

2013 Rana Plaza Collapse, Bangladesh: Case Study

Introduction

One of the deadliest industrial disasters in modern history occurred on April 24, 2013, when the Rana Plaza building in Savar, close to Dhaka, Bangladesh, collapsed. The eight-story building contained shops, a bank, and five clothing factories. There were at least 2,500 injuries and over 1,100 fatalities. The collapse brought to light serious shortcomings in global supply chain accountability, workplace safety, and regulatory enforcement.

Facts of the case

The building was built on land that used to be a pond. It had bad foundations and extra floors added without permission. The day before the disaster, large cracks were found, and shops and a bank were evacuated. But the owners of the garment factories made thousands of workers stay back inside the next day, threatening to fire them. The building fell during the morning work hours. Most victims were low-wage garment workers, mainly young women. Brands such as Primark, Mango, Benetton, Bonmarche, and others were linked to factories inside Rana Plaza. The economic impact was severe, with billions in losses to Bangladesh's garment sector, which contributes about 80% of the nation's export revenue.

Epidemiological aspects

Epidemiological methods were applied to record morbidity and mortality. Reports from the government and NGOs kept track of deaths and injuries, but the process of gathering data was cluttered and incomplete. Potential biases included undercounting undocumented workers and discrepancies in factory employment records. The main risk factors included weak construction standards, adding floors without permission, installation of heavy machinery, and failure to enforce evacuation after cracks were identified. These circumstances show how large-scale health crises can be caused by man-made hazards.

Management of the event

Local volunteers and Bangladesh's fire service, who did not have enough equipment and used hand tools to dig survivors out, were the first to respond. Heavy machinery and international rescue teams arrived later, rescuing hundreds of trapped workers. Despite these efforts, poor preparedness and delayed medical triage increased morbidity and mortality. Subsequently, international pressure resulted in the establishment of the Bangladesh Accord on Fire and Building Safety, a legally enforceable agreement among multinational brands, labor unions, and NGOs aimed at enhancing factory inspection and repair. Supervision has been raised, with the International Labour Organization indicating that the industry is now "safer" than previously, although challenges persist.

The owner of Rana Plaza, Sohel Rana, was arrested shortly after the collapse as he attempted to flee to India. He and several others faced charges including murder, negligence, and violation of building codes. His arrest showed that the government was willing to hold people accountable, but critics claimed that before the catastrophe, safety rules and legal action had not been enforced well.

Communications of the event

The Rana Plaza collapse generated intense international media coverage, sparking campaigns such as Fashion Revolution, which asked, “Who made my clothes?” Public pressure compelled major international brands to contribute to compensation funds and sparked a broader discussion about supply chain ethics. However, communication was weaker on the ground, with incorrect casualty reports and inaccurate data on survivors dragging down the coordinated response. As a result, local messaging exposed significant deficiencies, while global communication became a force for responsibility and reform.

Summary

The Rana Plaza disaster highlighted how a lack of safety enforcement and systemic negligence can turn workplaces into deadly disaster zones. Unsafe construction, ignoring warnings, and weak emergency preparedness led to morbidity and mortality worse. Reforms such as the Accord improved factory safety, but structural inequalities in the garment industry persist. The most important thing to remember is that safety in the workplace is also a public health issue, and governments, businesses, and consumers around the world need to be held accountable for keeping workers safe.

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