

Anger mounts as death toll exceeds 1,100 in Bangladesh building collapse

By Sarath Kumara
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The death toll from the Bangladesh building collapse had reached 1,127 by Sunday evening, confirming it as one of the world's worst-ever industrial disasters. Army official, Brigadier Mohammad Siddiquil Alam, indicated yesterday that the search operation would end by today, claiming there was little chance of finding further bodies.

The numbers killed may be much higher, because more than 3,000 workers, mainly female garment workers, were employed in Dhaka's eight-floor Rana Plaza. A complete list of names of the dead and missing has yet to be prepared, nearly three weeks after the catastrophe. That is an indicator of the callous attitude of the government and employers toward workers. Yesterday, a court directed the government to submit a list of those still missing, using identity cards, photos, appointment letters and documents collected from relatives.

The Rana Plaza, where five garment factories were located, collapsed on April 24. Even though cracks had been observed the previous day and the building closed, Rana Plaza owner Sohel Rana insisted it was safe. Factory owners compelled employees to go back to work the next day.

The rescue of Reshma Begum, 19, discovered alive in the rubble last Friday, 17 days after the collapse, highlighted the horrific nature of the tragedy. Begum said: "I hit the concrete with sticks and rods to attract attention. No one heard me. I never dreamed I'd see the daylight again." She had survived with a little dry food and drinking water in the building's basement. Begum has been taken to a military hospital, where she is recovering.

Most of the newly-found bodies had decomposed after three weeks. More than 200 were buried unidentified, said to be beyond recognition. Anxious to

see the bodies of their loved ones, nearly 400 people came forward to give blood for DNA identification.

The simmering anger among workers about the fate of their colleagues was shown again on the weekend. In the Ashulia industrial zone, tens of thousands staged protests on Sunday, shutting down about 100 factories. They demonstrated for around two hours, demanding higher wages and capital punishment for Sohel Rana. Another protest occurred on Monday in the Mirpur area, against the dismissal of 13 garment workers.

Nervous that further protests could erupt, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's Awami League is making vague promises to improve working conditions in garment factories. On Sunday, the cabinet established a wages board to recommend a higher minimum wage, in three months' time.

The wage was last increased in 2010, after a determined struggle by garment workers, in defiance of a government crackdown. But it was still on a poverty level of \$US37 a month, the lowest garment industry wage in the world. That was the benchmark for supplying the profit-hungry giant retailing companies in the US and Europe, which will not tolerate any significant wage increase.

The government is making a show of checking faulty buildings. Commerce Minister Ghulam Muhammed Quader said the labour ministry and fire service had found 943 defective factories and asked companies to repair them, but only 20 such factories had been shut down.

The minister said building safety would be monitored by the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association and the Bangladesh Knitwear Manufacturers and Exporters Association—that is by the factory owners themselves. These two bodies have promised to monitor safety measures in the past as

well, but have completely ignored the issue.

The *Daily Star* reported that there were only 51 inspectors in Bangladesh to investigate about 200,000 factories, including 5,000 garment factories. For garment factories, there were 18 inspectors. These figures underscore the official indifference toward workers, who are regarded as objects with which to extract profits.

In a revealing switch, the government said it would amend labour laws to allow trade unions to be formed without employers' permission. Successive governments have refused to permit unions, and Hasina's government established a new industrial police force in 2010 to crush workers' resistance. A labour activist Aminul Islam, who tried to organise a union, was killed last year, most likely by the police or employers' thugs.

The Western media has depicted the promise to allow unions as an improvement for workers, but the government is calculating that unions will help contain and control workers. After angry workers struck for four days following the Rana Plaza collapse, international media outlets published opinion columns favouring the establishment of unions.

An editorial in the *Times* yesterday concluded: "Most Western companies say they respect the right to unionize but have done little on that front. They should actively press factory owners to honor the right of workers to negotiate for better conditions." This policy is based on the recognition that trade unions internationally, including in the US itself, have been transformed into organisations for subjugating workers to the requirements of the corporate elite.

As a public relations exercise, some major buyers have put on an "altruist" face. Joe Mimran of the Canadian company Loblaw—whose garments were made in the collapsed building—said: "We must do a better job to enforce the safety of workers producing our products in Bangladesh and around the world." Swedish-based H&M, the largest buyer of Bangladesh garments in Europe, said it had signed an agreement to help finance safety and building improvements.

Behind this deceitful sympathy—after the exposure of their direct responsibility for the loss of more than a thousand lives—the international companies plan to continue their cheap labour exploitation. Associated Press noted that Bangladesh remained one place where

the demands of global buyers for "high volume, low prices, good quality and predictable service" could be met. These companies' profit margins are estimated at 60 to 80 percent.

Every aspect of the tragedy has underscored the culpability of the major retail corporates, as well as the complicity of the Bangladesh government and the country's garment manufacturers.

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