

April 27, 2013

Odhikar's statement on the deaths of garment workers at Rana Plaza in Savar

Odhikar expresses its outrage at the deaths of hundreds of factory workers, including garments workers, of whom about half were women; due to the collapse of a multi-storied building that had extensive, known structural damage, on 24 April 2013. A 36 hours general strike called by the BNP-led Opposition was withdrawn to facilitate the rescue operations at Savar. The rescue operations are continuing as hundreds of workers are trapped under the collapsed eight- storied building.

The building was, allegedly, built by filling up a pond and there were recent complaints that it was becoming dangerous to work in it due to numerous cracks, faults and other structural damage. Despite this, factory managers urged their workers to continue working there and it is alleged that the workers complied out of fear that their wages may be withheld if they did not listen. The floors of the building collapsed on top of each other, leaving workers and staff trapped and dying.

It has been reported that the owner of the collapsed building, Rana Plaza, is Sohel Rana, allegedly the Metropolitan Senior Joint Convener of the youth wing of Awami League. It must be noted that during the day of the incident the Home Minister commented to the press that the pro-hartal agitators from BNP and Jamaat were banging and tugging on the gate and pillar of the building, which contributed to its collapse. This gave rise to speculations as to whether the Government was being influenced in some way and trying to protect those responsible. Such an attitude towards human life in peril is astonishing.

However, at the time of releasing of this report, due to massive pressure from the people and agitated co-workers and protests by workers of other garment factories, the Prime Minister asked the law enforcement agencies to arrest the owner of the faulty building and the owners of the garments' factories, which were situated there. To date, Sohel Rana apparently cannot be found and his wife has been arrested, along with two of the garment factory owners.

From April 24 to April 27 a reported total of 343 bodies have been retrieved from the rubble. Many workers are still stranded alive under the debris. It is to be noted that between January 2009 to April 27, 2013 at least 509 workers have died due to lack of safety precautions, fire or due to collapse of factory buildings around the country.

Bangladesh earns a substantive portion of its revenue from the export of garments and accessories and a very large number of women are employed in this sector. But, no measures have so far been taken to protect the rights of these factory workers and even when they make demands for better working conditions. When they hold rallies and protest marches, they are faced with the actions by the Industrial Police Force, that protects the interests of the factory owners and management. Labour leader Aminul Islam, who was very vocal about the need to improve working conditions, disappeared on 04 April, 2012 and his body was later found with the marks of torture.

The Savar incident comes soon after the incident of fire that broke out at Tazeen Garments, on 24 November 2012, killing at least 113 workers. Appalling working conditions were exposed during the investigation of the fire, including the fact that even as fire alarms sounded, workers were locked in and told to continue working, as nothing had happened. If all such incidents were studied, a long list of human rights violations against garment factory workers can be written and their exploitation in the hands of the owners and managers exposed.

Unfortunately, fact finding and reports show that the apparent attitude of the governments of Bangladesh is to have a nexus with the moneyed business community and to defend them against the ordinary workers by all means. No action was taken against the owner of Tazeen garments, and the Bangladesh Garments Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) also defended him. This attitude and the fact that money and greed overrides human life and dignity in the garment industry, has resulted in a massive class division in the society without any safety net for the poorer section of the society.

Odhikar commends the rescue efforts being made under poor conditions with very little appropriate machinery, to save lives and retrieve casualties. We urge upon the people of Bangladesh to come forward to stand by the side of the victims and their families so that they have the much needed support to force a change in circumstances. Odhikar vehemently protests the continued injustices in the factories and against the culture of impunity against the perpetrators and demands the arrest of the government officials who connived with the owner to build the faulty structure.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Adilur Rahman Khan".

Adilur Rahman Khan
Secretary, Odhikar

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "ASM Nasiruddin Elan".

ASM Nasiruddin Elan
Director, Odhikar