

One Year ON: Workers Demand Compensation for Rana Plaza Victims



Photo: NGWF

One of World's Worst Industrial Accidents

Amid warnings that its columns were crumbling, it took 90 seconds for the poorly constructed eight storey Rana Plaza building in Dhaka to collapse on 24 April 2013. Tons of concrete and steel killed 1133 garment workers and injured 2500 in one of the world's worst industrial accidents. Hundreds more lost jobs as factory owners closed down 22 unsafe factories in its aftermath.

The Rana Plaza collapse drew international attention to the harsh and often unsafe working conditions in Bangladesh's garment industry. 85% of garment workers are women and often the sole breadwinner for extended rural families. These young female workers suffer long hours, low wages (NZ\$45 a month), poor job security and exploitative conditions.

This industrial disaster led to calls for more robust monitoring of safety standards – not only for the factories – but for the major clothing retailers that contract product to developing countries like Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. The outcry shamed many international clothing companies into pledging to help finance safety improvements in other Bangladeshi factories.

The collapse hit the heart of Bangladesh's economy. Garment manufacture is the largest industry in Bangladesh, with over 5,000 factories that employ 4 million people. In global production terms, Bangladesh is the second largest producer of export garments after China, with 75% of exports to Europe.

Safety Measures Adopted

Immediately after the collapse, the Bangladesh government rushed through measures to reassure critics, including raising the minimum wage and making it easier for workers to form unions.

In May 2013, 80 companies signed the new "Fire and Building Safety Accord". The Accord, brokered by IndustriALL and UNI Global Union in a strong alliance with leading NGOs, the Clean Clothes Campaign and the Workers Right Consortium, now has more than 150 signatories. It covers around 2,000 of Bangladesh's 4,000 garment factories. The Accord provides for a binding programme of fire and building safety reforms based on independent inspections, worker-led health and safety committees and union access to factories. It gives workers the right to refuse dangerous work. No United States-based retailers have signed on.



The Gap, Walmart and other US and Canadian companies have formed the Alliance for Worker Safety which is seen as less rigorous. So far Accord inspectors have found serious problems in every factory they have inspected with four being temporarily closed for repair. The Alliance has asked the Bangladeshi government to order four more closed because of structural problems—one has closed. More than 3,000 other factories will not be inspected at all and some middlemen are secretly sending them orders from Western brands.

Compensation Process Set Up

In September 2013 the Rana Plaza Coordination Committee was set up with membership from government, the garment industry both local and international, trade unions and NGOs, and independently mediated by the International Labour Organisation. The Committee devised a comprehensive and independent claims process to support victims, their families and dependants. Under intense international

“The 29 brands that sourced from factories within Rana Plaza either at the time of the collapse or in the recent past have combined profits of well in excess of US\$22 billion a year. They are being asked to contribute less than 0.2% of these profits to go some way towards compensating the people their profits are built on – the Donor Trust Fund has been open for two months now and it is still a long way off the US\$40 million that is required. The Arrangement clearly has the necessary buy-in: the current donor list includes some of world's biggest brand names, from both Europe and the US, but they are coming in with frankly shockingly low levels given what they can afford.”

[Ineke Zeldenrust](#), of Clean Clothes Campaign

pressure, four retailers – Bonmarche, El Corte Ingles, Loblaw and Primark - agreed in December 2013 to help finance a landmark \$40 million compensation fund for the victims. The new fund is considered a landmark in compensating families of garment industry victims, in terms of both the amount to be paid and the sophistication of the arrangements. However, only half the factories have paid US\$15 million into the fund.

New Zealanders support local Union

The Bangladeshi union, National Garment Workers Federation (NGWF) represented many of the Rana Plaza workers. The Union has campaigned for better working conditions, the “safe factory campaign”, compensation for victims’ families, and proper medical help for the injured.

Amirul Haque Amin, secretary of NGWF, asked Christian World Service for help in **“supporting our members – dead and injured, trying to reach the other dead and injured but the numbers are very big, ensuring that the injured get proper treatment, and making sure that the dead, injured and suffering workers get proper compensation”**. CWS acted quickly, raising more than \$10,000 for the affected workers and their families, and the safe workplace campaign in Bangladesh. Over \$2,000 came from First Union, \$5,000 from NZ Amalgamated Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union.

NGWF demands Compensation

A year later, [the people](#) most affected by the factory collapse are struggling without any guarantees of help, time frames, or adequate financial compensation. Rural families who abruptly lost the wages of a family member are struggling. Much of the money donated to the government for the survivors and the families of the dead has not been released.

Bangladesh’s government has made some modest short-term compensation payments to some victims. Families were given a one-time payment of NZ\$300 (20,000 taka) when they collected the body of a relative in the days after the collapse, and the government has established annuities for survivors who lost limbs.

A few companies have provided some compensation, including British chain Primark and the Canadian retailer, Loblaw, and the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association gave some survivors a few



Photo: ILRF

month's salary. In June, the NGWF provided financial support of \$37 (2500 taka) to 67 parentless children after the Rana Plaza disaster.

NGWF is demanding adequate compensation for the dead workers' children, safe workplaces, proper medical treatment for the injured workers, and the distribution of donations from the Prime Minister's Relief Fund. They are also seeking compensation for those affected by the earlier Tazreen fire which killed 112 workers in November 2012 and better conditions.

In December 2013, a government-appointed panel with owner representatives but no worker representatives proposed a compensation package that was unacceptable to garment workers and the NGWF. They voted to raise the minimum wage for millions for garment workers to 5300 takas NZ\$79.51 a month – still the lowest in the world. Garment workers have been demanding 8,114 taka (NZ\$121.59) instead of the current monthly minimum wage of 3,000 taka (\$45).

The NGWF continues to fight for fair compensation for Rana Plaza victims. In the last year they have organized several sit-ins, street marches and human chains.

Close Up

Rehana Khatun lost both legs in the Rana Plaza collapse. Now just down the road from Rana Plaza, at the Centre for the Rehabilitation of the Paralyzed, she joins several other survivors learning how to use prosthetics. The 20-year old is uncertain if she will ever walk again.

Ms Khatun is grateful for her prosthetic replacement legs but, after two months of practice, they are bulky and painful. Her legs were amputated above the knee, making walking difficult. She will need walking sticks, and she wants to return to her home village though roads are muddy and difficult to traverse.

She had left the village after her mother tried to arrange her marriage. The cost of a wedding would have bankrupted her family, so she came to Savar and found work in Rana Plaza to save up to pay for her own wedding and also educate her younger brothers.

"I dreamed that I could see my mother smiling," she said. "Now it is meaningless to talk about what my dreams are. I cannot lead a life like normal people. I will have an unusual, different life."

<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/12/19/world/asia/after-collapse-bleak-struggle.html>



Fashion Industry Take Heed

Overall, this disaster has exposed the murkiness and lack of accountability in the global supply chain for clothes to global consumers. Profit-driven clothing label giants are starting to take heed of customers' demands for better labour and trade practices and they have implemented some positive changes.

Fashion Designers with an ethical profile are choosing to mark the 24 April anniversary with global action. In Aotearoa New Zealand Untouched World is one company asking "Who made your clothes?". Supporters of [Fashion Revolution Day](#) are asking people to make a positive statement in support of better working conditions by wearing their clothes inside out. Join the campaign by finding out who made your clothes. Tweet the brand "Who made your clothes" and use the hashtag #insideout.

Support NGWF

If you would like to help Bangladeshi workers in their campaign for compensation for the victims of Rana Plaza and their families, please donate to the Bangladesh Workers Appeal on line, by phone or post.



Further information

Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh

www.bangladeshaccord.org/

Clean Clothes Campaign

www.cleanclothes.org/

Sign their [Living Wage petition](#): "I want the women and men who stitch my clothes to earn enough to feed their family, pay their rent and live a decent life. A living wage is a human right, for all people all over the world. It's time to pay a living wage to all garment workers. "

Rana Plaza Arrangement Committee

www.ranaplaza-arrangement.org/

"[Battling for a Safer Bangladesh](#)" by Steven Greenhouse and Elizabeth A Harris (Accord vs Alliance)
http://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/22/business/international/battling-for-a-safer-bangladesh.html?partner=rss&emc=rss&_r=0

"[How the World has Changed since Rana Plaza](#)" by Dolly Jones www.vogue.co.uk/news/2014/04/01/bangladesh-rana-plaza-anniversary-fashion-revolution-day

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