

## UNDERSTANDING CROSS-BORDER CONFLICT: HOW CAN INTERNATIONAL STUDIES HELP?

### Tragedy in Bangladesh\*

On April 23, 2013, the multistory Rana Plaza building in an industrial suburb of Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh, collapsed (see Map 6.3). More than 1,100 people were killed and another 2,500 escaped the wreckage, many with significant injuries. This was just the latest (albeit deadliest) in a series of disasters affecting garment factories in the country.

Bangladesh has more than 5,000 of these factories as it has emerged as one of the world's leading clothing exporters, second only to China. The textile industry is critical to the country's economic health, accounting for 17 percent of GDP and more than 75 percent of total exports. The Rana Plaza building itself contained five separate garment shops under contract with some twenty-nine global brands, including such trendy retailers as Canada's Joe Fresh, the United Kingdom's Primark, and Italy's Benetton. With its substandard construction, cracks developed and an inspection conducted the day prior to the collapse deemed the structure unsafe. Factory supervisors discounted the findings and ordered workers back into the building the next morning. Tragedy struck when the large and heavy power generators previously placed on the upper floors to compensate for regular power failures were turned on.

This disaster highlighted the circumstances faced by workers (overwhelmingly female), who have come to occupy critical roles in industries deeply impacted by the demands and pressures of globalization. In addition to their low wages, they often endure harsh and unsafe working conditions as employers seek to locate production facilities in the Global South to minimize costs in a highly competitive global market where consumers expect quality and inexpensive goods. In this instance, the toll was considerable. While a \$40 million fund under the auspices of the International Labour Organization (ILO) was established to compensate victims and their families, only about half of the brands associated with the building have contributed. Bangladesh enacted a series of new oversight measures, but the lack of sufficient numbers of inspectors and the resistance of influential factory owners to enhanced regulation have limited their impact.

\* <http://www.cnn.com/2013/10/24/opinion/bangladesh-garment-workers>

<http://www.cbsnews.com/news/the-bangladesh-factory-collapse-one-year-later>

<http://www.forbes.com/sites/clareoconnor/2014/04/24/report-a-year-after-bangladesh-disaster-retailers-fail-to-address-biggest-factory-risks>

What is the role of crossing borders in addressing this issue? How can the cross-disciplinary focus of international studies help?

*(Continued)*