Garment-Factory Fire Kills 112

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DHAKA, Bangladesh (AP) — The fire alarm: Waved off by managers. An exit door: Locked. The fire extinguishers: Not working and apparently "meant just to impress" inspectors and customers.

That is the picture survivors paint of the garment-factory fire Saturday that killed 112 people who were trapped inside or jumped to their deaths in desperation. For Bangladesh, where such factories commonly ignore safety as they rush to produce for retailers around the world, the tragedy was unusual only in scope: More than 200 people have died in garment-factory fires in the country since 2006.

About 15,000 Bangladeshi workers protested blocks from the gutted fire Monday, demanding justice for the victims and improved safety. Some 200 factories were closed for the day after the protest erupted in Savar, a suburb of Dhaka, the capital.

Protesters blocked a major highway, and some threw stones at factories and smashed vehicles, but there were no arrests and no clashes with police.

Maj. Mohammad Mahbub, fire department operations director, said investigators suspect that a short circuit caused the fire at the factory, which was making T-shirts and polo shirts.

But Mahbub said it was not the fire itself but the lack of safety measures in the eight-story building that made the blaze so deadly.

"Had there been at least one emergency exit through outside the factory, the casualties would have been much lower," he said.

He said firefighters recovered at least 100 bodies from the factory, and 12 more people died at hospitals after jumping from the building to escape the fire.

The government was unable to identify many victims because they were burned beyond recognition; they were buried Monday in a grave outside Dhaka. The government announced that Tuesday will be a day of national mourning, with the national flag flying at half-mast in honor of the dead.

Local media reported that up to 124 people were killed, and that about 100 people injured in the fire were being treated in about a dozen hospitals. Many were hurt as they jumped to escape the flames.

Survivor Mohammad Ripu said Monday that he tried to run out of the building when the fire alarm rang but was stopped.

"Managers told us, 'Nothing happened. The fire alarm had just gone out of order. Go back to work,'" Ripu said. "But we quickly understood that there was a fire. As we again ran for the exit point we found it locked from outside, and it was too late."

Ripu said he jumped from a second-floor window and suffered minor injuries.

Another surviving worker, Yeamin, who uses only one name, said fire extinguishers in the factory didn't work, "So these were meant just to impress the buyers or authority."

TV footage showed a team of investigators finding some unused fire extinguishers inside the factory.

The garment-factory fire was Bangladesh's deadliest in recent memory, but there have been several major factory fires in recent years, including one that killed 63 people in 2006 in southern Chittagong town.

Labor leaders hope outrage over the latest disaster will prompt change. Tahmina Rahman, general secretary of the Bangladesh Garment Workers Federation, says the group wants the government to work harder to punish factories for safety lapses.

"The owners go unpunished and so they don't care about installing enough security facilities," she said. "The owners should be held responsible and sent to jail."

The factory in Saturday's blaze is owned by Tazreen Fashions Ltd., a subsidiary of the Tuba Group that has produced clothing for Wal-Mart, at least in the past. Neither Tazreen nor Tuba Group officials could be reached for comment.

The Tuba Group is a major Bangladeshi garment exporter whose clients include Wal-Mart, Carrefour and IKEA, according to its website. Its factories export garments to the U.S., Germany, France, Italy and the Netherlands, among other countries. The Tazreen factory, which opened in 2009 and employed about 1,700 people, made polo shirts, fleece jackets and T-shirts.

Tazreen was given a "high risk" safety rating after a May 16, 2011, audit conducted by an "ethical sourcing" assessor for Wal-Mart, according to a document posted on the Tuba Group's website. It did not specify what led to the rating.

Wal-Mart spokesman Kevin Gardner said online documents indicating an orange or "high risk" assessment after the May 2011 inspection and a yellow or "medium risk" report after an inspection in August 2011 appeared to pertain to the factory. The August 2011 letter said Wal-Mart would conduct another inspection within one year.

Gardner said it was not clear if that inspection had been conducted or whether the factory was still making products for Wal-Mart. If a factory is rated "orange" three times in two years, Wal-Mart won't place any orders for one year. The May 2011 report was the first orange rating for the factory.

"Our thoughts are with the families of the victims of this tragedy," the retailer said in a statement. "While we are trying to determine if the factory has a current relationship with Wal-Mart or one of our suppliers, fire safety is a critically important area of Wal-Mart's factory audit program and we have been working across the apparel industry to improve fire safety education and training in Bangladesh."

In its 2012 Global Responsibility report, Wal-Mart said it ceased working with 49 factories in Bangladesh in 2011 because of fire safety issues, and was working with its supplier factories to phase out production from buildings deemed high risk.

Bangladesh has some 4,000 garment factories, many without proper safety measures. The country annually earns about $20 billion from exports of garment products, mainly to the U.S. and Europe.

The Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association said it would stand by the victims' families and offered 100,000 takas ($1,250) to each of the families of the dead. Tazreen's owner was meeting with representatives of the group Monday afternoon.

"We will discuss what other things we can do for the families of the dead," The association's acting president, Siddiqur Rahman, said Sunday night on Rtv, a private television station. "We are worried about what has happened. We hope to discuss everything in detail in that meeting."

Another fire broke out Monday in a 12-story building housing four garment factories, but the fire department said it was quickly doused and there were no casualties.

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Associated Press video journalist Al Imran Garjan contributed to this report.

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