



JOINT STATEMENT ON THE OFFICIAL ASSESSMENT OF THE SUSTAINABILITY COMPACT

On 27-28 January, the partner governments and the ILO issued a 2-page assessment of the Government of Bangladesh's compliance with the Bangladesh Sustainability Compact (Compact) – issued following the Rana Plaza disaster nearly 3 years ago. Despite a difficult and even worsening situation for millions of garment workers in Bangladesh, the assessment applauds largely procedural steps while giving only faint criticism for having failed to implement several key aspects of the Compact.

Among the 'progress' indicated, the partners cite the promulgation of implementing rules under the Bangladesh Labour Act. The rules, over 2 years late, contain numerous provisions which violate the principles of freedom of association and make it more likely than not that safety committees, critical to preventing further tragedies, will be dominated by management. There is no direct criticism of the new rules. Also applauded is the near completion of safety audits by the government; however, the quality of these audits has been seriously questioned, not to mention the lack of consistent follow-up to ensure violations are corrected. And, while staff has increased for fire and building inspection, we have yet to see real results. Indeed, the bulk of progress on fire and building safety remains the result of private initiatives like the Bangladesh Accord, not the government. This is hardly the progress we anticipate nearly 3 years on.

The document does indicate several areas where further progress is needed, many of which reflect the concerns and criticisms of trade unions. This includes reform of the EPZ Act, remediation and monitoring of factories on fire and building safety, the effective implementation of existing law and further reform of said laws and rules. However, we are disappointed that some points were worded in such a way as to conceal the seriousness of the problems. For example, the statement urges the government to make sure the union registration process is as "smooth and expeditious" as possible. The problem is not just a few bumps but rather the fact that the government has refused to register trade union applications from some of the most active and independent union; the government rejected more (legitimate) applications than it accepted last year. Further, the government has done nothing to investigate or sanction widespread acts of anti-union discrimination. Sometimes violent, these acts have led to the dissolution of nearly 50 unions. Factory closures, some of which appear retaliatory, have eliminated another 50 unions.

Bangladesh is not yet on a track to a sustainable garment sector. The government continues to engage in the same anti-union, anti-worker behavior we saw before the Rana Plaza collapse. Were it not for the Bangladesh Accord, the progress which has been made would not have materialized. Even then, some of the signatories to the Bangladesh Accord have failed to comply fully with their obligations. In government-run initiatives, progress is far less impressive. The industry will not be sustainable until the fundamental rights of workers are fully respected. The partners to the Compact must insist, using their economic leverage to do so, that legislation is consistent with international law and that workers in practice are able to exercise those rights. This is a matter of urgency, and cannot wait for another year to pass.