

# Bangladesh Army-police intervene after over 100 garment factories closed by protesting workers and outside activists

Saturday 7 September 2024, by [MAHMUD Noman](#), [UDDIN Jasim](#) (Date first published: 2 September 2024).

**The army and police initiated a joint operation tonight in the industrial zones of Savar, Ashulia, and Gazipur to restore order after more than a hundred apparel factories were forced to shut down, with some being attacked by outsiders and protesting workers over various demands.**

According to BGMEA sources, around 45 factories in Gazipur and 59 in Savar and Ashulia were forced to shut down due to protests demanding jobs and other benefits. The protesters blocked roads, vandalised three factories, and looted at least two others.



Factory owners, industrial police, and trade union leaders said first outsiders gathered in front of several factories, demanding employment. When they were told there were no vacancies, they resorted to vandalism and threw stones and bricks at the factories. RMG workers from various factories joined the protests later.

To seek protection for their factories, BGMEA and BKMEA leaders met with Home Affairs Adviser Lieutenant General (retd) M Jahangir Alam Chowdhury at the Secretariat yesterday afternoon. The decision to conduct joint drives was made in the meeting.

During the meeting with the home adviser, BGMEA Senior Vice President Abdullah Hil Rakib said that the unrest is driven by “outsiders who have been incited or incentivised by political leaders”.

He said, “Individuals wearing helmets and carrying sticks attacked our community police, and at least 30 employees of my factory in Gazipur have been injured in these attacks. He called for decisive action against these perpetrators.”

Unlike the past instances, protesters are not asking for arrears or wage hikes. This time they are making demands such as reduced workloads, stopping undue termination and increasing tiffin allowances.

Khairul Mamun Mintu, legal affairs secretary of the Bangladesh Garment and Sweater Workers Trade Union Centre, told TBS, “I believe there are outsiders involved in this protest alongside the workers. Additionally, local waste fabric [jhut] traders are exploiting the situation, especially considering the government change.

“The administration and police are not able to take effective action and have been largely inactive, causing the problem to escalate.”

He said, “Each factory’s workers have different demands, and some individuals also appeared out of nowhere demanding jobs. However, we have no involvement in this protest and the workers have said they don’t need any trade union leaders.”

An official from the Industrial Police told TBS, “Early in the morning, a group of people gathered in front of various factories in the Ashulia zone and began protesting for employment. When factory owners told them that there were no vacancies and that they would announce if they needed more workers, the protesters started throwing bricks and stones at the factories.”

The official added that the situation spiralled out of control when workers from various factories joined the protest with their own demands.

The country’s key export sector is facing this situation at a time when they are struggling to meet shipping deadlines and overcome shocks from the recent political turmoil.

Emerging from the meeting with the home adviser, BGMEA President Khandaker Rafiqul Islam said the adviser had directed the army, police, and industrial police to take immediate action to hold those responsible for the unrest accountable by Monday night.

The home adviser also asked owners to keep their factories open and continue production.

During the meeting, Adviser Jahangir told apparel factory owners that Labour and Employment Adviser Asif Mahmud Shojib Bhuiyan and Industries Adviser Adilur Rahman Khan held another meeting with labour leaders to address the situation.

Al Muslim Group Managing Director Md Abdullah said, “Over the past few days, we have been facing challenges due to the nearby NASSA Group factory, which has increments due. Their protesting workers have been staging demonstrations that disrupt our operations. As a result, we have had to close our factory shortly after reopening each day for the past three days.”

He said the RMG protest follows the unrest with the Ansar. Some political groups and NGOs may be involved in these. Without government intervention, the unrest could spread to other industrial zones.

Hameem Group Managing Director AK Azad said foreign buyers are requesting more female promotions to managerial positions, but the agitators are demanding the opposite – an 80% male recruitment.

“The police have not yet been fully active, and while the industrial police could manage the situation alone, the army is assisting despite lacking specific training for such protests. Local communities, union council members, homeowners, and local political leaders should be involved to help mitigate the issue,” he added.

BGMEA’s former president Quazi Moniruzzaman claimed that labour leaders, including Shahjahan Khan, are inciting the unrest and financing it to exacerbate the situation.

He also alleged that one labour leader holds citizenships and bank accounts in both Bangladesh and India and called for legal action against such individuals.

Major General Muhammad Moin Khan, general officer commanding (GOC) of the 9<sup>th</sup> Infantry

Division and area commander of the Bangladesh Army, stated that while some factories have typical wage-related issues that are manageable, certain demands from workers are irrational.

“Political groups are vying for control of the waste fabric [jhut] business following the regime change. Business owners should unite to safeguard their interests and cooperate with the army,” he said.

Responding to the industry leaders’ concerns, the home adviser said, “According to intelligence reports, both local and foreign forces may be involved in causing turmoil across various industrial sectors, including pharmaceuticals.”

### **Why the protest, what are the demands**

SM Noorani, vice president and admin head at Epic Group, which operates 12 RMG factories in Savar, Ashulia, Mymensingh and Narayanganj, told TBS, “The agitators of our Ashulia factory have presented an 11-point demand.”

The demands include a two-year ban on terminating or removing any worker, the resignation of all department heads, increasing the attendance bonus, providing lunch and transport allowances separately, limiting working hours for pregnant workers, a 10% annual increment, and dissolving the workers’ participatory committee.

Noorani said, “Many of these demands are illogical and contradict existing labour laws. As a result, our Ashulia unit has been closed since 29 August, following an attack on our factory by outsiders.”

Sources from the industrial police and union leaders said workers from various factories protested with differing demands.

Seeking anonymity, a female worker from Virtual Knitwear Ltd in Ashulia told TBS, “Staff at our factory mistreat the workers; they hire more female workers as the male ones protest more often against mistreatment. We want equal recruitment of male and female.”

She said, “We also have several other demands, such as stopping staff abuse, not putting excessive work pressure, increasing overtime and night shift pay, raising bonuses, preventing the dismissal of older workers, and ensuring job security.”

The Business Standard also obtained a handwritten note listing the collective demands of the workers at a factory called GAB Limited, which outlines 10 key demands.

These include halting unfair layoffs and guaranteeing at least 10 years of employment for current workers, closing factories during government holidays or providing double overtime pay and a day off if they remain open, improving the quality of food provided to workers, offering mandatory annual paid leave, providing medical treatment and medicine on-site, granting incentive allowances, increasing attendance bonuses, ensuring promotions every three years based on merit, giving 12 days off during the two Eids, organising an annual picnic, and providing Tk3,000 per worker if a picnic is not possible, among other demands.

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