

## Tazreen Fire Visit report

A fire broke out at Tazreen Enterprises, Ashulia, Bangladesh on the night of November 24, 2012. The fire resulted in the deaths of 111 workers and more than 300 workers were injured. There were multiple investigations undertaken by the government and the garment association (BGMEA – Bangladesh garment Manufacture and Export Association) which termed the fire as “pre-planned” and sabotage. Bangladesh Occupational Safety, Health and Environment Foundation (OSHE) carried out an independent investigation into the incident to bring out the root causes and failures resulting in the large number of deaths and injuries in the incident. The investigation report was presented during a multi-stake holder consultation on “*Safe Work at Garments Factories in Bangladesh : Lesson Learned from Tazreen Fire Accidents- Challenges and Way Forward*” held at the CIRDAP Auditorium, Dhaka on January 7, 2013. A large number of people from different trade unions, NGOs government agencies, victims, media, academicsetc were present during the discussions.

A visual documentary titled “Death trap” was showcased on the occasion. The documentary showed the conditions in the factory and the vulnerability of the workers.

Mr Omar Faruq presented the findings of the investigations. 111 workers lost their lives out of which 58 have been identified. 53 bodies are still unidentified and DNA samples have been taken from the victim’s families and report is awaited. It was told that the results will be disclosed only when all



samples are collected. Compensation of BDT 600,000 has been handed over to 45 families so far out of 58 deaths. Almost 300 workers are injured, some seriously although BGMEA has so far prepared a list of only 63 injured workers. OSHE team has compiled a list of 89 injured and 58 cases of death due to the fire tragedy.

The investigation also highlighted the reasons for the tragedy. The main reasons were that there was no emergency exit. Building codes were not followed. Although the owner had permission to build only 3 floors, he had constructed 9 floors and work on the 10<sup>th</sup> floor

was in progress. Raw material was stored on the ground floor. High power electric generators were next to the raw material on the ground floor. Gates were locked even after fire started and the management even asked workers to return to their stations terming the alarm as false. Only 40 workers had received a basic fire safety introduction. There was no provision of adequate water and fire safety equipment was completely inadequate. 95% of the workers were women. More than a month and a half has gone by but still all the deceased have not been identified. The injured are still waiting to receive free and comprehensive medical treatment and rehabilitation

The report also provided suggestions to ensure that this tragedy does not repeat – Endorsement of National Health and Safety policy, strict enforcement of labour laws, enhancing capacity of State Factory inspectorate and fire safety services, regular fire safety training for workers, establishing separate units for production and godowns, provision of emergency exits.

Mr IsrafilAlam, chair of Parliamentary committee of Ministry of Labour and Employment, criticized the report of investigation from the BGMEA and stated that the report was designed to protect the employers. This report was termed as biased, ill motivated and defensive. Brigadier General AbyNayem expressed his dissatisfaction at the unwillingness of garment factory owners to ensure fire safety. There was an emphasis on creation of a National Policy on RMG sector by Mr Shukkar Mahmud, Chairman of NCCWE. Mr Sanjiv Pandita, Executive Director AMRC expressed deep concern

for the victims and referred to the 100 year old triangle factory fire in New York which acted as a catalyst to ensure strict fire safety laws in the US. But in Asian region these tragedies keep on repeating.

The victims of the fire spoke about the situation in the factory and narrated their experiences. They spoke about the supervisors refusing them to go out of the factory, the smoke on the staircases. They said that in order to escape with their lives, they had to break the windows and jump. A pregnant lady jumped from the third floor (mercifully both she and her baby are ok), one lady even jumped from the 5<sup>th</sup> floor. BGMEA provided the initial medical cost but no more help has been provided.



During the discussion that followed, the assembled gathering gave their suggestions in order to prevent tragedies of this magnitude in future. Some of these suggestions were creation of a fund for the welfare of workers and strengthening of government structures, establishing a culture of accountability and others. There were suggestions to pressurize the buyers and brands to ensure that there are adequate safety provisions in the factories from where they are procuring their goods. Demands to arrest the owner of the factory and to try him for willful murders were made by one and all.



The next day we visited the factory site at Ashulia, about 50 kms from Dhaka. We met with about 50 victims at the local primary school who once again narrated their sorry stories of jumping out of factory to escape a certain death. The victims looked terrified and traumatized due to their experiences. Even the children were terrified and it may take many months and therapy for the community to overcome this disability. People with photos of their missing family members came to us for help. Some had lost 1 member, some more. Some had lost their will to live. Some had lost their mental balance and were terrified at any sound. There is an urgent need to provide immediate and comprehensive medical treatment to these victims to enable them to overcome from this tragedy. Some are only hurt physically but most are hurt mentally as well. There is a need for rehabilitation of these victims some of whom were the sole bread earner for their families and now are facing a grim and uncertain future.



We saw the factory and saw the rampant building code violations in the building – no fire exits; building of more floor than allowed, grills on windows etc. we also saw the broken industrial exhaust fans from where the workers jumped to escape death. The factory was surrounded by residences and if the fire had spread, it would have caused grave damages.

Immediate steps need to be taken by all concerned and as Mr. Repon Chowdhury, Executive Director of OSHE stated during the multi-stake holder consultation - “History will not forgive us if we fail to ensure justice for the Tazreen accident victims. Upholding the dignity and guarantying safe & decent work for all workers in the RMG sector of Bangladesh is an immediate necessity”.



OSHE invited us to visit their field office in Dhaka where they work with the rag pickers at a municipal landfill site. At the office they distributed safety kit and personal protective equipment's to about 30 rag pickers present. They plan to distribute the kit to more than 400 rag pickers following which no worker without the uniform and protective equipment would be allowed inside

the landfill. Both men and women were enthusiastic regarding the equipment and have promised to wear the same.

