On the frontline

Following two devastating garment factory tragedies in Bangladesh that killed more than 1,200 people, we find out the lessons learned from the fire service.

The Tazreen fire was very difficult,” recalls senior station officer Shams Arman, of the factory fire that broke out in Dhaka in 2012, killing 112 people and injuring many more. It was a harsh wake up call to the fire danger present in ready-made garment factories.

“We received delayed information, there was a huge scarcity of water and the only access to the factory was via a single, narrow one-way road,” says Arman.

Less than six months later Rana Plaza, a building housing five garment factories, collapsed, killing 1,136 people. The tragedy highlighted a different challenge for the fire service: those related to problems with structures.

“The Rana Plaza building collapse was challenging, but for different reasons: mainly insufficient rescue equipment and crowd management,” Arman adds. “We directly rescued over 250 people alive though, and helped others to rescue many more. We are now working to help factory owners make sure incidents like those do not happen again.”

To help him undertake this specialist work, Arman underwent training – supported by the International Labour Organization (ILO) – focusing on fire and building safety in garment factories. Forty inspectors were trained, and 16 were equipped with extra skills to help them train others. The training was provided through the ILO’s Improving Fire and Building Safety project, funded by the US Department of Labor.

This new work requires the Bangladesh Fire Service to visit factories almost every day, inspecting buildings and conducting training.

“The training provided by the ILO was of high quality. It equipped us with the technical skills to see the challenges in industrial situations, which have multiple hazards different to those typically found in households. The topics we found particularly useful were labour rights, industrial building design, separation and segregation systems and what hazardous materials are found in ready-made garment factories,” says Arman.

"Before the training, we did not know about different industrial building structures and the strengths and weaknesses of each design. We did not know how to do occupancy calculations, which are critical because there are so many more people on factory floors. We are learning a lot, which is good because factories are changing a lot. They are installing new things, like fire doors and early detection systems. Most owners are positive, they want their factories to be safe, and we are able to make them understand why safety also makes business sense.

“Since receiving the training, we have been taking our skills to fire stations in all seven divisions of Bangladesh,” Arman adds. “In the last two years I have inspected more than 600 garment factories. We created our own training module and the 16 of us have trained more than 100 additional inspectors, bringing the total number of trained fire inspectors to 140. This means that over half of our inspection workforce is now professionally trained in inspecting industrial establishments. We take a weekly exam to make sure we do not forget what we have learnt.”

Initiatives from the government of Bangladesh, the industry, trade unions and development organisations are making a real difference, says Maurice Brooks, coordinator of the ILO Fire and Building Safety project.

“The increased focus on fire awareness and prevention, coupled with the improved capacity of the fire service, has already reduced the number of fires and the loss of lives and property,” explains Brooks. “This is good not just for the garment industry, but other sectors too, as well as society as a whole.”

The training also covered the inherent safety risks in factories and how to work with factory management to minimise them.

“If I could give all factory owners one piece of advice it would be this – you can reduce fire danger by over 90% just through five simple measures: never block exits, take a dedicated approach to fire drills, have proper storage systems, use good quality electrical equipment and undertake periodic maintenance,” Arman concludes.

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