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Recent casualties in textile factory fires, notably in Bangladesh

Greens/EFA motion for resolution

The European Parliament,

– having regard to the EC-Bangladesh Cooperation Agreement of 2001,

– having regard to the statement by the EU Representation in Dhaka on the fire at a garment factory in Ashulia of 27 November 2012,

– having regard to the ILO Promotional Framework for Occupational Safety and Health (2006, C-187) and the Occupational Safety and Health Convention (1981, C-155), which have not been ratified by Bangladesh and Pakistan, as well as their respective recommendations (R-197); having regard also to the Labour Inspection Convention (1947, C-081), to which Bangladesh and Pakistan are signatories and its recommendations (R-164),

– recalling its resolutions of 25 November 2010 on human rights and social and environmental standards in international trade agreements(1) and on corporate social responsibility in international trade agreements(2),

– having regard to its recent reports entitled 'Corporate Social Responsibility: accountable, transparent and responsible business behaviour and sustainable growth', and 'Corporate Social Responsibility: promoting society's interests and a route to sustainable and inclusive recovery',

– having regard to the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, which set a framework for both governments and companies to protect and respect human rights and which was endorsed by the Human Rights Council in June 2011,

– having regard to Rule 110(2) of its Rules of Procedure,

A. whereas on 24 November 2012 the worst ever factory fire in Bangladesh consumed a nine-storey building of the factory operated by Tazreen Fashions, a subsidiary of the Tuba group, in Ashulia, where some 1200 mostly female garment workers were assembling textiles for major Western retailers, killing at least 112 people and injuring over 100, according to government figures, while labour union representatives claim that the real number of casualties is significantly higher;

B. whereas the Tuba group's clients include Wal-Mart, Carrefour, C&A, IKEA and Sears and its factories export garments to many countries in Europe and to the US;

C. whereas Bangladesh has become the world's second largest exporter of garments after China, with the lowest garment wages, the textile sector accounting for almost 80 % of the country's exports, with the EU being its primary export market; whereas the production pressure in the international textile market dominated by low costs and quick turnaround, make Bangladesh's work force a particularly vulnerable target;

D. whereas just weeks earlier, on 11 September 2012, over 300 people were killed and some 250 injured in Pakistan, reportedly including many minors, when the textile factory Ali Enterprises in Karachi, which produced jeans for the German discounter KiK, and a shoemaking factory in Lahore caught fire, equally considered the most deadly and worst ever industrial factory fire in Pakistan;

E. whereas the high number of casualties in each case has been blamed mostly on the absence of minimal safety measures, as illustrated by barred doors and windows, missing exit routes, fire extinguishers, and emergency lights, unprepared and incompetent management, dangerous stocking of inflammable material close to the workers, illegal and dysfunctional building construction, lack of access for the fire brigades and their delayed reaction;

F. whereas according to reports by the Pakistani Textile Workers Union (NTUF), Ali Enterprises had passed an internationally recognised safety test just weeks prior to the disaster and whereas Tazreen Fashions had received production orders despite the fact that inspections by a Walmart-linked company and by the European Business Social Compliance Initiative had found serious safety violations;

G. whereas, according to information from the International Labour Rights Forum, more than 600 garment workers have died in factory fires in Bangladesh since 2005, while, according to reports by human rights organisations, none of the factory owners or management have ever been brought to trial;

H. whereas in recent months tensions between the Bangladeshi Government and labour activists have been escalating, and whereas this has included the still unresolved murder of Aminul Islam in April 2012, who had been criticising the unsafe factory conditions in the garment industry;

I. whereas the reluctant acknowledgement by certain Western retailers that the factories concerned were producing the garments which they sold demonstrates the lack of transparency and accountability in the international textile industry's supply chain;

J. whereas there is a joint responsibility, stretching from the end customers in Europe, over the retailers to the factory management and governments at all levels of the production and supply chain, to make efforts towards improving work and safety standards in the garment sector for the benefit of workers;

1. Expresses its grave concern at the loss of lives and the many casualties in the factory fires in Bangladesh and Pakistan in recent months and offers its condolences to the families of the victims;

2. Calls on all European retailers whose orders were being processed at the time of the fires to support the local authorities and involve social partners in setting up an adequate and transparent compensation scheme for the victims and their families as well as contributing to such a system; takes the view that such a system should cover the loss of income and damages for the injured and the families of the dead, as well as free medical rehabilitation for the injured and care and education for deceased workers' dependent family members;

3. Welcomes the Bangladesh Fire and Building Safety Agreement of some trade unions, NGOs and

multinational textile retailers aimed at improving safety standards at production sites and accepting to pay for such measures, in particular by establishing an independent inspection system and actively supporting the creation of 'health and safety committees' involving workers' representations in each factory, which are obligatory by law bur rarely operational; calls on all relevant textile brands to support this effort, including the world largest textile retailer, Walmart;

4. Calls on foreign companies operating in Bangladesh and Pakistan to favour commercial relations with manufacturers that operate in compliance with the basic ILO Conventions and the laws of the two countries;

5. Acknowledges that employment in the garment sector has helped millions of poor rural women in Pakistan, Bangladesh and elsewhere to escape deprivation and dependence on male support; considers, however, that certain minimum safety and labour standards should be the norm worldwide, including in the EU;

6. Calls, in particular. on the Bangladeshi Government to enforce compliance by all manufacturers with the Labour Act (2006) and to increase the numbers and resources of inspection teams and enhance their methods;

7. Calls on the two governments to effectively implement the ratified ILO standards and to ratify and implement, in particular, the ILO Promotional Framework for Occupational Safety and Health, the ILO Occupational Safety and Health Convention and the Occupational Safety and Health Convention;

8. Believes that a rise in minimum wages in Bangladesh, which for many workers are below the subsistence level, in combination with increased prices for the end-products paid by consumers form part of the improvements required, and urges the Bangladeshi Government to sanction companies which are undercutting the legally established minimum wage;

9. Welcomes the steps which have been taken by the Bangladeshi and Pakistani Governments to support the victims and their families and to bring those responsible for the high number of casualties to justice; calls on the authorities to oblige the management to publish the names of all the workers who have been affected by the fires and to guarantee full access to the justice system for all victims, so as to enable them to claim compensation; calls also on the sourcing brands to make all audit reports available to the public;

10. Urges the Bangladeshi authorities to duly investigate the torture and murder of labour rights activist Aminul Islam, and calls on both governments to stop restrictions on trade union activities and collective bargaining;

11. Calls on the Bangladeshi Government to accede to the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearances and to ratify the Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture and remove its reservation under the Convention Against Torture;

12. Calls on the Bangladeshi and Pakistani Governments and on brands, retailers, and employers to take effective measures to improve work place safety in factories, train workers and management on safety measures and ensure that workers can speak out when safety regulations are ignored;

13. Welcomes Bangladesh's successful efforts to reduce child labour in the garment sector and urges Pakistan to step up its engagement against child labour;

14. Welcomes also the recent decision by the Bangladeshi Government to extend maternity leave to six months in the garment sector;

15. Calls on the Council and the Commission to include a binding corporate social responsibility (CSR) clause in all bilateral trade and investment agreements signed by the EU, on the basis of the CSR principles, as defined at international level, including in the 2010 update of the OECD Guidelines and standards defined by the UN (in particular the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights), the ILO and the EU; suggests that this clause harmonise existing standards and concepts in order to ensure comparability and fairness and that it contain measures for the monitoring of the effective implementation of these principles at EU level;

16. Calls on the Council and the Commission to introduce legislation obliging companies which wish to operate on the European market under EU law to provide information about the entire supply chain of their products, in line with the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights;

17. Calls on the Commission to provide support for Bangladesh and Pakistan to improve occupational safety and health via the planned new thematic programme ‘Global Public Goods and Challenges’ and through the DCI or Partnership Instrument;

18. Requests that, in future EU trade agreements with third countries, occupational safety and health should take a more prominent place as part of the decent work agenda and that the EU should provide technical support for the implementation of these provisions;

19. Instructs its President to forward this resolution to the Council, the Commission, the Vice-President of the Commission / High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, and the governments and parliaments of Bangladesh and Pakistan.

Recommended

Press release

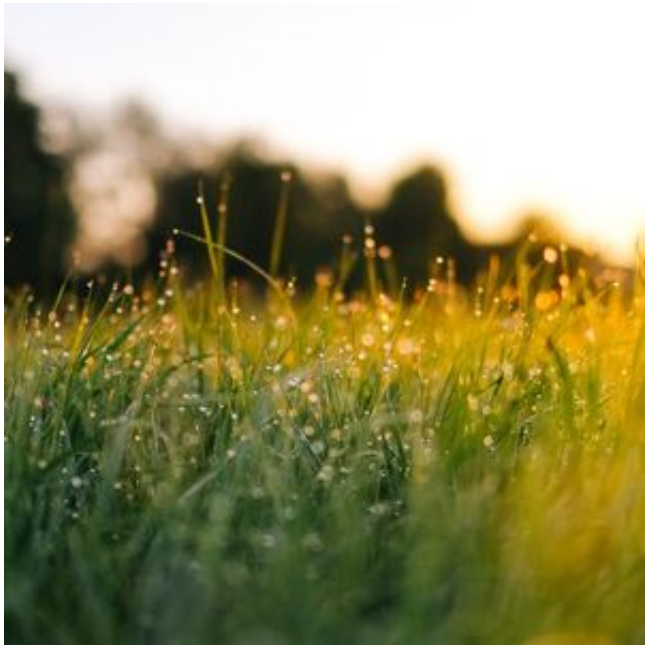
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