Bangladesh Fire Victims' Families Wait for Money

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DHAKA, Bangladesh (AP) — When fire ravaged a Bangladeshi garment factory, killing 112 workers, dozens of their families did not even have a body to bury because their loved ones' remains were burned beyond recognition. Two months later, the same families have yet to receive any of the compensation they were promised — not even their relatives' last paychecks.

An official with the country's powerful garment industry said DNA tests must first be conducted to confirm the losses of more than 50 families. He would not say why the families have not even received the wages their relatives had earned before the Nov. 24 blaze.

Many of the families desperately need money after losing their primary breadwinners in the fire at the Tazreen factory, which made clothes for Wal-Mart, Disney and other Western brands.

The Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association, a foreign supplier and the government promised to give the families of the dead 600,000 takas ($7,500) each, finance the education of the dead workers' children and pay the November salaries of both dead and surviving factory workers.

"I have got nothing. Nobody is saying anything," said Ansar, who uses one name and who lost his wife and daughter in the fire.

The 55-year-old is too ill to work himself. His 16-year-old son, who also worked at Tazreen, managed to escape but was traumatized by leaving his mother and sister behind "amid the darkness and ash," Ansar said at his home near the gutted factory.

The boy got a job at another factory but was unable to work because of his trauma.

"My son cannot sleep," Ansar said, sobbing. "He wakes up at midnight and then cries for a long time. The same thing happens to him every night."

Ansar has been unable to pay his rent for two months and fears that if he gets evicted and is forced to return to his home village in the impoverished north, he may never be compensated.

The fire drew international attention to the conditions that garment workers toil under in Bangladesh, where the $20 billion-a-year textile industry is incredibly powerful and politically connected.

The factory lacked emergency exits and its owner said only three floors of the eight-story building were legally built. Surviving employees said gates had been locked and managers had told them to go back to work after the fire alarm went off.

A government panel concluded that the fire was sabotage. No one has been charged with setting the blaze, though three officials accused of locking in workers have been arrested.

Siddiqur Rahman, vice president of the garment association, said checks have been cut for families of the 59 victims whose bodies were identified. In addition, 80 workers injured in the fire received 100,000 takas each.

The other 53 people killed were burned beyond recognition and buried in unmarked graves, after samples of their DNA were taken. The garment industry demanded relatives provide their own DNA samples to ensure their claims were valid. Those samples are undergoing testing.

Rahman said the industry did not want to handle the claims haphazardly and said the money should be disbursed by the end of February.

"We will do whatever we have promised," he said.

He declined to explain why the victim's families had not yet received their November wages, which they would be entitled to whether the employee had died or not. Those wages are much smaller than the promised 600,000 takas; Ansar said his wife and daughter together earned around 10,500 takas a month as sewing machine operators.

When Ansar heard about the compensation, he gave the industry association photographs of his wife and daughter, their employee IDs and copies of their national identity cards. His son gave a blood sample for a DNA test days after the fire, but he has heard nothing.

"We went there; we met the BGMEA officials. They have asked us to wait. They don't make anything clear. They asked us to stay at home, not to go there," he said.

He has their phone numbers, but they don't answer when he calls, he said.

"I went there three times, but returned without anything," he said. "How long should we wait?"

"These families are very poor," said Mahmudul Sumon, an anthropologist from Jahangir Nagar University who is studying the fate of the victims' families. "They have lost their dear ones. Now they are suffering a lot, as many of the families have lost someone who was the main earner in the family."

Ruhul Hannan, who said his 35-year-old wife was killed in the blaze, sent his 18-year-old son for a DNA test, but so far he has received nothing, despite his pleas to the garment trade group.

"I am just waiting. They told me to wait until end of this month for the test result," he said.

Activists criticized the government, the garment industry and the factory for keeping important information secret, including the names of the victims of the fire and who has received compensation.

"Who died, who got compensated, who not? We don't have any clear idea," said Kalpona Akter of the Bangladesh Center for Worker Solidarity. "There should not be any plot to play hide-and-seek."

She said the major Western brands that produced clothing in the factory have a responsibility to come to Bangladesh to check on the compensation situation. She also raised concerns about the DNA testing process.

"We don't know why it's taking too much time. If time is required, fine, but there should be proper reasons ... that should be explained," she said.

Ahedul, a mechanic who lost his wife in the fire but could not identify her body, said he has no idea what is happening with his claim.

"I have been asked to stay calm by the BGMEA," said Ahedul, who uses only one name. "They told me they will come to me. I don't need to go to them."

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