

2013 Savar building collapse

The **2013 Savar building collapse** or **Rana Plaza collapse** was a structural failure that occurred on 24 April 2013 in the Savar Upazila of Dhaka District, Bangladesh, where an eight-story commercial building named Rana Plaza collapsed. The search for the dead ended on 13 May 2013 with a death toll of 1,134. Approximately 2,500 injured people were rescued from the building alive. It is considered the deadliest structural failure accident in modern human history, and therefore also the deadliest garment-factory accident in history

The building contained clothing factories, a bank, apartments, and several shops. The shops and the bank on the lower floors were immediately closed after cracks were discovered in the building. The building's owners ignored warnings to avoid using the building after cracks had appeared the day before. Garment workers were ordered to return the following day, and the building collapsed during the morning rush-hour

Background

The building, Rana Plaza, was owned by Sohel Rana. It housed a number of separate garment factories employing around 5,000 people, several shops, and a bank.^[12] The factories manufactured apparel for brands including Benetton, Bonmarché,^l the Children's Place,^l El Corte Inglés, Joe Fresh, Monsoon Accessorize, Mango, Matalan, Primark, and Walmart.

The head of the Bangladesh Fire Service & Civil Defense, Ali Ahmed Khan, said that the upper four floors had been built without a permit. Rana Plaza's architect, Massood Reza, said the building was planned for shops and offices – but not factories. Other architects stressed the risks involved in placing factories inside a building designed only for shops and offices, noting the structure was potentially not strong enough to bear the weight and vibration of heavy machinery.

On 23 April 2013, a TV channel recorded footage that showed cracks in the Rana Plaza building. Immediately afterward, the building was evacuated,^[24] and the shops and the bank on the lower floors were closed. Later in the day, Sohel Rana said to the media that the building was safe and workers should return tomorrow. Managers at Ether Tex threatened to withhold a month's pay from workers who refused to come to work.

Collapse and rescue

On the morning of 24 April, there was a power outage, and diesel generators on the top floor were started. The building collapsed at about 08:57 am BST, leaving only the ground floor intact. The Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association president confirmed that 3,122 workers were in the building at the time of the collapse. One local resident described the scene as if "an earthquake had struck."

The United Nations' urban search and rescue coordination group – known as the International Search and Rescue Advisory Group, or INSARAG – offered assistance from its members, but this offer was rejected by the government of Bangladesh. The government made a statement suggesting that the area's local rescue emergency services were well equipped.^[30] Prior to offering assistance to Bangladesh, the UN held consultations to assess the country's ability to mount an effective rescue operation, and they reached the conclusion that they lacked that capability. Bangladeshi officials, desiring to take "face-saving" actions and protecting national sensibilities, refused to accept the assistance offered to them by the UN. A large portion of the rescue operation consisted of inadequately equipped volunteers, many of whom had no protective clothing and wore sandals. Some buried workers drank their own urine to survive the high temperatures, waiting to be saved. Not only was the Bangladeshi government accused of favouring national pride over those buried alive, but many relatives of those trapped in the debris criticised the government for trying to end the rescue mission prematurely

One of the garment manufacturers' websites indicates that more than half of the victims were women, along with a number of their children who were in nursery facilities within the building. Bangladeshi Home Minister Muhiuddin Khan Alamgir confirmed that fire service personnel, police, and military troops were assisting with the rescue effort. Volunteer rescue workers used bolts of fabric to assist survivors to escape from the building. A national day of mourning was held on 25 April.

On 8 May, army spokesman Mir Rabbi said the army's attempt to recover more bodies from the rubble would continue for at least another week. On 10 May, 17 days after the collapse, a woman named Reshma was found and rescued alive and almost unhurt under the rubble.

Causes

The direct reasons for the building problems were:

1. Building built on a filled-in pond which compromised structural integrity,
2. Conversion from commercial use to industrial use,
3. Addition of three floors above the original permit,
4. The use of substandard construction material (which led to an overload of the building structure aggravated by vibrations due to the generators).^[38] Those various elements indicated dubious business practices by Sohel Rana and dubious administrative practices in Savar.



Photo of Rana Plaza taken one year before the collapse.



Side view of the collapsed building



Video clip of rescue work at the collapsed building



Rescuers carrying out one of the survivors from the collapsed building

One good example to illustrate the dubious administrative practices is the evacuation of the building after the cracks. It was reported that the industrial police first requested the evacuation of the building until an inspection had been conducted. It was also reported that Abdur Razak Khan, an engineer, declared the building unsafe and requested public authorities to conduct a more thorough inspection; he was arrested for helping the owner illegally add three floors. It is also reported that Kabir Hossain Sardar, the Upazila Nirbahi Officer who visited the site, met with Sohel Rana, and declared the building safe. Sohel Rana said to the media that the building was safe and workers should return to work the next day. One manager of the factories in the Rana Plaza reported that Sohel Rana told them that the building was safe. Managers then requested the workers to go back to work and as a result workers also returned to the factories the next day

Causes related to manufacturers and safety compliance

Some people have argued that the decision by managers to send workers back into the factories was due to the pressure to complete orders for buyers on time. This second line of argument gives partial responsibility for the disaster to the short production deadlines preferred by buyers due to the quick changes of designs, referred to as fast fashion. Some have argued the demand for fast fashion and low-cost clothing motivated minimal oversight by clothing brands, and that collectively organised trade unions could have responded to the pressure of management. Others have argued that trade unions would increase workforce costs and thus endanger the Bangladesh garment industry

Since the Spectrum factory collapse in 2005, prominent manufacturers organised projects like the Ethical Trading Initiative and Business Social Compliance Initiative (BSCI) with the purpose of preventing such disasters. These programs ultimately failed to prevent the Savar building collapse. Despite social compliance audits conducted according to BSCI procedure at two of the factories at Rana Plaza, auditors failed to detect the structural concerns. In a press release following the collapse, BSCI explained that their system did not cover building safety. This has been contested, as the BSCI audit questionnaire required auditors to check building permits, and discrepancies between the permit and the number of floors in practice were evident. Some have argued that the BSCI has weak incentives to report such violations.

Aftermath

Bangladesh

The day after the Rana Plaza building collapsed, the Rajdhani Unnayan Kartripakkha (Capital city development authority) filed a case against the owners of the building and the five garment factories operating inside it. On the same day, dozens of survivors were discovered in the remains of the building. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasinah... ordered the arrest of Sohel Rana and four of the owners of the garment factories operating in the building. Sohel Rana was reported to have gone into hiding; however, authorities reported that four other individuals had already been arrested in connection with the collapse.

Two days after the building collapsed, garment workers across the industrial areas of Dhaka, Chittagong and Gazipur rioted, targeting vehicles, commercial buildings and garment factories. The next day, political parties and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party-led 18 Party Alliance demanded the arrest and trial of suspects and an independent commission to identify vulnerable factories. Four days after the building collapsed, the owner of the Rana Plaza, Sohel Rana, was arrested at Benapole, Jessore District, on the Indo-Bangladeshi border, by security forces. On the same day a fire broke out at the disaster site and authorities were forced to temporarily suspend the search for survivors.

On 1 May, during International Workers' Day, thousands of protesting workers paraded through central Dhaka to demand safer working conditions and the death penalty for the owner of Rana Plaza. A week later hundreds of survivors of Bangladesh's worst industrial disaster blocked a main highway to demand wages as the death toll from the collapse passed 700. Local government officials said they had been in talks with the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association to pay the workers their outstanding April salaries plus a further three months – £97. After officials promised the surviving workers that they would be soon paid, they ended their protest. The government and garment association were compiling a list of surviving employees to establish who must be paid and compensated. The next day, 18 garment plants, including 16 in Dhaka and two in Chittagong, were closed down. Textile minister, Abdul Latif Siddique, told reporters that more plants would be shut as part of strict new measures to ensure safety.

On 5 June, police in Bangladesh fired into the air in an attempt to disperse hundreds of former workers and relatives of the victims of the collapse who were protesting to demand back pay and compensation promised by the government and the Bangladesh Garments Manufacturers and Exporters Association. On 10 June, seven inspectors were suspended and accused of negligence for renewing the licenses of garment factories in the building that collapsed.

On 22 September, at least 50 people were injured when police fired rubber bullets and tear gas into a crowd of protesters who were blocking streets in Dhaka demanding a minimum wage of \$100 (8,114 takas) a month. In November, a 10-story garment factory in Gazipur, which supplied Western brands, was allegedly burned down by workers angered over rumours of a colleague's death in police firing.

In March 2014 Rana Plaza owner Sohel Rana was granted six months' bail in the High Court. This prompted angry reactions from labour leaders. However, Rana will not be released from jail as another case filed by police is pending. A December 2015 report, written by the NYU Stern Center for Business and Human Rights, found that only eight of 3,425 factories inspected had "remedied violations enough to pass a final inspection" despite the international community's \$280 million commitment to clean up Bangladesh's RMG industry. In 14 June 2016 Sohel Rana and 17 others were indicted for violating building code in the construction of Rana Plaza. On August 2016 the trial was postponed after defendants filled appeals with the High Court of Bangladesh.