Aziz

had to return to England. However, before I left, my father gave me his copy of the programme for the Merck Directors' Scientific Awards dated June 1987, which I have in my possession till this day. Beneath his photograph is stated his designation - "Senior Director Clinical Research, Merck Sharp and Dohme Research Laboratories" and the accompanying text reads as follows: "Mohammed A Aziz, MD, Ph.D has been most responsible for the clinical programme related to ivermectin. He encour-

aged the preclinical groups to provide the necessary support permitting human studies of ivermectin to treat and control one of the world's most devastating tropical diseases, onchocerciasis, a parasitic infection more commonly known as river blindness."

My father quietly lost the battle for his life at the age of 57 on November 25, 1987.

Following his death, The John Hopkins Hospital in Maryland, USA where my father had worked prior to joining MSD honoured him and still does with an annual memorial lecture in his name.

His dream of carrying out in his own words "research to help mankind" came to fulfilment when in 1987 WHO and Merck launched the "Mectizan (ivermectin) Donation Programme" which to date has treated over one billion people, with 80 million still undergoing treatment in Africa, Latin America and Yemen. Blindness due to onchocerciasis is definitely on the decrease and there are areas of Latin America and Africa where the disease has been completely eliminated.

The story ends with a letter dated October 27, 2015 from Kenneth C. Frazier (chairman, president and CEO of Merck) who wrote to my brother Professor Tipu Aziz: "Thanks to your father, Dr. Campbell and other key colleagues, river blindness and lymphatic filariasis are being eliminated in countries within Africa and Latin America. The Nobel Assembly said it best: 'The importance of ivermectin for improving the health and wellbeing of millions of individuals with river blindness and lymphatic filariasis, primarily in the poorest regions of the world, is immeasurable.' Your father's dedication to our company's mission saved millions of lives and changed the world for the better."

The writer is an autism specialist, and can be reached at leedyhoque@hotmail.com.

QUOTABLE Quote

KAHLIL GIBRAN

You talk when you cease to be at peace with your thoughts.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Bud holder
5 Prepares the hook
10 TV's O'Brien
12 Promptly, in a way
13 Band-leader Shaw
14 Fancy wrap
15 Hot drink
16 Lb. and oz.
18 Catch some z's
19 Geneva's nation
21 Moral no-nos
22 Sweet and sour condiment
24 Bird abodes
25 Dick Tracy baddie
29 Profound
30 Expired
32 Dripping
33 Letter after sigma
34 Spanish gold
35 Suspect's story
37 Compare
39 Zellweger of "Chicago"
40 Kid's transport
41 College houses

DOWN

2 Vast expanses
1 Sings like Ella
2 Shredded
3 Involve
4 Month after avril
5 Honcho
6 Hill resident
7 Well-recognized
8 Louisiana university
9 Oozes
11 Anchors, e.g.
17 Mosaic tile
20 Dawn
21 Writer Sontag
23 To blame
25 Kitchen gadget
26 Eye part
27 Lunchbox treat
28 Cry of discovery
29 Sleepy or Sneezey
31 Musical sounds
33 Father's Day gifts
36 Track action
38 Treasury Dept. div.

YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

S	O	W	E	D	D	A	T	E	S
C	R	I	M	E	E	J	E	C	T
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H	A	R	T	S	C	O	R	E	S

BEETLE BAILEY by Mort Walker

FOR GOSH SAKES, CLOSE THAT DOOR!

WHY DO YOU ALWAYS FORGET TO CLOSE THINGS BEHIND YOU?

GROSS MORT WALKER

BABY BLUES by Kirkman & Scott

AMATEUR