

Last month marked the first anniversary of the Rana Plaza building collapse in Bangladesh. **David Gold** discusses what steps have been taken to avoid a similar tragedy happening again.

Out of the ashes

INTERNATIONAL HEALTH AND SAFETY



The garment industry in Bangladesh employs over four million people, of which women make up roughly 90 per cent

One year ago, on 24 April 2013, the Rana Plaza Factory collapsed in Bangladesh and 1,129 workers perished. Since 2010, there have been five fatal factory fires resulting in more than 170 deaths.

The ready-made garment industry in Bangladesh employs over four million garment workers in more than 5,600 garment factories. The industry contributes significantly to the economy of Bangladesh, accounting for 79.63 per cent of total exports.¹ There are serious threats from North America and Europe that if changes are not made to improve fire safety and working conditions, special tariff and trade agreements will be either revoked or not restored.

A number of organisations and institutions are working in Bangladesh to try to bring about change by inspection and compliance as well as the provision of fire safety equipment and training. The first fire protection trade show was organised in Dhaka in February where, according to the organisers, over 3,000 individuals were in attendance, including factory owners, suppliers, and brands, as well as individuals representing organisations, institutions and agencies trying to improve fire safety in the country.

Visits to a number of factories in Bangladesh indicate there is a wide range

of attitudes and knowledge about fire safety, with some owners and managers being highly motivated to make positive changes while others still see any change as a threat to their status, livelihood or profit line. The motivation ranges from those who feel a moral obligation to make changes, to those who are doing it because of external legal, social or financial pressures.

It is clear, however, that there is an imperative for multiple forces to find a way to pull in the same direction to ensure the workers from the Rana Plaza collapse and the multiple factory fires will not have died in vain.

The occupational safety and health practitioner and organisations on the cutting edge of occupational safety and health recognise that the move from compliance to ownership, demonstrated by a positive safety culture that is fully integrated into the corporate culture, is the most effective way to make and sustain positive changes in the workplace and leads to significant reductions in occupational accidents and diseases.^{2,3} It is imperative that a move towards a safety culture also drives positive changes in Bangladeshi workplaces.

The Fair Labor Association (FLA), in response to earlier fires in Bangladesh, designed and implemented a fire safety initiative, built on 39 fire safety competencies. An element of the initiative is a programme to develop and sustain an individual within the factories with the knowledge and skills to build a fire safety climate leading to a fire safety culture through training, education and the provision of information.

From the initiative, two national master trainers in Bangladesh are being developed to pass on their training skills to others who will then train workplace fire safety facilitators – a motivated worker or manager with at least three years of experience at the work site – who then, in turn, will be able to train workers within the factories.

Several major brands are also participating at the master trainer level, allowing the brand or the supplier to train trainers, cascading messages to the workers in the same way.

A number of institutions and organisations are working in close collaboration with the FLA to support and strengthen this initiative. Notably, the (US) National Fire Protection Association has collaborated in the validation of the 39 fire safety competencies and the workplace fire safety facilitator training programme. IOSH has worked with the FLA and has accredited the workplace fire safety facilitator training course and its associated train-the-trainer course.

IOSH has also contributed to this initiative through its development fund to help implant this initiative in a sustainable way. A number of major brands are also contributing to strengthen this initiative. Participants successfully completing both accredited courses will receive certificates from IOSH.

As a programme with its primary emphasis on prevention, the FLA recognises that although Bangladesh is where most of the international attention on fire safety is focused, the risk of a significant fire or a building collapse certainly exists in other countries. The FLA's initiative, with support of the IOSH development grant, is also starting to take root in India, Indonesia and Sri Lanka through the identification and training of master trainers.

In Greek mythology the Phoenix burns, then rises from the ashes, spreads its wings and soars into the sky. Working together with the various efforts in Bangladesh, we, as safety and health practitioners and fire safety experts can encourage a safer, healthier working environment from the ashes of the tragedies in Bangladesh. ■

References

1. Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters.
2. DuPont Bradley Curve, www.dupont.com
3. www.hse.gov.uk/research/otopdf/2000/oto00049.pdf

David Gold is the founder and managing director of Gold-Knecht Associates – see page 4 for more details