Bangladesh Fire Victims Want Old Jobs Back

Julhas Alam, Associated Press

DHAKA, Bangladesh (AP) — As 112 of her co-workers died in a garment-factory fire, Dipa Akter got out by jumping from the third floor through a hole made by breaking apart an exhaust fan. Her left leg is wrapped in bandages and she has trouble walking.

Now she wants back in.

"If the factory owner reopens the factory sometime soon, we will work again here," the 19-year-old said. "If it's closed for long, we have to think of alternatives."

Major retailers whose products were found in the fire have disavowed the Tazreen Fashions Ltd. factory, but workers who survived have not. They can't afford to.

Factories like the one gutted Nov. 24 are a rare lifeline in this desperately poor country, and now many of the more than 1,200 surviving employees have no work and few prospects.

Akter spent 25 minutes trying to get down the smoke-filled stairs before jumping, which she said was "the only option other than being burned."

Despite her injuries and trauma, she needs the job. Without it, she said, she would either be a housemaid or jobless in her home village.

Almost one-third of Bangladesh's 150 million people live in extreme poverty. There are few formal jobs in villages, where about 70 percent of the population lives. Garment work is one of the few paths to secure a stable income, collect some savings and send money to family — especially for young, uneducated rural women, who are already trained to make clothes at home.

The industry has given women in this Muslim-majority, conservative nation an accepted opportunity to leave their homes and join the main workforce.

"I have a life here." Akter said. "I have a timetable to wake up in the morning and I know when I should go to bed."

Akter made about 4,550 takas ($57) a month sewing pants, shirts and nightgowns. Her husband makes about the same at another factory, but she said it is impossible for them to survive just on his salary.

The landlord is demanding rent and she has bills at a grocery shop.

"I am in big trouble because I don't have any savings," Akter said.

The government announced Saturday that it would give 200,000 takas ($2,500) to the families of those who died in the fire and 50,000 takas ($625) to the injured. It also said uninjured workers would get their November wages, but many employees are demanding four months' salary as compensation. It is not yet clear when, or even if, Tazreen will rebuild the factory.

"If I am not compensated, I have to start begging. I have to move to the street," said Ferdousy, a worker who uses only one name.

With overtime, the 20-year-old earned up to 7,000 takas ($87) a month from Tazreen as a sewing machine operator. She fled the factory unharmed by bolting out as soon as the fire alarm went off, ignoring her supervisors' insistence that she stay at her station.

But now she needs to work again, or to be compensated while the company rebuilds. But her husband needs treatment for asthma and is too sick to work. Her two children need food. The rent needs to be paid.

"I worked hard to support my family. I always tried to cross my production targets so I could earn extra money to support my family. But now I have no place to go," she said.

Ratna Begum, 30, is too injured to go back to work for the foreseeable future and needs compensation soon. She jumped out of a fifth-floor window to escape the flames, thinking, "If I die, my family will at least get my body."

Now she has a bandage on her head and unable to walk without assistance. Without her monthly pay of up to 5,000 takas ($62), she wonders how her family will afford rent, food, her medical bills and school for her two sons. Without compensation soon, the family from the desperately poor Rangpur district fears they will have no choice but to sell their only property: three cows.

The factory had no emergency exits. Police were continuing to question three managers suspected of locking in the workers during the fire. Clothes from major global brands including Wal-Mart and Disney were being produced at the factory, though the companies said the plant was considered high-risk and they had ordered subcontractors not to use it in recent months.

As difficult as life is for survivors, some families don't even know for certain whether their loved ones are among the dead. Dozens of bodies too badly burned to be identified have already been buried.

"My mother has gone to the factory, she has not returned home yet," 7-year-old Rumi said as she showed a passport-size photo of her mother. "Where's my mother? She has not come."

Her father, Ahedul, who uses only one name, said he went to the hospital morgue but could not tell whether his wife's remains were there.

"I don't know what to do now," Ahedul said. "The government said it will compensate us, but how will I compensate my baby?"

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