

# Dying for cheap clothes, lessons of the Bangladesh garment factory disaster

By Susan Ormiston, [CBC News](#)

It's a mournful place, the remains of Rana Plaza here in Savar, Bangladesh. Ragged shirts and pants still hang off mounds of concrete pushed to one side when bulldozers razed the site. A pool of rancid rainwater fills the space where five factories used to churn out cheap clothes for Western shoppers.

Nearly eight weeks after the world's worst garment industry disaster, families still press against the barriers, holding up pictures of missing loved ones. "The disaster shocked us, and made us in many ways ashamed of ourselves," says Mahfuz Anam, editor of the influential *The Daily Star* newspaper in nearby Dhaka.

Bangladesh's bustling clothes industry has suffered a huge blow, and the country's factory owners and government are trying desperately to rehabilitate their image, and keep their global customers, including those in Canada. The managing director at one of the companies, Knitwear Group in Dhaka, says international buyers are demanding assurances his factories are safe. "We are really under pressure. Some buyers are not giving us orders," says Mahmum Khan, whose company supplies lounge pants to Mark's Work Wearhouse and two Quebec-based companies with children's brands. "Actually they're scared because of Rana Plaza."

Over 1,100 people died on April 24, 2013 when an illegal, eight-storey building known as Rana Plaza collapsed in a heap of rubble, a direct result of greed and corruption in the Bangladeshi garment trade. The fault lines in the industry were well known: bribes, lack of rigour when it came to building codes, and a cozy relationship between business owners and the government. Indeed, a recent study by the Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology found that 60 per cent of local factories are somehow vulnerable, because of their construction.

Another culprit here is the race to the bottom for ever-cheaper clothing. "Before, I was working with Wal-Mart Canada", says Khan at Knitwear Group. "They're giving us very, very low prices. So if I follow that price always then maybe I can't give a good price to the workers. Last year if I'm making one sweater at \$5.00, this year I'm getting \$4.50. If the brands pay us a little more, maybe we can follow more strongly our rules and regulations."

The blame game here is in full flight, and for the obvious reasons. The needle trade employs over 3.5 million workers, and offers up even cheaper labour than China. Canada's trade with Bangladesh has more than doubled in five years to over \$1 billion. Bangladesh is anxiously trying to protect its interests. As Mahfuz Anam says, "the garment industry came as a surprise boom. We grabbed it, we tried to build on it. We kept cutting on costs; through that process we went into a zone that was dangerous." Today, the poor shantytowns dotting Savar, a Dhaka suburb, are still in mourning. Young workers came to the city looking for a step up. Even a minimum wage of \$37 dollars a month was better than what they could scrape out in their villages.

But so many died. So many more were injured. The "cost of cheap" is becoming unupportable. Compensation packages are still being negotiated among a combination of payers including the owners, the clothing buyers, the building association, and the government. Loblaws Canada was one of the buyers. A shipment of pants was days away from delivery when Rana Plaza collapsed. Loblaws has since signed the Bangladesh Fire and Safety Agreement, which promises tougher audits of structural integrity and a compensation package. But it hasn't said when it will start paying out or how much. Rana Plaza is a scar on the country's psyche. But it's only one of a catalogue of disasters in the garment trade in recent years.

An art gallery in Dhaka recently launched an exhibition of photos called "Murder not tragedy." It includes what's become an iconic photo of Rana Plaza. A man and a woman covered in cement dust, seemingly hugging. It's been dubbed "The final embrace." The exhibit's curator, Rezaur Rahman, is trying to sharpen the focus. "This is not a tragedy", he says, "this is a killing. We should make sure the people who are responsible get punished."

***Read the article and reflect on the documentary 'Made in Bangladesh' that we watched yesterday.***

(i) Review Marx's theory regarding the distribution of wealth and power in a society. Draw a diagram with labels (all those involved and important key concepts) to show and explain how Marx would interpret the Rana Plaza disaster.

(ii) Now, explain in writing what you have drawn.

(iii) Predict an outcome (what will happen in the future? next steps?) with the help of Marx. He obviously did not support the capitalist system he spent much of his life criticizing. What actions do you think Marx would recommend to challenge and change capitalism?

(iv) Gramsci, a Marxist theorist, also sought to challenge the power and domination of the ruling class; however, his theory of social change differed from Marx. What route(s) to social change would Gramsci suggest?

(v) Marx concluded that to understand ourselves, we need to understand where we 'fit' in society. Where do we fit, as North American consumers, in the Rana Plaza disaster? Are we complicit? Justify your position.

<b>Knowledge</b> Demonstrates knowledge of social theory terminology studied in the course appropriately and accurately. / 10	... with limited effectiveness.	... with some effectiveness.	... with considerable effectiveness.	Thoroughly...
<b>Thinking</b> Assesses the influence of social forces (as described by social theorists) that contributed to the development of the issue, problem, or need. / 10	...with limited effectiveness.	...with some effectiveness.	...with considerable effectiveness.	Thoroughly...
<b>Application</b> Effectively applies the terminology to a context. Makes appropriate predictions as to an outcome to the issue, problem, or need with the help of theorists. / 10	...with limited effectiveness.	...with some effectiveness.	...with considerable effectiveness.	Thoroughly...
<b>Communication</b> Effectiveness of the communication of your response. Organization, clarity, spelling, vocabulary. / 10	... with limited effectiveness:	... with some effectiveness:	... with considerable effectiveness:	Sophisticated

