

# TerranearPMC Safety Share

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## Week of September 9, 2019 – The Dhaka Garment Disaster

S&H professionals always emphasize the importance of hazard recognition. That's because, once a hazard is identified, the possibility of an incident occurring from that hazard is significantly reduced. The fact is, some of the greatest disasters of the world were the result of not seeing when danger was present. Or maybe the hazards were identified and instead, were ignored. Of course, the most famous example is the Titanic. Taking a course through the north Atlantic with the thought of breaking a record to traverse the Atlantic and not having enough life boats on board are only two circumstances that, if only heeded, would have prevented, or at least mitigated, the devastating results of the enormous loss of life. Yet here we are in modern times, and too often, when faced with an obvious hazard, warning signs go ignored. Such was the case of the Dhaka Garment Disaster. True, this event did occur in what we consider to be a "third world nation," Bangladesh. Nevertheless, the story did shock the world and left many asking the question, "Why?"

It was in 2013, in the Dhaka district of Bangladesh, when a building that manufactured clothing, collapsed due to structural failure, causing the fatality of 1,134 people with an additional 2,500 people left injured. This event is considered the deadliest structural failure accident in modern times as well as the deadliest garment-factory disaster in history. It occurred on April 24, and soon after, in May, the American Industrial Hygiene Association – a major organization in the United States that is dedicated to occupational safety and health – brought up the events of this tragedy in the main conference hall where thousands of S&H professionals listened with disbelief, knowing full well that the tragedy being presented could have easily been prevented.

On April 23, 2013, a TV channel recorded footage that showed cracks in the building. Immediately afterward, the building was evacuated, and the shops and the bank on the lower floors were closed. Later in the day, the building owner insisted that the building was safe, and workers should return the next day. The factory managers threatened to withhold a month's pay from workers who refused to come to work.

The factory manufactured apparel for brands including Benetton, Bonmarché, Prada, Gucci, Versace, Moncler, the Children's Place, El Corte Inglés, Joe Fresh, Monsoon Accessorize, Mango, Matalan, Primark, and Walmart.

The head of the Bangladesh Fire Service & Civil Defense said that the upper four floors had been built without a permit. Meanwhile, the plaza's architect said the building was planned for shops and offices – but not factories. This was emphasized by other architects, voicing their concerns of placing factories inside a building that was designed only for shops and offices, noting the structure was potentially not strong enough to bear the weight and vibration of heavy machinery

On the morning of April 24, there was a power outage and diesel generators on the top floor were started the intense vibrations resulted in the building collapsing at about 08:57 am, 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.

An investigation was followed, acknowledging that the direct reasons for the building problems were:

1. Building built on a filled-in pond which compromised structural integrity,



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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).

The decision by managers to send workers back into the factories may have been due to the pressure to complete orders on time, putting partial responsibility for the disaster on the short production deadlines preferred by buyers due to the quick changes of designs, referred to as fast fashion. It was brought out that there was a demand for fast fashion and low-cost clothing which motivated minimal oversight by clothing brands, and that collectively organized 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.

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. Yet, 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 protect 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.

While the reasons listed for this tragedy centered around poor construction and improper decisions to allow industrial work in a building that was not designed for such use, the decision to build on a location that was noted to be unstable, was also a factor, that if heeded, would have prevented this tragedy from ever occurring. Meanwhile there was also a driving force based on financial motivation to insist workers continue their jobs after the severity of structural damage was evident. A major contributing factor that may not have been responsible for the actual collapse, but nevertheless contributed to loss of life, was the lack of proper emergency equipment and supplies as well as the response.

Of course many in the international community believe that such a tragedy occurred simply because it happened in an undeveloped nation. However, there have been too many times when similar incidents have occurred in the most developed nations of the world. For instance, the collapse of a walkway in the Kansas City Hyatt regency in 1981 (causing multiple fatalities) and more recently, in 2016, the tragedy of the Oakland, California "Ghost Ship" building where improper fire conditions existed (also resulting in multiple deaths).

Yes, the tragic event at the Dhaka Garment building did take place in Bangladesh, but other countless tragedies in highly developed nations occur just as well. And the one thing all these unfortunate incidents have in common was that hazards were identified – but, for whatever the reason – were ignored.

**The greater our knowledge increases the more our ignorance unfolds**

John F. Kennedy

