

Public Statement

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Bangladesh must stop violating labour rights and uphold corporate accountability

Poverty wages, repression of protests and inadequate compensation for occupational injuries and deaths severely threaten workers' rights

Workers in Bangladesh face multiple barriers in their ability to exercise their rights to freedom of expression, freedom of peaceful assembly, freedom of association and collective bargaining. These workers have some of the lowest wages in the region¹ and extremely high instances of occupational injury and death.² Amnesty International calls on the Government of Bangladesh to take immediate and concrete steps to ensure workers have their rights to freedom of association, assembly and expression respected and that legislative changes are made so workers and their dependents can obtain adequate and timely compensation for occupational injuries and deaths.

Poverty wages and unfair wage setting: Minimum wage protests by Ready Made Garment (RMG) workers

Garment factory workers in Bangladesh's capital, Dhaka, and the industrial district of Gazipur, took to the streets at the end of October and in early November to protest the offer by Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) to increase the monthly minimum wage from \$75 (8,000Tk) a month to \$90 a month (10,400) and the Minimum Wage Board's final figure of \$113 (12,500Tk). Workers and trade unions had been asking for the minimum wage to be increased to \$208 (23,000Tk) a month. The Minimum wage for the garment sector is only revised every five years and since the last revision in 2018 has not kept up with rampant inflation. Research suggests that by 2020, taking inflation (currently 37%) into account, garment workers' real wages had decreased to 2023 levels.³

Between 30 October 2023 and 8 November 2023, at least four workers died during protests relating to the Minimum Wage Board's decision on the national minimum wage for ready-made garment (RMG) workers - three by law enforcement using lethal force and one in a fire. The information available about the deaths of those workers killed by lethal force is summarized in Table 1, based on media reports.⁴

Table 1: RMG workers killed by force during the minimum wage protests in October – November 2023

Name of worker	Date of death	Age	Nature of injury	Designation/Affiliation
Anjuara Khatun ⁵	08.11.2023 (in a protest against the minimum wage announcement)	32	Bullet injury to head per Dhaka Medical College Hospital (as reported in New Age)	Sewing machine operator at Islam Garments Ltd, owned by Dhaka North City Corporation mayor Md Atiqul Islam
Russell Hawlader ⁶	30.10.2023 (in a protest leading up to the minimum wage announcement)	25	Bullet injuries to his chest, per Dhaka Medical College Hospital	Electrician at Design Express Ltd, a sister concern of Energypac Group
Jalal Uddin ⁷	11.11.2023 (at hospital after protest on 8 November)	42	Bullet injuries to his stomach per his relative	Supervisor at Islam Garments Ltd, owned by Dhaka North City Corporation mayor Md Atiqul Islam

Separately, while the protests were taking place a fourth worker, Erman Ali, died in a factory fire on 30 October, in circumstances which have not been subject to a prompt, thorough, independent and impartial investigation.⁸

Repression against Protestors

Factory owners also responded to the protests by workers with threats and violence. One media report described the beating of workers, including a 22-year-old seamstress at Dekko Knitwear in Mirpur.⁹ This is not the first time that violence has been used against garment workers this year. In June 2023 Shahidul Islam, President of the Gazipur branch of the Bangladesh Garment and Industrial Workers Federation was killed as he was leaving a factory operated by Prince Jacquard Sweater Limited in Tongi, Gazipur.¹⁰ According to several media reports, between 18,000 and 23,000 garment named and unnamed workers are being taken to court in connection with their participation in the demonstrations charged with vandalism and obstruction of police.¹¹ A representative of IndustriALL Bangladesh Council, the national workers council of the global trade union IndustriALL, stated that 120 workers had been arrested so far along with six union leaders¹² and that 62 cases are being filed against about 23,000 workers in the Gazipur, Mirpur and Savar areas.¹³ At least 43 First Information Reports (FIRs) have been filed in police stations, placing over 20,000 workers at risk of arrest. These FIRs list thousands of 'unnamed' workers increasing the fear of arrest by workers.¹⁴

Ongoing failure to protect worker rights

The recent crackdown and backlash against workers participating in demonstrations mirrors similar repression in 2018 and 2019 when the minimum wage for the garment sector was last revised in late 2018.¹⁵ Protests then had erupted in the run up to the wage board decision and demonstrations were met with disproportionate use of water cannons, tear gas, rubber bullets and batons to disperse workers,

according to video evidence. At least one worker was killed while thousands more were dismissed from their jobs for their part in the demonstrations. Hundreds of workers faced a range of criminal charges including property destruction and vandalism against them from the factory owners. In most cases, the factories in question produced clothing for large global fashion brands. According to the Clean Clothes Campaign, repression by factory owners included setting up billboards with names and photographs of dismissed workers at factory gates and the use of worker biometric data systems to track and share their names and profiles with other factory owners. Thousands of workers were affected by such blacklisting and repressive measures.¹⁶

On 13 November 2023, the Law Minister of Bangladesh described these protests as ‘labour unrest to thwart [the] democratic process’ and ‘acts of sabotage’ when addressing the 44th Session of the Universal Periodic Review Working Group at the UN Human Rights Council where Bangladesh was being reviewed. Amnesty rejects the Law Minister’s mischaracterization of workers’ exercising their legitimate right to protest as ‘labour unrest to thwart the democratic process’ and ‘acts of sabotage’.¹⁷

The lack of genuine tripartite negotiations within the wage board, in the context of continued repression trade unions face in Bangladesh, combined with the failure to revise wages yearly, and the resultant ongoing poverty wages are all factors that have fueled the recent protests, and those that occurred the last time the wages were revised. Garment unions have criticised the exclusion of genuine union representation and the lack of transparency over how the final decisions on wage levels are reached.¹⁸ In contrast, trade unions have stated that their proposal of 23,000 Tk or US\$208 per month was developed using criteria prescribed under both the Bangladesh Labour Act and international labour laws and standards (ILO Convention 131 on Minimum Wage Fixing which has not yet been ratified by the Bangladesh Government),¹⁹ unlike the employer’s (BGMEA) counter proposal.

Failure to ensure corporate accountability for occupational injuries and deaths of workers Continuing unacceptably high levels of deaths and injuries

The ongoing repression against RMG workers must be viewed in light of the overall poor labour rights situation in Bangladesh. April 2023 marked 10 years since the Rana Plaza collapse in Bangladesh, which left more than 1,100 garment workers dead and thousands more injured.²⁰ Despite the legislative, institutional and other reforms that followed, occupational safety of workers remains a distant prospect. Workers across the country are killed or injured daily in preventable occupational ‘accidents’, fueled by a lack of corporate accountability. Conservative estimates from the Safety and Rights Society, an NGO working to improve working conditions in Bangladesh, recorded more than 4,700 worker deaths between 2013 and 2022, excluding the death toll from Rana Plaza.²¹ Despite the signing of the International Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh that was launched in 2013, and has so far led to the inclusion of over 2 million garment workers in its factory monitoring programme, factory safety remains a major cause for concern.²² The frequency of industrial accidents underscores the continuing failure of the government to adequately monitor and ensure employers’ compliance with labour and building safety laws and regulations relating to the occupational safety of workers.

Wholly inadequate compensation for occupational deaths and injuries

Chapter XII of the Bangladesh Labour Act 2006 fails to uphold corporate accountability and adequate remedy for occupational deaths and injuries by setting arbitrary limits on the amount of compensation payable to victims and their families: 200,000 BDT (1817 USD) for deaths and 250,000 BDT (2271 USD) for permanent disablement.²³ Even when victims sue corporations in labour courts to recover this measly

sum of compensation, defendant corporations are able to easily employ dilatory tactics to lengthen trial periods and frustrate their claims.²⁴ Research has shown that in practice, the average time taken for a court to order an award of compensation from the date of application is 630 days, which is more than ten times longer than the statutorily prescribed time limit of 60 days.²⁵ Even when a compensation award is made after a lengthy trial, corporations seldom comply with the court order leaving many victims and/or their families without any compensation at all.²⁶

The BM Depot Fire

In June 2022, a fire at the BM Container Depot Ltd in Sitakunda (near the busy Chattogram port), killed at least 49 workers and injured 250 others.²⁷ Along with an array of other non-compliance issues, the Department of Explosives found that the depot did not have a license to store hydrogen peroxide, the presence of which was suspected to have caused the explosion.²⁸ Some of the surviving workers told the media that an exit gate was locked, preventing workers from escaping the fire.²⁹ An investigation led by the Additional Divisional Commissioner of Chattogram Division, held that the fire was caused by the negligence of the depot owners and management.³⁰ Immediately after the fire, a case was filed by the local police under various sections of the Penal Code 1860 against eight management officials of the depot, while the names of the owners were excluded.³¹ A year later, the police investigation concluded that the fire was an 'accident' and found no evidence of negligence, contrary to the findings of the investigation led by the Additional Divisional Commissioner.³²

The day after the fire, BM Depot Ltd issued a press statement declaring that the company was 'ready to set an unprecedented instance of humanity' for those affected by the fire, by paying 1 million BDT (9086 USD) to the families of those killed and 600,000 BDT (5451 USD) to those seriously injured.³³ A week later, victims told press that they are yet to receive the promised compensation from the depot owners and that payments ranging between 3000 BDT to 5000 BDT (27 USD to 45 USD) were made towards paying for the treatment of injured workers.³⁴ It remains unclear whether depot owners paid the compensation that was promised. The BM Depot was and continues to be used to store export-oriented RMG products awaiting shipment.³⁵

Hashem Factory Foods fire

A similar fire in the Hashem Foods Factory in July 2021 killed 52 workers, including at least 17 children who were employed as workers in the factory.³⁶ Under the Bangladesh Labour Act 2006, child labour remains legal for children aged above 14, on the basis of a distinction between children and adolescents, in contradiction of the definition of a child in the Children Act 2013 which gives effect to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child ratified by Bangladesh.³⁷ Given the health and safety risks, the employment of children in the Hashem Foods Factory was also in contravention of ILO Convention 182 on the Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, ratified by Bangladesh. The Convention classifies 'work which, by its nature or the circumstances in which it is carried out, is likely to harm the health, safety or morals of children' as one of the worst forms of child labour.³⁸ The factory was a subsidiary of Sajeeb Group, a Bangladeshi company which manufactured juice under Shezan International, which is based in Pakistan.³⁹ According to Sajeeb Group's website, the company exports its products to several countries including Australia, the US, Malaysia, Singapore, India, Bhutan, Nepal as well as nations in the Middle East and Africa.⁴⁰ Like in the BM Depot Fire, workers were locked inside the factory which prevented them from escaping the fire.⁴¹ A Citizens' Investigation Committee found that the deaths resulting from the fire was 'murder caused by negligence'.⁴² Families of those killed were paid 200,000 BDT (1817 USD) in line with the Bangladesh Labour Act as compensation by the parent company Sajeeb Group. However, when receiving the money they had to sign a declaration containing a stipulation relinquishing any further claims against Hashem Foods Limited in connection with the deaths in this 'accident'.⁴³ The

husband of a woman killed in the fire told reporters that he signed the declaration without understanding what it stipulated, since he is unable to read and the contents were not explained to him.⁴⁴ This underscores how the factory owners were able to exploit the literacy gap of the dependent victims to their advantage. In addition, the company was able to limit its liability due to the arbitrary limit of 200,000 BDT (1871 USD) set for occupational deaths under the Bangladesh Labour Act.⁴⁵ Consequently, the dependents of those killed in the fire have only been able to rely on this relatively paltry sum of money for their loss which is wholly inadequate for the loss of income over a working lifetime.

Recommendations

The Government of Bangladesh must respect, protect and promote the rights of workers including ensuring that it properly implements its duty to protect workers against abuse by third parties, including businesses, through appropriate policies, legislation, regulations and access to remedy. In particular:

Minimum wage and repression of RMG workers

Amnesty International calls on the Government of Bangladesh to:

- Hold independent and impartial investigations into the killing of four workers during the wage demonstrations. These include Russell (Rasel) Howlader, Jalal Uddin, and Anjuara Khatun.
- Urgently review its wage setting policies and practices to ensure that garment factory workers earn an adequate living wage according to ILO standards⁴⁶ and ensure worker participation in the wage setting process. The current arrangement of revisiting wages every five years is not adequate to ensure wages keep pace with rises in living costs. Wage levels should be reviewed periodically – ideally at least annually – and adjusted based on appropriate up to date data such as cost of living and inflation statistics
- Urgently reassess the recent decision made by the Wages Board and adopt a minimum monthly wage that complies with international standards and ensures that workers can adequately support themselves and their dependents to enjoy a decent standard of living.
- Ensure that workers can exercise their right to freedom of association and collective bargaining by being able to form and join trade unions at the factory level, engage in genuine social dialogue with government authorities and factory owners, and enjoy the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and to strike.
- Ensure that all law enforcement agencies uphold their obligations to protect and facilitate the exercise of the right of peaceful assembly, strictly adhering to international law and standards on the use of force, including by recognizing that dispersal should be an exceptional measure, and that firearms are not an appropriate tool for policing assemblies and must never be used to disperse a protest.

Corporate accountability for occupational injuries and deaths

Amnesty International calls on the Government of Bangladesh to:

- Amend the definition of child in the Bangladesh Labour Act to align it with UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Children Act 2013 and hold corporations accountable for employing child labour.
- Ensure that no children are employed in contravention of ILO Convention 182 on the Worst Forms of Child Labour

- Ratify the key ILO Conventions regarding occupational health and safety, namely:
 - o C102 - Social Security (Minimum Standards) Convention, 1952
 - o C121 - Employment Injury Benefits Convention, 1964
 - o C155 - Occupational Safety and Health Convention, 1981 and
 - o C187 - Promotional Framework for Occupational Safety and Health Convention, 2006

Amnesty international also echoes reform demands made by the Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust (BLAST) and other NGOs working on labour rights namely to:⁴⁷

- Amend the Fifth Schedule to the Bangladesh Labour Act, so the existing statutorily capped lump sum amounts (i.e. 200,000 BDT for occupational deaths and 250,000 BDT for permanent disablement) are treated as the minimum and not maximum amount of compensation payable in the event of death or permanent disablement.
- Introduce a provision in Chapter XII of the Bangladesh Labour Act that obliges Labour Courts to follow basic principles of damages assessment in tort law (e.g. factoring in the age and loss of earnings of the worker, number of dependents, severity of injuries etc.) when adjudicating compensation cases under the Bangladesh Labour Act.
- Introduce a national data repository on workplace deaths and injuries to ensure transparency and fill the current gaps in official data. The repository should list the total number of workplace injuries and deaths in any given year alongside the total number of compensation claims filed in all Labour Courts and the outcomes.

Annotations

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