

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR
LATE S. M. ALI

DHAKA WEDNESDAY APRIL 25, 2018, BAISHAKH 12, 1425 BS

Lessons from Rana Plaza

We have learnt ours, have the buyers learnt any?

FIVE years after Rana Plaza collapse, the deadliest garment factory accident in history that took over a thousand lives, the collective efforts of the Bangladesh government, entrepreneurs, apparel retailers and brands, workers' rights groups, NGOs and inspection bodies such as the Accord and Alliance, have led to considerable progress in fire, electrical and structural safety in Bangladesh's garment factories. But more needs to be done.

However, we must ponder for a moment why Rana Plaza happened—why the factory was housed in a building that was not fit for a factory, let alone a number of them which the building actually housed, not to speak of the fact that it was in a dilapidated state. The underlying motivation was to produce cheaply. And that is what we want to flag. What attracts global retailers to Bangladesh is of course the cost of RMG in Bangladesh. But cutting cost doesn't mean cutting corners, certainly not sacrificing safety or cutting wages. And in this regard the buyers who insist on fulfilling every requirement, and quite rightly too, should also play their due role in sustaining the progress that Bangladesh has made in the RMG sector since April 24, 2013.

Production cost has gone up but global brands are not paying up. This is affecting both manufacturers at home and garment workers because the former's ability to pay better wages to the workers and be compliant greatly depends on global brands committing to more than they are now.

Garment workers' wellbeing is inherently linked to international brands' commitment to spend more on sourcing apparel items from Bangladesh. Experts and researchers have come up with some very good recommendations, such as bringing workers under insurance coverage, which will be very hard to implement until and unless global brands and retailers do their part to show that they are sincere about the livelihood of our workers.

A community's commendable effort

Their work for children with disabilities should be supported

NOT very often are we accustomed to seeing a news item as inspiring as the one about a school for children with special needs in Jessore published by this newspaper on April 24. A bunch of wilful and dedicated people of the district's Abhaynagar Upazila built the school on their own. The school—a tinshed building comprising four classrooms—currently caters to as many as 101 students, many of whom discontinued or were rejected from normal schools.

The school is recognised by its students of being so important and interesting that some of them travel up to eight kilometres just to attend classes. Both guardians and teachers reported improvements in students' learning capacity. They no longer feel dejected in the school, unlike normal schools, in which few mates would be willing to interact with them.

The idea that the interest of children with special needs can be served best if they are schooled in specialised institutions is barely reflected in our policymaking circles. This school's story should serve as an example of the crucial role such institutions can play in improving the future of one of the most marginalised sections of our society.

These children, too, have a right to have a proper education that meets their needs—something that normal teachers aren't trained to do. The school's teachers also reported that they could have better taught these kids if they had been trained. They have requested the authorities concerned to arrange such training but with no results.

These people did all they could to address the needs of these vulnerable children. But the authorities are not only failing to encourage them but could also very well end up demotivating them. We would urge the authorities concerned to facilitate what these people need to run the school even better. Only then will other people be inspired to do something helpful for society.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

Protect Rohingyas in monsoon

The Daily Star recently published a news item titled "Monsoon worry for Rohingyas." Most of the Rohingya camps were built either on hilltops or along hillslopes. As the monsoon season nears, many international agencies including UNHCR and IOM have expressed concerns over the risk of living in those camps. They have requested the government to shift the camps to more suitable places for that period.

There is also a serious threat of contagious diseases that spread faster during monsoon. Bangladesh has already earned global praise for its continued support of the Rohingya refugees. It's important that it will now consider collaborating with the international agencies to provide for this shifting. Otherwise, as the report indicates, those unfortunate people may face yet another disaster.

Md Zillur Rahaman, By e-mail

The tale of many, still and now

KNOT SO TRUE



RUBANA HUQ

ANNIVERSARIES are scary. They are reminders. While one celebrates life and bonds on anniversaries, in no time one also becomes a chip of a mosaic laced with memory. If one

pinpoints losses on particular dates, then one mourns with regrets and tears as maybe an extra day, an extra hour, an extra minute could have made a difference. This is how many differences are not made; this is how we lose many without being able to say our last goodbyes. This is how on April 24, 2013, families of 1,134 people mourned in shock and regret while the entire nation faced the crisis of a collective national tragedy.

As a response to this disaster, many came forward—unions, brands, in fact all actors including, of course, the government. As a result, Accord, Alliance and National Action Plan began to address the fire, electrical and structural integrity issues. As a result, a few thousand factories came under the scanner. Over the last five years, remediation has continued. Actually, in most cases, we have taken the compliance issue beyond the expected level and we now have more green factories than anywhere else in the world. We now can do orders with speed and claim a faster turnaround time. We now have projects with more efficient industrial engineering practices set in place. We have new platforms like Tripartite Consultative Committee, a body which has labour representatives, ministries and the relevant stakeholders to solve any industry related disputes. We now have a Remediation Coordination Cell to take care of ongoing remediation processes. Trade Union registration has also gone up. Labor Law and Export Processing Zone laws are scheduled to go through revisions as well.

This happy evolution has happened over the last five years through toil and tears. While brands pushed us for remediation, while we ran to banks for opening letters of credit to bring in the UL Certified fire-safety-related tools and products, while we kept on hearing about how international financial institutions would help us finance our remediation, in reality, we faced the darkness of the night. Most of the mid-sized factories scrambled for funds and wondered if it made sense for them to remain the same size or whether it was better to shift to bigger spaces, make more investments and just stay in business and bank on customers' loyalty and hope for better days to

come. While all of this happened, there was a serious infrastructural support that manufacturers needed to cope with; there were financial hiccups. Many tried running their factories with a generator in new premises and face gas crunch. Many retrofitted and many are still talking to their architects about a new building, in their own lands, if they are lucky enough to have one.

Many have closed down. Many have lost jobs. Many have downsized. But that's

collapse of Rana Plaza is a case of one side playing against the other. With time, this tragedy, most unfortunately, has morphed into a part of politics.

Today, we are looking at two platforms, Accord and Alliance, due to exit Bangladesh this year. The transition mechanism is yet to unfold. A national platform is yet to be formed. Even if one took RCC into consideration, we are still having to give brands the RCC start date of July 2018. So in more ways than one, we

without solving the core problem. Meanwhile real offenders seek loopholes and seal them with paper trails. If bringing attention to the workers' lives and safety is a real concern, then media-manipulation doesn't help. Headliners and critical opinion editorials may catch the attention of international policy makers, who may just decide to adjust their Bangladesh lens once again, but that does not affect the workers' lives positively. That change can only come through



Civilian volunteers assist in rescue operations after the collapse of Rana Plaza on the outskirts of Dhaka in April 2013.

PHOTO: MUNIR UZ ZAMAN/AFP

Unfortunately market reality. Markets aren't things we control from our end of the game. While consumers shift tastes and invest in diversity, while brands' and retailers' margins and sales figures get dominated by the storms, sleet and rain of the season, while we wait for the next order projections to come in, a lot of lives bear the brunt of our uncertainty. It is that fear that I want to write about today.

April 24, 2018: Five years on, Bangladesh is still getting bad press on Rana Plaza. Five years on, *New York Times* is still publishing unfounded, loose columns on how nothing has changed since 2013. Five years on, international journalists are calling us to get our views on whether anything has changed so far and whether we want to see the exit of Accord or Alliance. Five years on, the

have been slow in forming our own narrative. I would have defended our pace if I knew that we were actually moving. But we are not. We are still strapped by papers and corrective action plan (CAP) templates of compliance. Detailed engineering plans are still being studied, remediation assessment often is ending up with newer observation with every audit, and we are still left defenseless. So our pace being in question, with articles being written against the industry, not only do we get affected, but so does a worker.

International or national labour representatives continue to raise issues on workers still being treated poorly and do not hesitate to stage protests and start petitioning. Protests continue

collaboration of all stakeholders and well meaning steps to graduate to the next level of excellence in labour practice.

After having scored substantially well with remediation measures, can we not expect all stakeholders to now sustainably engage with the bigger picture of workers' welfare instead of one side of unions pointing all fingers and the other side of manufacturers engaged in a defensive gait? This war isn't going to be ever won by either side. This war can only lead to a hapless draw and then the only ones to suffer and languish in pain are going to be the workers. But then again, are workers even the real focus of any of our current discourse?

Rubana Huq is the managing director of Mohammadi Group.

Building national capacity to tackle climate change

POLITICS OF CLIMATE CHANGE



SALEEMUL HUQ

UNDER Article 6 of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), all countries are supposed to ensure awareness, education and capacity building to tackle climate change with the developed countries also promising to support these efforts in the developing countries. Each year, at the annual Conference of the Parties (COP), there is a negotiating track to review progress on Article 6. This negotiating track is usually very uncontroversial, and developed countries send their most junior negotiators as it tends to be quite cordial.

However, in the pre-negotiations for the Paris Agreement at COP21 in December 2015, the topic of support for capacity building became somewhat controversial as the developing countries, led by the Least Developed Countries (LDCs), challenged the prevailing paradigm under which nearly a billion dollars had been invested in supporting capacity building.

This paradigm consisted of developed countries allocating funds either through their respective bilateral aid agencies (e.g. USAID in US, DFID in UK and JICA in Japan) or through UN Agencies (e.g. UNEP, UNDP) or multilateral development banks (e.g. World Bank, Asian Development Bank) for supporting capacity building in developing countries. These agencies would in turn hire consulting companies or think tanks, with the bilateral agencies usually selecting companies from their own countries to "parachute" as international experts to the developing countries for a short time to carry out some workshops there. This fly-in and fly-out modality of supporting national capacity at best only delivered some short-term capacity with hardly any longer-term in-country capacity being left behind.

Another aspect of this prevailing paradigm was that each developed country decided the amount as well as channels of funding capacity building as well as which developing countries would be the recipients. The UNFCCC had no oversight of what was being delivered. Hence, the LDC group argued for the UNFCCC to have oversight as well as focus more on investing in capacity building systems that are able to sustain it at the national level without being dependent on international consultants for ever.

The developed countries were quite happy with the prevailing paradigm of consultant-driven support without

(PCCB) with a mandate to oversee all efforts for supporting capacity building around the world. The PCCB is constituted with equal representation from developed and developing countries.

Since then, the PCCB has developed its work plan and also initiated an annual Capacity Building Day at the COP where all the stakeholders involved in capacity building activities can share what they are doing. There has also been a number of new initiatives such as the University Network on Capacity for Climate Change (UNCCC) and the LDC Universities Consortium on Climate Change (LUCCC) as well as others

adaptation and mitigation.

The first phase is to raise the level of awareness of the problem by informing the general public about how climate change may affect the country. This has been largely achieved in the case of Bangladesh where climate change is now a familiar term.

The second phase for developing capacity to tackle climate change is to move forward from awareness of the problem to knowledge of solutions to the problem. Here it is important for each stakeholder group to actively learn about what role they should play to tackle both adaptation and mitigation to the climate change. Hence, the role of government officials from different ministries will be different from that of NGOs, or private sector or media or academia, etc. Each group will need to actively learn and be trained on their respective roles.

The third phase is to enhance the knowledge of the next generation of citizens through the education system so that in time every educated citizen of the country becomes a climate-resilient individual. This will take another decade or more.

In Bangladesh, we have largely achieved the first phase of raising awareness of the climate change problem and are now well into the second phase of training the different stakeholder groups on their respective roles. We need to now accelerate the training efforts to cover more and more groups while also investing in the educational institutions so that we start to produce climate-resilient citizens of tomorrow.

If an all-out effort to enhance national capacity to tackle climate change is made by all concerned, Bangladesh could transform itself from being one of the most vulnerable countries (in terms of climate change) today into one of the most resilient countries by 2030.

Saleemul Huq is Director, International Centre for Climate Change and Development at the Independent University, Bangladesh. Email: Saleem.icccd@iub.edu.bd



It's important to enhance the knowledge of the next generation of citizens so that in time every educated citizen of the country becomes a climate-resilient individual.

PHOTO: DIN M SHIBLY

oversight from the UNFCCC and resisted the demand for change.

The good news is that the LDC's argument was accepted and the Paris Agreement adopted Article 11 on Capacity Building which supports the need for every country to develop in-country sustainable capacity building systems and no longer depending on international consultants for ever. It also created the Paris Committee on Capacity Building

bringing together universities as well as think tanks from both developed and developing countries.

One of the challenges in delivering effective capacity building is how to measure it at the national level. Although there are still no universally recognised metrics of measuring capacity building, we can still categorise it in several ways, at least when trying to assess national capacity to tackle climate change through