



## TUNDRA FOCUS

### RANA PLAZA - FIVE YEARS LATER

On April 24, 2013, an eight-story building – one of many that manufactured apparel exclusively for Western fashion brands such as Benetton, Mango, Primark and Walmart – collapsed in the outskirts of Dhaka, killing more than 1,100 workers and injuring over 2,500. The tragedy highlighted the complete disregard for workers' safety and rampant corruption in Bangladesh's extremely lucrative garment industry worth \$28.1bn. In the immediate aftermath of this tragedy, called one of the world's worst industrial disasters, almost 250 Western brands joined either the European-based *Bangladesh Accord on Fire and Building Safety* or the US-based *Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety* and pledged to work only with those factories that complied with safety demands.

According to a report released this month by the Center for Global Workers' Rights (CGWR), dramatic changes have been made in the area of building safety. Local factory owners have, to a large extent, realised that international buyers are increasingly stringent when assessing working conditions, worker health and safety etc. Compliance teams are usually

sent to assess the factory floor, electrical and structural safety along with workers' facilities. The CGWR report also states that 97,000 out of 132,000 hazards at Bangladeshi factories have been eliminated due to the remediation schemes. In its 2017 report, the Alliance states that it has surveyed 785 factories and provided basic safety training to 1,389,566 workers.

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The Alliance identified 162 factories that were operating in risky conditions and suspended them from its compliant list (it does not have the authority to shut down factories). Out of these 162 factories, 39 have relocated while the remaining 124 factories continue to operate in unsafe buildings. In addition, workers' rights such as wages, overtime hours, work conditions, and production demands still show significant shortcomings in light of international standards. Bangladesh has been repeatedly condemned for its poor worker and union record by the International Labour Organisation (ILO). A 2016 ActionAid Bangladesh survey states that nearly 48% of the Rana Plaza collapse survivors are unemployed due to physical and/or mental difficulties; nearly 5% of the survivors working in the garment industry are earning below minimum wage. In their defence, factory owners insist that brands still persist in lowering costs which directly impacts wages. Human Rights Watch states that of the 72 brands contacted to sign up to a "Transparency Pledge" only 17 agreed to disclose practices in 2017.

### SUSTAINABLE FASHION INITIATIVES

The Rana Plaza collapse ignited a spark in the fashion industry, giving way to movements that demanded transparency and questioned the

human cost of fast fashion. These include a range of initiatives. *Mistra Future Fashion* is a consortium of over 50 partners that conduct research on the circular economy for a "future positive fashion industry." *Fashion Revolution* advocates for a fair and transparent fashion industry, works with the UK government to put on Fashion Question Time in the Houses of Parliament as well as workshops to address these issues. *Remake* led by a group of fashion enthusiasts focuses on "slow fashion" in order to empower women garment workers. Discussion forums such as the '2018 Sustainable apparel: How brands can transform supply chains,' are held regularly to discuss innovations in circular fashion, transparency and factory engagement.

### CHALLENGES AHEAD

While the remediation has mainly focused on the important task of making factories safe, urgent measures must be taken to safeguard workers rights. More international buyers need to step up and sign the "Transparency Pledge." After the Alliance and Accord phase out at the end of 2018 and 2021 respectively, it will be more important than ever for Bangladesh's government, buyers and consumers to remain engaged and vigilant.

