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HUFF POST POLITICS

## New York Times Deserves a Pulitzer Prize for Reporting on Bangladesh Sweatshops

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In the wake of several recent deadly factory disasters that killed more than 1,200 workers, the phrase "Made in Bangladesh" is now rightly associated with dangerous, unsafe workplaces, miserable below-poverty wages, and the absence of basic workers rights. Much of the credit for raising public awareness of these inhumane conditions - and of holding global apparel companies like Wal-mart, Disney, Tommy Hilfiger, Calvin Klein, Sears, and H&M accountable for their supply practices - goes to the *New York Times*, which has done a remarkable, steady job of reporting from both the front lines and the corporate suites where decisions about what American consumers buy can come at the price of human lives in far-off Bangladesh.

If journalism's role is to not only report the facts but also to expose wrongdoing - and thus shape public opinion, business practices, and public policy - then the *Times* deserves kudos, and a Pulitzer Prize, for its excellence and persistence in documenting and explaining the emergence of Bangladesh's new sweatshop economy as a major source of the clothing that American and European consumers buy every day. For the past year, reporters Jim Yardley (the *Times*' South Asia bureau chief, based in New Delhi), Julfikar Ali Manik (the chief reporter for the *Daily Star*, Bangladesh's largest circulating English daily newspaper, who has freelanced for the *Times* since 2005) and Steve Greenhouse (the paper's labor reporter, based in New York) have done extraordinary enterprise reporting, while the *Times* has supplemented their reports with several editorials and guest op-ed columns, raising ethical and economic questions about the complicity of well-known American clothing brands in knowingly putting the lives of Bangladeshi workers at risk. The totality of their Bangladesh reporting could serve as a syllabus for a course on the global economy.

More than [95 percent of the clothing](#) as well as most toys sold in the United States are made overseas, primarily in Asian factories, often in sweatshop conditions. In Bangladesh and other low-wage countries, companies like Wal-Mart, Disney, Carrefour, Benneton, and Marks & Spencer do not own their own factories. Instead, they hire contractors that in turn give the orders to factories to produce clothing made to their specifications. Many of the contractors are large companies, owned by Koreans, Hong Kong, Taiwanese, mainland Chinese and other entrepreneurs. The global clothing brands demand that these overseas contractors produce goods at minimal cost, often resulting in dangerous working conditions, below-poverty wages, and few workers' rights.

The *Times*' team introduced readers to the human and economic realities of Bangladesh's garment industry. Bangladesh is now second only to China in global apparel exports. As Yardley wrote, Bangladesh's appeal to global companies is simple: "[cheap labor](#)." He observed that garments account for "[80 percent of Bangladesh's manufacturing exports and more than three million jobs](#)," 80 percent of them held by women. Eager to attract garment orders from abroad, the Bangladesh government has been reluctant to impose standards for factory safety, allow workers to unionize, or adopt wage regulations that might upset global corporations. For example, Bangladesh's minimum wage -- \$37 a month - is the lowest in the world.

Under these conditions, it was probably inevitable that some of Bangladesh's 5,000 garment factories would face catastrophe. But it was hardly inevitable that once they occurred, in this part of the world remote to Western consumers, they would be subjected to ongoing journalistic scrutiny.

Yardley reported on escalating protests by workers who'd "seen their meager earnings eroded by double-digit inflation" and frequently clashed with police. Factory owners also own newspapers and TV stations and are major political donors. Yardley reported. Government military, police, and intelligence agencies closely monitor and harass labor organizers, while the government offers tax breaks and other benefits to attract foreign investment.

Between 2006 and November 2012, some 500 Bangladeshi workers not only died in factory fires, but countless workers also suffered a litany of abuses at the hands of their employers, according to the Clean Clothes Campaign, a human rights group based in Amsterdam. With sources among labor groups, human rights observers, and dissenting government officials, the *Times* reporters uncovered the growing worker anger over workplace dangers and abuses, including sexual harassment and getting paid less than the nation's minimum wage, and the growing concern among major clothing brands about the country's volatile labor strife. The country's garment industry was a ticking time bomb.

It exploded last November 24 at the Tazreen Fashions factory in the Ashulia industrial district on the outskirts of Dhaka, the Bangladesh capital, that produced clothing for major American and European labels. At least 112 people were killed in a fire in the nine-story building. Although the factory employed 1,500 workers, only 600 workers were inside, working an overtime shift, when the fire erupted. In a scene reminiscent of the tragic 1911 [Triangle Shirtwaist factory fire](#) in New York City that galvanized the public and led to a wave of workplace safety laws, most of the fatalities occurred because there weren't enough exits.

Then five months later, on April 24, an even bigger tragedy occurred when Rana Plaza, a building housing five garment factories in Savar, a squalid industrial suburb of Dhaka, collapsed. Police officials initially put the death toll at 134 but within a few weeks, after family members and rescue workers had removed the rubble, the official death count reached 1,127.

Since the Tazreen fire, the *Times* team - Yardley, Manik, and Greenhouse, aided occasionally by other reporters - have written 30 stories about the human toll, the apparel companies' response, and the political finger-pointing about who was responsible for the tragedy. The paper has also published three editorials and seven op-ed columns on the subject.

When a government report blamed the Tazreen factory owner for negligence, Manik and Yardley dug deeper, pointing out a consistent pattern of low wages, labor abuses, factory fires, and negligent government oversight. Their accounts moved between first-person stories of terrified workers trapped as fire engulfed the building, to the role of brands and retailers who shape a global production system in which repeated tragedies are inevitable. These stories set a standard for journalistic excellence, putting a human face on the operation of global supply chains.

The *Times* exposed [Wal-Mart's role in blocking efforts](#) to have retailers pay their contract factories enough to cover the cost of badly needed electrical and fire safety improvements. Wal-Mart, they noted, sold clothes from [six companies that were using the Tazreen factory for production](#), yet Wal-Mart officials refused to take responsibility. The reporters have consistently quoted Wal-Mart executives, including its CEO [Michael Duke](#), claiming its commitment to stronger safety standards, then quoting academic experts, and labor and human rights advocates in Bangladesh and the United States, pointing to Wal-Mart's history of broken promises and practice of blaming local government officials and its subcontractors for workplace problems. Wal-Mart is "squeezing the manufacturers" by fueling competition to produce clothing at the cheapest price," [Farooq Sobhan](#), a former Bangladeshi diplomat involved in trade negotiations between the U.S. and Bangladesh, told Yardley and Greenhouse in a December 28 story, "and the manufacturers are happy to get away with the minimum compliance that they can."

The *Times* stories also laid bare the fiction that self-policing among the clothing brands and retailers could solve these problems, pointing out that the Tazreen factory's previous audit found only ["medium-risk violations."](#) In one article, Yardley told the story of [Aminul Islam](#), a labor organizer whose phone was tapped and who was harassed and even beaten by security forces who accused him of hurting Bangladesh's export industries. Islam was eventually abducted, tortured, and killed, at a time when he was mediating a labor dispute involving a factory that made shirts for Tommy Hilfiger, American Eagle and other major brands. Even though Islam's murder had attracted global attention, a half a year later, Yardley reported, no arrests had been made in the case.

Until eclipsed by the Rana Plaza building collapse, the Tazreen fire had been the largest factory disaster in a country plagued by workplace deaths and injuries. The Rana Plaza collapse - one of the largest factory disasters in history - received nearly daily coverage by the *Times*. These articles combined powerful, poignant on-the-scenes reports with detailed analysis of the inner workings of a global industry. Yardley, Manik, and Greenhouse combined forces to show how brands and retailers shaped a production system that contributed to conditions like those found in Bangladesh.

The *Times'* reporters also put a human face on the death count as it grew day by day. One powerful example was Yardley's story about [Shaheena](#), a 32-year-old woman discovered four days after the collapse. Her horrific situation - trapped in a crevice barely two feet high, begging to see her young son - offered a moment of hope. Shaheena, Yardley explained, was typical of the "more than 2.5 million women working in the garment industry in Bangladesh whose lives usually attract scant notice." With the world's attention focused on efforts to save her, Yardley's sensitive coverage drew readers into a compelling account of the millions of women who, like Shaheena, "are the workhorses of the national economy."

Sadly, this sole story of hope ended in tragedy, emblematic of the Rana Plaza collapse itself: as workers frantically sought to cut a rescue passage, a spark from an electric grinder ignited rolls of fabric, and Shaheena perished in the fire, reportedly from smoke inhalation. Yardley's story concluded by quoting Shaheena's sister, who was tightly hugging Shaheena's child: "I had three children. Now I have four. He will be with me the rest of my life."

As the *Times'* stories unfolded, readers were treated to contrasting accounts on the part of retailers and labor advocacy groups. Wal-Mart, for example, denied all responsibility, blaming a Canadian contractor that it said placed an unauthorized order when evidence of Wal-Mart brands was found in the Rana Plaza factory rubble. Wal-Mart claimed it conducted its own ["in-depth safety inspections"](#) in its Bangladesh factories, and praised the government for closing 18 factories with safety violations. [Scott Nova](#), head of the U.S.-based Worker Rights Consortium, provided an alternative explanation in an article by Manik and Yardley, observing that "the front-line responsibility is the government's, but the real power lies with Western brands and retailers, beginning with the biggest players. The price pressure these buyers put on factories undermines any prospect that factories will undertake the costly repairs and renovations that are necessary to make these buildings safe."

When Disney, whose name appears on more apparel and other products than any other company, announced it was pulling all of its production from Bangladesh, [Greenhouse pointed out](#) that this was relatively costless for Disney, since less than one percent of its factories would be affected. Greenhouse also quoted David Schilling, Program Director for Human Rights at the Interfaith Center on Corporate Responsibility, urging a "stay and improve" rather than "cut and run" approach for Western companies.

The most significant - and perhaps most hopeful - result of the Rana Plaza tragedy is that for the first time ever, some of the world's largest brands and retailers have agreed, at least in principle, to a legally binding obligation to pay for fire and safety improvements in Bangladesh. One *Times* editorial cited a Worker Rights Consortium cost estimate of \$3 billion over five years, to bring Bangladesh's 5000 garment factories up to Western safety standards. This is equal to 3.3 percent of the total value of exports over the same period - ["a tiny price to pay for safer factories,"](#) according to the *Times*. An investment of that magnitude,

however, would have a negligible impact on consumer prices. If passed on to consumers, it would increase prices by only about 10 cents per garment.

Such an agreement, assuming the details can be worked out and ratified over the next month and a half, would be precedent setting. As the *Times* reporting has made clear, in global production systems, the brands and retailers currently bear no enforceable legal responsibility for the factories that make their labels, since those factories are independently-owned contract shops.

For global clothing companies, which depend on consumer loyalty and brand recognition, reputation is everything. Surveys find that a growing number of consumers care about the workplace conditions and environmental impact of the factories that produce the clothing they buy. As a result, the Rana Plaza collapse has been a public relations disaster for the firms that produce in Bangladesh. The *Times* deserves credit for shining the media spotlight on these firms and helping bring them to the negotiating table, and eventually sign the Accord on Fire and Building Safety. To date the signatories include H&M (Bangladesh's largest clothing buyer), Inditex (the world's largest fashion retailer, with brands such as Zara and Massimo Dutti), Carrefour (the world's second largest retailer), Benetton, Marks & Spencer, and El Corte Inglés. All of these companies are based in Europe. The only U.S. companies to sign so far are Abercrombie and Fitch and PVH, owner of Calvin Klein and Tommy Hilfiger.

In a May 14 piece, "[As Firms Line Up on Factories, Wal-Mart Plans Solo Effort.](#)" Greenhouse reported on Wal-Mart's refusal to sign the accord. Instead, the world's largest private employer pledged to "conduct in-depth safety inspections at 100 percent" of the 279 Bangladesh factories it uses and to post results on its website. Greenhouse quoted Rajan Kamalanathan, Wal-Mart's vice president of ethical sourcing, explaining that the company "is committed to a global supply chain that first and foremost provides safe conditions for workers." But Greenhouse also documented Wal-Mart's history of broken promises and quoted the WRC's Scott Nova observing that Wal-Mart's plan "is a unilateral initiative that's nonbinding and unenforceable, and it's unclear how much transparency there will be."

In an April 25 editorial, "[Another Preventable Tragedy in Bangladesh.](#)" the *Times* pointed out that "there are just 11 collective bargaining agreements in the entire country of 150 million people and that "unions can make a big difference in improving working conditions." In the Rana Plaza disaster, the *Times* editorialized, "strong unions could have prevented the loss of many lives by supporting workers who had noticed cracks in the structure but were forced back to work when factory owners threatened to dick their pay and fire them."

Other daily papers, as well as weeklies like *BusinessWeek*, have episodically covered the Bangladesh tragedies, but none with the consistency and depth of the *Times*, which has devoted considerable resources, in terms of reportorial time and space in the paper and on its website (including many photos), to the subject.

"Greenhouse and Yardley (along with Pakistan reporter Declan Walsh) have done more than any other journalists to expose the bankruptcy of industry inspection programs and the central role of Western brands and retailers in producing and perpetuating the deadly conditions in garment factories in South Asia," said a veteran human rights activist who deals regularly with the major apparel companies and wished to remain anonymous. "The *Times'* reporting on the worker safety crisis in Bangladesh has been played a major role in shaping public understanding and, in so doing, has helped generate substantial pressure on brands and retailers to sign the binding fire and building safety accord."

"The *Times'* coverage of the Rana Plaza disaster has focused attention in exactly the right place: the responsibility of the global brands," said Jeff Hermanson, coordinator of the International Union League for Brand Responsibility who recently worked with Indonesia workers in their successful negotiations with the German sportswear giant Adidas. "The brands have designed and constructed a system of production that maximizes their profits by depressing wages and working conditions to the lowest possible level. Exposing this system and the greed of the billionaires that devised it is an achievement of immeasurable social value."

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