

Speaking points for Andrew Barnard – message from Ambassador William Hanna to the National Dialogue on Factory Safety in Bangladesh, 13 May 2013

Ambassador Hanna regrets that he is unable to be here today, as he has had to go to Brussels for important meetings about Bangladesh. On his behalf, I would like to deliver the following message:

The disaster at Savar has shocked us all.

We wish to express again our sincere condolences to the families of the victims.

The scale of this incident - the numbers of dead, as well as the circumstances of their death - has led to great concern all over the world. And nowhere more than in Europe, which buys the bulk of Bangladesh exports.

This concern has been expressed by many people, including by HR/VP Ashton and EU Trade Commissioner de Gucht in a statement on 30 April.

It is important at to look at the different elements of this statement, and to see what it is trying to achieve. There are eight main points.

- First, it expresses condolences, sympathy and concern.
- Second, it refers also to the recent fires- putting this new incident in the context of a wider problem of factory safety.
- Third, it points out our EU responsibility as Bangladesh's largest trading partner to be concerned about labour conditions, including health and safety.
- Fourth, it then makes a clear call on the Government to act immediately.
- Fifth, it refers specifically to the need to comply with international labour standards including International Labour Conventions.
- Sixth it goes on to say that the EU is presently considering appropriate action -including through the GSP - through which Bangladesh currently receives duty free and quota free access to the EU market under the Everything But Arms scheme in order to incentivise responsible management of supply chains involving developing countries.
- Seventh, it says that the EU is ready to assist the Bangladeshi authorities to meet the international standards. We already do this through several projects, including the Better Work and Standards Programme in which we work with GiZ.
- Eighth, at the same time we continue to encourage European and international companies to promote better health and safety standards in line with internationally recognised corporate social responsibility standards.

So this is a comprehensive statement. It aims to assist Bangladesh to bring about change. It is about all sides - including the buyers and importing countries - taking their responsibilities.

What is needed now?

We were encouraged to see the high level ILO mission visit Bangladesh last week.

At the end of that mission a Joint Statement was signed, involving workers representatives, employers and government.

This is a good first step. The ILO has a key role to play as the guarantor of internationally accepted standards. An action plan is needed. It must be clear and time bound. Of course the problem cannot be solved in a day – but that should not be an excuse not to start, and I would echo what the Deputy DG from the ILO said at his press conference: "What is needed most now is commitment."

The RMG story in Bangladesh in recent years has been one of great success. It has provided employment for many people, mainly women. We have been happy that our market access has helped achieve this. This has shown that trade can lead to development. But the Ashulia fire and the Savar disaster are too high a price to pay. The sort of development which does not respect basic human rights is unsustainable, and the EU wants to play its part in putting an end to it.

It is up to Bangladesh to come up with the solutions, and we are ready – and will always be ready – to assist you in this.

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