

Rana Plaza's haunting echo

What has changed and what must change

TASLIMA AKHTER

Some losses are irreparable. Some wounds, whether physical or mental, linger as unbearable memories, nightmares, and fear. Life is precious and invaluable to everyone, whether born in a hut or a palace. All share the desire to dream, to love, to be with loved ones, and to experience life fully. When life is lost or permanently scarred, its value cannot be measured in crores of taka or millions of dollars. Such loss, and the pain it leaves behind, are beyond comparison.

On April 24, 2013, 1,175 lives and thousands of dreams were crushed beneath the rubble of the Rana Plaza building. According to *Hajar Praner Chitkar* (2015, Bangladesh Garment Sramik Sanghati), 1,175 people died and 162 went missing, while around 2,500 were injured or permanently disabled. This is a date that cannot,



A scene of devastation at the Rana Plaza site in 2013, marking a catastrophic failure of industrial safety that claimed 1,175 lives.

on the third and eighth floors instead of the ground floor. Despite visible cracks appearing the day before, work continued. Shortly after the workday began, a power outage occurred. When the generators were switched on, the building collapsed with a deafening roar.

Workers like Rupali, Brojeswar, Shanthana, Shefali Madi, Runa Rani Das, Raja, Baby Akter, Anna, Mahedul, Ankhi, and Shalinara had come in as they did every day, unaware of what awaited them. What followed is now part of the country's collective memory.

For survivors, the past remains ever-present. When Rozina looks at her severed hand, it is not only the physical loss she sees, but the trauma of being trapped for three days before cutting it off to survive. Shirin and Shahed, a married couple, left for work together and never returned. Mohsina from Joypurhat and her mother were also among the missing. Two brothers, Shahin Reza and Al Amin, died side by side. Rikta, from Bikrampur, and her daughter Jabin never came home. Workers from 59 districts had travelled to Rana Plaza in search of a livelihood; their stories of loss spread across the country.

The rescue operation continued

for 17 days. On the 20th day, it was formally called off. Even then, the full toll remained unknown. For days afterwards, human remains continued to be recovered from the debris. Thirteen years have since passed, but the memory of that day endures—unresolved, and impossible to forget.

The history of the labour movement in Bangladesh cannot move forward without addressing the Rana Plaza homicide. From 2013 to 2026, 13 years have passed. In that time, how much have workers' living standards improved? What is the condition of those affected, and what has become of the perpetrators? How far have amendments to labour law progressed? Each year, as April 24 returns, these questions resurface.

It cannot be said that nothing has changed. The number of major building collapses and factory fires in the garment sector has declined, and structural safety has improved. Wages have also increased: from Tk 3,000 in 2013 to Tk 12,500 in 2026. Yet this rise has not kept pace with the growth of the industry or the cost of living. Surviving on Tk 12,500 remains difficult for most workers.

A year after the disaster, at the 2014 Dhaka Apparel Summit, industry

leaders set a target of transforming the sector into a 50-billion dollar industry within 50 years of independence. That ambition has since expanded. In 2022, the BGMEA outlined 20 goals for a sustainable garment sector, including reaching 100 billion dollars in exports by 2030. Bangladesh's economy remains heavily dependent on ready-made garment exports, with the country holding a leading position in denim exports to the European Union and the United States. There are now 280 LEED-certified green factories in Bangladesh, the highest number in the world.

Labour law has also undergone notable changes. Two of the most significant amendments came in 2013 and 2026. Within two months of the Rana Plaza collapse, on July 22, 2013, the labour law was revised across 87 sections. Thirteen years later, in 2026, a further 92 sections were amended, with stated aims of strengthening rights to life, livelihood, and freedom of expression for workers.

However, despite these developments, key issues remain unresolved. Compensation for victims and accountability for perpetrators continue to lag. Although there have been demands for compensation that reflects a lifetime's loss, legal

provisions have changed little. In 2013, compensation ranged from Tk 1 lakh to 1.5 lakh; it now stands at Tk 2 lakh to 2.5 lakh. Cases related to the disaster remain pending, and the judicial process has been slow, hindered by a culture of impunity and political influence.

The broader political context has also shaped outcomes. The period from 2013 to 2024 was marked by an environment in which the judicial process struggled to remain independent. Individuals such as Sohel Rana were widely reported to have links with those in power. The absence of timely justice has weakened deterrence, allowing negligence to persist in parts of the sector.

Fires and industrial accidents, though less frequent, have not ceased. Incidents such as the Chawkbazar fire in 2019, Hashem Foods in 2021, the Bailey Road restaurant fire in 2024, and the N.R. Fashion fire in Mirpur in 2025 underscore continuing risks.

Thirteen years on, Rana Plaza remains both a turning point and an unfinished chapter.

The Rana Plaza disaster was a wake-up call. Yet even after such a tragedy, no comprehensive database was created to identify workers, and the site itself was not preserved. In the immediate aftermath, significant legal changes were introduced under domestic and international pressure. Safety committees were established, and the requirement for forming a union was reduced from 30 per cent worker participation to 20 per cent, leading to a rise in unionisation. Under the 2026 labour law, a union can now be formed with just 20 workers, and safety committees have been made mandatory. Many provisions were amended in 2013 and again in 2026.

An elected government and parliament are now in place. The strength of democracy can be judged by the living conditions of working people. An accountable state, a democratic path, and a united movement can challenge the long-standing culture of impunity and advance workers' rights to life, livelihood, and dignity.

Taslina Akhter is the president of the Bangladesh Garment Sramik Sanghati and a member of the Political Council of Ganosamhati Andolon. She was also a member of the Labour Reform Commission (2024). She can be reached at taslima.74@yahoo.com



Relatives display portraits of the missing and deceased, symbolising the irreparable human cost and the ongoing struggle for accountability.

PHOTOS: ANISUR RAHMAN

and should not, be forgotten. It remains one of the most devastating industrial disasters not only in Bangladesh, but in the world. Just five months earlier, on November 24, 2012, 119 workers were killed in a fire at Tazreen Fashions in Nishchintapur, Ashulia.

Rana Plaza, a nine-storey building in a densely populated workers' area about an hour from Farmgate in Dhaka, was originally approved for only six storeys. It was illegally extended. The lower floors housed shops, banks, and a market; five garment factories occupied the middle floors, while the top floor was vacant. Generators were placed

Not just garment factories, all workplaces must be safe

SYED SULTAN UDDIN AHMED

It is often said that Bengalis unite in times of disaster and celebration. The Rana Plaza collapse thirteen years ago in Savar offered a stark illustration of this truth. As news spread that an eight-storey factory building had collapsed with thousands of workers trapped beneath it, people seemed to reach the site faster than the news itself.

A vast coalition of volunteers, rescue workers, fire service personnel and day labourers abandoned their livelihoods to save the injured. The response was total. Van drivers ferried casualties to Enam Medical College Hospital, where intern doctors waited at the entrance to provide urgent care. Housewives brought home-cooked khichuri for survivors. Engineers worked alongside ordinary citizens, risking their lives in the debris. One poignant memory remains of a mosque muezzin from Manikganj who arrived at NITOR with funds collected from his village. Seeing the overwhelming support already present, he quietly approached a BILS volunteer, embarrassed by the modest size of his contribution but determined to help.

We carry countless such memories, yet they are slowly fading. The nation is now paying the price for that erosion. The collective awakening and compassion that emerged in the aftermath were not transformed into lasting change. Those entrusted with that responsibility—the state and policymakers—failed to make permanent the resolve that such a tragedy should never happen again, that no one should have to stand beside rubble crying, "Where is my child? Where is my mother? Where is my brother? Where is my sister?"

We also failed to extend the national and international cooperation that followed—through which significant improvements were made in structural and fire safety in one sector—into a broader national model. As a result, the lessons of such immense loss, collective empathy and global solidarity remained confined to a single industry and a single moment. We did not embed them in our national consciousness or build a lasting culture of workplace safety. Consequently, major industrial accidents have continued to occur, claiming lives year after year.

The pattern is tragically familiar. Thirteen firefighters died in the Chattogram container terminal explosion—an event rare in global history. Nearly eighty workers were killed in the Hashem Foods factory fire in Narayanganj, fifty-five of them children. Families could not identify their loved ones; DNA testing was needed to return remains to grieving relatives. Similar scenes unfolded in the gas lighter factory explosion in Keraniganj, where once again identification required DNA tests. In many of these disasters, one recurring factor significantly increased fatalities: locked factory gates. This was seen in Saraka Garments, Tazreen Fashions and again in Keraniganj.

Elsewhere in the world, such catastrophes have often led to systemic change, with nations learning, rebuilding and setting new safety standards. After Rana Plaza, there was hope that Bangladesh would adopt a firm "never again" stance. The record since then tells a different story. From Rana Plaza to 2025, there have been 5,427 workplace accidents, resulting in 6,785 deaths. Industrial disasters—and workers' coffins—have not stopped.

Why did this happen? From the outset, there was a deliberate effort to let the incident fade from public memory. Offers of international rescue assistance were declined, the scale of the tragedy was downplayed, and investigation reports—both before and after Rana Plaza—were never publicly disclosed. Had the findings from investigations into tragedies such as Spectrum been properly disclosed, greater caution could have been exercised in granting building approvals, regulating structural use, and ensuring compliance. The collapse of Rana Plaza might itself have been averted. Likewise, had the findings of the Tazreen investigation been widely disseminated, the Hashem Foods fire might well have been prevented.

When the causes of accidents and regulatory failures are transparent, people take precautions. Instead, information was suppressed, institutions moved on, and, in time, the public was made to forget.

Through the Accord on Fire and Building Safety and the Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety, a multinational initiative



The 2006 KTS factory inferno remains a haunting precursor to Rana Plaza, exemplifying a decades-long failure to transform "collective empathy" into the permanent, legally-enforced safety standards the nation still lacks.

PHOTO: STAR

developed over several years, a model for structural, technological and fire safety was established in the ready-made garment sector, at least in larger factories. Other countries are now seeking to follow that model. Yet in Bangladesh, no meaningful effort was made to extend, formalise or legislate these standards across other industries. The issue was framed too narrowly. The collapse of Rana Plaza was often reduced to an unauthorised building with structural weaknesses. That was only part of the story. The deeper causes lay in weak enforcement of laws, ineffective regulatory systems, negligent approvals, disregard for worker safety, and the absence of workers' rights to speak or organise. These conditions allowed workers to be forced back into a visibly cracked building, reassured by officials over loudspeakers that there was no danger.

This entrenched culture of negligence is reflected in the near absence of justice. From Tazreen Fashions to Keraniganj, the pattern remains unchanged. Only one individual—Rana—has been imprisoned. Others have faced no meaningful accountability, nor has responsibility been clearly established. This lack of consequence has fostered recklessness

and indifference towards safety.

Justice is not only about punishment; it serves as a warning to society. That warning has not been delivered. Even where structural improvements have occurred in certain sectors, legal reform has lagged behind. In Bangladesh, the maximum penalty for death due to negligence remains four years' imprisonment, while compensation typically ranges between BDT 200,000 and 250,000. Such minimal penalties do little to incentivise investment in safety. As one construction contractor remarked, safety equipment can cost more than the compensation paid after an accident. That stark calculation reflects a deeper systemic failure.

Without legal reform, strict enforcement and a commitment to learning from past failures, infrastructural improvements alone will not break this cycle. Escaping collective indifference is now an urgent task. Every workplace must be made safe, all workers brought under legal protection and a national database, and the right to refuse unsafe work without fear of losing employment must be guaranteed.

Participation is essential. Beyond

infrastructure and technology, safety requires a framework that actively involves workers, employers and inspectors. While Rana Plaza led to the formation of safety committees, these remain largely confined to a single sector and are often ineffective. Efforts have not been scaled or sustained.

The risks are visible in places like Keraniganj, Mirpur and Bailey Road, where factories are densely embedded within residential areas. Community awareness, local government engagement and the role of elected representatives are critical. With around 85% of economic activity occurring informally, even bystanders are at risk, as seen in the Tampaco explosion.

We do not argue for closing factories; we argue for making them safe. Safety strengthens productivity, employment and local economies. The claim that safety threatens livelihoods is false. Nothing is more valuable than life, and a safe industrial zone creates more sustainable growth.

Equally important is infrastructure in industrial areas. Older zones like Tongi and Tejgaon once offered healthcare, education and dignified living. Today, in Ashulia, Narayanganj and Gazipur, millions of workers lack basic civic facilities. This worsens disasters, hinders rescue efforts, and harms physical, mental and social well-being.

Industrial production must be planned. Neglecting it is neglecting life itself. If we adopt "Safety first, safety for all" as a national principle and openly examine past accidents, we can build awareness while learning from successful reforms.

One positive outcome of Rana Plaza was compensation based on ILO Convention 121, replacing token charity. Yet it was never codified into law or expanded, and disability assessment remains weak. Many survivors continue to suffer without long-term care.

Forgetting does not heal. Our task is to turn sympathy into lasting commitment and make safe work a norm. Only then can we say we have learned—and ensure it never happens again.

Syed Sultan Uddin Ahmed is the Executive Director of the Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies (BILS).