

RANA PLAZA TRAGEDY: EIGHT YEARS ON

More needs to be done to ensure workplace safety

Says ILO Country Director Tuomo Poutiainen

REHAFET ULLAH MIRDHA

Yesterday was the eighth anniversary of Bangladesh's deadliest industrial disaster, the Rana Plaza building collapse. Many changes have taken place in the garment sector after the disaster that killed 1,138 workers and left more than 2,500 injured. Tuomo Poutiainen shed light on various aspects of the tragedy.

DS: What did Bangladesh learn from the collapse of the Rana Plaza building?

Tuomo Poutiainen (TP): In response to major industrial incidents in Bangladesh's readymade garment (RMG) sector in 2012 and 2013, a National Tripartite Plan of Action on Fire Safety and Structural Integrity was developed in 2013. Bangladesh now knows what needs to be done to address dangerous workplace hazards. The nation and its RMG industry have the know-how to safeguard its workers and citizens from industrial catastrophes and poor working conditions.

DS: Has the safety standard in the garment sector in Bangladesh really improved after the Rana Plaza building collapse?

TP: Bangladesh has come a long way since the 2013 tragedy. The initial aim was to identify factories dangerous to life and close them immediately.

As a result, thousands of factories were inspected on electrical, fire and structural safety; a wide range of safety remediation and improvement measures were taken; the most critically unsafe factories were closed by the government; and tens of thousands of employers and workers were educated and trained on occupational safety and health.

Yet not all factories are up to the agreed standards, and more still needs to be done to mitigate safety and health risks at workplaces. Key



Tuomo Poutiainen

to this is to have national codes that clearly outline requirements and the legal enforcement process for fire and building safety, better collaboration and alignment between government, employers, workers, and entities sourcing from Bangladesh, as well as a national framework on industrial safety that envisages development of expertise needed for world-class standards in Bangladesh, through partnerships between government authorities, private sector and academia.

Within months of the Rana Plaza building collapse, the Bangladesh Labour Act 2006 was amended with revisions on occupational health and safety and provisions to give workers a stronger 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 places of work. More and more of them need to know that they have basic rights that must be respected and protected. Safety committees are a legal requirement in all establishments with 50 or more workers. Safety committees have an important role to play to ensure decent working conditions

in workplaces. DS: How much compensation has been paid to how many victims of the Rana Plaza collapse so far? Is the amount that has been paid to the victims grant or compensation? Many union leaders say this is not compensation but a grant.

TP: The Rana Plaza Claims Administration (RPCA) provided \$30 million under its umbrella to around 5,500 claimants. This amount includes direct payment from Primark and financial support from the government. The RPCA was closed in 2015, and its work is now being managed by the Trust for Injured Workers Medical Care (TIWMC), which continues to provide lifelong medical support to those injured in the Rana Plaza building collapse.

The issue of whether the financial benefit provided under the Rana Plaza Claims Administration can be considered as "compensation" was raised in the tripartite plus coordination committee that governed the Rana Plaza Claims Administration. To respect the definition of compensation by the Bangladesh Labour Act, which states that direct employers' payment

to their respective worker can be regarded as compensation, the coordination committee decided to term the financial benefits as "award". At that time, the ILO's focus was to mobilise resource and reach adequate financial benefits to the victims in a transparent manner.

The ILO is now actively working with the government, employers and the workers' organisations on establishing a trial (pilot) of an employment injury scheme, starting in the readymade garment sector. This scheme would gradually include prevention, compensation and rehabilitation of any industrial accident and occupational disease in Bangladesh.

The current Covid-19 crisis has showcased the need to develop comprehensive social protection systems covering both formal and informal sectors. These types of investments require new thinking on how to address shocks to individuals, businesses and the economy as a whole. The ILO is working with the UN system, government, and its social partners on this.

DS: Are the RMG Sustainability Council (RSC) and the Remediation Coordination Cell (RCC) working well to protect the recurrence of the Rana Plaza building collapse in Bangladesh or not?

TP: While a lot has been done, the government needs to increasingly extend industrial safety work to all industries to ensure safe factories and establishments. The role of the government is essential in monitoring the industry and ensuring compliance with national codes and standards. In this regard, the garment industry is leading the way with the establishment of the RSC, which builds on the legacy of the private sector initiatives for remediation of RMG factories, and can serve as an example for other industries.

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Yardlong bean farmers over the moon with bumper yields

DISTRICTS IN FOCUS

MINTU DESHWARA

Farmers that cultivated yardlong bean in fallow lands in two unions of Kulaura upazila in Sylhet's Moulvibazar district are enjoying tremendous success thanks to bumper yields and a reasonable market price.

They now hope to expand cultivation with support from the government.

Favourable weather conditions and the availability of relatively cheap fertilisers led to a huge harvest this season, according to farmers.

Yardlong bean, also known as asparagus bean, was farmed on 50 hectares of land in Brahmanbazar and Baramchal unions of Kulaura this year, up from 40 hectares in 2020, data from the Department of Agricultural Extension (DAE) shows.

The region produces three varieties of legume. It is considered a good yield when one bigha of land produces 10 to 12 maunds of yardlong bean two months after planting.

Amid the ongoing harvesting period, many local women are engaged in collecting the vegetable. They are paid a portion of the harvest as wages.

"I can collect 14 to 16 kilograms of

yardlong bean daily and get one-sixth of it as wages," said Husna Begum, who was collecting the vegetable from a field in the upazila's Chokergram village on Friday.

Similarly, Aklima Begum, Helena Begum, Ambia Khatun, Kohinoor Begum, and Jahanara Begum are all engaged in the seasonal profession to add to their family income.

Wholesalers from all over the country come to Sreepur Madrasa Bazar on Kulaura's Brahmanbazar-Baramchal road to buy the bean from local farmers.

As such, the bazar bustles with activity from 6:00 am to 9:00 am almost every day as traders come to buy the vegetable.

During a recent visit to the area, this correspondent spoke to Md Harun Mia and Jahangir Mia, residents of Singur village, who had come to sell their yardlong beans at the market.

"Since my one and a half bigha of land would be otherwise left unused after harvesting aman paddy, I cultivate yardlong bean in December-January," Harun said.

He sells 700 kgs of yardlong bean at the wholesale market every day.

"So far, I have made around Tk 21,000 from the crop this year. I will be able to sell the vegetable worth another Tk 50,000 in one month," he added.

Jahangir said he had been cultivating the bean for 15 years now.

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Favourable weather conditions and availability of cheap fertilisers led to a huge harvest this season, according to farmers.

PHOTO: MINTU DESHWARA

Bitcoin tumbles below \$50,000, other cryptos sink over Biden tax plans

REUTERS

Bitcoin and other cryptocurrencies posted sharp losses on Friday, on concern that US President Joe Biden's plan to raise capital gains taxes will curb investments in digital assets.

News reports on Thursday said the Biden administration is planning a raft of proposed changes to the US tax code, including a plan to nearly double taxes on capital gains to 39.6 per cent for people earning more than \$1 m.

Bitcoin, the biggest and most popular cryptocurrency, slumped to \$47,555, falling below the \$50,000 mark for the first time

year, however, it was still up 72 per cent.

But while social media lit up with posts about the plan hurting cryptocurrencies, and individual investors complaining about losses, some traders and analysts said declines are likely to be temporary.

"I don't think Biden's taxes plans will have a big impact on bitcoin," said Ruud Feltkamp, CEO of automated crypto trading bot Cryptohopper. "Bitcoin has only gone up for a long time, it is only natural to see consolidation. Traders are simply cashing in on winnings."

Others also remained bullish on bitcoin's long-term prospects but noted it might take



REUTERS

Smaller rivals Ether and XRP fell 3.5 per cent and 6.7 per cent respectively.

since early March. It was last down 4 per cent at \$49,667.

Smaller rivals Ether and XRP fell 3.5 per cent and 6.7 per cent, respectively, while dogecoin, created as a joke for early crypto adopters and which had surged about 8,000 per cent this year prior to this latest setback, was down 20 per cent at \$0.21, according to price and data tracker CoinGecko.

The tax plans jolted markets, prompting investors to book profits in stocks and other risk assets, which have rallied massively on hopes of a solid economic recovery.

"With a high growth rate in the bitcoin price, crypto holders that have accrued gains will be subjected to this tax increment," said Nick Spanos, founder at Bitcoin Center NYC. He sees bitcoin dropping further in the coming days. Bitcoin is on track for an 11.3 per cent loss on the week, it is the worst weekly showing since late February. In the

time before prices start increasing again.

"Investors will see the price drop across the crypto market as an opportunity to widen their portfolio by averaging up their investment outlay and buying new altcoins," said Don Guo, chief executive officer at Broctagon Fintech Group.

He added that for bitcoin, investors will see it as an opportunity to buy bitcoin at a lower price.

Shares of cryptocurrency exchange Coinbase were up 0.5 per cent at \$294.86 in the early afternoon US trading. The public floatation of its shares on April 14 had seen bitcoin prices rise to \$65,000, before pulling back 25 per cent in the following days.

"The Coinbase listing - the ultimate poacher-turned-gamekeeper moment - might have been the high watermark for bitcoin," said Neil Wilson, chief market analyst at Markets.com.

GLOBAL BUSINESS

Germany set to upgrade 2021 growth forecast: minister

AFP, Berlin

The German government is set to upgrade its growth forecast for this year as industry holds up well to the economic fallout from the coronavirus pandemic, Economy Minister Peter Altmaier said Saturday.

"In January, we forecast growth of 3.0 per cent. Current data show that it will even be slightly higher," Altmaier said in an interview with the Funke media group. Europe's biggest economy shrank by 4.9 per cent in 2020 as restrictions to curb the pandemic hit many sectors.

The economy ministry is scheduled to unveil its updated gross domestic product forecasts on Tuesday.

"There are reasons to be



REUTERS/FILE

German Economy Minister Peter Altmaier in Berlin, Germany.

optimistic," Altmaier said, pointing to better-than-expected data as industry benefits from the global recovery. Nevertheless, he acknowledged that the anti-Covid restrictions - which are being tightened in Germany from this weekend in an attempt to rein in a ferocious third wave of infections - have hit sectors such as retail, gastronomy and hotels particularly hard.

The German economy will return to pre-pandemic levels "by 2022 at the latest," Altmaier said.

Last week, Germany's leading think-tanks similarly warned that the current wave of the pandemic would put the brakes on economic recovery, but they were pencilling in growth of as much as 3.7 per cent this year.

Oil edges higher as recovery support countered by Asia virus surge

REUTERS

Oil settled higher on Friday, supported by bullish economic data from US and Europe, though a rise in coronavirus cases in India was still pressuring prices.

Brent crude settled up 77 cents, 1.1 per cent, to US\$66.11 a barrel. US West Texas Intermediate (WTI) US crude gained 71 cents, or 1.2 per cent, to US\$62.14 a barrel.

For the week, both benchmark crudes fell about 1 per cent due to the resurgence of infections in India and Japan, the world's third and fourth largest oil importers.

"This price consolidation follows a strong four-month price advance that was largely predicated on US vaccine progress that forced some upward revisions in global demand ideas across this year," said Jim Ritterbusch, president of Ritterbusch and Associates in Galena, Illinois.

Euro zone Purchasing Managers' Index (PMI) data for April showed

a stronger-than-expected recovery and more European states began easing coronavirus lockdowns. France said schools would reopen on Monday.

US data added to the upbeat outlook; the number of

Americans filing new claims for unemployment benefits fell to a 13-month low last week. "The PMIs across Europe were really off the charts, especially following the strong unemployment report in the US," said John Kilduff, partner at

Again Capital LLC in New York.

US refiner Valero said demand for gasoline and diesel was at 93 per cent and 100 per cent of pre-pandemic levels.

International oil activity should ramp up through the end of this year and beyond, Schlumberger NV top boss Olivier Le Peuch said.

US energy firms cut the number of oil rigs operating for the first time since March, as rigs fell by one to 438 this week, according to energy services firm Baker Hughes Co.

Before this week, drillers added rigs for five weeks in a row and has been up 80 per cent since falling to a record low of 244 in August 2020.

Oil demand concerns weighed as India's coronavirus cases surged to record highs.

Several countries, including Australia, Britain, Canada, and the United Arab Emirates have barred or cut flights from India.

Japan declared new lockdowns in Tokyo, Osaka and two other prefectures on Friday.



REUTERS/FILE

A general view of the Amuay refinery complex which belongs to the Venezuelan state oil company PDVSA in Punto Fijo, Venezuela.