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Tazreen Fashions Fire: A deep scar

by Lutfur R Khandaker

The fire at Tazreen Fashions on November 24, 2012 raised many questions regarding the operation of industries in Bangladesh in the 21st Century. Bangladesh is competing in a Global economy at the cost of poor workers who are skilled in this industry. Accidents can happen anytime and anywhere. But how we can minimize the loss of lives and overall impact on total loss is important.

The owner's responsibility for the safety of the occupants warrants assessment. But, the responsibility of the buyer is a key factor as buyer has the ultimate and final say if they want to buy garments from an unsafe factory or not. In this case, Walmart needs to assume significant responsibility for this incident and do what is necessary for its future procurements from factories to provide safe and healthy working environments. If such thing occurs in a developed country, the architect and engineers may lose their license to practice and face criminal charges if there is a design error that results in death. But, in Bangladesh no one raises this issue even there are many incidents being reported regarding poor design, improper design and incomplete design as well as faulty construction.

Negligence on the part of a physician can result in the death of an individual. Mistakes of an engineer or architect can cause hundreds of deaths. This particular incident is a perfect example. Governments can and should regulate the issuance of professional licenses and require educated, experienced and competent engineers, architects and designers. The nation needs to consider passing laws to regulate professional licenses and determine the consequences of failure to comply with the law by the design and construction professionals. We cannot depend on BGMEA, the fire department nor factory owners for the proper design and construction of the safe factory buildings. The Bangladesh National Building Code (BNBC) needs to address safety and proper design of the fire fighting systems along with fire egress as mandatory requirements as a design and construction building code for light, moderate and heavily populated industries separately. But ultimate design responsibility should be assigned to the architect and the Engineer of Record (EOR) for the proper design of the systems and for the contractor to comply with the design.

Each and every constructed building must have a dedicated stand-alone fire fighting system and emergency egress system. Further, an adequate supply of water for firefighting must be designed properly considering the number of occupants. The firefighting system should be controlled automatically during a fire and be activated by a smoke detector. That way, human error cannot cause a failure. Regular fire drills and safety training of the workers must be performed on a regularly scheduled basis. Any new employee should be required to attend safety training. This training should be verified and documented to assure compliance.

It is a normal practice in developed countries to display a board in a public area that indicates notices of Accident Free Days in an industry. Both the employer and employee take the notices seriously as an indication of accident prevention and awareness. A public display of accident awareness is one of the factors for determining overall safety of the industry.

As opposed to waiting for legislation from the Government, the BGMEA has the opportunity to be proactive and develop standards to protect garment workers. The development of standards by the BGMEA would likely be a welcome effort by western buyers such as Walmart, Macys, Gap, JC Penny, Zara, Tesco, IKEA, H&M etc. and it would provide a measure of assurance to workers in the industry. Implementing the following recommendations would be a constructive and positive development that could be implemented in a very short amount of time.

- 1) Suspend construction of any new garment factories until proper safety measures are in place for each existing factory.
- 2) Construct fire fighting systems that are designed based on the availability of the water locally. The system will require special design and construction of firefighting system sufficient for the entire factory facility with automatic sensors and controls that actuate without human intervention in the event of a fire.
- 3) Design and construct appropriate fire egress for all of the existing garment factories in all of the occupied areas as required by modern building codes. The International Building Code (IBC) and National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) standards as used in the United States should serve as an example of appropriate fire egress requirements but must design considering local factors.
- 4) Train all workers for the evacuation during fire or an emergency.

- 5) Upgrade and install fire extinguishers throughout the entire building
- 6) Maintain and clearly mark all fire egress and fire doors for all employees.
- 7) Conduct fire drills on a regular basis. Drills should be monitored by the authority responsible for fire safety professionals assigned by the BGMEA.
- 8) Develop a written simple safety manual for the entire industry compliant with the international standard. Develop specifications based on accepted international standards and provide assurance that the owner is required to comply with the safety manual. The consequence of not complying with the safety manual should result in revocation and suspension of the ability of the facility to remain in business. There should also be significant fines and sanctions by law enforcement agencies. The threat of revocation of BGMEA membership should also be tool to force compliance.
- 9) BGMEA should also conduct unannounced visits for the purpose of auditing compliance with the fire safety and training requirements. The BGMEA should develop a compliance team for the purpose of monitoring compliance.
- 10) Provide fire proof digital and electronically readable identity cards for all workers. The BGMEA can provide a unique identity number for each worker to populate a data base to identify all workers.
- 11) Before allowing the operation of any new garment factory, BGMEA should assure that the proper design and construction of all aspects of the stand-alone fire fighting system and fire escape structures in place per above recommendation.
- 12) Simple measures can be taken to improve the lifestyles of the workers.
Provide primary healthcare for the worker and their immediate family members.
Provide performance based incentive and incremental increases in salary.
Provide a reasonable salary for the worker that can provide incentive for the worker to perform better.
Provide long term plans for providing residential living for workers close to the factory or inside the premises of the factory area.
Recall that the garments are made in one of the poorest countries and are being used by the western people and the richest people in the world.
We need technically experienced design engineers to design the systems using as much as possible the local available materials and that will be a challenge. Achieving a safe working place for the workers and attracting the foreign buyers to grow this industry and others would be augmented by a properly developed fire safety program.
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