



CLEAN CLOTHES CAMPAIGN

*Improving working conditions
in the global garment industry*



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15 Aug. 2001, [Twenty-four die in Bangladesh garment factory blaze](#) (International Textile, Garment and Leather Workers' Federation)

Update on Bangladesh fire

(29 Oct 2001) Dear Friends,
Several weeks ago we forwarded information on the fire at the Mirpur factory in Bangladesh, which took place on August 8th and resulted in the death of 24 garment workers. Since that time the CCC has been gathering information on the companies that were having their garments produced at the several factories housed at this facility. We'd like to share that information with you and urge you to take the time to contact these companies to press them to take responsibility for what has happened to the workers and to take steps to improve health and safety at all the facilities where their goods are produced.



BACKGROUND

The Mirpur Factory where the August 8, 2001 tragedy took place is situated at Industrial Plot No.M-2, Main Road No.1, Sec. 14, Mirpur, Dhaka City, Bangladesh.

There are four separate factories contained in the same building:

1. Europe Sweaters, ground and first floor
2. Four Wings, second floor
3. AJAX Sweaters, third and fourth floors
4. MAICO Sweaters, fifth through seventh floors (MAICO Sweater is sometimes also called Mico Sweater, and has a separate juridical entity Mico Knitting Ltd).



The total number of workers is about 2600.

Description of the events:

On August 8 at 9 a.m the fire alarm, located on the 6th floor, was allegedly sounded by a worker after seeing sparks from the electric circuit board. The alarm system is located in a very small and cluttered office, and hard to reach. It is the supervisors job to sound it, but it allegedly in this case was a worker who did this.

Newspaper reports quoting fire department spokespersons and the building inspectors report confirm that there was a small fire, but that it was contained to the electrical box. (A later inspection shows a new box, with new circuit breakers and no evidence of sparks or of an explosion).

After the fire alarm sounded workers from all floors tried to reach the gates and the emergency exits. Both the northern and southern entry gates of the building were locked during the incident, which is illegal. By the time the southern gate was opened, after about fifteen to twenty minutes, the 25 x 15

foot floor area between the staircase and the entry gates was turned into a pile of approximately one hundred motionless bodies -- some already dead and many seriously injured.

According to our sources there were only two emergency exits. Given the size of the building and the number of workers this should have been at least four or five. The exit egress (that is, the size of the corridors and the stairways) was not wide enough to permit the orderly evacuation of this size group. There were no emergency lights in case of power failure, which contributed to the tragedy, since during the panic turned the main electrical switch was shut off, plunging the entire building into darkness. Owners report that there was an emergency exit on each floor, and that they were opened. The building inspection report confirms that the exits were locked, as do eyewitness reports, such as the following from one female employee:



"I am working at Mico for over four months now, but I never knew that there is another stairway at the back of our building until that terrible morning. As everybody was running towards the main gate, I suddenly spotted a group of my co-workers trying to open a small gate at the back. After they opened the gate, I don't know how, they were shouting at us to follow them. I did and luckily survived the stampede."

What is the use of having an emergency exit if the workers don't even know about it? Fire drills were started recently in one of the factories (Four Wings) but not at any of the others.

A detailed account of the events can be found on the website of the Bangladeshi Daily Star, which published a feature article on this tragedy in its August 24 edition:

<http://www.dailystarnews.com/magazine/2001/08/04/coverstory.htm>

This tragedy comes nine months after the [Chowdury factory fire](#) in Bangladesh, which claimed 48 lives. This brings the number of workers who died because of factory fires in Bangladesh in the sector to 84 over the past twelve months.

BRANDS PRODUCED AT THE MIRPUR FACILITY

Various local sources have informed the CCC that the following brands were being produced at the factories housed in the Mirpur facility at the time of the tragedy. We have asked some of you earlier for information on brands and that has helped. However, we would still like to get information on the following brands:

- Seppala
- Kappakin
- Dr. Refil
- Kik
- YGM
- Miles
- Kik



Apart from these brands, **C&A, H&M and Obermeyer** are producing in this factory. CCC has written letters to all three companies and BGMEA (Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Employers Association).

The CCC has been in touch with H&M regarding this incident and received a prompt and comprehensive response to our inquiries . According to Ingrid Schullstrom from H&M, the Code of Conduct manager from H&M visited the factory after the fire. H&M's supplier Four Wings has made all safety improvements required by H&M and has also performed regular fire drills. H&M claims that Four Wings has tried to convince the other factories in the building to make joint fire drills, but they have refused. H&M has arranged professional counselling for the workers who were in shock after the accident. Four Wings has paid all hospital bills for the injured workers. CCC will write H&M again to ask for clarification on some points, such as what kind of safety improvements were required by H&M. We will continue the discussion with H&M about safety procedures.

C&A has also replied . Their audit company SOCAM visited the factory just two weeks before the accident and found that both exits were open but that

staircases were partially obstructed by boxes. SOCAM reported to C&A about this and they contacted their Taiwanese supplier who subcontracts to MAICO Sweaters about this. They did investigate why the fire exits were locked but as far as we know they didn't take any other measures.

BGMEA has not replied to our letters.

What you can do:

We would like to ask you to contact these companies.

You could ask **Obermeyer** the following:

- clarification on how this sort of tragedy could take place and what Obermeyer has been doing to implement health and safety standards in the workplaces that produce their goods.
- What is Obermeyer's position in relation to workers rights and what policies and procedures exist to guarantee that they are observed in their contract facilities ?
- Is Obermeyer monitoring if BGMEA does give compensation and coverage of medical expenses for the victims of this tragedy ? Will BGMEA cover educational expenses of the victim's children ?

Heinrich Obermeyr GmbH&Co
Stickwaren, Textilmode, Import, Export
Postfach 100
D-87528 Oberstaufen

C&A :

According to C&A they have done all they could by checking the production unit and point out healthy measurements and security hazards. We think it's important that C&A should take responsibility in improving health and safety and that they didn't clarify enough what has been done in order to prevent these kind of disasters. We also think C&A should take responsibility of the victims of the accident.

You can write to:
Jochen Overmeyer
C&A Mode KG
Bleichstrasse 20
D-40211 Dusseldorf

BGMEA :

- BGMEA should provide clarification on how this sort of tragedy could take place and what BGMEA has been doing to implement health and safety standards in Bangladeshi garment-producing facilities.
- Since there has been several accidents in Bangladeshi factories there have been many calls for improvement. The fact that there has been yet another accident doesn't speak well of BGMEA's commitment to actually improve safety situations. Therefore, it would be good if BGMEA can clarify their position on its position in relation to workers rights.
- BGMEA should clarify what kind of follow-up this tragedy will have. Will all victim's families be financially compensated ? Will BGMEA cover educational expenses of the victim's children ?

Fax BGMEA: #88-02-956-2562



TOP



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