



The Massacre of Ashulia

**Walmart's
Human Incinerator**

“Specifically to the issue of any corrections on electrical and fire safety...costly modifications would need to be undertaken to some factories. It is not financially feasible for the brands to make such investments.”

Wal-Mart Director of Ethical Sourcing

April 2011¹

Front cover photo: 58 unidentified bodies from the Ashulia fire, at the Dhaka Medical College morgue, awaiting DNA testing. Dhaka, Bangladesh, November 26, 2012. Monirul Alam.

Death-trapped in a burning cage: the Ashulia inferno



Comments on the horrific fire that swept through a Bangladeshi garment factory on Saturday, November 24th.

By Red Marriott

Another fire in a Bangladeshi garment factory, over 120 lives lost and more than a hundred injured - the only difference this time from the many other factory fires in the past thirty years is the scale of the deaths and human suffering. It is this that makes it 'worthy' of comment, for a brief moment, in the international media. But fire is an occupational hazard for both bosses and workers in this industry.² For employers—and their foreign buyers whose brand names are on the labels—it is merely part of a cost and profitability equation and an element of Corporate Image management. This particular death-trap factory was operated by Tazreen Fashion Ltd in the Dhaka industrial suburb of Ashulia and supplied, among other major brands, C&A in Europe and Walmart in the US.

That factory fires have for decades been such a common occurrence in the ready made garment (RMG) industry means that fire risk is, in effect, factored in as an influence on decisions on how production is organized. With fast turnaround times demanded by buyers for foreign orders in the highly competitive global fashion retail markets, time is always tight and any production stoppages edge businesses ever-closer to invoking contractual financial penalty clauses for late delivery. Inevitably, corners are cut and workers'

health & safety is a low priority.³ (Employers claim that fires have been reduced in recent years. But it may only be that—as production models develop and their scale increases—that though there may be less fires, bigger factories will mean their death count becomes larger when fires do occur.)

In this case the fire began at around 6:45 p.m. on Saturday evening, for reasons that remain so far uncertain, on the ground floor and quickly swept upward through the nine storey block. Survivors report hearing a fire alarm and beginning trying to leave the building; but workers claim that management told them to return to work, saying there was no fire and that the alarm was simply malfunctioning.

This lie was shortly revealed; as fire began sweeping up the stairwells of the building it ignited piles of fabric and yarn stored in corridors. Over a thousand workers were trapped in the building; trying to escape, with only three staircases and no safety exits, many found themselves trapped by locked grills separating the floors.

According to Zakir Hossain, another worker, management told their employees not to evacuate immediately.

“The office staff asked us to stay where we were, telling us not to panic. We did not listen to them and started moving out,” Hossain recalled. “A lot of people were stuck there. Some people got out climbing down the bamboo [scaffolding] tied against the building.”⁴

“The fire alarm went off during the incident [when the fire broke out]. At that time we tried to go downstairs fearing a fire has broken out but the authorities said nothing had happened. The alarm was out of order [said the authorities],” said Ripu.

“They locked the collapsible gate from outside and asked workers to go back to work saying the alarm was being fixed.”⁵

Kamrun Nahar, who worked as a sewing machine operator on the fifth floor, said they tried to rush to the ground floor as the alarm went off, but found the gate on second floor’s staircase

locked.

The supervisors told her to return to work.

“I helplessly waited for two minutes and then ran towards another staircase. Around 50 men and women followed me and we reached the exit on the ground floor, where all the staircases meet. We felt heat and saw smoke when we came down.”

Many workers escaped through the adjacent building by breaking metal bars of windows. The owner of that building, Mahmud Ali Sikder, said a makeshift bridge was made to connect the two structures.

Sikder claimed that more than 400 people were helped to escape through his building.⁶

Workers were forced to leap from windows in trying to escape the heat, smoke and flames, many jumping to their deaths trying to reach roofs of surrounding buildings. Some managed to find their way to upper floors from where they were rescued by firefighters. Others created improvised bridges to nearby buildings or rope ladders from rolls of fabric. The rest were trapped by locked exits and



the advancing fire...Dozens of bodies were recovered from various upper floors, many so charred as to remain unidentifiable.

Locked gates are another common danger workers repeatedly complain of in relation to factory fires. For security reasons—to guard against theft of fabric stock and to control movement of workers—exits are often kept locked. That this has repeatedly been noted for decades as a major contributing factor in fire deaths has made little difference to factory bosses; it remains a cost-effective measure and that's what counts. For the Tuba Group (a major garment exporter of which this factory was a subsidiary) this is probably a relatively minor set-back and temporary embarrassment. Basic factory start-up costs are low and, in one of the world's poorest countries, labour power is easily replaceable. Lost productive capacity will soon be re-established. A few cosmetic crocodile tears will be shed by employers:

The owner of the Tazreen factory, Delwar Hossain, told AFP by telephone that the cause of the fire was not yet known but he denied his premises were unsafe.

“It is a huge loss for my staff and my factory. This is the first time we have ever had a fire at one of my seven factories,” he said, confirming that the premises made clothes for C&A and Li & Fung.⁷

Hossain conveniently ignores that serious concerns about safety issues were already voiced last year by Walmart compliance inspectors—yet neither the owners nor inspectors acted on those concerns (see below).

Akram Hossain searched every corner of the fire-devastated factory of Tazreen Fashions Ltd in Ashulia for his wife Lipi Begum.

“Oh, God, where do I search for her, now,” said a helpless Akram.

Of the dead, 54 bodies, which could not be identified and remained unclaimed, were handed over to the voluntary organization Anjuman Mofidul Islam.

Akram moved around the ashes of fabrics, burned flesh, debris of ceramic tiles, sewing machines, charred electric wires and

examined everything repetitively in the hope of finding his wife. He got nothing but scattered sandals of terrified workers, scarfs, shirts, tiffin-box and shattered windows of the factory, sited at Nischintapur, half a kilometer north off Dhaka-Ashulia highway.

One attendance card of one Ms. Zaida was found lying at the third floor near a window which iron grills were broken by the desperate workers to escape the blaze.

To help the families of the deceased, Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers Association announced Tk 1 lakh[\$1,235] as compensation.

“It is not possible for me to claim an unknown body as my wife only for money. What’s the meaning of money if I do not get her,” said Akram, giving a blank stare. [...]

Hanif said his wife managed to escape the fire by jumping from the third floor. She lost her leg and her chest bones were broken. She has been undergoing treatment now.

A lucky worker who could escape the death is Mamata, a young girl, who joined the factory early this month.

“A male fellow worker helped me to escape the fire. Otherwise, I would have died,” said Mamata.

“When the fire broke out and fire alarm rang, manager suggested us not to be worried saying that nothing had happened,” said the worker, recalling the horror episode.

The fire broke at the ground floor which was used as a warehouse. Those who were working at the first, second and third floors were the worst victims, said Md Obaidul a survivor who also escaped the fire through the window.

“Hot smoke filled the air within minutes as soon as fire alarm rang and electricity supply became off. We were running to escape death through the dark. Many died inhaling smoke,” said Shiria, another woman survivor.⁸

This is business as usual for the garment industry; compensation at the rate of \$1200 a life will be paid out by the garment bosses and

production is likely to carry on much as before.

The country is a major clothing exporter, second only to China. There are around 4 million workers in 4,000 Bangladeshi RMG factories earning the bosses up to \$20 billion a year and these profits are built on these conditions. RMG workers earn some of the lowest industrial wages in the world. Exporting cheap clothing to the West has its price, cheap or dear depending on your viewpoint and material interests.

As part of maintaining the Global Brand Image, corporations employ compliance officers to check the working conditions of their factory suppliers. All sides know how this game is played; a minority of workplaces largely comply with minimum standards while the rest make some show of doing so, knowing that an attractive sale price trumps all other issues and that international brands will not let the necessary image of compliance inspection to interfere too much with the reality of a regular supply chain. Model compliant factory areas may be maintained as showpieces for compliance officer visits—while actual daily factory conditions bear no resemblance to this. A separate set of compliant books, showing fictitious higher rates of pay and safety expenditure may be kept. Compliance visits can be simple audits of paperwork rather than effective inspection. Equally, government-employed safety inspectors—who are paid lower wages on the tacit understanding that income can be ‘topped up’—are easily bribed to turn a blind eye.

Walmart inspectors had already graded this factory as high risk:

Importers were not satisfied with Tazreen Fashions Limited, the ready-made garment factory in Ashulia, where a fire killed at least 110 of its workers, and ranked its working condition as ‘highly risky’

A document posted on the factory’s website shows the main importer of the factory, Wal-Mart, listed it, a sister concern of Tuba Group, in the ‘Orange’ category, just below ‘Red,’ which prohibits signing of any deal with it. [...]

According to The New York Times, an “ethical sourcing” official for the Wal-Mart flagged “violations and/or conditions which were deemed to be high risk” at the Ashulia factory on May 16, 2011.

The Wal-Mart evaluation, however, did not specify the nature of the infractions.

The Wal-Mart categories to evaluate a factory's compliance are 'Green', 'Yellow', 'Orange' and 'Red'.

A factory remaining in the 'Orange' category in three assessments for two consecutive years is automatically placed in the 'Red' category, leading to the cancellation of business deal with it for a year.

Those in the 'Green' category are the most complaint ones.⁹

This shows how easy it is for RMG suppliers to appear to comply with the minimum asked of them by foreign buyers—even when concerns have been flagged up. This was not some back street hole-in-the-wall fly-by-night marginal operation. It was a major exporter's large factory supplying leading international brands; making clear how prevalent these deadly conditions are, forming the basis of the \$450 billion global clothing industry. It also shows, once again, that these fires are known by workers, bosses and foreign buyers to be both entirely predictable and, if desired, largely preventable.

One might assume that such horrific scenes could become a tipping point where the demands for significant lasting safety improvements in the industry becomes irresistible; but there have been many other horrific scenes, other “worst ever fires” before this one. Meanwhile the profits keep growing.

Today, Monday 26th, there was another factory fire in Ashulia, this time with no reported injuries. 200 factories in Ashulia are closed and roads have been blockaded as thousands of workers have walked out to march to the factory ruins to protest the deaths and demand improvements in conditions.

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Initial assessments by local police and fire services have stated there is no evidence for deliberate arson, suggesting that an electrical fault in the basement is a likely cause. Firefighters have also noted the absence of safety exits and that they had to cut through locked gates, verifying workers' claims.

But Bangladeshi politicians on all sides have never been slow to

shamelessly mobilise the dead in the service of propaganda gains. (This is rooted in the conflicting loyalties of the nation's War of Independence that have continued to divide the society ever since.¹⁰) The latest reports are that the government is claiming the fire as an act of sabotage by political opponents—yet with no evidence so far produced to support such a claim. Two garment workers who were arrested on Sunday at nearby Debonair factory in Ashulia have confessed to an act of attempted arson. Released factory CCTV footage shows a woman, Sumi Begum, setting fire to clothing at Debonair—which was quickly spotted and doused by other workers; she is reported to have later confessed that a fellow worker, Zakir Hossain, paid her TK20,000 [\$246] to set the fire. But, though Prime Minister Hasina is linking the arrests with the deadly Tazreen Fashion fire, those arrested have not confessed to any involvement in it and no evidence has so far linked them.

(Yet a process of disinformation is perhaps already underway to conflate the two different incidents. One newspaper has already reported on its front page that the PM's claim that "It is not an accident. It is a pre-planned incident," is proved by the arrest of Begum and Hossain—as if their attempted arson occurred at the Tazreen



factory. When in fact—as an article inside their own paper makes clear—their arson attempt was made elsewhere at their own workplace, the Debonair factory.)

Though one cannot definitely dismiss deliberate arson, it looks a very convenient ‘explanation’ for the ruling class all round, for several reasons:

1) The ruling Awami League government has begun the process of finally trying those accused of war crimes in the 1971 War of Independence. Prominent members of the Islamicist Jamaat-e-Islami party are facing trial and their supporters have been becoming increasingly militant in response. Relations with the AL’s main opposition party, the BNP, are also very bad. To claim, as the AL leader PM Hasina now does, that the RMG fire is a conspiracy of her political rivals attempts to paint her government in a more favorable light and to discredit the opposition. It also gives an excuse for increasing political repression of rival parties.

2) Playing on nationalistic insecurities, similar conspiracy claims have been used for decades to imply that Pakistani and Islamic forces are ‘threatening the national interest’. This paranoia has regularly been used to both excuse the failings of politicians and of garment bosses as a supposed ‘explanation’ of political opposition and workers’ unrest. This is meant to imply, particularly to foreign observers, that there could be no genuine reasons for violent dissatisfaction with politicians or with factory working conditions.

3) The garment bosses—who have for years made similar unverified claims to ‘explain’ workers’ unrest—would be relieved to point the finger elsewhere as the cause of this tragedy. In decades of making these claims—whenever workers’ protest reaches a peak—there has never been evidence produced to prove existence of these conspiracies. Yet—even if it was proved to be a genuine act of sabotage—it could not refute the fact that the Ashulia fire has again exposed that many garment factories are death traps, neglecting all possible safety precautions for the sake of profit; and that compliance requirements of Western corporations are often little more than a sickening smokescreen.

Notes

1. Renee Dudley & Arun Devnath, “Wal-Mart Nixed Paying Bangladesh Suppliers to Fight Fire,” December 5, 2012. Bloomberg News. <<http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2012-12-05/wal-mart-nixed-paying-bangladesh-suppliers-to-fight-fire.html>> [accessed December 27, 2012].
2. See our earlier articles:
<http://libcom.org/news/death-traps-work-home-fire-poor-bangladesh-10032010>
<http://libcom.org/news/cloth-dyed-blood-18122010>
3. With few zoning planning regulations—and little enforcement of what safety rules do exist—the Bangladeshi poor also live with the fear of fire at home. Their closely packed slum dwellings are tinderboxes waiting to catch, as they often do—and slums are often sited close to workplaces using various inflammable materials.
4. Jason Burke & Saad Hammadi, “Bangladesh textile factory fire leaves more than 100 dead,” November 25, 2012. The Guardian. <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/nov/25/bangladesh-textile-factory-fire>> [accessed December 27, 2012].
5. Selim Ahmed, “Fate sealed as gate was ‘locked,’” November 25, 2012. BDNews24.com. <<http://www.bdnews24.com/details.php?cid=2&id=236973&hb=top>> [accessed December 27, 2012].
6. Shaheen Mollah, “Grief-struck,” November 27, 2012. The Daily Star. <<http://www.thedailystar.net/newDesign/news-details.php?nid=258929>> [accessed December 27, 2012].
7. “Garment factory blaze kills 109 in Bangladesh,” November 25, 2012. Agence Presse France. <http://www.myrepublica.com/portal/index.php?action=news_details&news_id=45407> [accessed December 27, 2012].

8. “Desperate search for Ashulia fire victims,” November 26, 2012. The Daily Star. <http://www.thedailystar.net/newDesign/latest_news.php?nid=42709> [accessed December 27, 2012].
9. Farhan Fardaus, “Tazreen Fashions was ‘highly risky,’” November 25, 2012. DBNews42.com. <<http://www.bdnews24.com/details.php?id=236966&cid=4>> [accessed December 27, 2012].
10. *From the very beginning, the “pro-Islam” segments of Bangladeshi society and of the army had sympathies for Pakistan and opposed the independence of Bangladesh in the name of Islamic unity. The Jamaat-e-Islami (the main Islamicist party) leadership was at the forefront of mass atrocities on behalf of the Pakistan army on the eve of Bangladeshi independence. (It is only now, almost 40 years later, that war-crime trials are beginning.)*

Assumed identities can be varied and complex in Bangladesh—and most stem from one’s defined relationship to the 1971 Independence War. The lines drawn through Bangladeshi society by that war are still deep divisions today. For some, the national victory is seen as a victory for the Bengali culture embracing diversity and tolerance—in the face of the continued threat from Muslim fundamentalists who resent the split from their fellow Pakistani Muslims. Depending on emphasis, there are various ethnic, national and religious identities composed of different measures of cultural Bengali, national Bangladeshi and/or religious Muslim combinations or oppositions. (The other smaller religious and pre-national indigenous/tribal self-identities do not concern us here.) These oppositions embody contending views as to what kind of society Bangladesh should be and are contested at various levels, both politically and culturally. Source: <http://libcom.org/library/tailoring-needs-garment-worker-struggles-bangladesh>

Postscript: "Among the Dead"
by Mary Fell

First a lace of smoke
decorated the air of the workroom,
the far wall unfolded
into fire. The elevator shaft
spun out flames like a bobbin,
the last car sank.
I leaped for the cable,
my only chance. Woven steel
burned my hands as I wound
to the bottom.

I opened my eyes. I was lying
in the street. Water and blood
washed the cobbles, the sky
rained ash. A pair of shoes
lay beside me, in them
two blistered feet.

I saw the weave in the fabric
of a girl's good coat,
the wilted nosegay pinned to her collar.
Not flowers, what I breathed then,
awake among the dead.

