

**Forum:** United Nations Human Rights Council

**Issue:** The question of finding measures to improve the working conditions in the Bangladesh textile industry

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## Introduction

This issue is of critical importance to many people whose lives are impacted everyday by the harsh conditions and low wages of the Bangladesh textile industry. Crisis such as factory fires and buildings collapsing in the past decade have made international news, yet people in the west continue to consume clothing and products that put innocent people at risk. These bad conditions are facilitated by the North America and Europe's demand for cheap clothing.

However, this industry has also been paramount in aiding the development of this small nation from an LDC into an emerging market, therefore the industry must simply be better regulated, in a way that doesn't halt the economic benefit to the country, but that also protects the workers and their families from atrocities such as the Rava Plaza building collapse, which killed 1,134 people.

The international response to such incidents has been vast, and the improvements since the tragedy in 2013 have resulted in international, legally binding treaties such as the "Bangladesh Accord", which stipulates better fire and safety regulations for such factories and has the backing of many major western brands.

However, complacency is setting in and this Accord specifically is losing the Bangladeshi Government's interest, who wish to take control of regular safety inspections themselves, a move which is not held for sufficient by the international community. This committee will aim to find lasting and sustainable solutions to protect Bangladesh's factory workers as well as their families, while at the same time keeping in mind the importance of economic growth for this developing nation.

## Definition of Key Terms

### **Textile industry:**

The industry which involves sections like research, design, development, manufacturing and distribution of textiles, fabrics and clothing.

### **Cloth:**

Cloth is a generic term embracing all textile fabrics and felts. Cloth may be formed out of any textile fiber, wire, or material.

### **Next Eleven:**

The Next Eleven is a term coined by Goldman Sachs investment bank, listing eleven countries likely to become large economies.

### **Corruption Perception Index:**

The Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) is an index published annually by Transparency International since 1995 which ranks countries "by their perceived levels of public sector corruption, as determined by expert assessments and opinion surveys."

## Background Information

The People's Republic of Bangladesh has been shaped by its complex and conflicting history of dispute, war and colonisation into an independent country of a Least Developed Country (LDC) status. In order to understand how it became widely known as the most favoured textile and ready-made garment exporter for Western fast-fashion and clothing brands and how it affects the population, we need to look at the country's historical, economical and cultural aspects.

### **Bangladesh's history**

Ever since the times of British colonisation, the country was important as an export market. After its end as a colony in 1947, a largely Muslim state comprising East, including modern territory of Bangladesh, and West Pakistan is established. They were not only separated geographically, but also culturally. To this extent the West began a strategy to

forcibly assimilate the Bengalis culturally because of religious dispute, which lead to conflicts, deficiency and finally to the Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971. After independence was accomplished and the Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh for a parliamentary government was founded. The country was faced with chronic political instability, crisis and floods, making living standards harsher and overall governing unreliable.

### Bangladesh's economy

The economic liberation in 1991 implemented capitalist standards and promotion of the private sector, having influence on the very export-oriented industry in Bangladesh. Despite the hardships, Bangladesh has become less poor throughout the last decades, the garment-manufacturing industry has played an important role in this development, making up almost 80% of the exportation earnings. Apart from that the agriculture has been and still is the largest sector of the economy along with Bangladesh being the seventh-largest natural gas producer in Asia. Although the country is specified as one of the 'Next Eleven' "emerging markets", there are many problems that hinder its growth or produce fatal consequences for the population. Among others the major problem is the overpopulation, as it is the world's most densely-populated large country, especially in the urban regions. Furthermore the issue with corruption largely influences the economy and human rights of the inhabitants, considering it ranked the 14th place on the Corruption Perceptions Index. Together with its vulnerability to climate change, the religious extremist groups, insufficient power supply and overall poverty, it proves to be a foundation for abuse of human rights.

### The textile industry

Due to rapid changes in technology, culture and globalisation the textile industry their business model also changes drastically. Today for the sake of fast-fashion and the massive consumer culture, major brands resort to cheap production and work labour on expense of mostly developing countries that provide these values. Especially about a decade ago when global restrictions on garment production, negotiated in the 1970's to protect western jobs, were lifted and the recession, a general slowdown of economic activity, hit western economies, brands forced prices down a significant amount. Suddenly, with China increasingly expensive, Bangladesh was the focus of attention, because of the great amount of cheap labour. The impossible demand has resulted in increase in e.g. exploitation, bad working conditions, child labour and Sweatshops.

## Major Scandals

Apart from the overall bad working conditions and incredibly low wages and long working hours, other hazards of the Bangladesh textile industry include ergonomic hazards, musculoskeletal disorders that can be traced back to insufficient standards, abuse of all forms and chemical hazards.

Major factory crises include a great amount of factory fires, such as 2012 Tazreen Fashion factory fire and the Mirpur textile factory fire 2013, and the Rana Plaza collapse in 2013, which is the deadliest industrial incident to this day.

The causes can be lead back to the little to none planning or regulation during the construction of factories, due to the great demands from brands and companies, and also lack of inspection or reliance on faulty local authorities.

## Major Countries and Organizations Involved

### Bangladesh

The Bangladesh government, especially the Commerce Ministry are against taking any measures which would at all hurt the exports of Bangladesh, as these are of paramount importance to the economy, regardless of how the workers are treated. This is also in part to protect the millions of jobs which the textile industry provides to Bangladesh's citizens.

### China

China was the previous country of choice for cheap ready made garment production, however with wages rising Bangladesh seems the welcome, cheaper alternative. This is again taking away from China's export economy.

### International Labour Organisation

In 2013, in response to the Rana Plaza collapse, started a mission in Bangladesh to monitor enforcement of stricter fire and safety regulations.

### Better Work Bangladesh

Better Work Bangladesh is a programmed set up by the International Labour organisation in order to promote safe working conditions while at the same time making the Bangladesh Garment industry an internationally competitive one.

## Timeline of Events

Date	Description of event
March 26 <sup>th</sup> , 1971	Formation of Bangladesh
1974	Multi Fibre Agreement
April 24 <sup>th</sup> , 2013	Rana Plaza collapse
May 15 <sup>th</sup> , 2013	Bangladesh Accord

## Relevant UN Treaties and Events

- CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women), 18 December 1979 (**A/RES/34/180**)
- CRC (Convention on the Rights of the Child), 20 November 1989, (**A/RES/44/25**)
- The Bangladesh Accord, 2013

## Previous Attempts to solve the Issue (150 words)

Although the International Labour Organisation and other NGOs are pleased with the progress that has been made on worker safety, labour law issues have lagged behind. By 2012, there were 122 unions in Bangladesh's garment industry but only represented less than 3% of workers. The Rana Plaza collapse spurred an increase in both the number of unions and the number of workers joining them, resulting in a more than 20% increase in factory unions in the country's textile sector.

Today there are 437 unions, representing nearly 5% of workers in the sector. Part of the remediation plans that came out of talks immediately following the Rana Plaza collapse was

the need to establish worker safety committees at the city's factories, so that employees would have a place to voice concerns about workplace safety. So far, those committees have not been formed because the government has been slow to draft policies for their creation.

### **Possible Solutions (150 words)**

Real change will come in the form of improvements to worker safety and worker's rights. The United Nations must find a way to adapt to the constantly changing loopholes factory owners find to work around labour laws. A clear standpoint must be enforced from the countries importing from Bangladesh. The factory owners heavily rely on those imports and would be forced to produce at the given standards. This would also give a strong incentive to the Bangladesh government, to speed up their legislative process.

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