

One year after factory collapse, Bangladeshis suffer

By Julhas Alam
The Associated Press

SAVAR, Bangladesh — One year after the Rana Plaza garment factory collapsed in a pile of concrete slabs and twisted metal, Bangladeshi seamstress Shefali says she would rather starve to death than return to factory work.

Like many survivors of the worst disaster the garment industry has ever seen, 18-year-old Shefali, who goes by one name, says she suffers from depression and has flashbacks of the catastrophe that killed more than 1,100 people. She was injured in the collapse that happened a year ago and has lingering back pain.

And despite efforts by western brands to improve safety at the Bangladeshi factories that produce their clothes, Shefali fears nothing good will trickle down to the poorest of the poor. The country has one of the lowest minimum wages in the world — about \$66 a month — while churning out goods for some of the world's leading retailers.

"We die, we suffer, nobody takes care of us," Shefali said as she toured the site of the collapse, now a barren, fenced-off expanse. She hasn't started working again and stays at home with her parents.

"I had dreams of getting married, having my own family," she said. "But now everything looks impossible."

There have been some significant developments. The owner of the illegally constructed Rana Plaza building is behind bars, pending an investigation, but there has been no word on when he will be put on trial. The owners of the five factories operating inside the building also have been detained.

Authorities have appointed more factory inspectors, plan to appoint more, and say they aim to ensure that no new factories are built without following proper safety regulations.

But problems remain. According to Human Rights Watch (HRW), the international companies that sourced garments from five factories operating in the Rana Plaza building are not contributing enough to the trust fund set up to support survivors and the families of those who



FACTORY FALLOUT. A Bangladeshi woman holds a candle and a portrait of a missing relative, a victim of last year's Rana Plaza building collapse, during a gathering on the eve of the anniversary of the tragedy in Savar, near Dhaka, Bangladesh. More than 1,100 people were killed when the illegally constructed, eight-story building collapsed on April 24, 2013 in a heap along with thousands of workers in the five garment factories in the building. The placard reads "Farzana, Rana Plaza missing." (AP Photo/A.M. Ahad)

water that saved her life.

Although her story has a happy ending — she now works in an international hotel in Dhaka's upscale Gulshan area — Begum is still haunted by the disaster.

"I can't tolerate darkness in my room at night. The light is switched on always," Begum said in an interview from her sister's home in Savar. "If the light is turned off, I start panicking. It feels like ... What I can say? Like I am still there (at the Rana Plaza)."

Begum, who says she is either 18 or 19 years old, is waiting for the day that the factory owners face justice.

"So many people have died because of them," she said. "I want to see them executed."

Although some of the Rana Plaza workers have left the garment industry for good, others have returned to a job that many see as a path out of poverty. Every year, at least 300,000 rural residents — and perhaps as many as 500,000 — migrate to the Dhaka area, already one of the most crowded cities on the planet.

Poverty remains the norm across most of rural Bangladesh, where less than 60 percent of adults are literate. To them, the steady wage of a garment factory can lift their living standards significantly.

On the eve of the anniversary of the collapse, a spokesman for Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina tried to head off criticism of the government response and said the country must protect the lucrative garment industry.

"Bangladesh is working hard to improve conditions," the spokesman, Mahbubul Hoque Shakil, said. "All must keep in mind that if this important sector faces any setback from any negative propaganda, millions of families of the workers will be the main victims."

died. "One year after Rana Plaza collapsed, far too many victims and their families are at serious risk of destitution," said Phil Robertson, deputy Asia director at the organization. "International garment brands should be helping the injured and the dependents of dead workers who manufactured their clothes."

The target for the fund, chaired by the International Labor Organization, is \$40 million, but only \$15 million has been raised so far, HRW said. Retailers Bonmarche, El Corte Ingles, Loblaw, and Primark have all pledged money.

Mojtaba Kazazi, a former U.N. official who heads a committee to execute the fund, said they have started disbursing 50,000 takas (\$640) as initial payments to the families of the victims.

The very structure of Bangladesh's garment industry is also viewed as problematic.

According to a recent study by New York University's (NYU) Stern School of Business, an "essential feature" of the sector involves factories subcontracting work to other workshops that have even worse conditions.

"In the absence of regulation by the government of Bangladesh, the prevalence of indirect sourcing has resulted in a supply chain driven by the pursuit of lowest nominal costs," said Sarah Labowitz, co-director of the NYU Stern Center for Business

and Human Rights and co-author of the report. "That means that factories receiving subcontracts are operating on razor-thin margins that leave concerns about safety and workers' rights perpetually unaddressed."

Many garment workers are skeptical that there will be any lasting change.

When the collapse occurred on April 24, 2013, thousands of Bangladeshis were toiling inside the Rana Plaza in Savar, the center of the country's \$20 billion garment industry.

A violent jolt shook the floors around 9:00am. Then the eight-story building gave a deafening groan, the pillars gave way, and the entire structure went down in a heap with terrifying speed.

Investigators say a host of factors contributed to its collapse: It was overloaded with machines and generators, constructed on swampy land, and the owner added floors in violation of the original building plan.

The final death toll was 1,135 people, with thousands more rescued from the wreckage. Rescuers found Reshma Begum 17 days after the collapse, and authorities say her survival was miraculous.

When the building began to crumble around her, Begum said she raced down a stairwell into the basement, where she became trapped near a wide pocket that allowed her to survive.

She found some dried food and bottles of

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			8					
		3	9					4
				4	7	9		3
2					9	1		4
	9						5	
1		5	6					8
7		6	4	2				
	4				5	7		
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Difficulty level: Hard #83944

Instructions: Fill in the grid so that the digits 1 through 9 appear one time each in every row, column, and 3x3 box.

Solution to last week's puzzle

Puzzle #68191 (Medium)

All solutions available at <www.sudoku.com>.

6	4	8	2	5	1	3	7	9
7	1	5	6	3	9	4	2	8
9	3	2	4	7	8	5	6	1
5	2	6	3	9	4	8	1	7
1	9	4	8	6	7	2	5	3
8	7	3	5	1	2	6	9	4
3	6	7	9	8	5	1	4	2
4	8	9	1	2	6	7	3	5
2	5	1	7	4	3	9	8	6

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Sherpas struggle with climbing season in disarray

Continued from page 2

money on food, equipment, oxygen, paying porters to get all that to base camp. ... How are we going to bear all these losses?"

The Sherpas who stand to lose the most from walking off the job are the ones who take foreign clients up to the summit and carry their gear, although hundreds more who cook and clean at base camp would also be hurt.

Trekking officials were

more optimistic.

Ang Tshering of the Nepal Mountaineering Association acknowledged that it would be tough for many Sherpas and their families this year, but he noted that most Sherpas had already received at least some money for the season.

"There are many more Sherpas, like the porters who carry the loads to the base camp and bring it back to the airport, who will be paid in full," he said.

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News page advertising deadlines for our next two issues are:

May 19 to June 1 edition:

Space reservations due:

Wednesday, May 14 at 1:00pm

Artwork due:

Thursday, May 15 at 1:00pm

June 2 to 15 edition:

Space reservations due:

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Artwork due:

Thursday, May 29 at 1:00pm