

April 29, 2013

Bangladesh Needs Strong Unions, Not Outside Pressure

By FAZLE HASAN ABED

BANGLADESH, my country, is again in tears. Last week in Savar, a suburb of Dhaka, the capital, a poorly constructed building that housed garment factories and other businesses collapsed. More than 300 have been confirmed dead, and the final death toll could well exceed 700.

Bangladesh is no stranger to disasters, both natural and man-made. Still, this is one of the saddest chapters since we won our independence in 1971, precisely because the tragedy could easily have been prevented. Structural weaknesses had been found but not fixed. The victims were among the most vulnerable in our society — hardworking people making an honest, but meager, living. Many died manufacturing clothing for Western brands.

I appreciate the unease a Westerner might feel knowing that the clothes on his or her back were stitched together by people working long hours in dangerous conditions. It is natural that people in richer countries are now asking how they can put pressure on Bangladesh and its manufacturers to improve the country's dismal safety record.

But ceasing the purchase of Bangladeshi-manufactured goods, as some have suggested, would not be the compassionate course of action. Economic opportunities from the garment industry have played an important role in making social change possible in my country, with about three million women now working in the garment sector. I have dedicated my life to alleviating entrenched poverty, and I know that boycotting brands that do business in Bangladesh might only further impoverish those who most need to put food on their tables, since the foreign brands would simply take their manufacturing contracts to other countries.

The rise of manufacturing here has had good effects. In the past, for example, a poor family's vision for a newborn daughter's future was often to marry her off as young as possible, since the dowry paid to a husband's family grows as a daughter gets older. Even after the dowry was outlawed in 1980, the practice continued. A girl would often be married off as young as 13, and would never leave her village, never know a brighter future for herself or her children.

Partly because many women and their daughters now take garment industry jobs — even in factories where workers' rights are virtually nonexistent — families living in poverty have changed their vision of the future. More have acquired long-term goals, like educating their sons and daughters, saving and taking microloans to start new businesses, and building and maintaining more sanitary living spaces.

Many outsiders think only of calamity when they hear the word Bangladesh — of factory fires, cyclones, floods and poverty. But the true Bangladesh is also the birthplace of microfinance and home to a robust civil society. It has seen rapid gains in living standards: maternal mortality is one-quarter of what it was in 1990; early childhood mortality is one-fifth of what it was in 1980, and we have eliminated the gender gap in primary and secondary school enrollment.

These remarkable gains will mean little if we allow tragedies like the one at Savar to continue. The law must work for everyone, rich and poor, landless laborer and factory owner alike. We must not allow those who benefit from the exploitation of the vulnerable to continue to treat life so cheaply.

What, then, is the solution? The changes must come first from Bangladesh itself. My country will require new political will to hold accountable those who willingly put human lives at such grave risk. It will also require the support of factory owners; civil society organizations, including my own; and the private sector, including Western buyers.

The solutions start with the workers themselves; they must be allowed by their employers to unionize, so they can engage in collective bargaining and hold their employers responsible for basic standards of

pay and safety. Their organized power is the only thing that can stand up to the otherwise unaccountable nexus of business owners and politicians, who are often one and the same.

Western buyers, instead of squeezing factory owners on price, should finance better safety standards. The point needs to be made in the marketplace overseas that safety improvements are not so expensive that they can be used as an excuse for raising prices to the consumer. And consumers who are shocked by the working conditions need to realize that a playing field where the price tag is the only standard for a purchase is not a level one when workers' lives are at stake.

At the same time, the owners themselves cannot be let off the hook, for there is no excuse for criminal negligence. But they cannot be trusted to voluntarily do all that they might. In a country with 100,000 factories in and near the capital, and three million workers in its garment industry, an inspection force numbering 18 people only invites unconscionable lapses on the part of unscrupulous employers. The inspection force must be increased drastically, and it must vigorously enforce safety standards.

The government, finally, must stop neglecting worker safety issues, even as it steps up enforcement. But that will be extremely difficult to accomplish as long as there is an unholy web of employers and politicians colluding to avoid responsibility for criminal negligence; that, in the end, is what trapped thousands of workers in the flimsy factory building that collapsed on them in Savar. Those workers cannot be forgotten until these issues are resolved.

“Made in Bangladesh” should be a mark of pride, not shame. Bangladeshi civil society stands ready to work with the authorities to make this so. In the 1970s, during the early years of my country's nationhood, Bangladesh was suffused with the energy of the struggle for independence, a yearning for freedom from exploitation. From this energy came microfinance, community health work, and other social innovations that, combined with new economic opportunities in export industries like textiles, have transformed the lives of tens of millions of poor people, particularly women.

Today I grieve with my fellow countrymen, but I also raise my voice to say that this must not continue. As we mourn our losses, let us rekindle that spirit of liberation.

[Fazle Hasan Abed](#) is the founder and chairman of the antipoverty organization BRAC, formerly the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee.