

Recent casualties in textile factory fires, notably in Bangladesh

European Parliament resolution of 17 January 2013 on recent casualties in textile factory fires, notably in Bangladesh (2012/2908(RSP))

The European Parliament,

- having regard to the EC-Bangladesh Cooperation Agreement of 2001,
 - recalling its resolutions of 25 November 2010 on human rights and social and environmental standards in international trade agreements¹ and on corporate social responsibility in international trade agreements²,
 - having regard to the International Labour Organisation (ILO) report entitled ‘Globalising Social Rights: The International Labour Organisation and beyond’,
 - having regard to the ILO report entitled ‘Labour in the Global South: Challenges and alternatives for workers’,
 - having regard to the ILO report entitled ‘Globalisation, Flexibilisation and Working Conditions in Asia and the Pacific’,
 - having regard to its resolution of 9 March 2011 on an industrial policy for the globalised era³,
 - having regard to the updated OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises of 2011,
 - having regard to the ILO Promotional Framework for Occupational Safety and Health (2006, C-187) and the Occupational Safety and Health Convention (1981, C-155), which have not been ratified by Bangladesh and Pakistan, as well as their respective recommendations (R-197); having regard also to the Labour Inspection Convention (1947, C-081), to which Bangladesh and Pakistan are signatories, and its recommendations (R-164),
 - having regard to the Commission communication entitled ‘A renewed EU strategy 2011-2014 for Corporate Social Responsibility’ (COM(2011)0681),
 - having regard to the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights,
 - having regard to Rule 110(2) and (4) of its Rules of Procedure,
- A. whereas at least 112 people died at the Tazreen factory fire, in the Ashulia district, Dhaka, Bangladesh on 24 November 2012 and 289 people perished in a blaze in Karachi, Pakistan in September 2012;

¹ OJ C 99 E, 3.4.2012, p. 31.

² OJ C 99 E, 3.4.2012, p. 101.

³ OJ C 199 E, 7.7.2012, p. 131.

- B. whereas hundreds of workers are killed every year in similar accidents all over South Asia, with an estimated 600 garment workers having died since 2005 in factory fires in Bangladesh alone, many of which could have been prevented;
 - C. whereas conditions in the textile factories are often poor, with little regard for labour rights such as those recognised under the ILO's main conventions, and often with little or no regard for fire safety; whereas many owners of such factories have gone unpunished and therefore have done little to improve working conditions;
 - D. whereas there are more than 5 000 textile factories in Bangladesh, employing approximately 3,5 million people, with Bangladesh being the world's second-largest exporter of ready-made clothes, next only to China;
 - E. whereas the European market is the largest export destination for Bangladeshi apparel and textile products, with prominent Western companies admitting they had contracts with the owners of the Tazreen factory for the supply of garments;
 - F. whereas rising labour costs in other parts of the world have pushed low-skilled manufacturing jobs into India, Pakistan, Cambodia, Vietnam and, in particular, Bangladesh, where clothes now make up 75 % of exports;
 - G. whereas it is regrettable that some companies initially sought to deny working with the company involved in the Dhaka fire, only later acknowledging that their clothes had been produced at the site;
 - H. whereas in recent months tensions between the Bangladeshi Government and labour activists have been escalating, with workers denouncing their low salaries and poor working conditions;
 - I. whereas the murder in April 2012 of Aminul Islam, who had been criticising the unsafe factory conditions in the garment industry in Bangladesh, remains unsolved;
1. Expresses its sorrow at the loss of life suffered in the recent factory fires; extends its condolences to the bereaved families and to those injured; regards as wholly unacceptable the number of workers who have perished in factory fires in recent years in South Asia;
 2. Calls on the Governments of Bangladesh and Pakistan to continue with thorough investigations into the recent events and to put in place measures to prevent a recurrence of the tragedies, including full compliance by all manufacturers with health and safety legislation (notably the Labour Act (2006) in Bangladesh) and the establishment of an effective and independent system of labour inspections and inspections of industrial buildings;
 3. Welcomes the Bangladesh Fire and Building Safety Agreement between a number of trade unions, NGOs and multinational textile retailers, aimed at improving safety standards at production sites and agreeing to pay for such measures, in particular by establishing an independent inspection system and actively supporting the creation of 'health and safety committees' involving workers' representations in each factory, which are obligatory by law but rarely operational; calls on all relevant textile brands to support this effort;
 4. Urges all stakeholders to combat the corruption in the supply chain which is apparent in

many South Asian nations, including collusion between safety inspectors and factory owners; calls for more to be done to combat such practices;

5. Expects those responsible for criminal negligence and other criminal activity in relation to the fires to be brought to justice, and local authorities and factory management to cooperate in order to guarantee full access to the justice system for all victims, so as to enable them to claim compensation; welcomes the steps which have already been taken by the Bangladeshi and Pakistani Governments to support the victims and their families;
6. Welcomes the action of those European retailers which have already contributed to compensation schemes for the victims and their families and encourages others to follow their example; calls for free medical rehabilitation for the injured and care for deceased workers' dependent family members;
7. Calls on major international garment brands to critically investigate their supply chains and to cooperate with their subcontractors to improve occupational health and safety standards; calls on retailers, NGOs and all the other actors involved, including as appropriate the Commission, to work together to look at developing a voluntary labelling standard certifying that a product was manufactured in accordance with the ILO's core labour standards;
8. Calls on the Commission actively to promote mandatory responsible business conduct among EU companies operating abroad, with a special focus on ensuring strict compliance with all their legal obligations, in particular international standards and rules in the areas of human rights, labour and the environment;
9. Welcomes initiatives currently being delivered by the Commission with the aim of providing support for improving factory safety in Bangladesh, for example through the 'Promotion of Labour Standards in the RMG sector' project and joint work with the Bangladesh Fire Service and Civil Defence Directorate; calls for such cooperation to be strengthened and expanded to other countries in the region, as appropriate;
10. Recalls the need for consistent implementation of the ILO's eight core conventions; underlines the importance of robust health and safety provisions for workers, irrespective of the country in which their workplace is located;
11. Calls on the European External Action Service to ensure that EU trade officers, if based in EU delegations, are given regular training on corporate social responsibility issues, in particular with respect to the implementation of the UN 'Protect, Respect and Remedy' Framework, and that EU delegations function as EU contact points for complaints concerning EU companies and their subsidiaries;
12. Notes the important role that can be played by workers and trade unions, for example through the continued development of worker-led safety committees in all factories, and the importance of access to factories for unions in order to educate workers on how they can protect their rights and their safety, including their right to refuse unsafe work;
13. Welcomes Bangladesh's successful efforts to reduce child labour in the garment sector and urges Pakistan to step up its engagement against child labour;
14. Urges the Bangladeshi authorities duly to investigate the torture and murder of labour rights

activist Aminul Islam, and calls on both the Bangladeshi and Pakistani Governments to lift restrictions on trade union activities and collective bargaining;

15. Instructs its President to forward this resolution to the Council, the Commission, the governments and parliaments of the Member States, the Vice-President of the Commission / High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, the EU Special Representative for Human Rights, the governments and parliaments of Pakistan and Bangladesh and the Director-General of the ILO.