



Bangladesh factory fire highlights new safety concern

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Labour rights groups are calling for garment factory safety initiatives to be extended to cover boiler safety, after at least 31 people died when a boiler exploded at a packaging facility in Bangladesh.

The explosion happened on Saturday (10 September) at the Tampaco Foils factory, located in the Tongi industrial area in Gazipur, around 30km from Dhaka – with the blast triggering a huge fire and partial collapse of the three-storey building.

According to local media, between 100 and 250 workers were present at the time of the explosion and, in addition to the fatalities, as many as 70 people have been injured.

Factory safety is a major concern in Bangladesh, and the latest tragedy "demonstrates the ongoing dangers to industrial workers in that country and the failure of global corporations to take meaningful steps to protect the safety of workers in their supply chains," say the Worker Rights Consortium, International Labor Rights Forum, Clean Clothes Campaign and Maquila Solidarity Network.



Factory safety is a major concern in Bangladesh

According to its corporate website, Tampaco Foils' customers include two of the world's largest consumer products brands: Nestle and British American Tobacco.

"If this information is correct, the question for Nestle and BAT is why were they producing at a factory where basic safety precautions, like inspection of boilers, were not being taken," the worker rights groups say.

However, they also point out that the tragedy raises the issue of boiler safety in Bangladesh's massive garment sector.

There have been numerous boiler explosions at garment factories in recent years, they say, including incidents in November 2014 at Shanta Expressions Ltd (one dead, four injured), December 2015 at RN Garments (eight injured), and in January 2016 at Active Zipper (two injured).

There has been major progress in improving fire and building safety in garment factories in Bangladesh thanks to the Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh and the Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety, but none of the safety initiatives covering the 1,600 garment factories used by global apparel brands and retailers cover the issue of boiler safety, the International Labor Rights Forum says.

"Accord standards concerning fire safety address the spread of a fire caused by a boiler explosion, but they do not address the prevention of such explosions – and, in an explosion the size of the one we have just witnessed at Tampaco Foils, limiting the spread of fire will not be enough to protect life and limb.

"This is a major issue that the Accord, all other building safety initiatives in Bangladesh, and the Bangladesh government must address."

The Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety says because it was not a ready-made garment factory, the packaging plant was "not aligned with any current safety initiative – which speaks to why factory safety reform is needed across all industries in Bangladesh to ensure every worker is protected."

The group adds: "We urge the government of Bangladesh to take further steps to implement the National Action Plan commitments to improve factory safety, and to ensure that such work extends beyond the garment industry to improve workplace safety in all enterprises of Bangladesh."

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