

Bangladesh factory safety monitors get court extension

Global clothing brands including H&M, Primark and Tesco won a Bangladesh Supreme Court case Sunday, allowing international factory safety monitors to operate in the country which has had a string of industrial disasters. The top court in the South Asian nation - which became notorious after the 2013 Rana Plaza disaster in which 1,138 people died - ruled that the Bangladesh Accord on Fire and Building Safety could continue its oversight of clothing factories for one more year.

Bangladesh is the world's second biggest garment maker after China and the country's factory owners had been lobbying for the Accord monitors to leave, arguing that the programme's five-year mandate had expired. After a lower court backed the factory owners, ordering the monitors to wind up its operations, labour groups warned of the risk to workers' lives if the Accord, which is backed by about 200 mainly European clothing labels, was forced out.

The Accord has played a big role in pushing through safety upgrades since the collapse of the Rana Plaza warren of factories in 2013. One of the world's worst industrial disasters, the incident put the spotlight on poor safety standards in Bangladesh's \$31 billion a year garment industry.

The Supreme Court said the Accord could keep operating for 281 more working days, around 13-14 months, after it made a deal with the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) lobbying group, a lawyer said. The deal has been endorsed by the Bangladesh government and will lead to the establishment of a national safety entity, the Ready-made Garment Sustainability Council which will take over the monitoring.

The BGMEA said the deal would establish the route to self-monitoring by Bangladeshi manufacturers. Christie Miedema, a spokesperson from the Amsterdam-based Clean Clothes Campaign, said the group was studying the deal to understand its consequences. But local union leader Babul Akhter said the deal gives wider powers to factory owners and was a threat to worker safety. "It will have bad consequences," he told AFP. Under intense pressure after the 2013 disaster, leading international brands set up two safety watchdogs to monitor more than 4,500 factories that make clothes for Western stores.

The Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety, which represented mainly US brands, has already closed while the Accord had asked for more time to enforce safety measures in the factories under review. The textile companies fear monitors could start looking into other worker rights issues in an industry where minimum wages start at \$95 a month, critics say.

RECORDER REPORT