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In Bangladesh, echoes of NYC's 1911 Triangle fire

By Meghan Barr
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NEW YORK — Terrified women leaping to their deaths. Locked exits trapping workers. Piles of clothing blocking stairwells to safety.

The fire that raced through a garment factory in Bangladesh last week and killed 112 workers bore eerie echoes of another blaze more than a century ago: the Triangle Shirtwaist factory fire in New York City. While the

March 25, 1911, Triangle fire that killed 146 workers spurred the organized labor movement and led to workplace safety improvements, experts question whether the same will happen in Bangladesh.

"Profit and efficiency and competition always trump safety and health," said James Gross, a labor relations professor at Cornell University. "There's all this hoopla, and

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Labor union members gather to protest and mourn the loss of life in the March 25, 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire in New York. AP

Triangle

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then not a lot happens after."

In Bangladesh, officials blamed the high death toll in part on the lack of an emergency exit in the eight-story building that housed Tazreen Fashions Ltd., a factory that made clothing for such U.S. retailers as Wal-Mart, Sears and Disney. Likewise, Triangle survivors testified that as the fire raced through the top three floors of a 10-story building, a crucial door that would have helped many escape was locked.

Most of the workers at the Tazreen factory were women from the poorest region of the South Asian country. Young, poor immigrant women dominated Triangle.

Stacks of yarn and clothes

blocked part of the stairway in Bangladesh, and dozens of fire extinguishers in the building appeared unused. At Triangle, the stairway was blocked by crates of blouses and other goods, and water buckets were not adequate.

"All around me the others were screaming and hollering," Triangle worker Celia Saltz Pollock recalled later as part of a project to interview survivors. "The door was locked and I pushed over to the door of the elevator. When the elevator stopped on our floor, I was swept into it by the pushing crowd."

A state commission convened in response to the Triangle fire drafted 20 laws aimed at improving workplace safety, including requirements for fire drills, occupancy limits and clearly posted exit signs.

"I'm heartsick. It's tragic,"

said Suzanne Pred Bass, the great-niece of Katie Weiner, who survived the Triangle fire, and of Rose Weiner, who did not. "It's not just reminiscent; it is the same event replayed again."

Bass said what breaks her heart is the fact that she hasn't seen the same degree of outrage that followed the Triangle fire.

"I think we need, in this country, to have a boycott of Bangladesh clothing until their factories are safe," she said. "Until their unions are protected."

But unions are scarce in third-world countries like Bangladesh, where workers have few protections, said Ethan Snow, a spokesman for Unite Here, a union that represents garment and textile workers in the U.S.

"The reason why these major companies have moved to these countries is because there are no unions," Snow said.