



At least 16 bodies were recovered from a garment factory in Rupnagar, Mirpur, following a devastating blaze triggered by a suspected chemical explosion.

PHOTO: STAR

MIRPUR FACTORY FIRE

How many more workers have to die before impunity ends?

TASLIMA AKHTER

Time after time, factory owners have evaded accountability through political connections and influence. In the post-uprising period, can we afford to allow this pattern to persist?

"Unknown 14, Unknown 15, Unknown 12"—such numbers were marked on the white plastic body bags holding the charred remains of seven or eight garment workers inside the morgue. The rest of the bodies were kept in another morgue's freezer. According to available information, the death toll stood at sixteen—nine men and seven women. Amidst the burnt remains, one of the bodies still had its eyes open.

From one of the body bags, the raised hand of "Unknown 14" was sticking out—perhaps a final desperate attempt to survive. The air felt suffocating, heavy, and unbearable. I hurriedly stepped outside. In front of

the emergency morgue, a few relatives of the victims were still waiting—hoping to identify their loved ones. The official in charge opened the door again. I wondered—how will these families find their people? How will they accept what they see? How will they carry such a horrific memory for the rest of their lives?

Overwhelmed by these thoughts, I left for the burn unit to meet the injured—Shukuruzzaman, Sohel, and Mamun. I could meet only two of them; Sohel was not in a condition to talk. From the others, I learned fragments of what had happened. I felt it would be cruel to ask too many questions. Their bodies and minds still bore the wounds of that terrible night.

It was Tuesday, 14 October 2025. Mirpur's Shialbari neighbourhood—around nine kilometres from Dhaka's bustling Farmgate—was just beginning to stir. As on any other morning, the rhythmic sound of workers' footstep filled the narrow lanes. Among them were fourteen-year-old Mahira Akter, a newly married couple of seven days, and others—Tofail Ahmed (21), Nargis Akter (18), Nure Alam (23), Sanowar Hossain (22), Abdullah Al-Mamun (39), Rabit Islam Robin (19), Nazrul Islam (40), and Muna—unaware that this ordinary morning would be their last.

Arian Fashion (some called it Anwar Fashion), a small garment factory employing 35 to 40 workers, stood opposite Alam Traders, an

unauthorised chemical warehouse. The workers produced hoodies and sweaters—sold in local markets and exported to Saudi Arabia under the brand Texora Global Ltd. Around 11 a.m., a deafening explosion erupted, and flames and smoke engulfed the building. The roof door was locked, and the narrow staircase below offered no escape. Even children aged between fourteen and fifteen were trapped inside, unable to make it out alive.

When we visited the site the following day, locals, workers, and relatives stood in stunned silence. The fire had been so fierce that rescuers could not enter the warehouse.

For more than fifteen years, workers in Bangladesh have suffered the same recurring tragedies, born of a culture of impunity. Time after time, factory owners have evaded accountability through political connections and influence. In the post-uprising period, can we afford to allow this pattern to persist?

We have long demanded reforms to the Labour Commission and amendments to labour laws to ensure workers' rights and dignity. The interim government's priority list, we were told, placed the labour sector at the top—to bring it up to international standards. We trusted those promises. Yet the Mirpur tragedy has again stirred our doubts, fears, and anger. The cries of these sixteen workers seem to echo through history—reminding us of Tazreen, Hashem Foods, Chawkbazar,

death—sixteen—may yet rise, as more cries of anguish join their ranks. The voices demanding justice for those lost at Rana Plaza, Tazreen, Hashem Foods, and countless other tragedies return to haunt us once more. None of us can claim innocence.

We can only hope that the cries of the dead reach the ears of the government. They must not forget—those "unknown" workers who died nameless were the very ones who gave their lives in the people's uprising, alongside students and ordinary citizens.

The progress of Bangladesh's labour sector and the dignity of workers' lives are inseparably linked. If we are to achieve democratic transformation, we cannot separate workers' rights, safe working conditions, and human dignity from national economic development. The new Bangladesh cannot bear another death born of negligence, nor another dream crushed by indifference. It must be built on unity and justice.

We must remain vigilant before the coming election. The new social contract of the new Bangladesh cannot exclude the workers. The dying cries of those sixteen workers still echo around us—we want justice, we want dignity as human beings, we want the guarantee of a natural death.

To prevent another tragedy like Mirpur, justice must be ensured. The culprits must be punished, and warehouses must be removed from residential areas. Equally necessary is



Even after 24 hours, firefighters continued to battle lingering smoke and toxic fumes at the Rupnagar fire site.

PHOTO: PALASH KHAN / THE DAILY STAR

Tikatuli, and Rana Plaza.

History sometimes teaches us lessons—but often, we fail to learn from our own mistakes. Let us hope that this time, the interim government will draw strength from history and set an example by ensuring justice for the victims of Mirpur. Alongside labour law reform, the government must also establish accountability for such structural killings. It must explain how unapproved chemical warehouses and hazardous establishments are allowed to operate in residential areas—and take immediate action to end this negligence.

The number of those burnt to

a new social order—one that belongs to the workers. We need a new image of the labour movement, and a new class of entrepreneurs who will see workers not merely as tools for profit but as partners in progress.

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The disappearing snails of Sundarbans

Protecting bonojibis is key to saving biodiversity

MD RAIHAN RAJU

for their daily subsistence.

There are multiple local agents in these regions already connected to the global supply networks of shrimp, soft-shelled crab, live eel fish, live crab, and chilled fish. Some of these agents have recently begun purchasing snails and mud clams from the Sundarbans region.

In mid September, the Bangladesh Forest Department moved to stop the widespread collection of snails and mud clams in the Sundarbans after discovering that the practice—illegal under existing forest laws—is causing serious environmental damage.

Snails and mud clams play a crucial role in maintaining ecological balance, enabling collaborative survival and sustenance among the various species within the wetland ecosystem. Most importantly, they help to sustain the food cycle, which is essential to maintaining ecological stability.

Snails and mud clams also play a vital role in maintaining aquatic ecosystems by absorbing harmful substances from river and canal beds, thereby helping to purify water and keep aquatic habitats healthy. They are often called natural filters. These species also serve as a crucial food source for fish, crabs, shrimp, and other aquatic organisms, thus supporting the biodiversity of these environments. A significant number of wild animals ultimately rely on snails and clams for survival.



Bags filled with snails and mud clams collected from the Sundarbans by local bonojibis are stacked and awaiting sale to agents who export them abroad.

PHOTO: MD RAHAMATULLAH

The removal of these species threatens not only water quality but also the entire aquatic food chain and ecosystem. Protecting snails is therefore essential for preserving biodiversity and sustaining the livelihoods of communities dependent on the Sundarbans' aquatic resources.

Furthermore, snails and clams play a key role in stabilising alluvial mud, helping to protect coastal areas from erosion. Rampant and unregulated collection of these species can disturb the sediment layer, leading to

increased riverbank erosion and long-term environmental degradation. Snail and clam collection often requires digging up riverbeds and alluvial mudflats, causing significant ecological damage. This practice disrupts natural habitats, destroys fish breeding grounds, and leads to a decline in crab and other aquatic populations.

According to Fazlul Hoque, Range Officer of Satkhira, Bonojibis began collecting snails and clams in large numbers due to shifting global food habits and rising international demand. These species have become delicacies in Singapore, Indonesia, China, Taiwan, and parts of Europe. Consequently, exporters have incentivised local communities to collect them. Although licensed to export live blood clams from the ocean, many exporters are reportedly sending mud clams instead.

However, these are not the only causes. Over the past two decades, fishing grounds in the Sundarbans' coastal regions have shrunk drastically due to various conservation laws and regulations. An elderly woman fisher from Munshiganj Union stated, "More than half of the forest is closed to us. Nobody can enter throughout the

year. Bondo bada has permanently restricted us. Some influential people enter these areas by bribing local forest officials, but fishers like us are not allowed." The business that has thrived around these restricted areas is locally known as bondo bada byabsa.

Another respondent from the coastal region lamented, "Earlier we never used to catch snails and clams. But since the forest is closed, what else can we eat if we do not collect them? They also fetch a good price."

For the Bonojibis of the Sundarbans, survival is becoming increasingly uncertain. More than half of the forest is now restricted for biodiversity conservation, and during certain periods, the entire forest is declared off-limits. Seasonal bans on fishing further tighten the noose, leaving marginalised fishers struggling to survive. With their traditional fishing grounds shrinking and no alternative livelihoods available, many have turned to collecting snails and mud clams, especially during the closed months of June and July. These landless Bonojibis, whose lives are inseparably linked with the forest's ecology, cannot simply be excluded in the name of conservation. Their forced disconnection undermines both their survival and the forest's balance.

Once protectors of the ecosystem, they are now driven by desperation—an unintended consequence of rigid, top-down conservation policies that ignore the human side of sustainability.

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