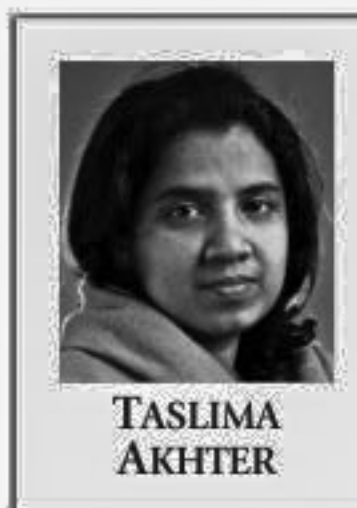


SIX YEARS AFTER RANA PLAZA

# From Triangle to Rana Plaza: Workers must be the priority



TASLIMA AKHTER

thousand workers of Rana Plaza, which collapsed on this day six years ago. I remember it was a day of scorching sunshine. The Bengali New Year had begun only ten days earlier. This is usually a time of joy and celebration when people take a fresh look at their life and make plans that would change their future. What was it like for those ill-fated workers?

On April 24, 2013, their day began, like workers in 59 districts across the country, with the familiar drone of machines. The nine-storey Rana Plaza had five clothing factories located in different floors of the building. News of cracks in the building had reached the workers but they were told to come anyway, and there was nothing they could do about it. Everything, however, changed when generators on the top floor kicked in after a power outage and the whole structure imploded. In a matter of minutes, it came tumbling down, floor by floor, like a house of cards. The rest is history.

Most of those who died in the collapse were aged between 13 and 30, with 58 percent of them between 18 and 25, and they were paid somewhere around Tk 3,000 per month. These figures make you shudder, and you wonder if there could be a more



People gather in front of a sculpture made by members of labour organisations at the site of collapsed Rana Plaza in Savar. PHOTO: REUTERS/FILE

meaningless death. Six years on, those whose greed and corruption led to these tragic deaths couldn't yet be brought to justice.

When we look at the circumstances surrounding the Rana Plaza collapse, we are reminded of another incident that took place over a hundred years ago: the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire. It happened in New York City, on March 25, 1911. Like the owners of the factories in Rana Plaza, the owners of this factory, located in the Asch Building which is currently part of New York University, also exploited its workers. Most of these workers were immigrants who came to the US from Italy and some Eastern European countries for a better future. They worked on a contractual basis, over 12

hours each day, and were paid a weekly wage of USD 7-12.

At that time, there was a movement going on which demanded increased wage, shorter working hours and better work environment for the workers. The movement, launched by the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU), boasted about twenty thousand members spread in various factories, including the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory. But the factory owners stubbornly pushed back against demands for reforms. It was against this backdrop that the fire incident took place, causing the deaths of 146 workers, 123 of them women and 23 men. Of the 146, 62 victims jumped to their deaths while the rest died from fire and smoke inhalation. The exits and stairwells of the

building were locked from outside which made it impossible for many to escape from fire.

The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire had a huge impact on the labour movement in the US. It moved the legislators and common folk alike and provided the rallying cry for improved factory safety standards. In a demonstration organised by the labour unions ten days later, 80,000 people turned up to express their solidarity with the demands of the workers. Over 300,000 people joined a rally organised to pay tribute to the fire victims. Two years after the Triangle incident, the daily working hours were reduced to 53. It also led to the formation of a Safety Code as well as 36 new laws on safety, factory inspection and other issues made within the first year of the incident.

The Rana Plaza collapse and the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire have several things in common. The victims in both cases had to endure hardship and exploitation as part of their daily lives. Both incidents were set in backgrounds hostile to the interests of workers. The Rana Plaza disaster seems like a replay of the Triangle tragedy, some hundred years apart, and both triggered universal calls for change in how workers are treated. In our case, however, the pace of change has been frustrating. The labour movement in Bangladesh couldn't yet gather enough momentum as workers have to face a myriad of threats including arrests, attacks and lawsuits if they try to speak up about the need for decent wage, workplace safety or job security. There is a climate of fear across the factories.

This is really unfortunate because a stronger labour movement and a motivated workforce actually helps in the production process which can contribute to better outputs.

After Rana Plaza, several cases were filed, and in only two of them, charge sheets were submitted to the court. Police have filed a murder case in which 41 people were made accused. Of them, 32 are out on bail, two deceased, and six are absconding; only Sohel Rana (who owned Rana Plaza) is in jail. The excruciatingly slow process of trial, while a judicial issue, doesn't at all help the grievances long nursed by workers about the continued disregard for their rights. If anything, it further aggravates them. Who will they turn to for their problems? In the last six years, there has been no substantial development in the RMG industry that could make the whole supply chain responsible for the change that is being desired.

The BGMEA is moving ahead with a vision: turn the industry into a USD-50-billion one by 2021, when the country celebrates its golden jubilee. It's an ambitious goal, and it will be a big achievement if we can fulfil that goal, but what about the workers? Can an industry expect sustainable growth without a properly motivated workforce? Can the image of the industry or the country remain untarnished if the voices of its workers are silenced and their rights denied? History has shown that only a proper labour movement can bring real change in the industry.

Taslima Akhter is President, Garment Sramik Sanghati, and a photographer. The article was translated from Bangla by Badiuzzaman Bay.

## Enforce building code for all public establishments



TUOMO POUTIAINEN

SIX long years have passed since the horrific tragedy that engulfed Rana Plaza on April 24, 2013. Over 1,100 workers perished that day and the devastation sent shockwaves not

just through the ready-made garment (RMG) sector but across the entire world.

Within months of the tragedy, the Bangladesh Labour Act 2006 was amended with revisions on occupational health and safety and provisions to provide workers with more voice, through freedom of association and collective bargaining rights. While more is needed, workers can increasingly raise the alarm on health and safety concerns in their place of work. More and more of them need to know that they have basic rights that must be respected and protected.

The Bangladesh government also made several major commitments to overhaul the Department of Inspections for Factories and Establishments (DIFE). Positions for hundreds of new inspectors were created in 2014, and DIFE's budget has since increased from USD 900,000 to USD 4.15 million in 2018-2019.

Thousands of factories have now been inspected and many thousands of

factory workers educated on fire and building safety (the critical importance of early detection, working fire alarms, and safe exit routes from all floors). Factory managers better understand that when a fire strikes, toxic smoke rapidly spreads through vertical shafts such as stairways in multi-storeyed buildings—making them unusable as escape routes, unless they are enclosed and protected.

Recent deadly fires in Dhaka have shown that lessons learned in the RMG industry must now be applied to all industries. In the event of a major fire, it is paramount that people can safely escape from a burning building—well before fire rescue services arrive. This is what the building codes such as the BNBC stipulate in their requirements for the design of all multi-storeyed buildings. Sadly, those rules and laws are being flaunted—with deadly consequences.

The country has come a long way since the Rana Plaza tragedy. On April 28, 2019, the government of Bangladesh will be celebrating its fourth annual National Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) Day organised by the Ministry of Labour. Much has clearly been done. And much more needs to be done.

For over 100 years, the ILO has been committed to advancing social justice and peace, and building just societies based on principles of decent work for all. In our centenary year, the ILO



PHOTO: FILE PHOTO

stands ready to support new initiatives to build a culture of safety and health at all workplaces. These initiatives should include comprehensive risk assessments of all public buildings with a focus on adequate fire evacuation measures. Prevention, fire suppression, adequate water supply, effective firefighting, and stricter enforcement of the country's building codes need addressing.

When workplace accidents lead to loss of life and debilitating injuries, the victims and their families must be compensated. The Rana Plaza Compensation scheme was closed in 2017 after providing USD 30 million to around 5,500 claimants. Its work is

now being managed by the Trust for Injured Workers Medical Care (TIWMC), which continues to provide lifelong support to those injured in the Rana Plaza factory collapse.

The ILO is now actively working with the government, employers and the workers' organisations on establishing a universal employment injury (EII) system that would include prevention, compensation and rehabilitation of any industrial accident and occupational disease in Bangladesh.

Under the proposed EII scheme, workers suffering from work-related injuries or diseases will be compensated for their loss of earnings

and also receive medical care and rehabilitation services. International brands and buyers, and major development partners are keen to see this scheme become a reality.

In its response to the Rana Plaza tragedy, Bangladesh has shown that change is possible. It has shown that the nation and its RMG industry increasingly have the know-how to safeguard its workers and its citizens from industrial accidents and poor working conditions.

The lessons learned from the RMG sector, including the work conducted by initiatives such as the Alliance and the Accord, have significantly contributed to this. The Accord's work needs to continue, while the government gradually builds its own capacity and manpower—all Accord factories must be brought to acceptable safety standards.

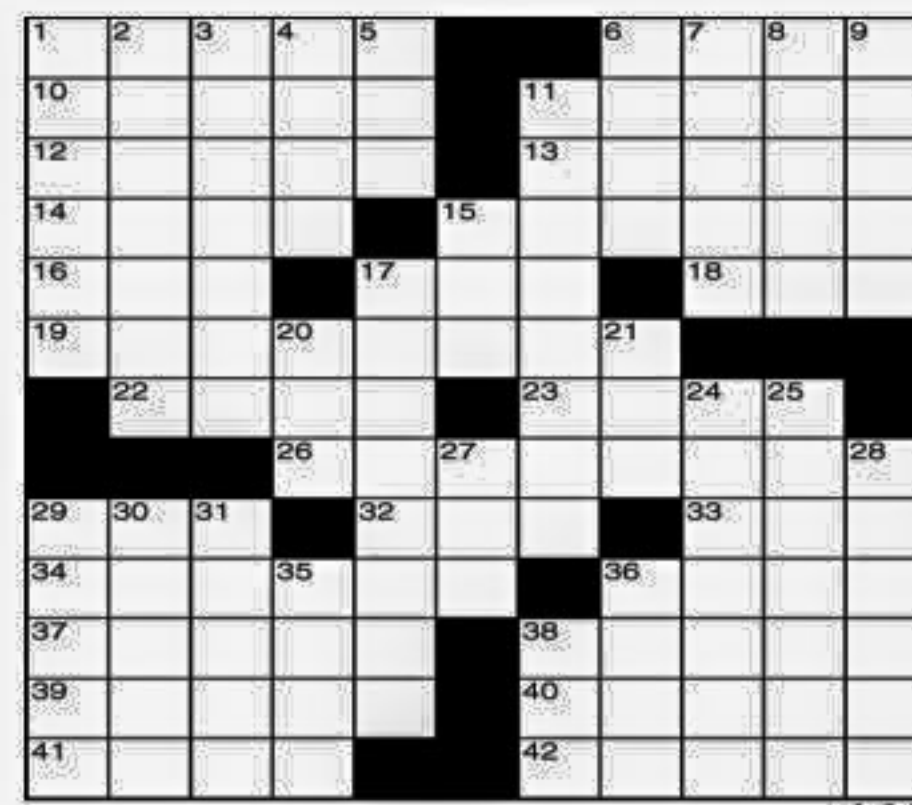
We now know what needs to be done to address dangerous workplace hazards in Bangladesh. A good number of investments and local innovation have been introduced to mitigate these health and safety risks.

Inaction, inertia and indifference are no longer acceptable. The lives of millions of workers and members of the public cannot be put at risk any longer.

Tuomo Poutiainen is the Country Director of International Labour Organization (ILO) Bangladesh.

### CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- |                       |                         |                             |
|-----------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------------|
| ACROSS                | 33 Squid's squirt       | 7 John of music             |
| 1 Irritate            | 34 Old fridge           | 8 Emergency light           |
| 6 Headed out          | 36 "Toodleoo!"          | 9 Used a keyboard           |
| 10 Bars on cars       | 37 Henry VIII's house   | 11 Nonsense                 |
| 11 Unwise undertaking | 38 "I understand!"      | 15 Adj. modifier            |
| 12 Closes             | 39 Florence's home      | 17 "Animal Farm," e.g.      |
| 13 Like draft beer    | 40 Happened             | 20 Lifeboat need            |
| 14 Pert talk          | 41 Gambler's giveaway   | 21 Costadel --              |
| 15 Candidate of 2000  | 42 Docking spots        | 24 Ace, for one             |
| 16 Yale student       |                         | 25 Crown repairer           |
| 17 Say further        | DOWN                    | 27 Scandal subject          |
| 18 Homer's neighbor   | 1 Quarterback, at times | 28 Rink need                |
| 19 Turns              | 2 Breathed out          | 29 Words to the band-leader |
| 22 Starting a hand    | 3 Hard to catch         | 30 Not obtuse               |
| 23 Driving site       | 4 Horse healers         | 31 Olympics award           |
| 26 Clears up          | 5 Curvy letter          | 35 Cotton pod               |
| 29 Deli choice        | 6 Protracted            | 36 Matador's foe            |
| 32 Salon stuff        |                         | 38 Mountain pass            |



### YESTERDAY'S ANSWER



### BEETLE BAILEY



### by Mort Walker



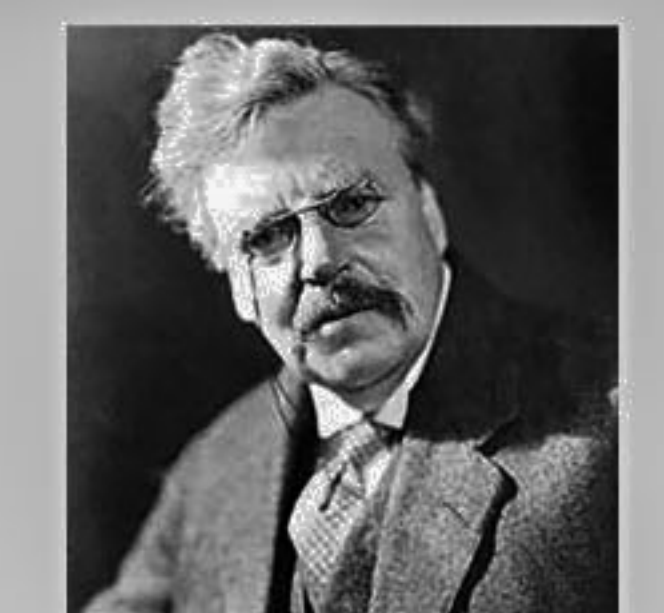
### BABY BLUES



### by Kirkman & Scott



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