Bangladesh factory fires: fashion industry’s latest crisis
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Nearly 800 people have been injured in scores of largely unreported fires in garment and textile factories in Bangladesh in the last 12 months, according to new figures compiled by international labor campaigners.

The high numbers of casualties will raise concerns at the slow pace of change in the politically unstable south Asian state, where more than 1,130 people died when a building housing factories making garments for chains including Primark and Matalan collapsed in April.

The tragedy was the worst industrial accident anywhere in the world for a generation.

But activists in Bangladesh say fires pose as serious a threat as poor building construction. Five months before the April collapse, 114 people had died in a fire in a factory making clothes sold by global retailers such as Walmart, Sears and C&A among others.

Last month, 10 died in a textile mill blaze.

There are an estimated 5,000 garment factories in Bangladesh, of which around two thirds are active.

"The reality is that we have so many factories that every day there is something happening in some place but it doesn’t make the news," said Mohammad Riaz Uddin, director of the Alternative Movement for Resources and Freedom Society in Dhaka.

In the last year there has been more than one fire a week, according to figures compiled in Bangladesh by the American Center for International Labor Solidarity (ACILS). The statistics are based on reports in the local media and from their network of affiliated union groups.

The true number of injured is unknown, however, and may be even higher, said Alonzo Glenn Suson, the ACILS country director.

On November 25, at least 15 people were injured in a stampede as panicked workers rushed to exit when a fire broke out at a factory outside Dhaka belonging to the Mondol Group, which deals with western brands.

Another 20, including five local people, were injured after a blaze at a mill where textiles are prepared in the Ashulia industrial zone. Two weeks earlier 15 more were injured when fire took hold at a dyeing facility in Gazipur, another major center of the garment industry.

"If industries are there then accidents can happen. It is a big challenge for the country as well as the sector," said Reaz bin Mahmood, vice-president of the Bangladesh Garments Manufacturers and Exporters Association, an industry body that represents factory owners.

Though an increasing proportion of factories in Bangladesh are purpose-built, hundreds of older units are found in converted residential buildings. Often these lack adequate fire escapes, alarms, first aid or fire-fighting equipment. Many produce clothes for sale in the west.

Training at many factories is also poor, industry experts say. More than 250 workers have been injured in stampedes triggered by false fire alarms this year, according to the
ACILS data. One such incident occurred at the Rana Plaza complex in December last year – exactly five months before the collapse – after a light exploded and workers panicked.

On at least one occasion over the last year, workers have died falling from unsecured staircases or in other accidents during evacuations.

"Frankly we have no accurate estimation of the magnitude of the unsafe factories. Over the last 20 years of exponential growth of the garment factory, monitoring mechanisms were not able to catch up to speed," said Srinivas Reddy, country director of the International Labor Organization.

More than a hundred international retailers have now signed up to two different agreements, one legally binding, which commit them to funding a push to improve safety and working conditions in the factories where they source their products.

A third initiative, involving the government of Bangladesh and the ILO, aims to fill the gaps between the two industry initiatives with a new inspection regime run by government engineers and technicians.

"All of this is new. It could definitely set a new model for elsewhere. But if it doesn't work you have more Ranas and Tazreens," said Suson.

Owners have warned that the new safety measures coupled with a rise in minimum pay could mean up to a third of existing factories will have to close down, putting a million people out of work.

Analysts dismiss such concerns. There is a shortage of skilled labor and continuing demand, which together mean any workers who are made redundant will rapidly find new jobs, said Ahsan Mansur, an economist and executive director of the Policy Research Institute, a Dhaka-based think-tank.

Attitudes among factory owners vary. One complained that continuing political unrest means roads are unsafe and deliveries cannot be made. The result is piles of highly flammable clothes building up in factories.

"I don't sleep easily at night. There will be more fires, that's certain," she said.

Others downplay the problem, even if obstructed evacuation routes are known to constitute one of the major risks to workers.

"If the aisles [between lines of production] aren't blocked then it's not a real factory," said one owner of a series of factories producing for western retailers.

The scale of the problem means reforms are bound to be slow, Reddy, the ILO chief, believes.

"It is not going to change overnight," he said.

- What should U.S. consumers know about clothing manufactured in countries like Bangladesh?
- Compare and contrast the Bangladesh factory fires and the Triangle Factory Fire.
- Choose a passage and respond to it.