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The House of Cards - the Savar building collapse. No accident: murder as merely a cost of production

Wednesday 1 May 2013, by [MARRIOTT Red](#) (Date first published: 26 April 2013).

The latest human disaster in the Bangladeshi garment industry - a poorly constructed factory building collapses...

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At around 9 a.m. on Wednesday 24th April an eight storey building collapsed in Savar, an industrial suburb of Dhaka. Within two minutes the Rana Plaza structure was a mass of rubble, twisted metal, machinery and crushed and trapped bodies. The building housed a shopping centre on the lower floors with five garment factories located on the third to eighth floors. Those present in the neighbourhood described the collapse as like a deafening earthquake. The full horror of the disaster was quickly apparent; with thousands of mainly female garment workers inside the building, those local people who rushed to the scene could see crushed body parts amid the wreckage and hear calls for help from the ruins.

Those first on the scene were mainly local workers - relatives of those trapped, fellow garment workers from nearby workplaces or other shifts, rickshaw drivers, shop workers etc. They quickly began desperately trying to reach survivors, using any available tools and forming chains to shift rubble as best they could. When the emergency services arrived they continued to help with rescue efforts as the enormity of the disaster became clear.

Over 3,120 workers from the five factories were thought to be in the building when it collapsed. While many were rescued, an estimated 315 are counted dead with over 1500 injured, many seriously - and these numbers will certainly rise. In a country with a long history of similar incidents, the Rana collapse is the country's worst-ever industrial tragedy.

Why?

The reasons for this slaughter are depressingly predictable; in the cost equation between periodic loss of workers' lives and effective workplace health & safety measures the cheaper option always wins out. For the capitalists involved – the factory bosses and the international buyers for the Western clothing brands - this is entirely rational. All involved know that workplace deaths from factory fires and building collapses are inevitable under present conditions in Bangladesh - and that these conditions contribute greatly to the low costs of wages, price and profits. The country is the world's cheapest supplier of clothing. The details of the disaster show the operation of this logic at work...

Rana Plaza building - Tuesday 23rd April; workers are asked by management to leave their factories after cracks appear in pillars, floors and walls. (There are also reports that workers refused to continue work and walked out.) The appearance of the cracks is reported on a local TV channel. The building owner, Sohel Rana, later states that an engineer has pronounced the structure safe and that workers should return to work the following day.

Wednesday 24th April; workers return for the 8a.m. shift. At around 9a.m. there is a sudden jolt and - with the ground shaking like an earthquake and a deafening thud - in two minutes the eight storey building collapses, killing, maiming and trapping thousands. Local people rush to the site and begin desperate rescue efforts immediately.

Mahmudur suddenly felt a jolt. Within a moment, he noticed his colleagues running back and forth, screaming. It took Mahmudur little time to understand that something ominous was going to happen.

As soon as he along with others moved 20 feet towards the staircases, the building began collapsing, giving him the feeling of a lift going down.

"Darkness engulfed the entire place with thick clouds of debris. I heard screams around me. My heart started pounding," said Mahmudur, a quality inspector of Ethar Tex Ltd on the fifth floor.

"I lay down near a pillar, thinking that perhaps I was going to die. We were being roasted inside," he said. The roof curved and fell on him, leaving a space of three feet above him. [1]

Why did most workers reluctantly return to the building despite the dangers? The industry pays probably the lowest industrial wages in the world. Most were owed several weeks wage arrears and were threatened with the sack if they refused to return. Once workers are sacked it becomes difficult to recover unpaid wages – this is one of the most common sources of conflict in the garment industry. Some workers were also routinely docked three day's wages for missing a day's work.

In contrast, the management of a local bank branch housed in the ground floor shopping mall had taken note of the safety concerns and evacuated the branch, so avoiding injuries.

How did such an unsafe structure ever come to be built? This is a common occurrence in Bangladesh. A combination of corruption/bribery, lack of regulation and naked capitalist greed in a young booming industry means it is all too easy to construct buildings using poor architecture, too-cheap materials and inappropriate sites. The capital Dhaka is full of them. And the Dhaka region is very vulnerable to earthquakes – so if/when the statistically probable major quake hits Dhaka the Rana Plaza scenario will likely be multiplied city-wide [2]...

The history of the Rana Plaza illustrates at a micro-level the cowboy capitalism of the Dhaka

(un)real-estate nightmare. Some years ago Rana's father migrated to the city and worked in a small mustard mill. In 2003 he began trading in land. Rana was given a small plot by his father where he set up 'Rana Oil Mill' in a tin shed. Just behind the plot was a large pond; Rana intimidated the owner into selling it to him. These two parcels of land became the site of the ill-fated Rana Plaza.

Alongside his land-grabbing career, Rana also entered local politics:

Rana became a political activist and a cadre of the ruling Awami League under direct patronage of its top local leaders.

"Sohel Rana is known as an Awami League muscleman in the area and he maintains gangs of youths," said another local businessman. "Savar area is known for drug trade and various sorts of illegal activities controlled by several gangs. Extortion, drug trade and illegal land brokering are some of the activities of these gangs," he added.

Other local sources also said Rana nurtures gangs of youths in Savar area and organises anti-opposition processions. He is mainly used by local lawmaker Murad Jong in retaining domination in the commercial areas of Savar.

Rana amassed wealth in the 10 years. He has another four-storey market in Savar and a house nearby. He owns two brick kilns in Dhamrai and recently he grabbed several acres of land in the area. [3]

Rana gained planning permission in 2008 for a five storey structure which was duly built. The construction was not supervised by architects or engineers to assess its quality. 60% of the building was constructed on the site of the acquired pond which had been filled in, compromising the stability of the structure from the start.

By 2010 Rana's political career had progressed and he was now a local convenor for the Juba League, the youth wing of the ruling Awami League. With his increased political clout he then felt free to add three more floors to the Plaza – but with no planning permission or supporting walls. Workers reported that the building would sometimes shudder and jolt when generators ran. Yet at the time of the collapse the greedy Rana was even having a ninth floor added to this house of cards.

* * *

The workers' response

As noted earlier, garment workers had been some of the first rescuers on the scene. Many have also donated blood for victims in the city's overwhelmed hospitals.

Thursday 25th April: fearing trouble, managers in Dhaka's main industrial areas shut many factories; in others workers walk out in solidarity with the Rana Plaza victims and to protest their dangerous working conditions. Hundreds of thousands of workers barricade several main highways for several hours, fight cops and vandalise factories. Two factories and several shops are set on fire. A smaller group of 1,500 manage to break away and lay siege to the (illegally built) HQ of the BGMEA garment employers' federation, pelting the building with rocks and smashing windows and vehicles.

Workers are demanding the prosecution of the factory owners and of Rana.

Friday 26th April: clashes between relatives and cops occur at the Rana Plaza site due to

frustrations at the perceived slowness of the rescue operations, hampered by insufficient modern rescue equipment. 2,500 people have so far been rescued. Hundreds of workers are also involved in clashes in various other parts of the city, with over 200 cars trashed; cops respond with tear gas and rubber bullets. As a 'precautionary measure' the BGMEA announces that all garment factories will remain closed for the weekend.

Aftermath

The usual statements of concern, regret, condolences, compensation and assurances of reform will be wheeled out again by all those who profit from the carnage; the government, garment bosses, foreign buyers and Western retail chains. The garment bosses' federation, the BGMEA, will insist again that this incident is exceptional and measures are being taken to continually improve workplace safety. Government will say again that construction standards and their enforcement are improving. *Yet the BGMEA's own present headquarters was illegally built on stolen land, is in breach of planning permission and is environmentally destructive to its wetland habitat. It has nevertheless been allowed by successive governments to remain. But a recent ruling has stated it will be demolished:*

The High Court, in its observation, said, "There was huge fraud behind the construction of the building. [...]"This smacks of land grabbing, if anything else," the court said mentioning that vested quarter was behind this deal. [4]

With this incident following so soon after the Tazreen fire disaster [5]

Yet none have been willing to force any demands on suppliers that threaten the rock bottom prices they enjoy. Primark, Benetton, Wal Mart and all the rest know why the prices are so 'competitive' and want to keep it that way – as proved by the past few decades they've been happy to let these conditions exist and to profit from them. The factory owners and real estate speculators never get prosecuted for these deaths. The thousands of injuries and deaths that have occurred from factory fires and collapses remain a mere minimal cost factor of the next season's retail fashion and their continued profitability.

Libcom.org

P.S.

* <http://libcom.org/news/house-cards-savar-building-collapse-26042013>

Footnotes

[1] <http://www.thedailystar.net/beta2/news/inside-the-hell/>

[2] Most construction in Dhaka used to occur on more stable clay soil areas. But with the rapid expansion of the city much new development has been on softer black soil areas with much less load-bearing capacity in the soil. Yet in the unregulated building boom thousands of buildings, many multi-storey, have been quickly thrown up with insufficient foundations, inferior materials

and poor design.

... if an earthquake measuring 7 on the Richter scale hit Dhaka city, it would result in the death of at least 131,000 people due to fragile and faulty structure of the residential buildings and commercial centres. ... <http://newsfrombangladesh.net/view.php?hidRecord=321603>

[3] <http://www.thedailystar.net/beta2/news/beyond-law-all-along/>

[4] <http://bdnews24.com/business/2013/03/19/bgmea-bhaban-is-cancer-in-hatirjheel-project>

[5] See our earlier article;

<http://libcom.org/news/death-trapped-burning-cage-ashulia-inferno-27112012> As further evidence of, intentionally or not, the largely cosmetic nature of such bodies:

At least two garment factories at Rana Plaza had passed international labor and safety standard audits under a European trade organization that addressed specific safety concerns at the factories but didn't assess the stability of the building that housed them. [[As further evidence of, intentionally or not, the largely cosmetic nature of such bodies:

Two Bangladeshi factories that were in the building, and suffered worker fatalities in its collapse, had cleared an audit by the Business Social Compliance Initiative, which was set up a decade ago by the Brussels-based Foreign Trade Association, a body that comprises some 1,000 European retailers such as Adidas AG, Esprit Holdings Ltd. and Hugo BossAG.

The group said its auditors aren't building engineers and didn't take the state of the edifice into account when they conducted the checks. It is up to local authorities to ensure that construction and infrastructure are secure.

"It's very important not to expect too much from the social audit," said Lorenz Berzau, BSCI's managing director. "BSCI and other initiatives contribute to improve the situation," he said. "But it's a long way we have to go."

<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424127887324474004578445991168551584.html>