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Building Collapse in Bangladesh Leaves Scores Dead

By JULFIKAR ALI MANIK and JIM YARDLEY

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Inspectors found cracks in the building's structure the day before it collapsed, local news reports said.

DHAKA, Bangladesh — A building housing several factories making clothing for European and American consumers collapsed into a deadly heap on Wednesday, only five months after a horrific fire at a similar facility prompted leading multinational brands to pledge to work to improve safety in the country's booming but poorly regulated garment industry.

By early Thursday, the Bangladeshi news media reported that at least 142 people died in the rubble of Rana Plaza, a building in Savar, an industrial suburb of Dhaka, the capital.

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Police officials put the death toll at 134, with more than 1,000 of 2,500 workers injured, many of them still trapped. Soldiers, paramilitary police officers, firefighters and other citizens clawed through the wreckage, searching for survivors and bodies.

Brig. Gen. Ali Ahmed Khan, head of the National Fire Service, said that an initial investigation found that the Rana Plaza building violated codes, with the four upper floors having been constructed illegally without permits.

“There was a structural fault as well,” General Khan added, noting that the building’s foundation was substandard.

The collapse followed a fire in November that killed 112 workers making shorts and sweaters for export and that led importers, including Walmart, to vow to do more to ensure the safety of factories where goods they sell are manufactured. The building collapse on Wednesday quickly revived questions about the commitment of local factory owners, Bangladeshi officials and global brands to provide safe working conditions.

The Bangladeshi news media reported that inspection teams had discovered cracks in the structure of Rana Plaza on Tuesday. Shops and a bank branch on the lower floors immediately closed. But the owners of the garment factories on the upper floors ordered employees to work on Wednesday, despite the safety risks.

Labor activists combed the wreckage on Wednesday afternoon and discovered labels and production records suggesting that the factories were producing garments for major European and American brands. Labels were discovered for the Spanish brand Mango, and for the low-cost British chain Primark.

Activists said the factories also had produced clothing for Walmart, the Dutch retailer C & A, Benetton and Cato Fashions, according to customs records, factory Web sites and documents discovered in the collapsed building.

Survivors described a sensation akin to being in an earthquake: hearing a loud and terrifying cracking sound; feeling the concrete factory floor roll beneath their feet; and watching concrete beams and pillars collapse as the eight-story building suddenly seemed to implode.

“I heard screams,” said Mahmudul Hasan, a quality inspector at Ether Tex, a garment factory, who was hit by a falling ceiling. “My heart started pounding. I lay down near a pillar and started thinking that perhaps I was going to die.”

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International attention was focused on labor conditions in Bangladesh five months ago, with the fatal fire at Tazreen Fashions, a garment factory near Dhaka. That fire brought pledges from government officials and many global companies to tighten safety standards.

But on Wednesday, many labor rights advocates said the collapse of Rana Plaza showed a continued failure to take meaningful action.

“The front-line responsibility is the government’s, but the real power lies with Western brands and retailers, beginning with the biggest players: Walmart, H & M, Inditex, Gap and others,” said Scott Nova, executive director of Worker Rights Consortium, a labor rights organization. “The price pressure these buyers put on factories undermines any prospect that factories will undertake the costly repairs and renovations that are necessary to make these buildings safe.”

Bangladesh is the world’s second-leading garment exporter, trailing only China, but the industry has been plagued by concerns over safety and angry protests over rock-bottom wages. The industry has grown rapidly in the past decade, particularly as rising wages in China have pushed many global clothing companies to look for lower costs elsewhere. Bangladesh has the lowest labor costs in the world, with the minimum wage for garment workers set at roughly \$37 a month.

Such low labor costs have attracted not just Walmart but almost every major global clothing company, including Sears, Gap, Tommy Hilfiger and many others. Bangladesh now has more than 5,000 garment factories, employing more than 3.2 million workers, many of them women, and advocates credit the industry for lifting people out of poverty, even with such low wages. Exports also provide a critical source of foreign exchange that helps the government offset the high costs of imported oil.

But critics have argued that the outsize importance of the industry has made the government reluctant to take steps that could increase costs or alienate foreign brands. Labor unions are almost nonexistent, and a labor organizer, Aminul Islam, was tortured and murdered last year. The case remains unsolved. Meanwhile, some factory owners say they cannot raise wages or invest in upgrading facilities because of the low prices paid by Western brands.

Poorly constructed buildings have long been a problem in Bangladesh. In 2005, at least 64 workers at Spectrum Garments were killed in a building collapse. Alonzo Suson, who runs an A.F.L.-C.I.O. training center in Dhaka known as the Solidarity Center, said Wednesday’s accident illustrated the repeated failure of government inspectors to ensure that safety standards and building codes are met.

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“It is substandard construction, shortcut construction,” Mr. Suson said. “There was already a crack in the building.”

On Wednesday, a spokesman for Walmart expressed sympathy for the victims and said the global retail giant was committed to promoting stronger safety measures. “We are investigating across our global supply chain to see if a factory in this building was currently producing for Walmart,” said Kevin Gardner, the company spokesman.

One problem exposed in the Tazreen Fashions fire was the opacity of the global supply chain for clothing. The Tazreen factory was making apparel for Walmart and Sears, but after the fire both retailers said they had not known that and accused their suppliers of secretly subcontracting the jobs.

Inside Rana Plaza, labor activists discovered a document detailing cutting specifications for an order from Benetton. Yet Luca Biondolillo, a spokesman for the Benetton Group, denied any connection to the factories in the building. “None of the companies involved are currently suppliers of Benetton Group or any of its brands,” Mr. Biondolillo said.

The Bangladeshi prime minister, Sheikh Hasina, announced that Thursday would be a national day of mourning. Ms. Hasina, leader of the governing Awami League, could face political fallout from the accident. Rana Plaza is owned by a political figure affiliated with the Awami League.

Mr. Hasan, the quality inspector who survived the collapse, recalled a chaotic scene in which the dust was so thick that he struggled to breathe.

“I found some other colleagues around me when they were using the light of their mobile phones,” he said. “We were all trapped. So we had to crawl to look for space to escape.

“We were screaming, shouting, saying, ‘Save me! I am here!’ ”

Julfikar Ali Manik reported from Dhaka, and Jim Yardley from New Delhi. Steven Greenhouse contributed from New York.