

Bangladesh plastics factory fire kills 13 workers

By John Lucas
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At least 13 workers, including two women, died and many others were injured in a devastating fire that erupted at the five-storey Appco Bangladesh plastics factory in Dhaka's Mirpur 1 district on Saturday afternoon. It took about 20 fire trucks three hours to extinguish the blaze, which is believed to have been caused by an exploding gas cylinder in a ground floor boiler room. Fuelled by plastics and other high flammable material, the fire rapidly spread throughout the building.

The bodies of the dead—most of them aged in their 20s—were badly disfigured in the blaze with two charred beyond recognition. Four workers—Towhidul Islam, 50, Kamal Hossain, 35, and Robiul Islam, 35—were hospitalised at the Dhaka Medical College Hospital and are in a critical condition.

According to the latest news reports, the Appco plant was operating illegally, lacked adequate fire safety measures and had never applied for a factory license.

Established in 2006, the plant recycled plastic and foam to make bags and other disposable household goods. It had two shifts, each run by 75 to 80 workers.

One of the firefighters, Abdulla-al-Arefen, told the media that the fire “spread so quickly after a gas cylinder explosion and there were huge inflammable substances, including chemicals, in the factory, that the employees could not use the fire extinguishers.”

Three workers escaped the fire by smashing a window and jumping from the plant's top floor and onto the roof of an adjoining plant. “We got trapped inside as the fire engulfed the building quickly through the stairs. We came out after locals cut the grills to make space,” Nazma Begum said.

Another worker, Shathi Akhter, said she was working on the first floor and “heard a big sound and later saw huge black smoke coming out from the ground floor.

Immediately after I heard another sound, and saw fire. I don't know what happened to the 10 people working on the first floor.”

Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has awarded a pittance in compensation to the families of dead workers and injured survivors. The families of those killed will each receive 20,000 taka (\$257) and those injured will get 5,000 taka for medical expenses.

Five days before the Appco blaze, Bangladesh began its 10th International Plastic Fair, attended by the hundreds of international investors. The event showcases Bangladesh's low cost, cheap labour plastics manufacturing industry.

While garment production accounts for most of Bangladesh's annual export earnings, the plastic industry has emerged as a major manufacturing sector during the past two decades. About 5,000 plastics factories, many of them small businesses, currently employ about 1.2 million workers. An estimated 1,200 of these plants operate illegally.

In 2012, the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific hailed the Bangladesh plastics industry, saying it could increase its annual turnover to \$2 billion this year and double it to \$4 billion by 2020.

Yesterday an editorial in the Dhaka-based *Financial Express* entitled “Providing props to plastic sector” praised the industry for its “tireless efforts to develop the plastic sector.” The newspaper made a one-sentence reference to the Appco fire, commenting only that the deaths demonstrated that the government should establish special industrial zones and help put plastic manufacturing on “a firm footing.”

The Bangladesh labour and employment ministry has formed a four-member inquiry committee headed by department of inspection for factories deputy inspector general Iqbal Hasan to investigate the Appco fire. It has

been directed to issue an official report on the disaster within three working days. The fire service has also established a three-member committee to investigate the fire's cause.

Whatever the outcome of these investigations, little will change in the working conditions and health and safety of Bangladeshi workers. A report last year by the Bangladesh Accord Foundation (BAF) found that major safety and construction flaws, including lack of adequate fire doors, sprinkler systems and dangerously-high weight loads on buildings, existed in hundreds of factories through Bangladesh.

The fire follows the collapse of the Rana Plaza complex in April 2013 that killed 1,220 people, mainly garment workers, in one of the world's worst industrial disasters. Just five months previously, the country's worst ever factory fire gutted the eight-storey Tazreen Fashions building, killing at least 112 workers. Some two years later, the oppressive and unsafe sweatshop conditions that led to these tragedies remain.

The workers who died in the Appco fire are the latest victims of the ruthless drive by global corporations to maximise profits through the exploitation of sweatshop labour in countries such as Bangladesh.

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