Garment Fire Claiming Lives: Accidents or Murders?

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In Bangladesh, fire accidents in export-oriented garment factories continue to kill workers, most of them women and children. Last year one single accident in a factory in Narsingdi District, near Dhaka, left about 50 dead. Observers say such deaths cannot be regarded as accidental; these are murders, caused by the negligence of the factory authorities.

The very first year of the new millennium saw at least sixty workers killed due to fire in three export-oriented garment factories in Bangladesh. The victims were mostly women and children. They were not burned to death though. The majority of them died in the stampede while trying to get out of the factories on fire. These deaths had been preceded by many such throughout the 1990s and most could be avoided.

Fire is a probable risk in any garment factory and this risk increases due to faulty electricity networks in many of the factories in Bangladesh. Many of these factories, housed in unplanned multi-storeyed buildings, do not have enough or proper emergency exits, and the main gates are usually kept locked. On top of it, most of the factories do not ensure any training of the workers about what to do when a fire breaks out. The result combined is panic, stampede, and death.

The garment industry is the number one export earner of Bangladesh. At least 1.5 million workers are employed in this industry. The majority of them are women, coming from rural poor families. Working on an average 10 to 12 hours a day, these women keep the industry going. The country earns foreign exchange, the factory owners grow richer, while the families of the workers barely manage to get three square meals a day.

A garment factory is not a war field, nor a life-risk industry. Workers are not to expected to be killed while working in a garment factory. And yet when many workers continue to die in the same way, for the same reasons, and over the years, can their deaths be considered accidental? Rather, when the factory owners tend to neglect prevention of a known disaster they facilitate many a murder. The government too becomes a party to the crime by not compelling the owners to implement the legal requirements for fire prevention and fire control in the factories.
Narsingdi: The Rising Death Toll

On November 25, 2000, in the evening, a fire broke out on the third floor of Chowdhury Knitwear, an export-oriented garment factory. It took the fire brigade till midnight to contain it. But by then at least forty people were dead or about to die.

When we visited the spot on the 27th, the district administration told us that 39 people had died in the accident. The local people and the factory workers who survived the fire claimed that the death toll was at least 49. The official and local sources agreed on one point: only four had been burned to death. The rest died in a stampede while trying to get out of the factory.

At the factory gate we met a small crowd of workers and local people. Some policemen were guarding the ruined factory. Mohammad Ibrahim, a worker of the adjacent towel factory owned by the same company, took us on a tour of the empty factory.

The building was being expanded to house another factory. On the first floor, a small landing separated the construction site and the factory. A steep, narrow and rickety iron-staircase from the third floor to the landing went by as the emergency stairs. Although the wing under construction had a second staircase, the first-floor gate to it was usually kept locked. Even if the workers managed to reach the landing by the emergency stairs, there was practically only one staircase for everyone to reach the ground-floor main gate, the only exit route.

We found the railing of the emergency staircase broken. Mr. Ibrahim said it broke down under the pressure of the workers rushing down in a panic. The office rooms of Chowdhury Knitwear were located on the first floor. On the second floor we could see rows of sewing machines. The third floor was a mess of water and ashes. The first and the second floors showed no sign of fire but the glass panes of the windows were all broken.

The third floor, where the fire occurred, used to be the finishing section of the factory. There was also a small sewing section on one side. Ibrahim said that the fire started in the finishing section. The director of the factory, Shamim Chowdhury was present there at that time. Mr. Chowdhury reportedly tried to make the fire extinguisher work but the fire spread rapidly. The production manager of the factory was burned to death on the spot.

Ibrahim was working in his factory when the fire started: “It was around 7:15 in the evening. As soon as I learnt that there was a fire, I rushed to this factory. The entire third floor was already on fire by the time the fire fighters came. I could go up to the first floor. Beyond that it was jam packed with panicked people trying to find a way out. It was a scary sight. The fire fighters were spraying water; people stranded on the first and second floors were breaking windows, desperately trying to get away from the fire.”

We met a few injured workers outside the factory gate who took us to a house nearby. More survivors gathered to talk to us. Mohammad Hanif was working in the third-floor sewing section when the fire broke out: “On seeing the fire I ran down the stairs. Half way through, the electricity went off. I fell down on a heap of people in front of me. More people fell down on me. Soon they started the emergency power generator. But I was not being able to get up. A friend of mine who worked on the second floor saw me. He and a few others somehow pulled me out from under the jostling bodies. I was heavily injured and they took me to the hospital. I came home after the doctors treated me.”

Hanif and some other workers said, the management switched the main power off suspecting that the fire had started from a faulty electric wire. They soon switched on the emergency power supply but for a few minutes the factory was in total darkness.

Thirteen-year-old Mohammad Sohrab worked as a helper in the second floor sewing section: “I had just gone to the finishing section to fetch some clothes for ironing. I suddenly saw a thread from a jersey catching fire. Soon it was blazing. Our director who was present there tried to stop the fire but it went on spreading. He urged us all to get out. The gate was
locked and he kept shouting for someone to open it. I was pushed to the staircase by a lot of people. I fell from the stairs and was hanging by a rod on the railing. Two men from the ground floor asked me to jump down. I did so and they caught me and somehow got me out.”

Sohrab’s mother Bilkis Begum and his elder sister too worked in the same factory. Bilkis was off duty at that time. Sohrab’s sister, about 16 years old, was dragged out through the second floor window.

Bachhu Mia worked as a supervisor in the finishing section: “The fire began in the southern corner of the floor. The director had just come in. Somebody shouted in alarm. I looked back and saw the fire. The director asked us all to get out of the floor. He himself was trying to stop the fire. Along with a crowd I got down to the second floor stairs. Somebody was shouting that the collapsible gate at the foot of the emergency staircase was locked. I passed out. The main collapsible gate on the ground floor was locked too. Finished goods and bales of cloth were stocked on the ground floor and they feared that these could be stolen if they kept the gate open. Had it been open, so many would not have to die.”

Rafiqul Islam, another worker of the same floor was with Bachhu Mia: “The two of us were in the staircase for about half an hour. The main gate on the ground floor was locked at that time. We were all running for our lives. I tried to get down by the emergency stairs but the gate at its foot was locked too. I tried to go to the rooftop but the door to that was also locked. I came down again but was stuck halfway to the first floor. There was such a crowd on the stairs! A woman fell down by my feet. I saw her dying. People were saying that the ground floor gate was locked. I heard the director asking some of us to go up so that there would be less crowd and confusion on the stairs. He was shouting at his men to unlock all the gates.”

Many tried to get down by the emergency staircase but found the collapsible gate at its foot locked. Machine operator Khaja’s seat was by the door of the emergency stairs: “I heard noises and opened the door. Women were rolling down the stairs. They were saying that there was a fire. I called the workers of my floor and asked them to take the emergency stairs. I also did the same. Then I found its exit locked. Somebody said they were not finding the key. I jumped across the railing on the landing and broke the lock”

Khaja said initially the gatekeepers were stopping people on the first floor landing. Apparently they were anxious that the workers would start ransacking the place. “The gatekeepers were barricading the last flight of stairs. Many people were pressed against the walls. They however lifted the barricade in a while. By then the fire got stronger and more people were crowding the staircase. The ground floor main gate was still locked. The main gatekeeper, who had the key, was not there. Later some people broke the lock.”

All the workers that we spoke to said they had never been trained to face a fire. The factory did not have any fire alarm. Khodeja Begum had previously worked in a garment factory in the Chittagong Export Processing Zone. They had regular fire drills in that factory and the training came handy this time, said Khodeja. Instead of rushing down in a panic, Khodeja had waited for the crowd to become thinner and then managed to find her way out. She jumped on a nearby rooftop from the first floor landing and was helped down from there by some men. She was hurt but could escape with her life.

Khaja stayed on the spot till 11:00 pm and the fire was still raging. He believes that because the main gate was locked while gates to individual floors were opened, a great many people crowded on the stairs. The workers had no idea how to react and in their panic they all tried to get down together. This was the main reason why so many died, said Khaja. Many other workers shared Khaja’s observation.

In the nearby village of Darir Char we met another Khodeja Begum, who lost her 13/14 years old son Zakir hossain. Khodeja’s husband was ill and could not do any work. The 550 taka that Zakir earned as his monthly wage as a helper was the only source of income for this family of five. Khodeja had rushed to the factory as soon as she heard about the fire: “When I
reached the factory gate I saw people carrying out dead bodies. I kept calling for my son but he did not come.” The neighbours later brought her Zakir’s body. “My son's chest was trampled to pulp when they brought him.” Khodeja was unable to keep up a coherent conversation. One moment she would wail, the next moment stare at us vacantly.

Khodeja’s widowed sister-in-law also worked in the same factory and she too died leaving behind two children. The little girls sat beside their aunt quietly.

The workers were saying that the factory had not paid many of them for the last two months. They were anxious to know what would happen to their pay now that the accident had temporarily shut down the factory. Another sister-in-law of Khodeja said: “Don’t we have a claim on the owner? Because they kept the gates locked so many of us died. What would happen to these orphans? Who would feed Khodeja’s family now?”

The government as an immediate measure, saw to the burial of the dead and gave 500 Taka and 25 kgs of rice to each victim’s family. The district and divisional administrations have asked the owner to pay 5,000 Taka per family of the dead workers. But no amount of compensation can replace the loss these families bear.

The police chief of Narsingdi District told us that his preliminary investigations had shown the deaths to be caused by stampede and from suffocation: “We got only four bodies that evidenced death by burning. I observed that the factory did not have adequate exit routes for so many people. I also saw that it had little fire prevention or fire control facilities. I found that the workers did not have any training about what they should do if and when a fire breaks out in the factory.” He pointed out that the victims were mostly women and children who had little strength to protect themselves from stampede.

The police chief compared the emergency staircase with a makeshift ladder and said that it was not effective at all. The deputy commissioner of Narsingdi thought the same: “I think the factory did not have enough facilities to control fire. Firstly, it did not have enough and effective fire extinguishers. Secondly, those working in the factory did not know how to use these. Therefore, the fire extinguishers could not be used properly. Besides, the emergency staircase was not safe or effective. It was a narrow and steep flight of stairs.

In fact, if a group of people tried to get down it in a hurry, chances were more that it would cause another accident.” He also reminded us that even this staircase could not see the workers out of the factory.

Record of Fire Accidents from 1990 to 2000

The fire service department of the government says that nearly 150 workers died due to fire accidents in garment factories from 1990 to 2000. Unofficial sources say this death toll exceeded 250. Over this period, at least 40 incidents of fire have been recorded in different garment factories. In the year 2000 alone, three major fire accidents in three different factories claimed at least 60 lives and injured over 200 people.

In 1990, a fire in the Saraka Garments in Mirpur Dhaka left 32 workers dead in stampede. One major cause of this was that the main gate was locked and the panicked workers could not get out of the factory. The reasons and the patterns of deaths in garment fires have remained the same throughout the decade of the 1990s and even in the new millennium.

In September 2000, 12 women workers died in a stampede following a fire in Globe Knitwear in Dhaka. The main collapsible gate of the factory was locked during the accident. In October of the same year 50 workers were seriously injured in stampede following a fire in another Dhaka factory. The year ended with the Narsingdi incident.

Deaths in fire accident in garments Factories in Dhaka

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<th>Year</th>
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1990  32
1991  05
1993  12
1994  05
1995  09
1996  10
1997  13
2000  60
2004  23
2005  23
2006  62
2010  52


The fire service authorities point out that many garment factories do not implement the legal requirements for preventing or controlling fire. A. Y. M. Hashmatullah, the director (administration) of Bangladesh Fire Service and Civil Defence, told us that the factories are required to have regular fire drills with the workers. They are also ordered to keep all entrance/exit gates open when people are working in the factories: “But many still do not follow these. This time too we found the main gate of Chowdhury Knitwear locked. We have recently inspected some 206 garment factories and none of them implemented the government regulations. The electrical wiring in most factories is not safe and dumping of finished goods along the passages or near the gates hamper easy and fast movement.” Mr. Hashmatullah also said that the emergency staircases were not effectively constructed and fire control facilities were inadequate in many cases.

The district administration formed an enquiry committee to look into the Narsingdi accident. The results of the investigation was not published till the writing of this report in January 2001. The police too filed a criminal case in this connection. These investigations may find out the reasons why this particular accident took place and who were responsible for it. But many believe, in general, the negligence of the factory owners and management is responsible for such accidents. Every time a fire kills garment workers, such investigations are carried out. But these investigations do not stop fire incidents in the factories or the resulting deaths.