

The Opinion Pages | EDITORIAL

# One Year After Rana Plaza

By THE EDITORIAL BOARD APRIL 27, 2014

A horrendous building collapse last April in Bangladesh killed more than 1,100 garment workers. Labor groups, Western clothing companies, the Bangladeshi government and others have made some progress toward preventing similar tragedies, but more needs to be done.

There was never any doubt that improving working conditions in Bangladesh, one of the world's poorest countries, would be incredibly difficult. The collapse of Rana Plaza was just one — though by far the worst — in a series of industrial accidents in Bangladesh's garment industry, which has become one of the biggest exporters of clothes to the United States and Europe because of its low wages.

It has taken longer than it should to begin making reparations and improving workplaces. Not until last September did the government, the United Nations, the clothing industry and labor groups set up a committee to compensate the families of those who died or were injured. The committee estimates that it needs \$40 million to do the job, but it has raised only \$15 million. Factory owners and foreign retailers bear the primary responsibility for filling that gap, and they have failed to do so.

After Rana Plaza, Bangladeshi workers and officials feared that Western

retailers would stop doing business in the country because of outrage from consumers. That would have put millions of people out of work. It didn't happen. Bangladesh's clothing exports jumped 16 percent, to \$23.9 billion, in the 12 months that ended in March from the period a year earlier, according to local news reports.

Western companies have invested millions of dollars in two initiatives — one created primarily by European labor unions and businesses and the other by North American retailers — to inspect 2,300 of Bangladesh's nearly 6,000 garment factories. While it is too early to know whether these efforts are working, the European initiative has forced some unsafe factories to suspend production so that renovations can take place.

Some factory owners have complained that Western companies have not helped them remedy the defects the inspections have uncovered and compensate workers for lost wages while factories are being upgraded. If true, that's a fair point: The suppliers will have a difficult time footing the bill for improvements unless retailers pay more for clothes.

However, no effort to improve safety can be sustainable unless the Bangladeshi government does more to protect workers. To its credit, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's administration has allowed more workers to unionize, which should empower them to demand better working conditions.

The government has registered more than 140 labor unions since the start of 2013, up from just two for the previous three years, according to the International Labor Organization. But the government, which is still too beholden to factory owners, has not done enough to protect labor organizers from violence and intimidation. For example, two labor leaders were assaulted as they tried to unionize workers in February. The government also needs to hire and train many more inspectors to make sure that the factories that are not being audited by Western companies meet safety standards.

Bangladesh's clothing factories are better now than they were a year ago, but

they are not safe enough.

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