

THE BUSINESS STANDARD

Rana Plaza to Hashem Food: A tunnel vision of occupational safety and health in Bangladesh

The recent fire at the Hashem Foods Ltd factory in Rupganj demonstrates a clear failure on the part of all stakeholders in our country tasked with governing and enforcing labour rights

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After the Rana plaza disaster, like many other people, I also thought that we will see a paradigm shift in terms of labour rights of occupational safety and health.

We saw a flurry of activities. The international community, the government, employers and labour unions, along with NGOs, got into social dialogue, which brought many positive changes in terms of occupational safety and health in the RMG sector.

Immediately after independence in 1971 Bangladesh became a member state of the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and ratified 30 conventions simultaneously, including the Labour Inspection Convention 1947.

Bangladesh did not do much in terms of labour rights prior to the enactment of the Bangladesh Labour Act in 2006. The Act itself was a compilation of many fragments of various laws related to labour rights.

However, the consolidation of all the laws brought everything under one big umbrella and gave new impetus to labour rights in the country.

In terms of institutional framework, the country's labour sector is governed by the Department of Labour and Employment under the Ministry of Labour and Employment.

While these two governing institutions have country-wide reach, their efficiency and relevance are questionable.

For a country of 170 million people, there were four labour courts (a few more have recently been added, but they are not yet fully operational).

Due to geographical distance and procedural complexities, these courts have more than 18,000 pending cases. This is a simple demonstration of a very poor state of access to justice for violations of labour rights.



The massive fire that swept through the multi-storey building last Thursday claimed the lives of 53 workers. Photo: Salahuddin Ahmed

Following the Rana Plaza disaster, the 2006 Act was amended, and the new provisions were primarily aimed at addressing occupational and safety and health protection for workers from all sectors.

It was also followed by the elevation of the Directorate of Inspection for Factories and Establishments into a Department with increased human resources of up to nearly 1,000.

A national tripartite committee on fire safety was formed, and the fire and civil defense services were given more resources and training.

Where are we in terms of securing basic labour rights and safety in 2021, eight years after Rana Plaza and in Bangladesh's 50th year of independence?

According to the International Trade Union Confederation's Rights Index 2020, Bangladesh is one of the world's ten worst countries for all forms of labour rights violations.

The social dialogues on worker safety, the amendment of laws, the establishment of new institutions, and millions of dollars spent on training, travel, workshops, and symposiums did not significantly improve the condition of the poor workers in this country.

I believe this is a problem that we have created by focusing almost entirely on the RMG sector and ignoring workers in all other sectors.

The underlying reason for RMG being prioritised is simple and straightforward. RMG is the most important sector that has single-handedly contributed to our remarkable economic growth.

The main reason for such a high level of interest in RMG is that it is buyer regulated and driven by the need to project a positive image to the West and its consumers.

However, it is important to mention here that only after the Tazreen and Rana Plaza incidents did such a buyer-driven sector and its workers get improved occupational safety and health protection.

The recurrence of these unfortunate incidents demonstrates the inherent flaws in the governance and enforcement of occupational safety and health rights.

At this point in time, I would like to examine the main two bodies responsible for fire safety in our country.

In most cases of fire safety, the usual suspect is the Civil Defense and Fire Service Department. When I visited their website, I came across their citizens charter as well as their mission and vision statements.

My first impression is that the department is primarily concerned with responding to any fire incident. If one looks at the first services listed in the citizens charter, the department appears to have a wide range of tasks and responsibilities, including the issuing of fire compliance certificate of any building. Its preventive measures, however, are ineffective and less known.

In recent years the DIFE has become more prominent, owing primarily to its work with the RMG sector.

Any reader can see that the department's terms of reference are very broad, and it lacks the capacity to meet its own deliverables in any way.

This department has the dual responsibility of protecting occupational safety and health and other forms of labour rights as well.

It is very difficult to understand how one organisation can fulfill responsibilities encompassing two different qualities of labour rights. Labour rights of OSH and all other rights are not the same.

The recent fire at the Hashem Foods Ltd factory in Rupganj, which killed 53 workers, demonstrates a clear failure on the part of all stakeholders in the country involved with labour rights.

The factories in Keraniganj, Narayanganj, Saidpur, and Chattagram clearly demonstrate that DIFE or any other institution is not interested in them because they do not produce for the Western markets.

I now understand that Rana Plaza was never a paradigm shift. The establishment of a strong Health and Safety Executive (HSE) that will be responsible for ensuring fire safety by rigorously inspecting and enforcing the OSH requirements of every sector has become an urgent necessity.

It is also time to consider the effectiveness and relevance of all the existing institutions tasked with governing and enforcing labour rights.

Unless we change these institutions to meet the required international labour rights standards, the plight of our workers will worsen.

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