

**“SAVAR BUILDING COLLAPSED”, THE DARK HISTORY OF, DHAKA
BANGLADES!**

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Abstract

The building, Rana Plaza, was owned by Sohel Rana, allegedly a leading member of the local Jubo League, the youth wing of the ruling Awami League political party. It housed a number of separate garment factories employing around 5,000 people, several shops, and a bank. On the morning of 24 April, there was a power outage, and diesel generators on the top floor were started. The building collapsed at about 08:57 a.m. BST, leaving only the ground floor intact. Two days after the building collapse, garment workers across the industrial areas of Dhaka, Chittagong and Gazipur rioted, targeting vehicles, commercial buildings and garment factories. The next day, leftist political parties and the BNP-led 18 Party Alliance demanded the arrest and trial of suspects and an independent commission to identify vulnerable factories.

Keywords

Rana Plaza, Collapse, Rescue, Health and Safety, Garment Worker, Bangladesh.

Introduction

The 2013 Savar building collapse or Rana Plaza collapse was a structural failure that occurred on Wednesday, 24 April 2013 in the Savar Upazila of Dhaka, Bangladesh, where an eight-story commercial building named Rana Plaza collapsed. The death toll from Bangladesh's worst industrial accident has passed 1,000 as recovery teams continue to find more bodies in the wreckage. The eight-storey Rana Plaza factory building near Dhaka collapsed on 24 April with an unknown number inside. The authorities say on 2,500 people were injured in the accident and 2,437 people were rescued. The recovery operation is expected to finish on Friday. The rubble will then be shifted by bulldozers. On Friday morning, officials said a total of 1,021 bodies had been recovered from the debris of the fallen factory building in Savar. Almost 650 have so far been identified and handed over to families. Many bodies were decomposed, but could be identified by mobile phones in their pockets or staff passes, Army Captain Shahnewaz Zakaria said, adding that "most are female garment workers". It is considered the deadliest garment-factory accident in history, as well as the deadliest accidental structural failure in modern human history. The building contained clothing factories, a bank, apartments, and several shops. The shops and the bank on the lower floors immediately closed after cracks were discovered in the building. The building's owners ignored warnings to avoid using the building after cracks had appeared the day before. Garment workers were ordered to return the following day, and the building collapsed during the morning rush-hour.

Bangladesh's booming garment industry is one of the country's biggest employers and foreign exchange earners but has been plagued by fires, building collapses and other accidents for many years despite a drive to improve safety standards. In November 2012 112 workers died in a blaze at a factory in a nearby suburb, putting a spotlight on global retailers that source clothes from Bangladesh.

The day after the Rana Plaza building collapse, the Dhaka city development authority filed a case against the owners of the building and the five garment factories operating inside it. On the same day, dozens of survivors were discovered in the remains of the building. Although at first Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina had denied the membership of Rana in the Jubo League, after intense criticism of her speech she ordered the arrest of Sohel Rana and four of the owners of the garment factories operating in the building. Sohel Rana was reported to have gone into hiding; however, authorities reported that four other individuals had already been arrested in connection with the collapse.

Two days after the building collapse, garment workers across the industrial areas of Dhaka, Chittagong and Gazipur rioted, targeting vehicles, commercial buildings and garment factories. The next day, leftist political parties and the BNP-led 18 Party Alliance demanded the arrest and trial of suspects and an independent commission to identify vulnerable factories. Four days after the building collapsed, the owner of the Rana Plaza, Sohel Rana, was arrested at Benapole, on the Indo-Bangladeshi border, in Jessore District by security forces. On the same day a fire broke out at the disaster site and authorities were forced to temporarily suspend the search for survivors.



Background

The building, Rana Plaza, was owned by Sohel Rana, allegedly a leading member of the local Jubo League, the youth wing of the ruling Awami League political party. It housed a number of separate garment factories employing around 5,000 people, several shops, and a bank. The factories manufactured apparel for brands including Benetton, Bonmarché the Children's Place, El Corte Inglés, Joe Fresh, Monsoon Accessorize,[16] Mango, Matalan, Primark, and Walmart.

The head of the Bangladesh Fire Service & Civil Defense, Ali Ahmed Khan, said that the upper four floors had been built without a permit. Rana Plaza's architect, Massood Reza, said the building was planned for shops and offices – but not factories. Other architects stressed the risks involved in placing factories inside a building designed only for shops and offices, noting the structure was potentially not strong enough to bear the weight and vibration of heavy machinery.

On 23 April 2013, a TV channel recorded footage that showed cracks in the Rana Plaza building. Immediately afterward, the building was evacuated, and the shops and the bank on the lower floors were closed. Later in the day, Sohel Rana said to the media that the building was safe and workers should return tomorrow. Managers at Ether Tex threatened to withhold a month's pay from workers who refused to come to work.

There was no warning before the rear of the building fell in, followed by most of the upper floors, survivors said. "I was at work on the third floor, and then suddenly I heard a deafening sound, but couldn't understand what was happening. I ran and was hit by something on my head," said Zohra, another worker, who was pulled from the rubble by local people. Dilara Begum, a garment worker who survived the accident, said workers had been ordered to leave after a crack appeared in the wall of the building on Tuesday but on Wednesday morning supervisors had told them to return to work, saying the building had been inspected and declared safe.

Volunteers and relatives of buried victims were using hands and basic tools to shift mountains of rubble on Wednesday evening as rescue teams of fire-fighters and soldiers attempted to reach survivors. Bodies shrouded in white cloth were laid out in rows in the front yard of a nearby school. Mohammed al-Amin, a local shopkeeper who had volunteered to help the rescue teams, said at least 50 bodies had been identified and taken away by family members. Many others remained unidentified.



“Sheikh Hasina, the prime minister of Bangladesh, declared Thursday a day of mourning in the country”.



Collapse and Rescue

On the morning of 24 April, there was a power outage, and diesel generators on the top floor were started. The building collapsed at about 08:57 a.m. BST, leaving only the ground floor intact. The Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association president confirmed that 3,122 workers were in the building at the time of the collapse. One local resident described the scene as if "an earthquake had struck."

Very early on in the rescue effort, the United Nations offered to send their expert search and rescue unit, known as the International Search and Rescue Advisory Group (INSARAG), to the site, but this offer was rejected by Dhaka authorities. The Bangladesh government made a statement suggesting that the area's local rescue emergency services were well equipped. Prior to offering assistance to Bangladesh, the UN held consultations to assess the country's ability to mount an effective rescue operation, and they reached the conclusion that they lacked that capability. Bangladeshi officials, fearing damage to national pride, refused to accept the assistance offered to them by the UN. A large portion of the rescue operation consisted of inadequately equipped volunteers, many of whom had no protective clothing and wore sandals. Some buried workers drank their own urine to survive the high temperatures, waiting to be saved. Not only was the Bangladeshi government accused of favouring national pride over those buried alive, but many relatives of those trapped in the debris criticised the government for trying to end the rescue mission prematurely.

One of the garment manufacturers' websites indicates that more than half of the victims were women, along with a number of their children who were in nursery facilities within the building. Bangladeshi Home Minister Muhiuddin Khan Alamgir confirmed that fire service personnel, police, and military troops were assisting with the rescue effort. Volunteer rescue workers used bolts of fabric to assist survivors to escape from the building. A national day of mourning was held on 25 April.

On 8 May an army spokesman, Mir Rabbi, said the army's attempt to recover more bodies from the rubble would continue for at least another week. On 10 May, 17 days after the collapse, a woman named Reshma was found and rescued alive and almost unhurt under the rubble.



Causes

The direct reasons for the building problems were:

1. Building built first without authorization on a pond.
2. Conversion from commercial use to industrial use.
3. Addition of 4 floors above the original permit.
4. The use of substandard construction material (which led to an overload of the building structure aggravated by vibrations due to the generators). Those various elements indicated dubious business practices by Sohel Rana and dubious administrative practices in Savar.

One good example to illustrate this context is the evacuation of the building after the cracks. It is reported that the Industrial police first requested the evacuation of the building until an inspection had been conducted. It is reported that Abdur Razak Khan, an engineer, declared the building unsafe and requested public authorities to conduct a more thorough inspection; he was arrested for helping the owner illegally add three floors. It is also reported that Kabir Hossain Sardar, the upazila nirbahi officer visited the site, met with Sohel Rana, and declared the building safe. Sohel Rana said to the media that the building was safe and workers should return to work the next day. One manager of the factories in the Rana Plaza reported that Sohel Rana told them that the building was safe. Managers requested then workers to go back to work, so that on the next day workers entered the factories again.

Based on all the above elements it can be concluded that one cause of the disaster is the lack of good governance in Savar, and corruption. Some have called Sohel Rana "a crooked mobster".

Worldwide Criticism

Nick Clegg, then UK Deputy PM and leader of the Liberal Democrats said:

"There's more we could do to talk about what goes on behind the scenes and this terrible catastrophe might well prompt people to think again.

On 1 May, Pope Francis spoke out against the working conditions in the factory: A headline that really struck me on the day of the tragedy in Bangladesh was 'Living on 38 euros a month'. That is what the people who died were being paid. This is called slave labour. Today in the world this slavery is being committed against something beautiful that God has given us – the capacity to create, to work, to have dignity. How many brothers and sisters find themselves in this situation! Not paying fairly, not giving a job because you are only looking at balance sheets, and only looking at how to make a profit. That goes against God!

Human Rights Watch stated their concern over the number of factory-building tragedies in Bangladesh; there have been numerous major accidents in the country in the past decade, including the 2012 Dhaka fire.

IndustriALL Global Union, a global union federation representing textile and garment workers' trade unions around the world, launched an online campaign in support of the Bangladeshi unions' demand for labour law reform in the wake of the disaster. The campaign, hosted on Labour Start, calls for changes in the law to make it easier for unions to organise workers, as well as demanding improved health and safety conditions.

Fashion Industry Response

At a meeting of retailers and NGOs a week after the collapse, a new Accord on Factory and Building Safety in Bangladesh was created and a deadline of 16 May was set to sign it. The agreement expands on a previous accord signed only by the US-based PVH, which owns Calvin Klein, and German retailer Tchibo.

Walmart, along with 14 other North American companies, refused to sign the accord as the deadline passed. As of 23 May 2013, thirty-eight companies had signed the accord. Walmart, J.C. Penney and labour activists have been considering an agreement to improve factory safety in Bangladesh for at least two years. In 2011, Walmart rejected reforms that would have had retailers pay more for apparel to help Bangladesh factories improve safety standards.

On 10 July 2013, a group of 17 major North American retailers, including Walmart, Gap, Target and Macy's, announced a plan to improve factory safety in Bangladesh, drawing immediate criticism from labour groups who complained that it was less stringent than an accord reached among European companies. Unlike the accord joined mainly by European retailers, the plan lacks legally binding commitments to pay for those improvements.

Dov Charney, the founder and former CEO of American Apparel, was interviewed on Vice.tv and spoke out against the poor treatment of workers in developing countries and refers to it as "slave labor". Charney proposes a "Global Garment Workers Minimum Wage" as well discusses in detail many of the inner workings of the modern fast fashion industry commerce practices that leads to dangerous factory conditions like at Savar.

Compensation to Victims

As of mid-September 2013, compensations to families of disaster victims were still under discussion, with many families struggling to survive after having lost a major wage earner.[98] Families who had received the \$200 compensation from Primark were only those able to provide DNA evidence of their relative's death in the collapse, which proved extremely difficult. The US government provided DNA kits to the families of victims.

Of the 29 brands identified as having sourced products from the Rana Plaza factories, only 9 attended meetings held in November 2013 to agree a proposal on compensation to the victims. Several companies refused to sign including Walmart, Carrefour, Mango, Auchan and Kik. The agreement was signed by Primark, Loblaws, Bonmarche and El Corte Ingles. By March 2014, seven of the 28 international brands sourcing products from Rana Plaza had contributed to the Rana Plaza Donor's Trust Fund compensation fund, which is backed by the International Labour Organization.

More than 2 dozen victims' families have not been compensated as they could not back up their claims with documentation.

Conclusion

On 1 May on International Workers' Day, protesting workers paraded through central Dhaka by the thousands to demand safer working conditions and the death penalty for the owner of Rana Plaza. A week later hundreds of survivors of Bangladesh's worst industrial disaster blocked a main highway to demand wages as the death toll from the collapse of the nine-story building passed 700. Local government officials said they had been in talks with the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association to pay the workers their outstanding April salaries plus a further three months – £97. After officials promised the surviving workers that they would be soon paid, they ended their protest. The government and garment association were compiling a list of surviving employees to establish who must be paid and compensated. Textile minister, Abdul Latif Siddique, told reporters that more plants would be shut as part of strict new measures to ensure safety.

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