

Victims of Bangladesh building collapse neglected

By Wimal Perera
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Nine months after the collapse of the Rana Plaza building complex in Bangladesh killed more than 1,100 people, mainly garment workers and almost 1,000 more, the families of the dead and the survivors have received little assistance and a pittance in financial compensation.

The local administration paid the families of those killed 20,000 Taka (\$US258) for funeral expenses and the Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina promised about 100,000 (\$1,290) in cash plus saving certificates. The Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) paid the unpaid wages of the victims who received as little as \$38 per month.

For many of the families, the limited compensation has been spent leaving them in a desperate situation. Most of the dead were young women from poverty-stricken rural areas who took jobs in the garment factories to support their families. The families of the seriously injured who cannot work face the same plight.

Speaking to the *New York Times* last month, 40-year-old Monju Ara explained that she had lost her 17-year-old daughter Smriti. “We are a poor family. That is why my daughter had to start work. Her wages helped us educate our younger children. Now we had to stop educating them,” she said.

Rehana Khatun, 20, lost both her legs in the disaster. She told the newspaper that she had left her village to find a job at Rana Plaza to make money for her marriage and to support her younger brothers’ education. “I dreamed that I could see my mother smiling. Now it is meaningless to talk about what my dreams are,” she said.

About 200 workers who worked in the Rana Plaza factories are still missing. Their families have received no compensation. Abu Kashem Mollah told the

Guardian that he was still waiting. “I have searched frantically. I have given DNA samples. I have given my phone number again and again at many different offices and to many different people but no one has contacted me. I can’t understand it,” he said.

BGMEA officials suggested that many such claims were fraudulent. Senior home ministry official Mainuddin Khandakar blamed the families of the victims, saying that “these are village people who are unclear about how they can properly trace [their relatives].”

Last month an agreement was signed to establish a \$40 million fund to provide long term compensation for survivors and the relatives of dead workers. The deal was signed by the BGMEA, Bangladesh Employers Federation and IndustriAll Global Union and a coalition of trade unions in Bangladesh.

While the agreement was hailed as a “landmark”, just four of the global retailers identified as connected to the Rana Plaza garment factories—Bonmarche, El Corte Ingles, Loblou and Primark—agreed to the fund on December 24. Of the remaining 25 companies involved, some are yet to make any offer. Others have refused to make any payment.

According to the *New York Times*, Mango, a Spanish brand, declared that it only had a test order at one of the factories. Walmart claimed that an unauthorised contractor was producing garments at Rana Plaza without its knowledge. The Children’s Place declared that it would not provide compensation because its garments were not being produced at the time of the collapse.

In one way or another, the major transnationals exploit the complex system of subcontracting to distance themselves from the gross forms of exploitation in the sweatshops that produce their items

in Bangladesh and other countries. All of them are responsible for the dirty, dangerous and arduous conditions in which workers labour for little more than \$1 a day.

If the compensation package for the Rana Plaza victims is somewhat higher than usual, it is only because the scale of the disaster threatened to undermine the reputation and brand names of the companies involved. The compensation package is simply part of a carefully contrived exercise in damage control orchestrated with the assistance of government officials, trade unions—local and international—and various non-government organisations.

A *Wall Street Journal* article on December 24 detailed the miserly approach of the companies to work out the compensation amounts, which is not only based on the existing poverty-level wages, but on the lower life expectancy in Bangladesh. For the injured, a guide has been developed to rank the level of injury and calculate the tiny payouts involved.

Details of the \$40 million fund are yet to be confirmed. The *New York Times* explained: “The fund’s members said they hoped to begin making payments in February, although they have yet to decide how much each firm will contribute, which depends in part on whether governments donate.”

The overriding concern of the global retailers, Bangladesh government and local garment manufacturers is to ensure that nothing stands in the way of the country’s \$20 billion export industry and the large profits that it produces.

Little will be done to end the failure to enforce basic safety standards in the thousands of garment factories in the country. According to a task force established to inspect factories, 50 percent are located on premises that are not safe. In November last year, 112 workers burned to death in a Tazreen factory.

Under its “fire, electrical and structural safety inspection” program, the government, with the assistance of the International Labour Organisation, had inspected 150 factories by December—well short of its target of 200. Bangladesh has nearly 5,000 garment factories.

It was only after the recent wave of workers’ strikes and struggles that the government was compelled to announce an increased monthly wage of \$68—still the world’s lowest. Many factory owners complained they

could not pay this limited wage.

The lengthy delay in paying any long-term compensation to the victims of the Rana Plaza tragedy and their families simply underscores the broader contempt of the corporate elite towards some of the most oppressed sections of the working class.

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