

TheCompass-20171227-WhatHappenedNextRanaPlaza

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(0:00 - 0:43)

Welcome to the BBC World Service and What Happened Next? The Compass is the podcast series which explores our world, and this mini-series tells the stories of people caught up in some of the worst natural and man-made disasters. What caused them? What should never have happened? And what needs to happen next? I'm Tulip Mazumdar, and today we're in Bangladesh. Six days after the collapse of an eight-story building in Bangladesh, rescuers say there's no hope of finding more survivors.

(0:43 - 0:55)

The eight-story building fell like a pack of cars last week, trapping hundreds inside. The biggest clothing factory in Bangladesh, which killed more than 1,000 people. It was the world's worst accidental building disaster.

(0:55 - 1:17)

The collapse of the Rana Plaza clothing factory, just outside the Bangladesh capital, Dhaka, in April 2013. More than 1,100 garment workers were killed. This is The Compass on the BBC World Service, and you're listening to What Happened Next? The stories of people caught up in some of the worst disasters of modern times.

(1:18 - 1:43)

What caused them? What happened? What should never have happened? And what needs to happen next? I'm Tulip Mazumdar. The garment industry is vital to the Bangladeshi economy. Ready-made clothing accounts for 75% of the country's export earnings.

(1:44 - 2:09)

These clothes end up on high streets all around the world, sold under global labels from Gap and Benetton to Primark and JCPenney. The workers are mostly women, and while having a job provides income and independence, for many, like Noor, it's a tough industry. Garments are a very hard place to work.

(2:10 - 2:22)

If one can work properly, then management behave good with her. If one can't work properly, then nobody likes her. You have to produce 100 to 200 pieces per hour.

(2:23 - 2:41)

If you fail, you get scolded. Nazma Akhter has worked in Bangladesh's garment industry for 30 years. She started work alongside her mother when she was just 11 years old.

(2:42 - 2:59)

It was then an unregulated, informal sector, with clothing factories often being housed in buildings designed for residential purposes. The safety and well-being of workers was a very low priority. She says it took two serious accidents for things to change.

(2:59 - 3:24)

The Tazrin factory fire in 2012, when more than 100 workers were killed, and the collapse of Rana Plaza just a few months later. When I was working in the factory, it was not addressing as a formal sector. But in 2012, there was severe fire incident happened in Tazrin, and 2013, there is big building collapse in Rana Plaza.

(3:24 - 3:40)

So after that, the people, internationally and locally, are thinking about the working safety issues in Bangladesh. Before, it was not that serious. Nobody is voluntarily addressing this area.

(3:41 - 4:05)

To understand how such a disaster could happen, we need to go back to when Rana Plaza was first built in 2007, as a luxury development to house shops and a bank in the Savar district of Dhaka. It was built by a local businessman and politician called Sahil Rana. This is Marcus Oxley, the director of the Global Network for Disaster Reduction.

(4:05 - 4:21)

The building was designed to be a mixed commercial premises. You had shops and you had residential accommodations, but it wasn't designed as an industrial building. So the use of the building changed to what it was originally permitted to be.

(4:21 - 5:04)

In addition to that, the building was subsequently increased by two or three storeys above what the original building was designed for. And Mohammed Tauhid is an architect from Dhaka. Because originally, Rana Plaza was given the permission to build a six-storey commercial building.

Somehow, they built eight, I think, and they staffed garment factory in it. So that structure was not meant to take that load. And then on top of the higher storey, we put some heavy generators as a backup power supply to the textile industries that were in the building.

(5:05 - 5:19)

So we are just creating a death trap. The workers of Rana Plaza had concerns about the safety of the clothing factory where they worked. Not only were there fire hazards, they could see the building structure itself was unsafe.

(5:19 - 5:42)

Yet these concerns were ignored. Marcus Oxley says it's this failure to listen to those who have little power that is the hallmark of man-made catastrophes. Disasters tend to hit the poorer groups in society, the lower income groups within our societies, who are perhaps the most marginalised from our political processes.

(5:43 - 6:24)

The concerns and the voices of the people who live or work in those buildings or in those environments are often the voices that are not really heard. But it's also a failure of the systems that are in place, according to the architect Mohamed Tawhid, who says that while robust building safety regulations have always been in place in Dhaka, a toxic mix of incompetence and corruption meant Sahil Rana's illegal building slipped through the net. I believe it is not a problem of the building codes or law, it is rather a problem of oversight, it's rather a problem of corruption.

(6:25 - 6:57)

People who were in duty to observe, people who were in duty to inspect and regulate and enforce this law, either they were bribed or they did not do their job or maybe there was also confusion about which organisation is in charge. Nearly 4,000 people worked in Rana Plaza, making garments for international clothing companies, most of them were women. The day before the accident, large cracks appeared in the building.

(6:58 - 7:17)

Anxious workers were reluctant to go inside and they alerted factory bosses, but they were threatened with the sack if they failed to turn up for work. Most felt they had no choice. The \$7 a week wage afforded a traditionally poor workforce a degree of independence and financial stability.

(7:17 - 7:37)

Those factory workers simply couldn't afford to lose that money. One of the reasons why people are vulnerable to disasters is that they are excluded from our mainstream processes. You know, they live in informal settlements, outside of normal planning, the formal planning regime.

(7:38 - 7:55)

They work in the informal economy. They have very little rights as employees. So on that April

morning, while the bank on the ground floor remained closed because of safety concerns, most of the workers of Sohil Rana's garment factory reported for work.

(7:56 - 8:07)

Nur was one of them. It was a nine-story building. I used to work on the sixth floor.

(8:08 - 8:22)

Previous day, factory announced general leave after seeing crack on the wall. Next day, they called and supposed to clear salaries and then they will give general leave. Some came, some didn't out of fear.

(8:23 - 8:32)

We were working. That day, three times load shedding happened. On the fourth time, management started the generator.

(8:33 - 8:55)

Just after generator started, we felt a tremble. After that, everyone started running towards staircase, which was on the backside. In the meantime, there was another tremble.

(8:56 - 9:31)

It felt like a mountain is melting down. A woman who used to work beside me said, Nurbanu, are you still working? Everyone is running for their lives. A power outage caused the upstairs generator to kick in, causing huge vibrations that tore apart the flimsy tower block in a matter of minutes.

(9:35 - 9:54)

There were 10 to 15 people around me, lying on the floor under heavy machines. They were saying, don't cry, pray. I was lying under a machine in a tiny place, can't even sit as the ceiling had come down.

(9:56 - 10:07)

If it had hit me directly on my head, I would have died. My parents wouldn't have found the dead body. After an hour, I couldn't talk anymore.

(10:08 - 10:36)

No words came out of my mouth. Architect Mohammed Tauhid arrived at the scene soon after the building collapsed, bringing tools and equipment to help the search teams pick through rubble and debris to try and find survivors. So when I went there, I was standing right next to the entry of that cordoned area, and I was talking to one of the army officers about the supplies

and things that I was bringing.

(10:38 - 11:09)

And meanwhile, I saw continuously around four or five ambulances were rushing out from the site. It was a very devastating and sad thing to observe, actually. When the ambulances were rushing past, all the doors from behind were open, and I could see bodies, I could see dead bodies in those vehicles lying around.

(11:12 - 11:26)

Noor doesn't remember how she was rescued. Some survivors described waiting trapped in the hot, humid darkness for days. There were unimaginable stories of people having to amputate their own limbs to free themselves.

(11:27 - 11:43)

One woman described drinking her own blood to stay alive. The last survivor was pulled out of the rubble two weeks after the building collapsed. The final death toll of the Rana Plaza disaster was 1,134.

(11:44 - 12:00)

This is what's happened next on The Compass on the BBC World Service. I'm Tulip Mazumdar. Among the ruins of Rana Plaza, rescuers found the remnants of clothes bearing the labels of some of the world's best-known fashion brands.

(12:01 - 12:24)

It was a wake-up call for the clothing industry worldwide. But what happened next? Four years later, what has changed? Soheil Rana was jailed earlier this year over corruption charges. He and 37 others, including government officials, could get the death penalty if they're found guilty of murder over the complex's collapse.

(12:25 - 12:45)

Sara Hussein is a lawyer for the Supreme Court of Bangladesh, who's involved in the ongoing cases for compensation and justice for the victims of Rana Plaza. That compensation money is coming out of a voluntary fund set up by some of the big clothing brands. Around \$30 million has been pledged so far.

(12:46 - 13:04)

I think the trust fund was a really important innovation. And I think we also have to recognise the context in which it happened, which is it happened in Rana Plaza, which produces garments, it produces clothes that people wear around the world. And because it resulted in a

response, which was a global response.

(13:04 - 13:14)

Within Bangladesh, there was a huge rush of support for everyone who was affected. But we saw that it happened globally as well. And I think what happened was something fairly extraordinary.

(13:14 - 13:30)

That translated itself into a sense that something really had to be done. It had to be seen to be done and had to be done quickly. One of the first clothing companies to publicly recognise that its clothes were being made in Rana Plaza was the Irish firm Primark.

(13:31 - 13:51)

We knew our clothes were in the building. So we made an announcement the very same day that we were in the building and that we accepted responsibility. Many clothing brands also agreed to fund the setting up of two new organisations, the Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh and the Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety.

(13:52 - 14:12)

More than 200 companies have signed up and said they will only source clothes from factories that comply with safety standards and that protect workers' rights. Olivia Wyndham-Stewart is part of an NGO called Impact. It works with women in the garment industry and she's just been to Dhaka to talk to workers about their lives today.

(14:15 - 14:38)

Have there been changes in your factory since Rana Plaza? Yes, there have been lots of changes. For example, now we have Accord Alliance and now also time to time engineers come to check our building, whether there is everything in place or not. And also they check the weight of each floor, whether it's heavy-weighted or not.

(14:42 - 15:16)

Now we have Accord Airlines in our country and now we have fire door safety committee placed in our factories too. So now we feel more safer. Do you feel differently about your job since Rana Plaza? And do you feel safer or less safe? So do you feel as though management are treating you with more respect since Rana Plaza or less respect? Yes, they have been treated more respectfully rather than previous time.

(15:17 - 15:35)

But despite these positive developments, it can still be a major challenge for workers to assert

their rights and demand to be heard. Attempts by workers to unionise have been met with strong resistance in parts of the garment industry. Trade union leaders have even been jailed.

(15:39 - 15:54)

After the Rana Plaza incident, we workers want that we can form a trade union, but owner doesn't accept that, owner don't agree for that. So now we want to form the trade union and the work is going on. Hopefully it will be finalised by the next month.

(15:57 - 16:23)

Nazma Akhter, the former child worker who we heard from at the start of the programme, is now a high-profile union activist. And she says far more needs to be done to give these women a voice. Safety issues are one issue, but workers living wages, their female leadership, their negotiation at the factory, and they need to also address their collective bargaining area and how we have to get the better wages.

(16:23 - 16:44)

And we need to be more skilled development to the female workers, how they build their negotiation capacity as well as their productivity. And also the female workers need to be the decision-makers at the workplace, because nowadays most of the men are decision-makers, but the females are labour force. So there is big discrimination.

(16:45 - 17:02)

So this also needs to be overcome, otherwise it's very difficult. The Accord and Alliance, set up soon after the disaster, will be funded until next year. They are responsible for ensuring factories comply to the new safety standards that allow them to export abroad.

(17:03 - 17:30)

Jim Moriarty is a former American ambassador to Bangladesh. He now heads up the Alliance, which he says has inspected more than 800 factories and has set up a helpline so workers can report unsafe practises. We need to make sure that the lessons learned to date, that worker training is essential, that the worker's voice is essential, that the factories have to maintain very high standards of physical safety.

(17:31 - 18:03)

It's going to be important that those lessons don't get lost. And that issue about sort of workers' empowerment and making sure they have the information they need, I mean it's all well and good putting in fire doors and sprinklers and things, but do you think that the workers are getting the right training they need? And also that they feel empowered to report their superiors if things aren't being done properly. Well, to put it in perspective, last month our helpline received 5,000 phone calls.

(18:03 - 18:27)

A good number of calls every month, someplace in the 20 to 40 range, are not just talking about safety issues narrowly, but they're talking about the working conditions in the factory. What happens then is we work with the factory, inform them of the issue. They know that within two days we will be working with the brands and let them know that this issue has arisen.

(18:27 - 18:54)

In almost all cases, whether it's extortion of money from workers by supervisors, physical abuse of workers, sexual harassment of workers, in almost all cases the factory takes the correct action. We go back to the workers involved to make sure that they agree with what the factory has done. So we see success of this system every day.

(18:54 - 19:29)

I would say it took the active support of the brands and the active interest of the brands to sort of underscore for all factories that this was not only essential, but it was in the factory owner's own good to work cooperatively with the helpline. This is really frustrating for us because year on year for the same product, let's say it's a school where customers, I would say shamelessly come up with 10% price reduction. That's Saiful Islam Khan, who runs two factories making clothes for top name brands in Europe.

(19:29 - 19:51)

He says he's doing his bit to help Bangladeshi workers, but his customers are not doing theirs. We are actually not as smart as the retailers. The retailers, they separate their departments very smartly, they have got social compliance or CSR departments and they have got commercial, merchandising, the buyers, separate departments.

(19:51 - 20:10)

When we try to explain our pains to the buyers, they said actually it's not my concern because my CSR department, they have this requirement. So we cannot share our pains with them. And when we discuss that, okay, your commercial department or your buyers, they are pushing us hard for the prices.

(20:10 - 20:20)

Social compliance, they said actually it's not my concern. I need to ensure the safety and I need to ensure that you match the standards. So it's a double standard actually.

(20:21 - 20:39)

I would say they have done it deliberately or under ability. They have done it very smartly to

corner us from every side. The new safety rules cost money to implement and many factory owners say they are the ones left picking up the bill whilst retailers continue to try and drive prices down.

(20:39 - 21:04)

In the end, it's the workers who are hit. Has your pay changed since the Rana Plaza incident? Salary has been increased but there is lots of stress from the production unit. Salary has been increased but not the basic salary.

(21:04 - 21:15)

The other allowances has been increased. For example, medical bonuses, this kind of thing has been increased. And has production pressure gone up? Yes, production pressure has been gone really up.

(21:16 - 21:43)

In case of remediation, we are not getting any direct money from the Accord or any of the buyers. Lutful Matin is a safety compliance officer for the Bangladeshi garment makers Natural Denim. Whatever the money they are giving, it is with the Accord or with the alliance to hire the expertise to have a better inspection and to find out the problems and giving us the problems and we used to give them the corrective action plan.

(21:44 - 22:05)

But yes, it's creating a lot of pressure in our sector to minimise the cost and again to have a better profit. So if the profit is more, I think the entrepreneurs will also be happy to increase their salary of their workers because they are their main working force. They are the main pillar of this industry.

(22:05 - 22:21)

So we also want that our workers will have a better life or a better living. There is clearly still much that needs to be done to improve the working lives of low-paid garment staff. But the tragedy of Rana Plaza did jolt the industry into action.

(22:22 - 22:35)

Many involved in it today agree that a disaster like Rana Plaza couldn't happen again because of all the changes that have been made. Here's Saiful Islam Khan again. So Rana Plaza was surely a very bad thing in our industry.

(22:35 - 22:44)

But it started a revolution. Of course, I mean, every revolution starts with a very harsh thing.

Rana Plaza was indeed harsh on us.

(22:45 - 22:59)

A huge number of lives were lost. But in the end, it eventually changed the whole country's perspective in terms of safety and compliance. Because safety and maintaining the laws and these things are not in our DNA, to be honest.

(23:00 - 23:16)

So we needed a bit of trust from external people or external things. And we got that trust through Rana Plaza. I would say that Bangladesh is the safest of the garment industries in the developing countries.

(23:17 - 23:38)

That's Rob Ways from the Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh. There's no other country where you have an accord and where the factories have been inspected and the factories can demonstrably and honestly say my factory was inspected by independent qualified engineers. Corrections and fixes have been verified.

(23:39 - 23:56)

And there's simply no other industry in the developing world that can say that honestly. And the Bangladesh garment industry can and they should. Four years after the collapse of Rana Plaza, it's clear that some lessons have been learned.

(23:56 - 24:39)

But the fact that it took a tragedy on this scale for the world to really take proper notice of the conditions garment workers were facing is a damning indictment of cheap fashion. Union activist Nazma Akhter says everyone in the supply chain needs to take responsibility for how their cheap clothes are being made. The multinational who are coming to sourcing goods from a country like Bangladesh, they have to do the responsible and fair business because if they have fair business and they are doing right things, this kind of incident and this kind of exploitation will never happen because everyone needs to be fair and transparent.

(24:39 - 24:55)

Whole supply chain has to be transparent where the cotton growing to the final production, even the consumer has a responsibility. So everybody has to know why they get very cheap price and how it's come because nothing is cheap in this world. Somebody has to be paid.

(24:56 - 25:14)

That is our workers blood and sweat. I mean, what can consumers, people like me, people

listening to this, what can they do to help the garment workers? The biggest thing you can do as a consumer is be willing to pay a pound more when you wear a shirt. That's Bangladeshi lawyer Sara Hussain again.

(25:14 - 25:27)

She says it's down to us, the consumers, to also think about why certain fashion is so cheap and be prepared to pay more for it. I think it's outrageous. I come here and I'm really thrilled.

(25:27 - 25:39)

Every shop I go into, I see made in Bangladesh. Every pair of trousers, every shirt pretty much has made in Bangladesh and it's great and I get very tearful and very excited when I see that. But I'm shocked to see what the prices are.

(25:40 - 25:49)

Let's pay that extra dollar if we have to. Instead of just sitting, oh, how dreadful, people having a terrible time in Bangladesh. Let's stop buying clothes and feel better and move on.

(25:49 - 26:12)

That shouldn't make you feel better. Because if you do that, if you stop buying clothes from Bangladesh, you're making sure that those girls and women who are working there, whose lives are actually being transformed by the opportunity to work and not be stuck in a home and be married off at 13, you're actually taking choices away from her. But if you make a choice to pay an extra pound for whatever you buy, you will actually enable greater wages, more safety.

(26:12 - 26:23)

And you're investing in an industry that you can be happy to invest in and happy to wear your jeans and shirt at the end of the day. So I think rather than bleeding hard stuff, that's what you should do. You should pay for what you believe in.

(26:26 - 26:44)

I'm Tulip Mazumdar and the producer is Maggie Eyre. Next time, I'll be looking into what happened next after the worst public health emergency of modern times. We hear from the people on the ground who fought Ebola in parts of West Africa and eventually stamped out the killer virus.

(26:51 - 26:59)

You've been listening to What's Happened Next on The Compass on the BBC World Service. I'm Tulip Mazumdar. The producer is Maggie Eyre.

(27:00 - 27:04)

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