

Deadly factory collapse calls into question the cost of cheap clothes

By Max Fox on 05.13.13

Word Count **934**

Level **1180L**



Bangladeshi volunteers and rescue workers are pictured at the scene after an eight-story building collapsed in Savar, on the outskirts of Dhaka, on April 25, 2013. AFP/Getty Images

The deadly collapse of a garment factory in Bangladesh has forced retailers and lawmakers to take a long, hard look at the human cost of cheap clothes.

The eight-story Rana Plaza factory complex crumbled on April 24 with nearly 3,000 workers trapped inside, killing more than 1,100. It is the garment industry's worst-ever accident and reports amid the debris have been dramatic.

A baby boy was born under the rubble shortly after the collapse. The baby's 26-year-old mother survived the falling concrete, mortar and bricks. Rescuers found the newborn with his umbilical cord still attached.

Another worker, Sonia Akthar, was sewing a "striped, long-sleeved T-shirt" when the ceiling collapsed on her, Al-Jazeera reported. Her leg became trapped under heavy concrete, and rescuers were forced to pull her away from her own limb to save her.

Other workers were luckier, and acted heroically to save their fellow workers. When a doctor refused to go into the wrecked building, 30-year-old worker Didar Hossein went in on his own. Using the doctor's tools, he amputated limbs to save workers who were pinned under rubble. Nineteen-year-old Reshma Begum survived for 17 days trapped in the wreckage with nothing but a little water and four packets of cookies.

Owner Arrested Fleeing The Country

The property owner, Mohammed Sohel Rana, was arrested trying to flee the country. He is a local politician, but was also well known as a "mastan" or neighborhood gangster. Police, engineers and workers themselves warned him that the building's pillars were near breaking. Rana reportedly ordered workers back inside the factory. The next day, tragedy struck.

On Tuesday, survivors of the collapse brought traffic to a standstill as they protested near the factory site. They were demanding wages and benefits. The government has agreed to improve factory conditions and its building inspections. But labor experts say the government is part of the problem. Widespread corruption in Bangladesh means factory owners can pay officials to look the other way and ignore safety hazards.

The garment industry is the lifeblood of Bangladesh. It is the world's second-largest clothing producer, after China. The industry generates roughly 80 percent of the entire nation's exports. Bangladesh is a densely populated, but poorly developed nation to the east of India, where almost half the population of 150 million people live on less than \$1 a day. The factory industry has provided many much-needed job opportunities, especially for women. But about half of the nation's 5,000 factories do not meet legal work-safety standards, said Kalpona Akter, a workers' rights activist who started working in garment factories at age 12.

Brands such as Benetton, Joe Fresh and Mango were among those whose clothes were being sewn at Rana Plaza when it collapsed. Western companies were attracted to Bangladesh for its low wages and fast production. But the cheap cost and quick turnaround comes at a human cost: factories commonly employed underage workers, and forced pregnant women to work until just before their due dates.

The European Union is one of Bangladesh's biggest customers. The EU said it was considering taking action against local producers to force them to obey building safety codes. Target, Gap and J.C. Penney met with workers rights groups last week to discuss how to improve safety conditions. Adidas said it set up a hotline for workers. They can send a text message if they feel they are being abused. But some are skeptical that the Western brands will make a difference, since they are the ones demanding quick, cheap production from the factories.

Are Big Labels Responsible, Too?

The big clothing labels "should reconsider their own cutthroat buying practices and agree to pay higher prices to (pay for) the safety improvements they say they want for workers," said Shahidullah Azim, the vice president of a garment manufacturing trade group. "How can a garment businessman keep up with this ever-increasing demand? Of course, by using every opportunity to minimize production costs -- paying workers less and not caring about workplace safety."

One Canadian retailer took the opportunity to blast his competitors. "I am troubled by the deafening silence from other apparel retailers on this issue," said Galen Weston, the chairman of Loblaw, a Canadian apparel brand that used the Rana Plaza factory to manufacture its goods. "As many as 30 international apparel brands were having goods manufactured in this building, yet only two have come forward and publicly commented."

The government has so far detained nine more people for questioning, including an engineer who publicly called for the building to be evacuated after inspecting its stability a day before the disaster. On May Day, workers rallied in the capital, Dhaka, calling for Mohammad Sohel Rana's execution. Rumors are flying that the construction workers who built the factory used second-rate materials and cut safety corners because they knew Rana would not pay for them. The most effective route to safety changes might be making the owners of these factories believe that they will actually be held accountable for tragedies like this in the future.

Consumer boycotts could spur change. The "Made in Bangladesh" label on a trendy new pair of jeans may remind shoppers of the doomed Rana Plaza workers. No matter how good the deal, they may not want to wear clothes that come at such a cost. However, with hundreds of bodies still being pulled from the rubble, the Bangladeshi workers themselves could provide the strongest force for change. One woman who came to lay flowers on the unmarked graves told Al-Jazeera that "garment factories are prisons, they are like hell. I will never work in one again."

Quiz

1 According to the article, all of the following contributed to the factory's collapse EXCEPT:

- (A) construction using cheap materials
- (B) employment of underage workers
- (C) corruption among government officials
- (D) Western companies' desire for low-cost labor

2 Read the paragraph from the article. Then answer the question.

The big clothing labels "should reconsider their own cutthroat buying practices and agree to pay higher prices to (pay for) the safety improvements they say they want for workers," said Shahidullah Azim, the vice president of a garment manufacturing trade group. "How can a garment businessman keep up with this ever-increasing demand? Of course, by using every opportunity to minimize production costs -- paying workers less and not caring about workplace safety."

How does the article help the reader understand the position of the garment businessmen?

- (A) by comparing their business practices to those in other industries
- (B) by showing how uncaring they are about the conditions of their factories
- (C) by suggesting that workplace improvements depend on brands paying more
- (D) by highlighting the rising demand of clothing consumers for better products

3 Which sentence from the article helps the reader understand the factory owner's character?

- (A) The eight-story Rana Plaza factory complex crumbled on April 24 with nearly 3,000 workers trapped inside, killing more than 1,100.
- (B) He is a local politician, but was also well known as a "mastan" or neighborhood gangster.
- (C) Brands such as Benetton, Joe Fresh and Mango were among those whose clothes were being sewn at Rana Plaza when it collapsed.
- (D) On May Day, workers rallied in the capital, Dhaka, calling for Mohammad Sohel Rana's execution.

4 Select the paragraph from the article that BEST helps the reader distinguish what's important about clothing production in Bangladesh versus other industries.