

Bangladesh: 41 belatedly charged over Rana Plaza factory collapse

By Sarath Kumara
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More than 32 months after Bangladesh's worst industrial disaster, the Rana Plaza factory collapse that killed more than 1,100 people, mostly garment workers, a court last month indicted the building owner and 40 others, including local government officials, on murder charges.

After the police took more than two years to file charges in June, Senior Judicial Magistrate Md Al-Amin decided on December 21 to proceed with the trial. This process is essentially a belated face-saving attempt by Awami League-led government in Dhaka, which has a long record of disregard for the appalling conditions facing apparel workers.

The multi-storey Rana Plaza building, which housed five garment factories at Savar, just outside Dhaka, collapsed on April 24, 2013. At least 1,135 workers were killed, while about 2,400 were rescued. Around 300 were injured, many seriously.

Prosecutors charged Sohel Rana, the owner of the building as the prime defendant. A regional leader of the ruling Awami League, he is accused of ordering workers to return to the building despite reports of cracked plaster and an engineer's opinion that the building was unsafe.

Rana's parents, who jointly owned the building with him, and the mayor of Savar, were also charged, along with associates of Rana who "slapped and forced" the workers to join the shift, the prosecutor said.

Seven owners of factories housed in the complex and 12 safety and inspection officials were charged. Four government factory and building inspectors were indicted, despite attempts by the government to shield them from prosecution by citing public service immunity rules.

Rana is in custody, 16 others are on bail and 24 defendants have fled. If convicted, they can face life imprisonment. In a separate case, Rana and others have been charged with violating building codes and with

illegally extending the six-storey building, which was initially approved as a shopping mall, into a nine-storey factory complex.

This public relations exercise does nothing to rectify the conditions of Bangladesh's workers, who continue to be brutally exploited, on poverty wages, in unsafe conditions, for the benefit of the country's ruling elite and global clothing chains.

After the Rana Plaza tragedy, in the face of worldwide outrage, giant international retailers such as Walmart and Gap in the US and Marks and Spencer, H and M, Carrefour and Tesco in Britain, all of which have deals with Bangladesh garment companies, declared they would intervene to correct the situation.

To date, however, the victims of the catastrophe have not been paid adequate compensation, and these corporations continue to profit from the labour of some of the lowest paid workers in the world, toiling in death-traps.

Just six months before the Rana Plaza collapse, 112 workers burnt to death at the Tazreen Apparel factory. Apart from cosmetic moves, such as some safety inspections of factories, and the closure of a few unsafe locations, the situation remains the same.

Two recently-released reports have shed light on some of the worst conditions.

A 43-page report, *Beyond the Tip of the Iceberg: Bangladesh's Forgotten Apparel Workers*, was produced in mid-December by New York University's Stern Business School Center for Business and Human Rights. Based on analysis of factory data collected from public sources as well as a field survey, the report identified more than 7,000 factories feeding into the global fashion industry, contradicting previous estimates of 3,600 factories.

The report noted that around 3,800 factories, employing some 3 million workers, were engaged in

subcontracting—“an essential element of Bangladesh’s low-cost, high-volume model of garment production.” These indirect-sourcing-factories operated “on very tight margins and with very little oversight, increasing the vulnerability of workers to safety violations and labor rights abuses.”

Of the 479 factories surveyed last June in two sub-districts of Dhaka, 32 percent were informal subcontractors. Of these, 91 percent produced at least partly for exports.

Most of the factories operated outside the two limited safety programs—the Bangladesh Accord for Fire and Building Safety (Accord) and the Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety (Alliance)—initiated after the Rana Plaza disaster. These programs cover just 27 percent of garment factories.

The other report, by the International Labor Rights Forum, based in Washington, noted that production targets and workloads of workers were “so high that managers prevent them from taking restroom breaks, drinking water, stopping work at a reasonable hour, or seeking leave to attend to their own or family members’ medical emergencies.”

The 108-page report, *Our Voices, Our Safety: Bangladeshi Garment Workers Speak Out*, was based on interviews given by more than 70 people, despite a “chilling web” of intimidation. Workers said wages were low and sexual harassment and abuse were routine, with authorities using threats and violence to keep workers silent about fire, electrical and structural safety issues.

Dalia Sikder, 22, a sewing machine operator, described what happened when she sought to help form a union. “Local thugs harassed us on our cell phones. They got our number from factory management. ‘You’ll need to leave the union if you want to stay at the factory,’ they told us. They also called my mother threatening her.”

Describing the factory conditions, Sikder said: “The factory management began to mentally abuse the workers. They increased our workload and did not allow us to use the toilet freely. A guard would follow us to the toilet to make sure that we didn’t talk to anyone. I was supposed to do 50 pieces before; now I had to do 150 pieces in an hour. I sewed waistband linings onto pants. While I was doing that job they yelled at me more than ever before. If I couldn’t do the workload in eight hours, I had to stay for 11 to 13 hours until I was done but they only paid for eight hours.”

The Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) rejected New York University

Center’s report at a December 24 press conference. The employers’ group said the report was “confusing” because it failed to distinguish local manufacturers from export-oriented ones.

BGMEA president Siddiquir Rahman claimed that only 3,600 factories produced garments for the international market and buyers did not allow any illegal sub-contracting. He declared that the BGMEA “will not take the responsibility of the non-member factories,” which was a tacit admission of the widespread abuses.

In reality, the garment sector earned its highest-ever export earnings in 2015, precisely because of this low-cost regime. For all the false “sympathy” expressed by Western governments and international retail giants after the Rana Plaza debacle, what attracts them to Bangladesh is its cheap labour.

According to Bangladesh’s Export Promotion Bureau, between January and November 2015 garment exports raked in \$26.26 billion, more than \$2 billion higher than for the whole of 2014. This was despite adverse currency shifts, which cut income by an estimated \$3 billion.

The employers hope the situation will be even better in 2016, aided by a cleaned-up public relations image. The BGMEA’s Siddiquir Rahman said that “2016 will be better than 2015 as all the factories have already been inspected and are safer now.”

With more Chinese factories exiting the garment sector due to relatively high labour costs, Bangladesh is seeking to become the globe’s largest apparel exporter. For this to happen, the *Daily Star* called for the “restoration of international retailers’ confidence in the structural soundness of Bangladeshi garment factories.”

Though 60 percent of their exports currently go to Europe, Bangladeshi apparel exporters hope to expand their market shares in countries like Australia, Japan, Brazil and even China. With the scheduled signing of the US-dominated Trans-Pacific Partnership this year, however, Bangladesh’s main competitor, Vietnam, will gain over Dhaka in the US market. This will only increase the pressure on the garment workers.

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