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RANA PLAZA TWO-YEAR ANNIVERSARY

BY

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Two years ago, the Rana Plaza building collapsed, crushing workers and drawing the world's attention to the readymade garment (RMG) sector in Bangladesh. In one day, Bangladesh lost over 1100 lives. Today we remember those workers and grieve their loss along with their families and friends. As we look to the future, we see that Bangladesh – its workers, employers, and government – is working alongside the world's brands and Bangladesh's international partners to prevent such a tragedy from ever happening again. Together, we are building a better and more productive RMG sector and demonstrating to the world that business success goes hand-in-hand with workers' rights and safety.

Bangladesh is not alone when it comes to surviving infamous factory tragedies. On March 25, 1911, in the United States, 146 workers died during a fire at the Triangle shirt factory. Similar to the workers at Rana Plaza, the Triangle shirt factory victims included many young women who had come to the factory to earn a salary for the first time. Like the Rana Plaza collapse, the Triangle shirt factory fire could have been prevented. The owners had locked the doors to the stairwells and exits, which prevented many of the workers from being able to escape the burning building. Instead, onlookers watched as young women jumped from the eighth, ninth, and tenth floors to their deaths on the streets below.

This tragedy led to enormous changes in the United States that included legislation requiring improved factory safety standards and the strengthening of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union. A Committee on Public Safety was formed, headed by Frances Perkins, who later became the first Secretary of Labor of the United States. The committee identified specific problems and supported new legislation including a bill to shorten the maximum hours in a work week. Field agents were hired to do on-site inspections of factories. New York City's Fire Chief John Kenlon told the investigators that his department had identified more than 200 factories with similar fire risks.

Change has similarly begun in Bangladesh to address factory safety concerns. Since Rana Plaza, over 2,700 factories have been inspected for fire, building and electrical safety, and 32 factories with dangerous conditions have been closed. People from all over the world can access information about these inspections on the Ministry of Labor and Employment website. The ministry has hired and begun training over 100 inspectors. But the work is not done; over 1000 factories under the National Tripartite Action Plan have not been inspected. Other factories

remain not registered; their conditions are unknown. We urge all of Bangladesh's stakeholders to ensure that all factories are safe.

The government of Bangladesh has also begun to show its leadership among industrializing nations by demonstrating its commitment to important labor rights standards. It has registered over 300 unions and created a website for unions to register online. We encourage the government to ensure these unions' members are able to exercise their legal right to collectively bargain, free from the fear that they will be fired or harassed, and that illegal retaliation will be dealt with quickly. We also would welcome use of an alternative resolution system to prevent disputes between workers and management from escalating into conflict. We look forward to the new inspectors receiving training from the International Labor Organization and inspecting worksites for wage violations and other issues as mandated by the labor law. And by issuing the Labor Act's Implementing Rules, the government will soon provide employers better guidance, help workers understand their role, and give Bangladesh authorities the direction to properly enforce the law.

Tragedies can and should lead to transformation. Workers, including thousands of young women employed for the first time, must be afforded the right to raise their concerns, be respected and work in safe conditions. BGMEA and the government have a responsibility to ensure all factories allow inspectors access and that factories remediate the problems that are identified. These reforms will also increase productivity. The garment sector's plan to grow to \$50 billion by 2021 is crucial to the nation's development goals, given the enormous contribution the RMG sector makes to Bangladesh's economy and women's empowerment. The United States is partnering with the government, the workers, and the employers to show the world that Bangladesh is working toward new standards for workers' rights and safety, ensuring that no worker need fear such a tragedy again.

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