

Garment workers protest after Bangladeshi fire

By Peter Symonds
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Thousands of Bangladeshi garment workers from the Ashulia industrial zone north of Dhaka took part in angry protests yesterday over the Tazreen Fashions factory fire that claimed at least 112 lives on Saturday night.

The protesters demanded justice for the victims, the punishment of the factory's owners and improved safety conditions. Police set up a roadblock on the main Dhaka-Tangail highway to prevent the workers from marching towards the city. Clashes broke out, with protesters throwing stones at police and passing cars.

One worker, Shahida, told Reuters: "I haven't been able to find my mother. I demand justice, I demand that the owner be arrested." On Sunday, some 40 garment worker organisations held a rally in front of the Jatiya Press Club in Dhaka.

Clearly aware of the widespread anger over the fire, managers closed many of the hundreds of garment factories in the Ashulia zone yesterday. Police sources told the *Daily Star* that the closures were "to avoid any untoward incident".

Fearful of wider unrest, the government declared that all garment factories would be closed today in a national day of mourning. The expressions of concern by government and opposition parties in parliament yesterday were completely cynical. Successive governments have taken no action over the appalling safety standards in the lucrative garment industry, which accounts for 80 percent of the country's exports, generating earnings of \$US19 billion.

Desperate to deflect attention from the government and employers, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina Wajed, without a shred of evidence, yesterday claimed that the fire was an act of sabotage. Pointing to the arrest of two people who allegedly set fire to a different factory on Sunday, Hasina declared that the Tazreen Garment fire

was undoubtedly "pre-planned" and accused "a vested quarter" of committing "acts of sabotage to destabilise the country".

Dhaka police superintendent Habibur Rahman Khan also claimed Saturday's fire was "likely to be an act of sabotage". He announced that law enforcement agencies had beefed up their presence at garment factories "to look after their security". This police build-up is clearly aimed at suppressing protests by garment workers who have previously participated in large-scale strikes and demonstrations over pay and conditions.

Senior fire fighters have already indicated that the likely cause of the Tazreen Garment blaze was an electrical fault. Regardless of how the fire started, the reasons for the high death toll lie in the lack of basic safety standards in the eight-storey building. Workers had no means of escaping, as doors were either locked or led to the ground floor, where the fire started.

One survivor, Mohammed Ripu, told Associated Press that he had been stopped from leaving the building after the fire alarm went off: "Managers told us, 'nothing happened.' The fire alarm had just gone out of order. Go back to work. But we quickly understood that there was a fire. As we again ran for the exit point, we found it locked from outside, and it was too late."

Many of the injuries and some of the deaths occurred when workers jumped to escape the fire. Bangladesh's chief factory inspector Habibul Islam said that the factory, which was built in 2009, had only been given permission for three storeys. "They expanded the building without our approval," he said.

The building lacked adequate fire fighting equipment. Another worker, Yeamin, told the Associated Press that the fire extinguishers in the factory didn't work, and

“were meant just to impress the buyers or authority.” TV footage showed investigators finding unused fire extinguishers inside the factory, the news agency reported.

Employers have paid limited compensation to the families of victims. The government has set up several inquiries. Labour Minister Rajiuddin Ahmed Raju yesterday declared that he would shut down garment factories that did not have at least two fire exits. Similar promises have been made previously, only to be broken.

Amirul Haque Amin, president of the Bangladesh’s National Garment Workers Federation, told Reuters: “This disastrous fire incident was a result of continued neglect of workers’ safety and their welfare. When a fire or accident occurs, the government sets up an investigation and the authorities, including factory owners, pay out some money and hold out assurances to improve safety standards and working conditions. But they never do it.”

The trade unions, however, have colluded with successive governments in maintaining low pay and poor conditions, in the name of keeping the country’s garment industry “internationally competitive”. Labour costs in Bangladesh are lower than in rivals such as China, Sri Lanka and Vietnam.

Global corporations that source their garments in Bangladesh have been quick to try to distance themselves from the fire. PVH, Nike, Gap, American Eagle Outfitters and the French company Carrefour have all released statements declaring that their products were not made at the Tazreen Garment factory.

Walmart issued a statement declaring that it was “trying to determine if the factory has a current relationship with Walmart or one of our suppliers.” However, Kalpona Akter from the Bangladesh Centre for Worker Solidarity, found labels at the site for Walmart’s Faded Glory brand, as well as for leading European retailers.

Associated Press has reported that inspections of the factory conducted for Walmart had given it a “high risk” rating in May 2011 and a “medium risk” rating in August 2011.

Anxious to protect their brand names and profits, and avoid any legal liability, international corporations have established various supposedly independent

factory audits for safety and working conditions. But such inquiries are often perfunctory.

A spokesman for the European retailer C&A said that Tazreen Fashions had been due to deliver 220,000 sweatshirts over the coming three months. He explained that the company normally conducted an audit for standards and working conditions before entering a business relationship, but acknowledged it had not been carried out in this case.

The global corporations are well aware of the atrocious pay, conditions and safety standards throughout much of Bangladesh’s garment industry. While buyers insist on the most exacting standards when it comes to price, manufacture, quality and deadlines for their products, similar conditions do not apply when it comes to the wellbeing of the workforce.

The result has been one tragedy after another, with at least 500 deaths from garment factory fires in Bangladesh since 2006. Yesterday another fire broke out in the first floor of a 12-storey building that houses three separate garment factories in the Uttara area of Dhaka. No casualties have been reported, in large part due to the efforts of construction workers in a neighbouring building, who quickly made a bamboo ladder to allow trapped garment workers to escape.

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