

## **Textile factory catastrophes in South Asia: who pays the price?**

*Wolfgang Kaleck, 20 June 2016*

*Since this blog began, I planned to feature contributions from colleagues who inspire and motivate me. Today's blog was written by Dr. Miriam Saage-Maaß. She heads the Business and Human Rights Program at the European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights (ECCHR) and works on human rights violations in the supply chains of the global textile industry.*

It's been almost four years since a series of catastrophes hit textile factories in Pakistan and Bangladesh: at Ali Enterprises, Tazreen, and Rana Plaza. These three man-made disasters attracted much attention at the time and led to a new awareness of working conditions in the textile industry in South Asia among parts of the German public and the rest of Europe. It is no longer possible to deny the human suffering brought about through Western consumption.

But the question remains: what has changed since then? In Bangladesh, the pressure on the many European buyer companies was so great that they paid into a special compensation fund. Over one hundred companies agreed to allow independent building and fire inspections of their supply factories. The German Minister for Economic Cooperation and Development, Gerd Müller, set up a "textile alliance" – a roundtable with political, business and civil society representatives – to develop standards for sustainable textile production. The alliance has been in existence for over a year now but without any concrete results or any prospect of a real breakthrough. The textile producers and retailers have no interest in changing the current model of global business, in which price politics and buying practices make it impossible for willing suppliers to guarantee a living wage and humane working hours. The companies also reject legal responsibility for the working conditions of their suppliers in the Global South.

Yet this is precisely what is demanded by the workers and trade unionists in South Asia. In March of this year, the international network "Clean Clothes Campaign" organized a conference in Nepal with its member groups and trade unions in South Asia. Over three days of meetings the conversation focused on the lessons from Rana Plaza and the other catastrophes. Conference attendees were particularly impressed by Saeeda Khatoon, Vice-President of the Baldia Factory Fire Affectedes Association – the organization of survivors and relatives of victims of the Ali Enterprises factory fire in Karachi. In a fiery speech, she stressed that any efforts by international organizations and companies are of little value if the affected workers are not actively involved. And this is exactly what Khatoon and the other members of the affectedes group in Pakistan are doing. I've been to three of the group's assemblies attended by up to 190 people affected by the fire. At these meetings, men and women discuss together – something that is not a given in Pakistan – the status of the legal proceedings in Pakistan against the owner of the Ali Enterprises factory, the lawsuit in Germany against the factory's main customer (clothing retailer KiK), and the legal action in Italy against the certification company RINA.

Saeeda Khatoon's son died in the fire at the Ali Enterprises factory in Karachi on 11 September 2012. That day Saeeda, a widow, lost the most important person in her life as well as the family's only breadwinner. She will never fully recover emotionally from the loss of her son but is now dedicated to the fight for justice. She helps other members of the

organization to deal with the Pakistani authorities, and together survivors and relatives pursue various proceedings against the Pakistani government in order to obtain adequate pensions. They are also fighting to ensure that KiK recognizes its legal responsibility towards the victims of the fire. In March 2015, Khateen and three other members of the affectees' organization filed a lawsuit against KiK at the Regional Court of Dortmund.

KiK rejects their claim but after intervention by the Ministry for Development in spring 2016, the firm did seem willing to negotiate on compensation in line with the Rana Plaza model. But there has been little action on these words of goodwill; KiK has let the negotiations stagnate. It seems the company is not so serious about the question of compensation. To maintain its credibility, the Ministry must continue to exert pressure on KiK. Through the textile alliance, KiK can present itself as a good partner of the Ministry while failing to live up to its promises when it comes to actually taking responsibility. Given this reluctance on the part of KiK, it's good that the case is up for review by the court in Dortmund.