



Tazreen Fire – the Ground Realities



Asian Network for the
Rights of Occupational and
Environmental Victims



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TAZREEN FIRE – THE GROUND REALITIES

Background

Bangladesh's textile sector is concentrated in export processing zones in Dhaka and Chittagong. The textile industry includes knitwear, ready-made garments and some specialized textile products. The export from textile sector accounts for about 80% of the total exports from Bangladesh. Bangladesh now ranks third in world textile exports (by value), only lagging behind Turkey and China, US and Europe are the major export destinations for Bangladesh garments. There has been intensive strife in the garment industry sector through the years as workers' most basic demands for acceptable minimum wages; work safety and freedom of association remain unmet, while the protests and riots of workers are met with police and company repression. Low salaries, unsafe working conditions, lack of proper training methods, and other issues make the RMG sector as one of the most hazardous to work in. More than 500 workers have lost their lives in the past 5 years due to fires in various factories. Some of the major incidents of fires in factories in RMG sector include deaths of 51 workers in fire at Garib and Garib, Matrix Sweater and Ha-Meem Group in 2010, death of 65 workers in factory fire at Chitagong KTS composite textile mills in 2006, death of 20 workers at Narayangonj Sun Knitting in 2005, 48 workers killed in a fire at a garment factory in Narshingdi in 2004, 53 workers killed in 2000 in a fire at Narshingdi Chowdhury Knitwear, death of 22 workers at Mirpur Rahman & Rahman Apparels in 1997, death of 27 workers at Mirpur Tamanna Garments in 1997, and 27 killed in fire at Mirpur Sareka Garments in 1990.¹

Tazreen Fire Accident

A fire broke out at Tazreen Fashions, Nischintapur, Ashulia, Dhaka, Bangladesh on the night of November 24, 2012. The factory employed more than 1200 workers almost 95% of whom were females. The annual turnover of the factory was over USD 36 million. The major buyers include Wal-Mart, KIK GMBH, Teddy Smith Ace, C&A, Li & Fung,

¹ Bangladesh Garment Industry in Turmoil By Surendra Pratap

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Infinity Women, Karl Rieker, Carrefour, Dickies, Ikea etc². The fire resulted in the deaths of 111 workers and more than 300 workers were injured. This accident created an uproar against the existing work conditions in the RMG sector globally. Wal-Mart cancelled its import contract with this factory considering its inadequate occupational safety measures. There were multiple investigations undertaken by the government and the garment association (BGMEA – Bangladesh garment Manufacture and Export Association) which termed the fire as “pre-planned” and sabotage.

Ratna braved a jump from the fifth floor to escape the advancing flames



The Bangladesh Occupational Safety, Health and Environment Foundation (OSHE) carried out an independent investigation into the incident to highlight the root causes and failures resulting in the large number of deaths and injuries in the incident. The team conducted field investigations, visited the factory site, met the workers and victims of the factory, met government officials and other Stakeholders. The findings of the report were presented during a multi-stake holder consultation on “Safe Work at Garments

Factories in Bangladesh: Lesson Learned from Tazreen Fire Accidents- Challenges and Way Forward” held at the CIRDAP Auditorium, Dhaka on January 7, 2013. A large number of people from different trade unions, NGOs, government agencies, victims, media, academics etc were present during the discussions.

A visual documentary titled “Death trap” was showcased on the occasion. The documentary showed the conditions in the factory and the vulnerability of the workers.

Mr Omar Faruk of OSHE presented the findings of the investigations.

- *There were no fire or emergency exits or stairways*
- *There was only 1 main entrance and exit way which is situated on the ground floor which was in itself not wide enough to accommodate the number of workers in the factory*
- *fire extinguishers and other fire defense materials were inadequate and were not to be found during the fire*
- *111 workers lost their lives out of which 58 have been identified.*

² Tazreen Accident Investigation Report by Md. Omar Faruk, OSHE

- *53 bodies are still unidentified*
- *DNA samples have been taken from the victim's families and report is awaited. It was told that the results will be disclosed only when all samples are collected.*
- *Most of the workers died due to suffocation and burns. only 6 workers died due to fall from height*
- *The second floor collapsible gate was locked and the highest number of dead bodies (69) were recovered from this floor. Supervisors on the 2nd and 3rd floors stopped the workers from evacuating the factory when the fire alarm went off stating the alarm as a false.*
- *Owner did not follow building code, had a nine storey factory but had permission only for three floors.*
- *Raw materials were stored on the ground floor and in close proximity to the high voltage electric transformers which resulted in the flames spreading at a fast rate.*
- *The factory did not have a renewed fire safety certificate either.*
- *Compensation of BDT 600,000 has been handed over to 45 families so far out of 58 deaths.*
- *Almost 300 workers are injured, some seriously although BGMEA has so far prepared a list of only 63 injured workers. The OSHE team has compiled a list of 89 injured and 58 cases of death due to the fire tragedy.*
- *Only 40 workers out of 1200 had received a basic fire safety introduction.*

During the meeting, Mr. Israfil Alam, the Chief Guest and Chair of Parliamentary Standing Committee on Ministry of Labour and Employment appreciated OSHE initiative for independent fact findings and criticized the report of the investigation conducted by Bangladesh Garments Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) terming the accident as “sabotage”. He said the BGMEA report has been designed to save the employer of the factory and termed the report as ill motivated, defensive and biased. He demanded the immediate arrest of the owner of the factory. He concluded by saying that “the garment factory owners are yet to become humans. They are still owners of garment industries.”

Brig. Gen. Abu Nayem Md. Shahidullah, Director General, Fire Service and Civil Defence expressed his dissatisfaction on the unwillingness of RMG factory owners to ensure fire safety provisions. He disclosed that every year 1500 fire accidents are taking place across the country. He emphasised on structural safety in the work places. 40 % of accidents occur due to short circuits.

Sanjiv Pandita, Executive Director, AMRC, expressed deep outrage at the colossal loss of life, which is now unprecedented by any scale. We cannot control fires, as accidents happen. However fires should not kill so many workers; fire safety is the minimal basic that workers deserve. Providing safe fire passage is well known for more than a century since the ‘Triangle Fire’ of New York in 1911, and if they are not there or remain blocked than this shows the apathy towards human life.

Mr. Shukkur Mahmud, Chairman of National Coordinating Council for Workers Education (NCCWE) emphasized on a National Policy for RMG Sectors. Criticizing the RMG owners Mr. Mahmud said that, the owners do not care for the rules and regulations of the country. He proposed to conduct a nationwide survey on occupational safety in RMG and the factories lacking the standards should be closed. He blamed the Government agencies for not carrying their responsibilities properly. He strongly demanded the arrest of the Mr. Delwar Hossen, owner of Tazreen Fashion Ltd.

The victims of the fire spoke about the situation in the factory and narrated their traumatic experiences. They spoke about the supervisor who refused to let them out of the factory. They said that in order to escape and save their lives, they had to break the windows and jump out. Khaleda who was three months pregnant was forced to jump from the third floor (mercifully both she and her baby are not seriously injured), Ratna braved a jump from the fifth floor to escaping the advancing flames.

Morsheda, Age – 30, Sewing Operator said that she was working in the evening of that fateful day. “Suddenly I felt that fire is moving to me, I tried to go down stairs but I was not allowed by the managers. Finding no other alternatives, I broke the window glass with other workers and jumped below. I was able to save my life, but got injured seriously. I cannot move my hands properly and have partially lost my eye sight.”

Muhammad Syed Ali, Age – 40 said -”I was working on the 3rd floor, suddenly I heard the fire alarm and tried to go down to the ground floor, but my Factory Manager advised me not to go down. By this time the smoke engulfed me and I was not seeing anything. Rapidly I rushed to the window and escaped by jumping out. I was injured and shifted to mother and child care center and moved to Dhaka Medical College and Trauma Center. BGMEA paid for my initial hospital charges.”

Mr. Roy Ramesh Chandra, Chairman of the Bangladesh National Council (BNC) an affiliate council of the global union federation IndustriAll said the employers of Tazreen should be immediately arrested for the murder of 111 workers and compensation should be settled immediately along the lines of the Spectrum fire accident tragedy.

The following recommendations emerged out of the consultation to address the needs of the Tazreen fire victims and for ensuring fire safety in the RMG sector of Bangladesh:



Short term-

- *Immediate, free and comprehensive Medical treatment for the injured workers and the traumatised community.*
- *DNA testing for unidentified bodies should be completed and report released without further delay*
- *National Policy on health and safety in the RMG sector should be formulated.*
- *Every factory owner should ensure the Bangladesh National building codes and fire safety guidelines are followed in their establishments.*
- *Formation of Fire Safety and OSH committees comprising of workers representatives (independently elected) on every floor of the factories during working hours. Members of these committees should receive appropriate training on fire safety.*
- *All workers should be provided adequate fire safety and OSH trainings, fire drills to be conducted regularly and refresher trainings provided.*
- *Adequate compensation to be provided immediately to all workers.*
- *There were demands made to arrest the owner of the factory and to try him for willful murders.*
- *Pressurize the buyers and brands to ensure that there are adequate safety provisions in the factories from where they are procuring their goods.*

Long Term -

- *Creation of a fund with contribution from the employers association, buyers, brands, workers and government to ensure social security and welfare of the workers.*
- *Strengthening of government structures like factory inspectorates and Fire safety, establishing a culture of accountability.*
- *rehabilitation for the injured workers*
- *Government to ensure the implementation of the Bangladesh Labour Act 2006 and other relevant laws and International Conventions & recommendations on health and safety.*
- *Formation of mobile courts at the factory level to ensure that workers get speedy justice for their disputes.*
- *Self-regulatory codes and mechanisms should be dismantled.*
- *To consider power and fire safety clearance as pre condition of issuing license to a garments industry*



Fact Finding Mission to Ashulia

The next day we visited the factory site at Ashulia, around 50 kms from Dhaka. We met with about 60 victims at the local primary school (the charred bodies from the factory were placed in the classrooms of this very school on that fateful day) who once narrated their harrowing stories of being forced to jump out of factory windows to escape death. We saw victims with bones broken in their spine, hands, legs, neck and hips. There were cuts, bruises and burns all over their bodies. First aid was administered to the injured workers on the day of the accident but no other medical help has been provided since. The victims looked terrified and traumatized due to their experiences. Even the children were terrified and it may take many months of therapy for the community to overcome this catastrophe.

Sahira has been mentally traumatized by the horrific fire and is now in constant fear of dying. Deepti was injured so seriously in her legs that she had to be brought to the school in a cart. She could not stand on her own. People with photos of their missing family members approached us hoping that we may help them to ascertain the fate of their loved ones who have



disappeared since that day. Sakina has lost her daughter, Abdul has lost his wife and daughter, little Raina has lost her mother, Roshani is missing her husband. There were many more heart wrenching stories. The family members left behind have nothing the look forward to and seemed to have lost their will to live.

More than a month and a half has gone by but still all the deceased have not been identified. The injured are still waiting to receive free and comprehensive medical treatment and rehabilitation. There is an urgent need to provide immediate and comprehensive medical treatment to these victims to enable them to regain their health and become employable again. Some are only hurt physically but most are hurt mentally as well. There is a need for rehabilitation of these victims some of whom were the sole bread earner for their families and now are facing a grim and uncertain future. The ultimate cost of development of the RMG sector in Bangladesh is being paid by these invisible workers who have sacrificed their lives and limbs.



We then went to the site of Tazreen Factory and saw the rampant and obvious building code violations in the building – no fire exits; building more floors than permitted, grills on windows, only one entrance and exit from the factory etc. We also saw the openings left behind by the broken industrial exhaust fans through which the workers jumped to escape death. The factory was surrounded by residences and if the fire had spread, it would have caused grave damages.

Immediate steps need to be taken by all concerned and as Mr. Repon Chowdhury; Executive Director of OSHE stated during the multi-stakeholder consultation - “History will not forgive us if we fail to ensure justice for the Tazreen accident victims. Upholding the dignity and guaranteeing safe & decent work for all workers in the RMG sector of Bangladesh is an immediate necessity”.



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