

TRANSCRIPT OF "FILE ON 4" – "WHAT PRICE CHEAP CLOTHES?"

CURRENT AFFAIRS GROUP

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ACTUALITY – RAIN, DHAKA

DEITH: Welcome to Dhaka in the middle of a downpour. For this week’s File on 4 we have come to Bangladesh, five months on from the Rana Plaza garment factory disaster. We’re here to find out what’s happened to the people pulled alive from the rubble and the families of those who died. But we also want to investigate whether the garment industry here is really serious about making sure the millions of people who make our cheap clothes aren’t working in death traps.

SIGNATURE TUNE

ACTUALITY OF STREET NOISE

DEITH: In front of me is a temporary barbed wire fence, and looking through it there’s an enormous hill really of debris. There’s slabs of concrete, tangled iron bars and rolls of fabric which have now gone mouldy. Hanging off one of the rusty bits of wire is a pair of jeans. Maybe they were destined for the British high street. Some plants have sprung up so they’re taking over now.

A summer has passed since the Rana Plaza, a sprawling factory complex making clothes, some for British high street brands, came crashing down. There were four thousand people inside.

DEITH cont: Cracks had appeared, but the building's owner had told people it was safe to go back in. One thousand one hundred and thirty three people died.

AHAMMAD: He says she is still missing, they didn't find her dead body.

DEITH: A small, slight man in a black shirt, blue sarong and bare feet wants to show me something.

So just to describe what I've got, I've got a slightly crumpled piece of white A4 paper which has been printed with a lady's details. I'm looking, I have also got a small colour passport photo of a lady, she looks as if she is in her forties, wearing a headscarf, a blue headscarf. And at the bottom of the paper, quite movingly, is a couple of phone numbers and it has got the name of the factory that she was working in - New Wave Bottoms Ltd.

Is this gentleman the husband of this lady?

AHAMMAD: Yes.

DEITH: He is saying gee gee, yes.

BABUL [VIA INTERPRETER]: My name is Babul and her name is Shahida and we have five children. I have lost my partner and I don't know what to do, because I have three daughters and I have to get them married.

DEITH: Babul Soail's wife could be among the 291 people buried without being identified. Apart from the pain of not having a body to grieve over, Mr Soail isn't entitled to any financial help, because the government and the garment industry trade association won't pay a penny until they have proof the missing worked in the Rana Plaza. DNA samples have been taken from relatives, but Bangladesh doesn't have the computer software to match the samples with the dead.

BABUL [VIA INTERPRETER]: I have made a copy of these papers and I have given these papers to the government authority and I told them, if you have any kind of doubt then you can send an inspection team to our home town and they will find that she is still missing.

DEITH: Babul Soial has received 16 thousand Taka – about £130 – from Primark, so far the only company to make any donations. But he's still waiting for the support the government promised – around £13,000.

Babul is saying that he comes here every day from his home with this, he's got a roll of pieces of white paper with her photograph, with his phone number, and he comes here every day hoping that someone official will listen to his case. I have to say it all feels a bit hopeless.

ACTUALITY AT REHAB CENTRE

DEITH: The seriously injured are still being treated at the Centre for the Rehabilitation of the Paralysed, a mile from the Rana Plaza site. The walls are bare and the equipment is old, but the atmosphere is hopeful. We're taken to a bungalow tucked behind the hospital's roaring generator. In one room, four young women are lying on their beds. In some ways it reminds me of a girls' dormitory, but a prosthetic leg propped up against the wall is the clue. When the women sit up, you see they are each missing one leg, or both - like Rehana who's 18. She's scared she'll never work again. She tells me she hasn't had any compensation and she doesn't believe she ever will. She's angry.

REHENA [VIA INTERPRETER]: Because I have two small brothers, I haven't got married, and my father died. I am the eldest. I work to support my family. Now they are suffering. I wouldn't have seen their suffering if I were dead. I've lost both of my legs, I need someone to help me. This is why I feel very upset. If I had received the money, the family wouldn't have to suffer. I am still willing to go back to work.

DEITH: A week after we left Dhaka, the Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina, gave Rehana a cheque for 15 Lakh Taka – about £12,000. But last month a report was published criticising the government and the factory owners association over the delivery on their commitments to the Rana Plaza victims. It's one hundred days since the Rana Plaza tragedy, Dhaka's Centre for Policy Dialogue reveals one in three families of the dead have had no support from the government. And the majority have received nowhere near what has been pledged.

We have crossed the road from the Rana Plaza and come down a lane, and at the end of the lane, in among some trees is a centre set up to help the victims of the Rana Plaza with the medical and psychological issues that they still are suffering with. In the days immediately

DEITH cont: after the disaster, this was run from a tent. It is now run from an abandoned hospital. Increasingly though what they are helping with is money issues. I am sitting down with Robi and Ratna. Ratna has come for physiotherapy. She has injured her spinal cord and has some problems with her leg. She is using a crutch. And beside her is her husband, Robi, who is caring for Ratna but also trying to keep the family together and they've got little Gabinder with them, who is their seven year old son.

RATNA [VIA INTERPRETER]: I cannot carry on with my regular activities, like I cannot wash my clothes and I cannot also cook for my family. You have to cook standing. I cannot stand for long.

DEITH: How difficult is to pay the rent, to buy food, to send Gabinder to school?

ROBI [VIA INTERPRETER]: It is very difficult for me. We share the house rent and our son's tuition fee and everything, but now she is not earning for the family and I have to bear all these things.

DEITH: So Robi is saying that he thought life would get better as time passed since Rana Plaza, but in fact it's been very difficult, life seems to be getting harder. It seems like we have struck a chord because Ratna is quite tearful at this point. The sense I'm getting really is that it's a sort of dawning realisation that the Rana Plaza tragedy is only really just beginning.

SULTAN: It's a huge disaster and the helplessness is increasing, that actually is a failure.

DEITH: Syed Sultan Uddin Ahmed set up the centre. It's running out of money too. It was established by the Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies using donations. In a few months there won't be the funds to pay for people's medicine. And it's not just medicine they need, but food.

SULTAN: A worker turning to beggar, running from door to door for help. More than a hundred complaining that they need day to day support. I would like it's inhumanely dangerous. From the very beginning government, owners and all those people

DEITH cont: announced it will pay another three months' salary to all affected families – to help them in the short term at least. Andrew Opie is Director of Sustainability at the British Retail Consortium, which represents many of the shops on the British high street and online.

Do the high street brands that are British Retail Consortium members have a financial and moral responsibility to help those workers who were put at risk in factories making clothes for our high street?

OPIE: Yes, we have a responsibility for those workers in our supply chain, whether they are in Bangladesh or whether they are in the UK here, and certainly British retailers were at the fore in terms of the ethical work that they do and in terms of many of the issues around health and safety prior to the Rana Plaza disaster.

DEITH: The Bangladesh Commerce Minister told us he is looking to you, the foreign buyers, to get involved, he said to look after the entire operation because the Bangladesh government is very resource poor. But the British high street brands are not really getting involved, are they? People have had almost no donations or financial help and what they have had has already run out?

OPIE: Well, I can't speak about those individual cases because I don't have the knowledge, but what I can say is we accept the responsibility for conditions for the workers that are in our supply chain and we will definitely work towards that. But it is an interesting comment from the Bangladesh government because whilst we accept the responsibility and we have a real commitment to improve the conditions for workers in Bangladesh, that will actually only really be achieved also alongside a similar commitment from both the factory owners and the suppliers that we work with and the Bangladesh government as well. So some of the issues around enforcement practices and enforcement of existing regulation in Bangladesh is also crucial alongside the voluntary measures that British retailers are putting in place and have put in place for a number of years.

DEITH: Bangladesh is the West's cut-price tailor. The country's been in such a rush to meet the £14 billion demand for cheap clothing, that while some factories are state of the art, many have been thrown up without plans or permission, or squeezed into shopping centres - even houses. Factories have collapsed before. Fires are

DEITH cont: common. Aside from the Rana Plaza, in the last six months, eight people have been killed and over five hundred have been injured.

ACTUALITY OF STREET NOISE

DEITH: We picked up a copy of the Daily Sun newspaper this morning and what do we find? An article about a fire at a garment factory just yesterday. It says that an electrical short circuit sparked the fire at a factory called Nipun Apparels in Savar. It says that there were no reports of any casualties, probably because thankfully yesterday was Friday, which is a public holiday here.

So, to reach the factory you have to walk down a narrow bazaar really of different shops selling garden tools, floor mats, clothes, plastic buckets and Nipun Apparels is above a supermarket on the second floor.

So we have come inside the building and come up some stairs and the entrance to the factory is behind a steel shutter which has been pulled down, but you can definitely smell smoke and see what looks like smoke on the paint around the shutter.

Since Rana Plaza, garment workers have started speaking out about unsafe buildings. The government's asked university engineering professors to help inspect two thousand factories. In initial checks they found 40% had major safety issues. The professors were so appalled at the condition of two buildings, they ordered them to be evacuated on the spot.

ACTUALITY IN VEHICLE

DEITH: It's 8am and we are on the road with engineering professors.

MANSUR: I'm Dr Tanvir Mansur of Bangladesh University of Engineering & Technology. It's interesting, it's challenging and also it gives us a huge opportunity to look at the current conditions of the buildings, because you know it's very tough.

DEITH: What's the scale of the job that you have before you?

MANSUR: Definitely it's humungous, yeah.

DEITH: Humungous?

MANSUR: Humungous, yes.

DEITH: Dr Tanvir thinks it will take a year and a half. The government's promised to recruit eight hundred of its own inspectors to help, but progress is slow. And there'll have to be a new way of working too. In the past, factory licences and inspections were waved through, sometimes without anyone even visiting the premises. One of the factories in the Rana Plaza was given an A+ safety rating by the authorities.

ACTUALITY OF FACTORY NOISE

MANSUR: working, ok.

DEITH: This one's the working factory? Okay. Which floor is it on?

MANSUR: Third, fourth and fifth.

DEITH: Third, fourth and fifth? Right. We're on the main production line floor now. I'd say there were about a hundred people in the room, men and women, at sewing machines, they're at tables, I think this is just putting in the labels, floral printed garments with Zara labels in them. And there's a group of ladies here just going over finished garments just with a pair of scissors, just taking off any loose threads. Nobody's saying much, all concentrating on their work, there's no chat here. The professors have got a tape measure out and they're measuring the girth of one of the columns. We're only halfway through the inspection, but so far the analysis seems to be that the top floors of this building are fine, they're structurally sound, but we'll find out more when they've completed their inspection.

MANSUR: They had some cracks on the second floor, not on the floor of the garments factory. They had some corrosion problems due to some like dampness.

DEITH: Corrosion?

MANSUR: Corrosion problem with cracking, so they retrofitted all those beams and columns, so now they look not perfect, but can do their intended job for the current loading conditions, so it is almost okay, yeah.

DEITH: Unions estimate it could cost up to £2 billion to make Bangladesh's garment factories safe. The government and universities are only inspecting half of them. Western retailers are going to inspect the other two thousand factories. But they're split on whether paying for improvements is their responsibility. About eighty mostly European brands – including M&S, Debenhams and Primark - have made a legally binding commitment to meet the cost. They've signed the Bangladesh Accord on Fire and Building Safety, enforceable by the courts, which commits them to working with the government and trade unions for five years. But companies which own a string of well-known high street names have so far failed to meet a deadline to sign the Accord. We asked Andrew Opie of the British Retail Consortium about the lack of unity on the Factory Safety Accord. There are a number of high profile European retailers who haven't signed up, which doesn't bode well for making sure all factories meet a minimum safety standard.

OPIE: Well, I think we are pretty confident, if you look at that standard that the vast majority of the factories will be addressed through this and it is for each company to decide whether it will sign whichever Accord. But I think with the combination and the different initiatives that are happening there, and crucially the number of retailers, the number of global retailers that are involved in the process, it will have a significant impact on the factories there. And I think crucially what it has also done is send a very very clear signal to the Bangladesh government that their own practices were not sufficient and that their export trade is at risk if they do not also support this. And we hope that will translate into much better qualified surveyors going out on the ground and doing government reports and government inspections and enforcement alongside the voluntary work of the retailers.

DEITH: You say that those who've signed are sending a clear and powerful signal to the government, but it would be better if it was a unified signal surely?

OPIE: I think it is a pretty clear signal. If you look at the weight and the numbers of those retailers that are concerned, it would be pretty clear to anybody in the garment industry in Bangladesh that what has happened before is absolutely unacceptable.

DEITH: Then there's the brands who think the onus is squarely on the factories to fund safety improvements. Walmart, Gap and sixteen other companies have formed their own alliance. They're prepared to lend tens of millions of dollars to factory bosses, but they don't want to be legally obliged to pay a cent themselves. They argue the threat of taking their business elsewhere will force factories to take safety seriously. But what if western brands do pull out of hundreds of garment factories? The industry employs four million people, mostly women. They're paid a pittance, as little as £25 a month, but they depend on those jobs to survive. Some workers are already regretting speaking up about dangerous working conditions.

At the office of the National Garment Workers Federation, four women told me how their factory – Sas Fashionwear - was closed down two weeks after the Rana Plaza collapsed.

WOMAN [VIA INTERPRETER]: The roof had many cracks on it. We joined the factory one year ago and we complained to the management many times, but they didn't listen to us. After the collapse of Rana Plaza, suddenly they shut down the factory one day and told us to leave.

DEITH: Can I have a look? A gentleman in the office has handed me a record file to do with Sas Fashionwear Ltd, and I will just read you what it says. "Dhaka City Corporation closed Sas Fashion on the 7/5 2013 as the factory building developed cracks. The management paid wages and overtime on the 14th of that month. The workers were not paid any compensation. The workers, with the help of the union, filed a petition to the BGMEA – that's the industry association - demanding compensation for the factory closure."

The factory workers staged a protest outside a satellite television station called ETV, owned by a relative of the boss of Sas Fashionwear. It turned violent; the women claim two male colleagues were beaten up and that they themselves were reported to the police on charges of harassment.

We want to speak to the owner of Sas Fashion, but unfortunately he doesn't want to speak to us. Our translator has made contact, but his reaction was something along the lines of, 'Why are you picking on me?' He said he was not interested in doing an interview.

DEITH cont: The Sas Fashionwear story shows Bangladesh has a real problem on its hands – how to keep workers safe, but keep them in work. The women I met are scared of the factories, but they're also scared of having no jobs.

The Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association is the most powerful group of factory owners in the country. Its headquarters stands out a mile in this city – a glittering glass tower. It's also illegal. The high court said it was built on land obtained illegally and put up without the proper permissions and ordered it to be demolished within ninety days. That was two years ago and of course it's still standing - many people say as a symbol of how the factory owners behave as if they are above the law.

The BGMEA disputes its HQ - or its members – are above the law. And vice president Mohammed Shahidullah Azim has little sympathy for the Sas Fashionwear workers' complaints.

You have got a list of factories which have closed and some workers have not received their salary benefits, for example, Sas Fashions.

AZIM: Sas Fashions is very close to us and what you told us is not, I can say with due respect, is not true, because the Sas people came to BGMEA, all the people are paid with their salary and benefits.

DEITH: Why would so many from Sas protest outside ETV if they had had the money that they were owed?

AZIM: It happened because there are a thousand people working there. Some people, they want to get money after working, some people they want to get money by sitting, it's all over the world. Some people always take the chance of the unemployment benefit. We have already 25% worker shortage in our sector, so those people who want to work, they can work, they can join any day. And the people who said he has not yet got paid so far, if he complains, we can take care of it.

DEITH: For many garment workers in Bangladesh, if it's a choice between working in an unsafe factory or not working, well there is no choice. Even children have to ignore the dangers for their families to survive. Boys and girls were working in the Rana Plaza. I met one of them, quite by chance, being wheeled down the corridor at the Hospital for the Paralysed.

ACTUALITY AT HOSPITAL

MASUD: What's your name now?

YANO: Yano.

MASUD: Yano?

MASUD: She is just fourteen years of age. Unfortunately her mother was also working at the same factory. Her mother died in this accident.

DEITH: She's obviously very brave and very strong, but how is she feeling about what happened to her and her family?

MASUD: She has three sisters and three brothers. She is the oldest one, so the only earning source was her father, but her father is engaged with her now so does not have any kind of income source. But she is still hoping she can contribute to the family as well.

DEITH: So even though she is injured, she is still thinking about how she can support the family?

MASUD: Yes, still she can manage, she is saying this.

DEITH: She is very strong.
Yano told me there were four other children in her factory. The law allows children to work from the age of fourteen, but the garment industry has officially banned children under eighteen from working in factories which make clothes for export.

ACTUALITY OF STREET NOISE

DEITH: Our translator, Ahammad, has heard about a 13 year old girl working in one of the garment factories in Savar, and we have met up with her father and we are playing follow my leader in rickshaws, because Ahammad and the girl's father are in front and we are following them on the way to his house to meet his daughter and hear how she feels about working in a factory at such a young age.

We've been told the girl's mother was injured in the Rana Plaza and can't walk. So her daughter has taken a factory job in her place.

It is half past 5 in the afternoon and we are waiting for her to finish her shift. We are not going to tell you her real name, because she can't afford to lose her job, so we're going to call her Ruma.

Salaam Alekum.

RUMA: Alekum salaam.

DEITH: How are you?

RUMA: I'm fine.

DEITH: How was work today?

RUMA [VIA INTERPRETER]: It was fine.

DEITH: And why did you go to work in the factory?

RUMA [VIA INTERPRETER]: My mother is very sick so I had no other option to go there.

DEITH: Do you find it tiring?

RUMA [VIA INTERPRETER]: Yes, I feel tired and I have to work every day. They say if I do not do overtime then they will not pay me.

DEITH: This week Ruma's worked seven long shifts, most of them twelve hours.

How many other girls and boys of your kind of age are in the factory?

RUMA [VIA INTERPRETER]: Yes, there is twenty to thirty teenagers working there.

DEITH: Twenty to thirty teenagers?

RUMA [VIA INTERPRETER]: Yes.

DEITH: And does the factory owner know how old you are?

RUMA [VIA INTERPRETER]: Yes, he guessed it. There are lots of teenagers like me working there and he said if someone comes to visit our factory then you will tell them that you are eighteen.

DEITH: What does she think about that? Does she think it is right that teenagers are working in a clothing factory?

RUMA [VIA INTERPRETER]: I don't know it is right or wrong because some families have several problems and I have also a problem in my family so I have no other options to go there. It is very hard for me. I cannot do a twelve hour shift every day.

DEITH: Ruma's family needs the £37 she earns each month. At the moment, that's what she has to think about. There's no evidence Ruma or Yano worked on orders for any of the big international brands. We asked Commerce Minister Ghulam Mohammed Quader about the impacts of Rana Plaza being felt now – the people jobless because their factories have closed, and children potentially being driven into child labour in garment factories.

QUADER: Some other factories which are now being inspected and not found to be okay are being closed down now. Problem with owners is that ... if I am not earning, if my factory is closed, how can I pay my workers? And the workers are thinking, when I have worked why should I not get payment?

DEITH: Aren't they due that under law? Aren't they due a salary if they lose their jobs?

QUADER: Of course under the law there are certain compensation systems, but the BGMEA did certain things on their own and maybe they needed to have some discussion with the owners, and so far I know they have been doing it from this side. And if they do not do it and if the workers do not get their payment, it is the government's responsibility to see that they get their due share.

DEITH: The other knock-on effect that we have encountered with our own eyes is where a parent has been injured in Rana Plaza and obviously they are the main earner for the family, that young girls are taking their places in other factories.

QUADER: [Laughs] These are really contradictory problems, you know. Sometimes a child is the only member left in the family and there is nobody really to look after. Our social security network system is not that efficient. Sometimes they try to find some work some place, but from the government side, especially for this type of factories where there are foreign buyers, there are very strict compliance regulations and they are not allowed to do that. Sometimes they go to some other places where there is no good inspection system, sometimes it is being overlooked by the supervisors, because that is the way they survive maybe.

DEITH: So what is the government doing to make sure that they know if factories are employing children?

QUADER: That is the reason government is trying to recruit more and more inspectors to go out on the spot and find out things which are not as per law and take action accordingly, so this is being done now.

DEITH: The inspections could throw up as many problems as they solve. The Western brands walking away because factories are unsafe is, the workers say, the last thing they want. They need the brands to stay and do more to help them. The Rana Plaza disaster exposed not just the workers' unsafe conditions, but their very low pay. Factory owners complain that Western buyers tell them to pay living wage, while at the same time beating them down on price. Amirul Haque Amin of the National Garment Workers Federation says it's one of the biggest barriers to better working conditions.

AMIN: The multinational company, on the one hand they are describing to the local business people, factory owners to provide the legal wage for the workers. But on the other hand, they're always putting pressure to the business people, factory owners to decrease the price of the goods. It is really contradictory. The multinational companies, they are the main actors of this business. They actually are taking the major portion of the profit. That is the reason they actually need to bear the major responsibility too. And I think they have enough power and enough capacity if they really want to do something for the better condition, they can do it.

DEITH: One of the biggest garment manufacturers in Bangladesh, Rubana Huq, employs nine thousand workers, and says factories have got to start being honest with buyers.

HUQ: I believe that manufacturers like us have done too little too late for the workers and this is a realisation that we all need to wake up to. I think it's also time for us to effectively negotiate with our buyers for a better price for our workers. I mean Bangladesh has come to such a level where we can afford to negotiate with our buyers and tell them that, you know, 'This is the bare minimum that you have to pay.' We shouldn't be hiding our overtime hours, we shouldn't be hiding child labour because, you know, the customers are really not going to walk away from us. So I think we should have more faith in our relationship with our buyers and negotiate a better deal.

OPIE: We are paying a fair price for these garments which we then expect to be reinvested in the factories themselves for the safety and obviously to pay the workers a fair wage in those factories, so we have been working with Bangladesh suppliers for a number of years now and we would expect for the payments to be reinvested in the infrastructure which would include the safety of the buildings.

DEITH: But you could help that process along, couldn't you?

OPIE: Absolutely.

DEITH: A few extra pennies on the price of a plain white t shirt could make the difference, so you have all the power here, the power to really change people lives.

OPIE: Absolutely, and what I am saying to you is we will pay absolutely a fair price for the garments that we buy from Bangladesh, but the best way to help is not necessarily to say, 'Right, okay, we need X retailer to pay 10% more.' Raise the national minimum wage. We have no problem for that. In fact, we have been lobbying for an increase in the national minimum wage which would help all workers. It would be easy maybe to say, okay we can't sort out the problems in Bangladesh so we will move to another country and we'll source from there, and it may be that the wages there are slightly higher, the minimum wage, but how does that help the workers who are now employed in the Bangladesh garment industry? The best way is to work with the government, to work with the factory owners to get the wages up, to make sure the investment in the factories actually works, to make sure that the factories themselves are safe for the workers that they employ.

DEITH: The human loss and distress caused by the Rana Plaza collapse has meant British shoppers are looking much more closely at the labels in the back of our clothes, and how the workers who make them are treated. It will take years to do the inspections needed to prevent another tragedy, and it will take the Bangladesh government being tougher with factory owners. As a result of consumer pressure, many high street brands say they will pay to help make factories safe, but when it comes to the price they pay for clothes, is it always going to be about getting the cheapest deal?

SIGNATURE TUNE