

Congress of the United States

Washington, D.C. 20515

February 23, 2017

Her Excellency Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina
Prime Minister
Government of Bangladesh
c/o Embassy of the Government of Bangladesh
3510 International Drive, NW
Washington, DC 20008

Dear Prime Minister Hasina:

As friends of Bangladesh and advocates of a strong U.S.-Bangladesh relationship, we write to express our serious concern regarding the arrest and detention of workers' rights leaders in the garment industry who have been engaged in peaceful activity in many areas of Bangladesh.

We take note that the Dhaka Apparel Summit 2017 will convene February 25, which will announce the garment industry's "massive transformation" "to ensure workplace safety" and the "well-being of workers". However, worrisome developments over the past several months are at odds with this pronouncement by the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers Export Association.

Since mid-December, Congressional offices have received briefings on an orchestrated pattern of arrests, surveillance and harassment of garment worker union members and leaders, as well as the forced closure of union offices and community education centers.

In response to largely peaceful protests calling for an increase in the minimum wage last December, factory owners responded by locking out workers, and suspending or firing at least 1,600.¹ Press reports indicate that Bangladeshi security forces arrested many labor activists, some of whom have still not been released.² Many of those labor activists who were arrested in Dhaka, Chittagong and even some in Ashulia had no involvement whatsoever in the Ashulia protests. It appears that these leaders have been targeted because they are involved in lawful labor rights education or union organizing.

This backsliding is also troubling because it is disrupting activities to develop a sustainable garment industry in the country. For example, dozens of USAID-funded training and education

¹ *Bangladesh Government, Factory Owners Shun Growing Concerns Over Apparel Sector*, The Fashion Law, February 7, 2017, available at <http://www.thefashionlaw.com/home/bangladesh-government-factory-owners-shun-growing-concerns-of-apparel-sector>.

² *Protests in Bangladesh Shake a Global Workshop for Apparel*, The New York Times, January 22, 2017, available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/22/business/bangladesh-protest-apparel-clothing.html>.

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activities to promote the rule of law, industrial relations and constructive conflict resolution have already been curtailed by these recent police actions, affecting over 500 Bangladeshi participants.

We are concerned that we are witnessing a reversal of efforts to turn the corner on the country's history of suppressing workers' rights. The situation in Bangladesh received international attention in 2013 when the Rana Plaza factory collapsed on thousands of workers inside. The death toll reached more than 1,100 Bangladeshis.³ Many of the workers who entered Rana Plaza on the day of the tragedy were reluctant to do so because of concerns for their safety⁴, but were threatened with losing their jobs.⁵

Later in 2013, in response to Rana Plaza and to persistent violations of the right to organize, the U.S. government revoked trade preferences under the Generalized System of Preferences (GSP) for certain Bangladeshi goods. In the immediate aftermath of the revocation, it seemed that the Government of Bangladesh was committed to improving its respect for workers' rights by allowing unions to register and reforming aspects of the national labor and factory safety laws.

In the past couple of years, progress on implementation of the GSP Action Plan appears to have regressed with regards to labor rights. For example, union registration approval rates have dropped from 65% to 29% between 2013 and 2015, and certain unions have been advised that their registration applications will not, as a matter of practice, receive favorable consideration, according to information received by Congress.

We regret the backsliding of progress and deplore the criminalization of activities protected under Bangladesh and international law. We call on you to provide an immediate accounting of all individuals who have been detained, a review of the many charges which have been made, and urge your intervention to assure that the responsible government entities drop all meritless and unsubstantiated charges, immediately releasing those wrongly detained.

We are extremely concerned that the respect for labor rights in Bangladesh is moving in the wrong direction, and call upon you to personally intervene, and to clarify the government's policies and practices in the face of the deterioration in labor rights. We respectfully ask that you give full and fair consideration to our concerns and our request.

³ *Whoever Raises their Head Suffers the Most": Workers' Rights in Bangladesh's Garment Factories*, Human Rights Watch, April 22, 2015, available at: <https://www.hrw.org/report/2015/04/22/whoever-raises-their-head-suffers-most/workers-rights-bangladeshs-garment>.

⁴ *3 Years Later, Bangladeshi Survivors Remember the Collapse of Rana Plaza*, National Public Radio, April 24, 2016, available at: <http://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2016/04/24/475499651/3-years-later-bangladeshi-survivors-remember-the-collapse-of-rana-plaza>.

⁵ *Bangladesh Police Charge 41 with Murder over Rana Plaza Collapse*, The New York Times, June 1, 2015, available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/02/world/asia/bangladesh-rana-plaza-murder-charges.html>.

Sincerely,

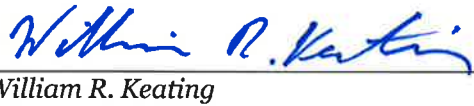

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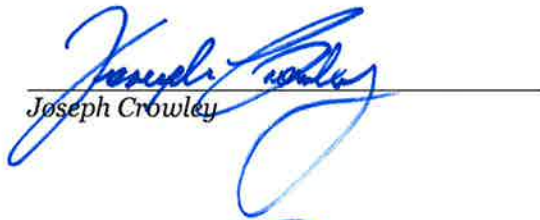

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