Can the Garment Industry Reform Itself?

In the Aftermath of the Disaster at Rana Plaza, A Special Report From Bangladesh

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Rana Plaza complex. Savar, Bangladesh. April 24, 2013. (ALL BLACK-AND-WHITE PHOTOGRAPHS BY ATISH SAHA.)
A board at Adhar Chandra High School tallies the dead, rescued, dead recovered by relatives, and bodies not yet identified.
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ON THE MORNING OF THURSDAY, APRIL 24, 2013, TRAFFIC ON THE DHAKA–ARICHA HIGHWAY WAS LIGHTER THAN USUAL. ON MOST DAYS, THE INDUSTRIAL ARTERY THAT CONNECTS THE BANGLADESHI CAPITAL OF DHAKA TO SUBURBS IN THE NORTHWEST IS CHOKED WITH SUZUKI HATCHBACKS, SCOOTERS, AND BANGED-UP BUSES THAT HONK AND BELCH INCESSANTLY AS THEY CARRY COMMUTERS TO CONSTRUCTION SITES AND FACTORIES IN TOWNS LIKE DHAMRAI, GAKULNAGOR, AND SARAR, A SUBDISTRICT OF THE CAPITAL DOMINATED BY GARMENT MAKERS. BUT ON THAT MORNING, THEY WERE IN THE THIRD DAY OF ANOTHER NATIONWIDE HARTAL, OR STRIKE, CALLED BY OPPONENTS OF THE RULING AWAMI LEAGUE PARTY, THE LATEST IN A NEVER-ENDING CYCLE OF POLITICAL BRINKMANKSHIP THAT HAD PARALYZED THE COUNTRY ON AND OFF FOR YEARS. LIKE POWER OUTAGES AND FLASH FLOODS, STRIKES ARE A FACT OF LIFE IN BANGLADESH. IN SARAR AND OTHER MANUFACTURING HUBS, THE PROTOCOL AMONG WORKING-CLASS PEOPLE GENERALLY IS TO HEED THEM OR BE PREPARED FOR TROUBLE.

RANA PLAZA, A HULKING COMMERCIAL COMPLEX THAT FRONTS THE HIGHWAY, WAS AN EXCEPTION THAT DAY. THE BUILDING’S OWNER, SOHEL RANA, INSISTED THAT EMPLOYEES REPORT FOR WORK AS USUAL, IN DEFANCE OF THE OPPOSITION, WITH PLANS TO MOBILIZE THEM FOR A POSSIBLE STREET PROTEST. THIS WAS NOT AN EMPTY GESTURE: ON ANY GIVEN DAY, THE PLAZA’S EIGHT STORIES HELD AS MANY AS FIVE THOUSAND PEOPLE, MOST OF WHOM WERE EMPLOYED BY GARMENT-MAKING COMPANIES LINKED TO WELL-KNOWN WESTERN BRANDS.

At his pastry shop across the street from the plaza, Saiful Islam was reading about the strike in the morning paper when he heard a shriek of breaking glass cut the air. He looked up to see shards of blue glass from the building that ad-
joined the plaza raining onto the far sidewalk, cutting several people waiting at the bus stand below. For a moment Islam assumed it was sabotage, a brick through a window, until the ground started to quake. Rana Plaza seemed to be imploding.

As the quake intensified, more panels blasted out onto the street, and several workers jumped to their deaths. Then the upper floors fell in quick succession, one after another, causing the bottom half of the building to pancake under their weight. In a matter of seconds, the eight-story building was reduced to a heap of slabs and iron.

As the cloud of concrete dust began to settle on the rubble, Islam and others bolted across the street to look for survivors. Police and the fire brigade were called to the scene, but word of the collapse spread even faster through nearby bastis—dense neighborhoods of concrete and tin barracks where poor garment-making families live. By the time fire-brigade officers showed up ten minutes later, an agitated crowd of hundreds had already gathered and was quickly swelling into a crowd of thousands, hindering authorities’ ability to access the site. “It was a human sea,” says Islam.

Lutfer Rahman, whose wife, Rina, worked at Rana Plaza, was sipping tea in their damp one-room home when a neighbor yelled through his doorway: The plaza was gone. Lutfer and Rina had married in their hard-bitten farming village and, like legions of people, moved to Dhaka for better prospects. They soon had two daughters, Arifa and Latifa, and Lutfer had supported the family by pulling a rickshaw until asthma forced him to quit. So Rina had become the breadwinner, a factory helper passing materials to sewing operators for 5,000 taka ($62) a month. Now, for the first time since he’d given up his rickshaw, Lutfer ran: about half a mile through the winding labyrinth of dirt lanes and workshops, past blacksmiths and brick kilns, trailed by his daughters. They reached the site just as two bodies were pulled from the wreckage, neither of them Rina’s. Lutfer, overwhelmed by the rising din of sirens and shouting, bent over to catch his breath.

At the edge of the plaza, Islam saw a passage that led to a public prayer room and could hear voices calling from within, but he did not dare go inside; he was too shaken by the destruction he’d just witnessed and figured he would be of better use by simply opening up his shop as a place rescuers could use. Within minutes a sixth-floor worker with a broken back was brought in. Islam gave her a drink and washed her head wounds until an ambulance was ready. Outside, victims with minor injuries were sliding down repurposed bolts of fabric to safer ground while packs of rescuers, including Islam’s younger brother, climbed the stairs of the building next door, hammering through walls to access crawl spaces where survivors might be trapped.

Deep inside the rubble, entombed in pitch black, Paki Begum awoke to a stabbing pain that seemed to swallow her whole. She could hear others nearby. When her eyes adjusted to the darkness, she saw the massive concrete beam that pinned her down and a man’s head crushed between the beam and her thigh. She looked to her right and saw the clothing of her sewing assistant, only to find his stomach organs spilling out. Another man lay to her left, his hand bent underneath her back. She wrenched the hand out to see if he was still alive but felt no life.

Farther off, she could just make out the panicked voices of rescuers and tried to call to them, but her voice was muted by the concrete that enclosed her. Debris fell on her face. The jagged slab that hung above her, angled like a reaper’s blade, seemed poised to slide downward. She started screaming, choking with each breath. The heat was stifling. In between calls for help, she would pass out. At one point, she pulled the leg of a dead body under her head for support. In the minutes she used to catch her breath, she prayed to Allah.

The previous afternoon, when she and hundreds of fellow workers returned to Rana Plaza from their lunch break, they were prevented from entering the building. Cracks two inches deep had formed in the walls spanning several floors, prompting the bosses of the five gar-
mment factories housed inside to send employees home for the day. The break was sudden and welcome. Since starting work at Ether Tex Ltd. eight months before, Paki had been pulling twelve- to fourteen-hour shifts six days a week at her sewing machine for 8,500 taka ($110) a month, with the rare day off. After she and other workers were sent home that day, a local engineer was called in to inspect the cracks and had declared the building “vulnerable,” recommending that it be sealed off and examined by experts from Bangladesh’s leading technical university. Word of the cracked columns reached a local TV station, which sent a crew to the site. A cameraman slipped inside and filmed for just a few minutes before being driven off by Rana’s men. A story about the cracks was broadcast later that evening.

The next day, Rana Plaza was open for business. On returning to work, Paki was nervous; she’d heard about the cracks, as had almost everyone else in the bastis, and was unsure about what to do. Some workers didn’t bother to show up, while scores of others gathered in front of the building but refused to go inside. Next door, the bank that normally would have been open for business was locked and closed. At Rana’s behest, factory managers ordered workers inside.

Up on the fifth story, amid Ether Tex’s sprawling rows of electric sewing machines and fluorescent lights, the mood was charged with anxious chatter over how bad the cracks really were. Paki and her coworkers approached a supervisor to voice their worries but were reminded of a fast-approaching shipment deadline for an important Western client: If they protested any further, he told them, they would lose a month’s wages.

At 8:45 a.m. the power abruptly cut off, a common occurrence in greater Dhaka; with a power-starved population of more than 15 million, disruptions are known to happen up to fifty times in a single day. Within seconds, four diesel generators, stationed at the rear of the building near the main staircase, automatically started up, and the factory lights flickered on again. The generators weighed several metric tons each, and their relentless vibrations pulsed through the building, now filled with more than three thousand workers spread from end to end and across the weak points at its core.

Paki was attaching a zipper to a pair of denim jeans when the floor and pillars began to shake all around her. A deafening clap echoed across the floor that sent throngs of workers, most of them women, scrambling for the stairwells. At less than five feet tall and weighing no more than eighty pounds, Paki was knocked down as soon as she made her move. The floor below her heaved, then fell away as she plunged headlong into a cascade of calving concrete and machinery, where everything went black.

The collapse is thought to have started with a column near the southwest corner of the seventh floor, triggering a chain reaction that took less than a minute from start to finish. Before army soldiers arrived to lead the rescue, locals with little more than plastic sandals and bare hands emerged as first responders.

One of them, Faisal Muhid, showed up with simple tools—a flashlight, a hammer, and pliers. It was the first time the twenty-nine-year-old high-school teacher had seen a dead body, and the mound of concrete slabs and twisted rebar was far more intimidating than he had thought while watching the live broadcast that had stirred him to action. He scoped the front of the building and saw a passage that appeared to offer a way inside, but it was shifting under the weight of other rescuers. Walking, then scrambling on all fours, Muhid traversed to the backside of the building, where he found a dark cleft. No authorities were around, so he ducked inside. Muhid turned on his flashlight and spotted two bodies, a man and a woman with their arms entangled. The sight froze him in place, and for a moment he wondered if they were related. Walking under a beam, he could see the outline of several more bodies whose limbs dangled from between two collapsed slabs. One of them, a man caked in blood-soaked debris, seemed to stir. Muhid reached for the man’s
Rana Plaza, April 24, 2013
Illustrations by Jeana Ripple and Barbara Porada
hair and the scalp slid away. As jarring as this was, Muhid didn’t retreat. Over the next three days, he would only go deeper into the wreckage, coming to know and care for the dead in a way he never could have predicted.

Another rescuer, a wiry bricklayer named Rafiqul Islam, was working at a nearby construction site when the plaza went down. By noon he’d brought six people out on his back, and for the better part of the next few weeks he would pull the living and the dead out by any means—digging them out at first, then cutting them out. When there were no more people left to save, he set about unearthing what remains he could find.

At first, everybody was taken to the same place, hustled into ambulances and requisitioned flatbed trucks that sped off to the Enam Medical College & Hospital, less than a mile away. For four days, a torrent of dead and wounded kept rolling into the hospital’s parking lot. Dozens of first-year medical students, called in to support the staff, moved survivors relay-style, off-loading them onto gurneys and wheelchairs and wheeling them as fast as they could up to the sixth- and seventh-floor wards, where sheets blanketed the floor to accommodate the crush of patients. Within a day, the 750-bed facility was slammed to capacity.

Among those trying to make order out of the chaos was Taslima Akhter. A photographer by profession and activist by impulse, she’d spent years documenting the lives of garment workers, many of whom she’d befriended. Her camera was slung around her shoulder when she turned up at Rana Plaza, but she was too preoccupied with the rescue to snap a single image. Along with members from her People’s Solidarity Movement, the self-described Communist walked to Enam to help with the blood drive and counsel relatives of Rana Plaza workers who were flooding the hospital lobby, desperate for answers. She began compiling a list of the missing in her notebook. At dusk, Akhter returned to the factory site with friends who had set up a tent to collect food and supplies for families and rescuers. Social media was fast emerging as a parallel channel for mustering relief, and Akhter had more than a thousand followers with whom she kept in touch via status updates and calls for provisions.

Akhter preferred to record the daily lives of women garment workers—at home brushing their hair, striding to the factories in the morning, protesting for better wages, fists in the air, or back at home putting their children to sleep. In Bangladesh’s male-dominated culture, she admired how women found a new identity through industry, earning a living in spite of the harsh labor conditions that kept them perpetually at risk. Her photographs, taken
in cramped slum dwellings and tenements, captured a quiet dignity invisible to most outsiders. Yet a responsibility to record the more familiar horrors gnawed at her conscience. Five months before, at the Tazreen Fashions factory in Dhaka, where a fire killed some 117 workers, she had spent long hours photographing bodies charred beyond recognition; Rana Plaza demanded even more attention. Around 2 a.m. on Friday, two friends insisted she follow them to see bodies they’d discovered at the rear. Akhter relented.

The ground beneath her feet trembled as local rescuers led the group to the back of the site, still absent any authorities. She was hesitant, but, seeing her camera, the locals insisted she get a closer look. Climbing up into a narrow passage, Akhter peered inside. Flashlights illuminated a man and woman locked in an embrace, their faces powdered with dust. Akhter paused for a minute, maybe two. Then she raised her camera. It was the last picture she took that night. Consumed by the rescue
effort, it wasn’t until a couple of days later that she uploaded the images to her Facebook page, at which point they quickly went viral.

By Friday morning, the death toll had risen to 142, making the Rana Plaza collapse already one of the worst manufacturing disasters on record. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina declared April 25 a national day of mourning, ordering the arrest of Sohel Rana and the owners of the five garment factories that leased the building. Within days, two owners and a pair of government engineers were taken into custody, while Rana’s father and wife were arrested and questioned on his whereabouts. Rana himself was nowhere to be found.

As army soldiers, firefighters, police, and volunteers sorted through the wreckage, outrage multiplied throughout the city and beyond. A 1,500-strong mob in central Dhaka threw rocks at the headquarters of the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA), the country’s powerful trade body; another mob attacked a building where garment factories remained open despite Hasina’s proclamation. Elsewhere in Savar and in the garment-making industrial zones of Gazipur, Ashulia, and Narayanganj, at least two factories were torched while scores of workers smashed vehicles and clashed with police, demanding the death penalty for Rana.

Though government agencies and the police knew about the cracks the day before the plaza collapsed and could have shut the building down, Rana was roundly blamed for convincing factory managers that the building was safe. Speaking to the media, an official with Dhaka’s development authority ticked off a list of building-code violations, including substandard materials and two illegally constructed floors, but failed to mention that Bangladesh’s Fire Service & Civil Defense had signed off on Rana Plaza’s building and safety compliance multiple times—giving it an “A” rating as recently as April 4, according to a BGMEA official.

As in previous factory disasters, including the fire at Tazreen Fashions, activists scouring the rubble found connections to well-known brands: At Rana Plaza they found tags for Italy’s Benetton and Spain’s Mango, Canada’s Joe Fresh and Ireland’s Primark. And from the US, Walmart. Some of those companies, such as Primark and Loblaw Companies Limited (which owns Joe Fresh), quickly acknowledged their reliance on the fallen factories and offered condolences, with a pledge to help families and improve working conditions. Others, such as Benetton and Walmart, issued flat denials, saying that no orders were being filled at the time of the collapse, or that orders had been subcontracted without their authorization. (Benetton has since entered negotiations for compensation, and Walmart has begun studies to analyze its impact in Bangladesh.)

Western diplomats, for their part, concluded that Bangladeshi authorities were ill prepared for an urban-rescue operation of this magnitude. Hours after the collapse, a senior UN official in Dhaka reminded the director general of the fire brigade that the government was part of a network of disaster-prone countries eligible for international search-and-rescue assistance. The UK followed up with an offer to dispatch an urban-rescue team equipped with potentially life-saving micro cameras and scanners that could detect body heat under the rubble. The offer went ignored. Internal documents obtained by London’s Daily Telegraph later revealed that Bangladesh rejected outside help, fearing damage to national pride. The documents reportedly noted “face-saving” measures suggested by foreign diplomats to help avoid offending Bangladeshi officials.

More than a day had passed, fading in and out of consciousness, before Paki Begum heard a man’s voice booming down from above: a passage. She called back with what she could muster. A bottle of water tumbled down the shaft and rolled within reach. Paki shared it with two others nearby, a middle-aged woman and a girl she had assumed were dead but who were instead knocked out by the fall. The water
was a cool respite from sucking the sweat from
their clothing.

A pair of doctors reached them several hours
later. A beam was lifted off the older woman’s
leg, and the girl’s arm was freed from where
it had been trapped. But Paki was stuck; they
could scarcely move the beam that pinned
her down, and she could feel the bones in her
thighs grinding under their added weight as
they tried. “It’s too much,” she pleaded with
them. “I can’t stand it anymore.” Within min-
utes, a third man shimmied down the shaft,
hacksaw in hand.

Paki relented. “Please cut off my legs, but
don’t delay anymore,” she said. “You are pulling
out dead bodies, but I am still alive. Rescue me.
I beg you, brothers.”

One of the doctors produced a syringe of
anesthetic before pausing to ask if she had any
legal guardians. Paki named her husband, Jah-
angir, but could not remember his cell-phone
number. “If your legs are cut off, you will get
crippled,” the doctor warned. “Your husband
and family will no longer want you.”

“I don’t care!” Paki shot back at him. “I have
two children—I want to see them again.”

The doctor, a large man, took the hacksaw
and set to work, but he couldn’t get enough
leverage in the cramped space to drive through
the bone. The newcomer, Hira, took his place,
bearing down as Paki screamed, until finally
she passed out. Some time later, the wail of an
ambulance stirred her awake.

As survivors were rushed from the rubble
to Enam Hospital, the dead were carried off to
a different station, shuttled on flatbed trucks
past the hospital to Adhar Chandra High
School. The sprawling cricket grounds in front
of the school were thronged with workers’ rela-
tives, some of them milling around in nervous

Muhid called down to them, holding up his
fingers and placing them on his heart to signify
the people still alive inside.

groups, some camped out on tarps with docu-
ments and pictures. Food had been brought
in: rice, biscuits, bananas, juice, and other do-
nated goods (which later included body bags
and air fresheners to mask the rank odor of
the corpses). Whenever a vehicle arrived with
more bodies, scrums of people rushed forward,
yanking at limbs. Unclaimed bodies were lined
up cheek by jowl under the white colonnade
that rings the school, left to fester in the heat.

City officials later admitted that a lack of
oversight and a gross underestimation of the
scale of the disaster allowed people to make
off with the wrong bodies in the days that fol-
lowed. Some of those seizures may have been
unintentional; many of the victims’ features
were damaged beyond recognition, and in their
haste to bury bodies in accord with Islamic cus-
tom, overwrought families made rushed deci-
sions. The lure of cash may have also played a
part, since authorities were doling out 20,000-
taka payments to help cover burial costs. In at
least ten instances, bodies wrongfully taken
had to be exhumed from distant villages and
returned to family members.

Hunched over in a makeshift passage,
Faisal Muhid gazed into a mess of hang-
ing limbs that brought to mind a roadside meat
stand. Behind him, a voice called out: “Brother,
please save me. I need my mother.” He turned
around to find a man pinned under a beam,
barely breathing, his legs swollen and purple.
The man asked for painkillers, but all Muhid
had to offer was water. A woman called to him
from the far side of the beam. “Brother, please
save us,” she cried out. “For god’s sake. Don’t
go without me. I have two children.” She added
that there were three others trapped with her.
Muhid could feel the building shift. He climbed back out from the passage and onto the top floor, where he spotted a group of official personnel below. He called down to them, holding up his fingers and placing them on his heart to signify the people still alive inside. “Panch jon,” he shouted—five people. They turned away. Incensed by their apathy, Muhid still took care as he climbed down so as not to unsettle the broken concrete, and walked over to the command tent and made his case with a presiding officer, who was disinterested. “That part of the building is collapsing,” he said flatly. “It’s time to get out.”

Soon Muhid was back in the hole, calling into the darkness. No one responded. Shaken, he walked home to rest and vowed never to return to the site. But sleeping was impossible; Muhid’s interlude in the plaza’s horrific underworld had struck some inner chord that he couldn’t fully understand—a strange kind of comfort in the presence of the most desperate, the dying and the dead. “It was scary,” he said, “but it was like an addiction. I spoke with them and said I felt their pain. My feeling was that their spirits were coming over me.”

Rafiqul Islam, the bricklayer, had likewise found a sense of purpose that he’d never known before. At one point he became trapped and spent seven stifling hours in the black, gasping for air. Four other men were with him; one who was too large to be extracted died in the hole. The incident made Rafiqul second-guess his choice to volunteer—and his friends encouraged him to quit—but a dogged compulsion to extract survivors sent him back into the rubble the next day, this time with a hacksaw. “I was only thinking that I have a great responsibility to pull out bodies, even if it kills me,” he says. “I had no choice.”

He knew that time was running out. The combined effects of dehydration, rapid blood loss, and low oxygen meant that most victims who’d survived the collapse would not live beyond the seventy-two-hour mark. Fewer people were being pulled out alive, and an animal intensity had overcome the living: The first man Rafiqul attempted to extricate by hacksaw tried to bite him. His left arm and leg were pinned down, so Rafiqul bound the man’s free arm and covered his mouth with a piece of cloth before using his blade without anesthetic. It was the first of eight people he would cut out by hand.

At Enam Hospital, doctors worked around the clock to mend the hack jobs of volunteer rescuers. The number of wounded tested the endurance and expertise of the staff, but they found a rhythm. “The place was oversaturated,” says Dr. Khalilur Rahman, the head of orthopedic surgery who led triage, “but we never stopped working together.” Medical students maintained reasonable order in the jam-packed wards as relatives tried to push through; supplies from other hospitals multiplied over the days. But the support barely kept pace with the mounting pile of corpses in a white-tiled basement washing room: dead Rana Plaza garment workers mistakenly delivered to the hospital for treatment.

Though her bleeding had slowed to a drip, Paki was in severe shock when nurses hauled her onto Rahman’s operating table. To create a prosthetic-ready stump, he trimmed back the femur bones protruding from her thighs to allow muscle and tissue to heal over them like a cushion. By now her right thigh was infected, necessitating a second operation and large amounts of blood transfusion. Luckily, the hospital’s blood bank was flush (by Saturday, deliveries from other hospitals had to be sent back). When she awoke, several days after the collapse, her husband, Jahangir, was standing at her bedside. He flashed his betel-stained teeth and held her hand firmly with both of his. “Everything will be fine,” he said. She thought about her children, the work she could no longer perform. She stared at where the sheet fell flat just past her thighs. But she was relieved to be alive.

Four days into the Rana Plaza rescue, Abul Khair was burnishing his reputation as a national hero. A veteran rescue firefighter with copper skin, close-cropped, silver hair, and a
raspy voice from smoking two packs a day, he'd made a living throwing himself into one disaster after another—diving into fierce currents to retrieve the victims of overloaded ferry boats that frequently sink in the country's 230-odd waterways; staying underwater for six hours at a stretch to locate the body of a single missing boy; scaling multi-story factories to free hundreds of workers trapped in a blaze—all for several dollars an hour, no health insurance or overtime pay. At the disaster site, Khair was in his element: thirty-seven, then twenty-two, and another eleven people saved in succession. But the heat soon began to sap his strength, claiming more victims than he and rescuers could reach in time. By Sunday afternoon, only five people had been saved. The deeper Khair and his team descended, the more dead bodies they discovered.

Then, late on Sunday afternoon, Khair heard a woman's voice in the depths: “Brother, save me, help.” He worked his way closer, keeping a conversation going—her name was Shahina, she told him. Then supervisors ordered him to the surface: A section of roof appeared ready to fall at any moment, and the entire rescue was temporarily called off. Khair insisted on going deeper, and ordered the installation of bottle jacks and wood logs to stabilize the broken concrete. Saline water was funneled down to the woman below. Once the improvised supports were in place, he descended again, pulling himself through inches at a time. It took several hours for Khair to reach the concrete beam that separated him from Shahina. Though four oxygen lines had been run down into the pile to sustain the air-starved workers, Khair found himself gasping by the time he reached her. He cracked apart the beam with a hammer, then took a hacksaw to the rebar inside. When Khair finally managed to cut out a hole large enough to squeeze through, he could see Shahina in her torn white and green kameez, a gash on her forehead. He poked his head through and saw that her two companions were dead.

Shahina tried to squeeze through the passage but couldn't fit; her clothing snagged on the concrete. Khair insisted that she take off her clothes. “I’m your brother,” he assured her, “and your life is most important.” Shahina did so, and Khair, stretched out on his belly, pulled her by her arms. But the space was tight, and her breasts scraped the wall. “I’m poor—I don’t have a husband, but I have an eighteen-month-old son,” she said. His name was Robin. “Please don’t damage my breasts,” she begged. “I must breastfeed him.”

Exhausted from hours of effort, Khair reluctantly went up for air. He procured some bottles of shampoo and suggested that his boss send someone else down; his hands could no longer grip. A volunteer rescuer, Mohammad Kaikobad, went down the hole with a cutter machine. In all the haste, everyone failed to remind him that the oxygen being pumped into the shaft had made it highly combustible. As Kaikobad began cutting into the rebar, a spark triggered a clap-blast that shook the building. Smoke pushed the rescuers back. By the time they reached Kaikobad, dragging him out by his legs, then smothering his flaming clothes with a blanket, his body was a patchwork of third-degree burns. (Kaikobad was rushed to a military hospital in Savar, then moved to Singapore, where he succumbed to his injuries. He was later buried with state honors.)

Firefighters doused nearly two-dozen tunnels that wound from the roof to the lower floors. Though they couldn't extinguish the fire, they did bring it under control and continued to send water down the shaft as Khair descended yet again. He found Shahina's lifeless, unburned body a fair distance from where he'd left her: As the fire raged, she had pushed herself through the hole, only to asphyxiate in the smoke-filled passage, where the oxygen levels were poor enough that Khair himself blacked out. He would regain consciousness at an area hospital later that day.

By Monday morning, the odds of finding anyone alive were slim. At around noon, Brigadier General Azmal Kabir, the rescue supervisor, told reporters that the second phase of work was underway, “assuming that there is no survivor.” Army engineers began using hydraulic cranes to cut and move large slabs, to ensure
no secondary collapses. Meanwhile, relatives of
the missing set about finding their dead.

The walls of Enam Hospital were soon
plastered with posters of the missing—a
mishmash of old family photographs, ID cards,
birth certificates, and fake documents used to
secure jobs for underage workers, whatever
families could muster. The faces extended
down the street to the periphery of Adhar
Chandra High School, where crowds of rela-
tives held vigil from dawn until dusk.

The trucks from Rana Plaza were coming
less frequently now, the families more craven
each time a new one pulled up. Scuffles broke
out among people competing for a closer look,
though the combination of radical injuries and
decomposition accelerated by near 100-degree
heat made identification difficult. People walk-
ing single file under the colonnade scanned the
remains, bloated and decomposing under the
slanting sun. Now and then the pall was wors-
ened by the fitful screams of someone finding
a loved one.

Short of breath, Lutfer Rahman sat under a
tree while Arifa and Latifa searched for their
mother. Initially the girls were horror-stricken,
crying hand in hand as they went. But numb-
ness eventually set in, such that unzipping
body bags seemed almost routine. If a face was
too badly damaged, the girls looked for clues
in the small plastic bags containing personal
effects that were tucked next to the body.

This collecting of possessions was Faisal
Muhid’s doing. When he first arrived at the
high-school grounds twelve days earlier, his
anger over the Rana Plaza rescue was replaced
by astonishment at the treatment of the dead.
Though police were manning a table near the
gate, there was no effort to maintain order
among hundreds of people searching for vic-
tims’ bodies. As he stared in disbelief, an el-
derly woman grabbed his arm. “Give me some
bones, please give me some bones so I can bury
them,” she said.

The plea resonated with the right person.
Along with a genuine sympathy for garment
workers and their families, Muhid was pos-
sessed by a macabre yet unexplored fascina-
tion with death. He was a fan of Gunther von
Hagens, an infamous German anatomist and
promoter of Body Worlds, a traveling exhibition
of corpses whose flesh is preserved by plastina-
tion, a technique he invented that pushes plas-
tic directly into tissue cells. Muhid had watched
him at work on a National Geographic Channel
series, and it occurred to him that some of von
Hagens’s more basic methods could be applied
to the plaza victims. He called his brother, Saji-
ul, and gave him a shopping list: paint brushes,
tissue paper, gloves, air freshener, bleaching
powder, and alcohol.

“Have you gone mad?” his brother exclaimed
when Muhid started to clean the face of one
of the bodies. Perhaps he had, but the cir-
cumstances were dire and Muhid was already
consumed by the task. He developed a ritual
to mitigate the decay: collecting anything that
might help families with identification—keys,
cell phones, papers, teeth, nose pins, and tabij,
a kind of prayer amulet—then sealing it all in zip-
locked bags that were tucked next to the bodies.

People kept their distance, not sure what to
do. Touching women's bodies was taboo, even
more so when they were deceased. Yet Muhid
knew his examinations were critical to bringing
grieving families some closure. (He whispered
apologies to dead women as he handled them,
assuring them that they would be reunited with
their families, that they had moved on to a bet-
ter realm.) When a police officer walked over
and denounced him, he asked bluntly: Who
would take his place? The officer walked away.

As the days wore on and temperatures
soared, the rotting flesh grew harder to
manage. At one point, while Muhid tried to
straighten a head before cleaning it, a man-
dible came undone; another time, a sudden
push from onlookers sent his forearm through
the side of a face. Authorities verbally harassed
him but never lingered, nor did they provide
any supplies or monitor the crowds. Personal
items were stolen, and the zippers of the body
bags frayed from overuse, leaving some of the
corpses exposed.
Muhid preferred to work at night, when things were quiet and fewer people were around. One night, heading off to rest in a classroom, Muhid was intercepted by a volunteer who’d rushed over to alert him—dogs had arrived. Through a window, they could see a pack of five strays nipping at a body bag. Muhid ran out and cursed at the animals, but they refused to back off. He then called his friend, Iresh Zaker, a well-known actor, and relayed what was happening. “There are still seventy here and there’s no one guarding the gate, no media around,” he said, pressing Zaker to get authorities to come. Zaker made some calls, and within the hour a team of police officers arrived and beat the animals back with batons.

Muhid’s diligence paid off. On May 10, after viewing well over 500 corpses, twelve-year-old Arifa Rahman found her mother. Her body was badly damaged; Arifa may have passed her by several times. But the newly added name on the body-bag tag read: RINA RAHMAN, HUSBAND: LUTFER RAHMAN, DISTRICT: RANGPUR, taken from a stained document Muhid had removed from a pocket. The family’s search had ended. It also secured them a 200,000-taka ($2,500) check from an ad hoc relief fund administered by the prime minister. They received another 20,000 taka for burial costs.

The Rahmans loaded Rina onto a rickshaw bed and headed home. In the family compound, relatives washed the body and cloaked it in a cotton shroud. That same day, Rina was buried in a small graveyard near their house. The land is overgrown and no headstone marks her plot, but Lutfer knows the place.

A SLOW RECKONING

SOHEL RANA GREW UP THE SECOND SON OF A land broker named Abdul Khalek, who, with profits from the sale of a parcel in Savar, opened a mustard-oil factory on the site where
Rana Plaza was later built. Khalek cultivated ties with well-known film actors and politicians, a wheeler-dealer style that Rana would learn to emulate even more aggressively. He had a cold temperament well suited to the thuggery and intimidation tactics that are a mainstay of Bangladesh’s cutthroat local politics. In 1996, the Awami League party, chief rivals of the BNP, came to power, and the president of the party’s student wing tapped Rana, just a year after he’d dropped out of high school, to be his political aide. Two years later, Rana was promoted to secretary.

Rana’s profile grew after he befriended Murad Jong, an aspiring politician who became the Awami League leader of Savar in 2001, due in large part to Rana’s muscle. When the Awami League took back the government seven years later, Jong returned the favor by unilaterally naming Rana to a leadership post of the Jubo League, the party’s youth front. In parliament, Jong used his clout to manipulate police and extort protection money from business owners, with Rana as his faithful enforcer.

The rise of the country’s ready-made garment industry caused land values around industrial suburbs like Savar to skyrocket. And when a dispute between Rana’s father and his Hindu business partner erupted over the plaza site, the Rana family dispatched thugs to seize the property by force. The partner complained to local authorities, and says that Rana threatened him for doing so. The police, meanwhile, did nothing. Flexing his connections in the Savar mayor’s office, Rana secured a construction permit and began laying the groundwork for the plaza, erecting the six-story building on hastily filled-in swampland, using cheap materials. At its August 2009 opening ceremony, Jong was the guest of honor.

On the wall behind Rana’s desk, in the basement office where he poured whiskey for local cops and political players alike, hung a framed photograph of Jong kissing Rana’s forehead, the same photograph he had plastered on walls around Savar. Their relationship was crucial to Rana’s ability to prosper in both open and underground markets. While presiding over a business portfolio that included brick kilns and the sale of garment overruns, officials say Rana and his associates kept a hand in the drug trade.

Most profitable of all were the garment-factory rentals at Rana Plaza. By 2011, five floors were being leased out to garment manufacturers, contributing the bulk of the plaza’s 1.5 million euro annual rental income. Three years earlier, in March 2008, Mayor Refat Ullah granted Rana a permit to add additional stories to the building, without approval from the city development authority. By 2013, a ninth floor was in the works.

When the cracks appeared, on April 23, Rana was dismissive. “Don’t make my life miserable,” he told concerned factory owners, asserting the building was safe for another hundred years. He was also unmoved when the local engineer who’d been called in to inspect the site was shaken by the large cracks he’d found in the building’s pillars and walls. For days, Rana had been planning a counterprotest against the BNP-ordered hartal, and his reputation in Savar hinged in large part on his ability to mobilize grassroots defiance. On the morning of April 24, he was in his basement office with colleagues calling people by phone, haranguing them to report for work. When workers outside refused, he joined the factory owners to bully them inside.

Oddly, the basement turned out to be one of the safest places in the building. After the building caved in, bodyguards called Rana’s cell phone, discovered he was trapped in his office, and dug him out. Three days later, he was arrested in the border town of Benapole while preparing to cross into India. His arrest was announced during a news conference at the disaster site, where weary crowds burst into raucous cheers and chanted for his hanging.

The menial workforce has always been susceptible to exploitation, and for nearly a century the garment industry’s sweatshops

Manufacturing instructions for pants found in the rubble of Rana Plaza. (JASON MOTLAGH)
have acted as de facto laboratories for a variety of abuses and endangerment. Other than mining, it is difficult to name another industry that has produced so many public, large-scale catastrophes. And yet, for all the lives damaged and lost in these sweatshops, little has been done in the way of reform.

When the rescue and recovery operations were called off at Rana Plaza on May 13, seventeen days after the collapse, at least 1,100 people had been killed and some 2,500 injured, making it the deadliest event in the history of the garment industry. Perhaps it was the scale of the disaster, or the timing, occurring so soon after the fire at Tazreen Fashions. Likely both factors forced the industry’s hand, so that by summer 2013, more than seventy companies, most of them European, adopted the Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh—a five-year, legally binding commitment that subjects factories to independent inspections and public reports while requiring retailers to fund annual safety upgrades of up to $500,000. (As of March 2014, more than 150 companies have adopted the accord.) Participants include Swedish mega-retailer H&M (the largest buyer of ready-made garments from Bangladesh), France’s Carrefour, Britain’s Marks & Spencer, and the Inditex Group, the Spanish clothing giant that owns the Zara chain. Prior to the collapse, just two companies—American PVH Corp (Tommy Hilfiger, Calvin Klein) and Germany’s Tchibo—had signed on.

The about-face drew comparisons to the infamous Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire in New York City in 1911. On March 25 of that year, 146 garment workers, mainly immigrant women in their teens and twenties, perished in a factory that had been locked by owners. The horror of workers jumping several stories to their deaths sparked an unprecedented public outcry that ultimately led to improved safety standards, stronger unions, and limits on working hours—a turning point for labor rights in the United States. Scott Nova, the executive director of the Washington, DC–based Worker Rights Consortium, hailed the post–Rana Plaza safety accord as a “sweeping transformation” that departs...
from the failed models and evasions shown by brands in the past.

American companies Walmart, Gap, J. C. Penney, Sears, Target, and others refused to commit to the accord and in early July announced an alternate five-year plan, the Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety. It parallels the Accord on Fire Safety but allows the retailer to “opt-out” of the agreement if disaster strikes. Critics labeled their effort a foot-dragging attempt to avoid costly, long-term investments, expressing doubt over whether the companies could legitimately police themselves—noting, for instance, how an audit conducted by Walmart at Tazreen Fashions the year before the accident pointed out obvious fire hazards, and yet the company subsequently approved a higher fire-safety rating.

To some observers, the Accord-Alliance divide was emblematic of clashing approaches in the way European and American companies do business abroad. But in the months after Rana Plaza fell, big-box Western retailers linked to the complex were uniformly apathetic toward victims and their families. Statements of sympathy were concluded with denials. No long-term payment packages were formalized, neither to the families of victims nor the rescue volunteers who were left traumatized by the experience. Only nine of twenty-nine firms sourcing from the complex attended September compensation talks in Geneva. By the time the talks ended, only one company, the Irish budget-fashion chain Primark, had agreed to provide short-term aid. Since then, other brands have slowly begun to follow Primark’s lead, signing on to a proposed $40 million compensation fund, though none are American. And while these companies have indeed made contributions to the fund, there is no mechanism that guarantees it will reach $40 million. Nor is there a timetable for when families will begin receiving payments.

In mid-September, Rashida and her husband traveled to the forensic lab on the campus of Dhaka University, where, in a sterile tenth-floor chamber, bone samples were tested for the purposes of finding a match to the missing. Samples were stored in batches of test tubes that vibrated on metal trays, part of the process of decalcification that helped glean a genetic profile. This process was the couple’s last hope for any government compensation. They had submitted blood samples back in May. A match would qualify them for 100,000 taka (about $1,250)—a pittance for a child’s life, but no
small sum for a Savar family without a breadwinner; a negative result would spell the end of their fight for a settlement. After DNA samples were extracted, all unidentified remains were buried at a cemetery in south Dhaka, a stone’s throw from where unidentified victims of the Tazreen fire had been laid to rest.

After five months of waiting, Rashida was greeted by a technician with disappointing news: Final results would not be ready for at least several more weeks, at which time they would be published in local newspapers. The technician explained that software was on its way from the US to help sort through tens of thousands of possible DNA matches, but that more time was needed. In the end, many relatives would be left empty-handed: Nearly 550 blood samples had been submitted for 322 unidentified victims.

Picking up her folder for the long trip back to Savar, Rashida was forlorn. “We go from place to place for some aid, but they all tell us to come back later,” she sighed. Tears carved a line down her dusted cheeks. “It was supposed to be that we would die and our kids would bury us, but it happened in reverse. We thought we’d see happiness when Nasima started work. But now she’s gone.”

The headquarters of the BGMEA stands apart from the fray of downtown Dhaka. A tower of blue-green glass surrounded by water, it is the preserve of the country’s garment barons, accessible via a single, guarded footbridge. As much as the trade body tries to project power and modernity, the building is also a symbol of a corrupt industry culture. In 2011, Bangladesh’s High Court ruled that the land had been illegally obtained and the building constructed without proper approvals, jeopardizing a natural drainage system that runs through the heart of the city. The court went on to call the headquarters “a scam of abysmal proportions” and ordered it demolished within ninety days.

Three years on, the building still stands. When I first arrived in August 2013, I had to
push through a crowd of protesters clutching pictures of missing relatives. Rashida was not there, but Nasima’s picture was, held by an elderly woman on Rashida’s behalf. Riot police loitered in the parking lot below, flanked by rows of white SUVs being carefully wiped down by their drivers. I took the stairs up to the fourth floor, passing cracked windows that let in the odor of the stale water below.

Reaz Bin Mahmood, the BGMEA’s co-vice president, was on time for our meeting, no small feat in Dhaka. A flurry of underlings came into his office with papers to sign, only to be dispatched in an authoritative baritone. Switching to crisp English, honed as an MBA student in Texas, he said he could give me fifteen minutes; an event was planned that afternoon in support of Rana Plaza orphans. And what of the protesters below? Mahmood said that compensation packages were still being worked out with the government, while extra money was raised by BGMEA members. Sohel Rana and the arrested factory owners should pay, he added, but the banks had frozen their money. “We are not a profitable organization, you know.”
Though technically true—the BGMEA is a trade body—the notion was disingenuous. Its members form the backbone of the national economy, with an outsized role in government, media, banking, and insurance sectors that gives it a degree of influence rarely seen in other countries. Of the national parliament’s 300 members, more than thirty own garment factories outright. These owners sit on high-level committees that regulate and administer an industry that accounts for 80 percent of the country’s total exports, exceeding $20 billion per year. For labor activists, the association’s ongoing defiance of the court order against its headquarters is Exhibit A that Bangladesh is a government of garment-factory owners, for garment-factory owners.

When I pressed Mahmood about complaints that the BGMEA was not doing enough to clean up the industry, he countered that inspections were underway and that twenty at-risk factories had already been shut down. “We want to do it sincerely and transparently,” he said, but the task was immense. The BGMEA had just ten inspectors on staff, the fire department a tenth of what it needed. The Labor Ministry was struggling to hire more than 200 inspectors by year’s end. This shortage in manpower was compounded by the absence of a central coordinating body that could ensure some factories weren’t being inspected twice while others got a pass.

Of the 5,000 registered factories around the capital, Mahmood said, about half were operational. Assessments took anywhere from several days to several months, after which owners had to make costly upgrades for re-approval. All of these factors made compliance a sluggish campaign at best. What’s more, in addition to the export factories covered under the Accord and Alliance frameworks, there were also thousands of second-tier facilities requiring inspection. “You have seen the traffic in Dhaka, our communications. Everything takes longer than planned,” he said. “But we must try.”

In late June, the United States announced it would suspend Bangladesh’s trade privileges, citing concerns over safety hazards and labor violations in the garment industry. The move was largely symbolic—garments were excluded—but it rattled garment-factory owners, who feared a similar move by the European Union, Bangladesh’s top global customer, which buys 60 percent of the country’s exports duty-free.

Mahmood blamed the measure on labor unions, a reckless attempt to bring jobs back
to the US. “I am a manufacturer, but if I close down my factory I will still make a living,” he said. “But what about my workers? At the end of the day, if the factories are closed and the workers are unemployed, will the AFL-CIO pay their salaries?” If there was an upshot to the “harsh” US decision, he added, it was to push owners to fast-track safety reforms. A new workers’ rights law was on the books, and he expected the minimum wage to increase in the coming months. “There should be no more excuses,” he said.

My time was up, but Mahmood wasn’t finished. Grabbing the collar of his black tunic, he went on the offensive. “A shirt like this—c’mon, everyone knows how much it costs. Fabric, buttons, and trims”—he did some quick calculations. “It’s very clear how much profit we’re making. The books are very open. But no one wants to pay more.” He recalled, for instance, an H&M executive who came to Bangladesh demanding a wage increase at a supplier while assuring shareholders in Stockholm beforehand that prices would not be raised.

“If you really care about the workers, you must have proper pricing,” he insisted. “If buyers paid a little bit more, they could make sure more money was going to wages and safety improvements—they could check the books and talk to workers.” As a businessman with 1,500 employees, however, he was adamant that it was consumers who needed to assume greater responsibility. “When Rana Plaza collapsed, we saw lots of propaganda on the streets of London and New York. But when you’re selling three-pound jeans, everybody loves it. So you have to come out of that mentality as a consumer. You have to stop and think: Where are these clothes coming from, and at what cost?”

**AFTERMATH**

Although Lutfer Rahman is grateful for the government’s 200,000-taka settlement, and hopes to someday use it to help pay for his daughters’ weddings, the fact that injured victims have received greater compensation than the families of the dead doesn’t make sense to him. After all, Rina supported the whole family with her wages from Rana Plaza. “She took care of me, and made sure I had food for the day before she left for work—I doubt if modern-day wives care for their husbands so much,” he said when I visited him in September. He shook his head. “The future is bleak with the burden of raising two girls on my shoulders.”

Asked what she missed most about her mother, twelve-year-old Arifa gave a blank stare. The silence lingered a few seconds until Latifa, not yet fourteen, interjected: “We are in trouble now. I don’t want to work in a garment factory. I’m afraid of that job. But we have to survive. My father is weak, and if I don’t earn money my sister will not be able to continue her studies, so I must leave school.”

For what kind of work?

“What job is there,” she shot back, “except in a garment factory?”

Paki Begum, meanwhile, considers herself one of the lucky ones. Two months after the accident, she was discharged with 2.2 million taka ($28,000) from the prime minister’s fund. While recovering in the hospital, she befriended two fellow amputees, Shahinur and Lovely. The women have since continued their physical therapy together at a rehabilitation clinic, where they practice walking along parallel bars, adjusting to the awkwardness of prosthetic limbs.

Taking a break, Paki massaged her stumps and winced from the residual pain. She blamed Sohel Rana for what happened, but didn’t want him to hang. “I want him to experience the suffering I’m going through—of being a burden on others’ shoulders,” she said. Her husband, Jahangir, brushed off the thought and teased her playfully, stealing kisses and darting away when she tried to swat him. His affections hadn’t wavered.

Ironically, the family now has the financial security that first drew them to the capital in the first place. To Paki, the signs were clear: She wanted no more of the city. “I’m done with Dhaka,” she said. Once her therapy was
completed, she hoped to move back to her village to open a small shop and raise her two children. Paki left school for good when she was eight years old and began garment work as a teenager. She swore her girls would not follow in her footsteps. “I want my children to grow up educated, but let’s see what Allah does,” she said.

For his heroic efforts, Abul Khair received a promotion and was once again thanked in person by the prime minister. But he saved credit for the civilians who stepped up during the crisis. “We worked shoulder to shoulder,” he told me in September, at the fire brigade headquarters in Dhaka. “A few got in our way, but largely the volunteer rescuers were of great help.” He still thinks of Shahina almost every day. “I spent nearly thirty hours close to her during the rescue effort—she told me I was like her brother,” he told me. “I think that if I could have rescued her, I would have some peace of mind.” Before the Eid al-Fitr holiday, Khair and his boss delivered clothing to Shahina’s son, Robin, who insisted she was still at work and would be back by the afternoon.

Like so many volunteer rescuers at Rana Plaza, Faisal Muhid and Rafiqul Islam have struggled to recover from the trauma of their experiences. For both men, the scars are obvious. Fitful nights give way to disorientation and sudden outbursts during waking hours. These days, Muhid collects documents from victims’ families to lobby the government to pay for those who have not received DNA confirmation. If a family calls him in need of money, he tries to raise funds from his network of friends, who also support him so he can afford a cocktail of prescription drugs to alleviate his sudden mood swings. “Am I going to be psycho?” he once asked me, wondering if he should seek clinical help.

Rafiqul, too, has never fully surfaced since he plunged into the rubble on April 24. Following three weeks in a hospital, he left to be with his wife before the birth of their fourth child, a son. Since then, his wife has been un-easy around him, and he’s had trouble holding down a job. The first time I went to the family home, deep in one of the bastis that recedes from the highway, I found Rafiqul standing alone in a baking-hot tin room, bewildered in the dark. The only nod to his sacrifice was a medal from a local workers’ rights organization that rested on his nightstand. He confessed that thoughts of bodies he’d left behind made him angry and restless, and that he found himself wandering the alleys at odd hours, unable to silence the voices in his head. They often drew him back to Rana Plaza, where he said the cries grew louder.

On the day I followed him there, he stopped at the edge of the rubble and stared, glass-eyed. A police officer nearby told him to leave. Rafiqul ignored him. When the officer seized his elbow to escort him out, Rafiqul flew into a rage: “Do you know what I did here? Do you know how many people I cut out? Touch me again and I’ll do the same for you!” He picked up a metal rod and cocked it back. A friend intervened, walking Rafiqul out to the street to cool off. Then another outburst—one that silenced all the chatter at the corner tea stand nearby.

For a month or so after the disaster, Saiful Islam’s dreams were a tortuous loop of workers plunging from the plaza’s upper floors. These days the pastry-shop owner grapples with what he calls a “building-collapse phobia.” Backfiring vehicles trigger a momentary panic. A while back, he ran a snack bar inside the Rana Plaza complex and befriended several garment-factory workers during his time there. Many of those same customers followed him to his store across the street. Their absence burns, as does his resentment over the “greed and negligence of a few men to make money at the expense of the poor.” And yet his grief is tempered by a deep admiration for his neighbors. “I had no idea the people of Savar were so helpful and generous, so sincere and sympathetic,” he said to me in his shop, recalling how teams of locals spent their own money to procure food, oxygen, and tools for the rescue. “These efforts were, for me, a never-before-
seen example of goodness and humanity in Bangladesh.”

Despite the industry’s exploitive reputation, there are plenty of garment factories in Bangladesh where ethical management and profitability go hand in hand. At one six-story facility I visited in Gazipur, the work floors were well lit and fan-cooled, with multiple stairwells and emergency instructions posted at every exit. Working mothers dropped their children off at a child-care center, free of charge, and regular tea breaks were allowed at a discount canteen. Though most of the supervisors were men, women were clearly climbing the ranks. When I asked one young woman who was recently promoted what her goal was, she didn’t miss a beat. “I want his job,” she said, pointing to the startled factory manager guiding me around. Such a direct challenge was hard to imagine elsewhere; here it was part of the company culture.

The factory owner, a top-ten jeans producer who counts H&M and Zara among his clients, agreed to meet with me at his corporate headquarters in Banani, an upscale Dhaka neighborhood. In exchange for keeping his name out of print—we’ll call him Tareq—he poured me a coffee and offered an honest assessment of the industry that has made him very rich.

At the time of Bangladesh’s founding in 1971, tea and jute fiber were the top export sectors. But within a few years, its economic trajectory was forever altered by the Multi-Fiber Arrangement, an international trade agreement intended to limit textile exports from the developing world. In 1977, entrepreneurs from South Korea seeking to expand their output through quota-free partnerships established a joint venture with a Bangladeshi firm, Desh Garments Ltd. Within several years, more than a hundred Desh employees left to start their own companies or work with other emerging textile companies for better pay. Preferential market access to Europe accelerated the indus-
try’s growth, so much so that by 1980 garments were the country’s main export.

Tareq’s break came two decades later. Under the terms of the World Trade Organization’s Agreement on Textiles and Clothing, in effect from 1995 to 2005, more-industrialized countries agreed to export fewer textiles while less-industrialized countries saw their export quotas increase. The new regime was a boom for Bangladeshi garment makers, who enjoyed quota-free access to Europe and higher exports to the US and Canada. Seeing the writing on the wall, Tareq and some college friends pooled their resources and started producing pants. In a highly unregulated industry with low start-up and labor costs, dominated by unscrupulous players, he built a loyal client base by upholding higher quality and safety standards, which soon distinguished him among his competitors.

Today Bangladesh is the largest garment exporter behind China, where rising costs and the growth of a middle class are driving manufacturers to outsource more stages of production. Despite political unrest in early 2014 that has disrupted production and led to order cancellations, stoking fears that summer and fall exports may plummet, Tareq is confident that Bangladesh’s bottomless supply of cheap labor will remain a long-term trump card against would-be competitors like Vietnam and India. “They simply can’t compete with us on this level,” he contended. “Business is not leaving Bangladesh.”

Tareq’s high standing among factory owners has given him access to negotiations with top Western companies working to improve safety conditions post–Rana Plaza. More than 170 companies have signed the Accord and Alliance pacts combined; for those companies

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Workers finish sweaters at an export garment factory in Gazipur. (JASON MOTLagh)
that fall outside the purview of the pacts, there is a third government-sponsored program. The three groups have agreed to common inspections enforced by qualified inspectors, with support from the International Labor Organization.

While he thinks it is an important step toward better regulation, Tareq insists the “wild west” style of doing business is fundamentally the same today. Government inspections remain toothless, since agents have neither the resources nor the competence to conduct them thoroughly. What’s more, he said, bribery is rampant. Although auditing certificates on the walls of his factory attested to a sterling record on safety compliance, he was adamant: “Everybody is taking money.”

Then there is the murky matter of subcontracting, of thousands of lower-level suppliers that are directly or indirectly involved in the export trade, making zippers and trimming threads, attaching buttons or brand labels. Located in basements, on rooftops, often signless and buried deep inside teeming residential areas, they defy the notion of what a factory is and remain completely outside the purview of inspection, with no incentive to invest in safety. The truth is that no one knows how many of these operations actually exist. And with frequent political violence, worker strikes, shipping delays, and other variables that threaten to stymie production, subcontracting is the only reliable way to improvise around a work stoppage. “There will be subcontracting every day—you cannot stop it,” Tareq said, conceding that he must occasionally farm out smaller stages of production to deliver orders on time or risk losing lucrative contracts. “Officially, the brands will say no more, that they are controlling it. But unofficially, it will always happen, and they know it.”

Late one afternoon in Dhaka’s Mirpur district, I went to see for myself. Without thinking twice, I walked past a security guard who must have assumed I was a foreign buyer, passing through a rusted gate and up a dark staircase thronged with boxes marked for shipment to Spain. The second floor was a windowless maze, full of workers ironing T-shirts beneath fans and fluorescent lighting. The fire-code violations were plenty: Evacuation maps were covered with flyers; hoses were missing from their hinges; stacks of boxes and piles of fabric blocked emergency exits.

To my left, a man was affixing labels to a set of pink children’s jump suits. The retail price tag read: FIVE POUNDS STERLING. Another woman was vacuuming glittery pants with hearts and suns printed on them. The workers who had initially looked at me with curiosity suddenly appeared more anxious. I turned around to face a supervisor, head low, eyes raised. “Please follow me,” he instructed.

In an office strewn with clothing samples, he asked what my business was. I lied that I was a wholesale buyer from the United States looking for new suppliers, that I’d come to meet with his boss on a friend’s recommendation. I posed some questions about their factory’s pricing and output capacity, which he said he could not answer. Instead, he took down my false name and contact information and advised me to call back tomorrow to set up a proper appointment. I thanked him for his time and walked out into the fading light, joining the stream of workers on their way home.

It was easy to presume that those strangers I encountered in the factory had difficult jobs, but it was also reasonable to wonder how long it would be before they found themselves in danger. Indeed, before the Rana Plaza collapse, fires were the most common killer of garment workers in Bangladesh, averaging two to three fires a week during some stretches. That choked stairwell wasn’t just a random hazard, but emblematic of the country’s more pervasive industrial horrors. Ten weeks before the Rana Plaza tragedy, on my first visit to a Bangladeshi garment factory, I saw a burnt-out, second-story facility on the outskirts of Dhaka, where eight people had died in a stairwell with a locked gate, just a few steps shy of daylight. The blackened walls were still streaked with hand marks.
On October 8, not six months after the Rana Plaza collapse, a late-night blaze that tore through a garment factory in Gazipur killed seven workers. Once again, inspectors found the fire-safety equipment lacking. Shipping records found at the scene tied a familiar cast of Western brands to the factory, as well as connections to producers at Rana Plaza. Spokesmen for Loblaw, the Canadian owner of the Joe Fresh label, denied that the company had placed any orders with the Gazipur factory and claimed to be investigating whether subcontractors had done so. Primark maintained that it had ceased using the factory several months before, as did Hudson’s Bay. A Walmart spokesperson responded that the company did not have “a direct contractual relationship” with the factory and was therefore not responsible for its safety protocols.

The Gazipur fire broke out amid a rising tide of wage protests, which in many cases turned violent. In Dhaka’s industrial zones, hundreds of factories were forced to close as thousands of workers turned out to demand a minimum wage of 8,100 taka ($104) a month, about triple the existing amount. Owners continued to resist, walking out of meetings with labor unions and threatening shutdowns until finally, last November, the BGMEA, under intense pressure from the government to acquiesce ahead of elections, agreed to raise the minimum wage to 5,300 taka ($68) a month.

In December 2013, another landmark was achieved: Delwar Hossain, the owner of Tazreen Fashions, was charged—along with his wife and eleven factory managers—with culpable homicide. Police initially said they did not have enough evidence to bring a case against them following the deadly 2012 fire; some even suggested that saboteurs were responsible. But a high-level state investigation accused Hossain of “unpardonable negligence.” This marks the first time Bangladesh has tried to prosecute a factory owner in its garment industry. Activists hope the case will set a precedent. Sohel Rana, meanwhile, remains in jail ahead of his trial, which is expected to begin this year.

In the southern edge of Dhaka, the Jurain cemetery is walled off from the swarm of the old city. Under the shade of palms, attendants sweep around the graves of martyred fighters from Bangladesh’s 1971 war for independence, which freed the country from Pakistan’s control. Farther along a brick footpath, the crow calls fade and the cemetery becomes a field of overgrown grass rows that stretch under the open sky. It is here that the poor and anonymous are laid to rest, a repository for dead garment workers. It is where Rashida Begum’s search for her daughter ended early one morning last November, after the Bangladeshi government announced the first round of results from the DNA testing. Of the 157 confirmed identifications, 116 were female, and Nasima was among them.

Three days later, Rashida traveled to Jurain. Upon arriving, she was issued a number from a list. She then walked among the rows, looking for her daughter’s resting place. All around her, relatives wore their grief in different ways. Some wailed hysterically, others prayed, and others still stood motionless as photographers snapped pictures from a respectful distance. In a far corner of the field, a group of boys played cricket.

Rashida stopped in front of a black placard—DNA #155—and dropped to her knees, hugging the plot mound with both arms. “My dear, look. I am here,” she said, sobbing. “You have gone too long without us, and I cannot live without you.” Then she offered a prayer: “Oh, Allah, please keep her in peace, for she suffered a lot in her life. We couldn’t provide her good care, education, or even food. We are very poor, and so we had to send her to work. Please, Allah, forgive us for our sins, and keep her in heaven.” She lingered for an hour or so, surrounded by grazing goats and curious onlookers. Beyond her, receding into the hazy distance, most of Jurain’s burial plots were empty, a vast and foreboding number of them at the ready.

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