

United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN RELATIONS

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-6225

September 25, 2013

The Honorable Ellen O’Kane Tauscher
Chair, Board of Directors
Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety
Washington, DC

Dear Undersecretary Tauscher:

Thank you for your leadership in addressing fire and building safety in Bangladesh’s garment industry through your role as Chair of the Board of Directors of the Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety. I welcomed the creation of the Alliance as an important first step toward safer working conditions in Bangladesh. As the Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and the son of a former garment worker, I believe that we have a moral imperative to help bring about fundamental change in Bangladesh’s garment industry. Groups like the Alliance have an important part to play in effecting this change, and I urge you to take advantage of a momentous opportunity by increasing awareness and understanding of workers’ rights in the Alliance’s garment factories in Bangladesh.

Our Committee held a hearing on labor issues in Bangladesh this past June, and we consistently heard that if the workers of Rana Plaza had been in unions, their managers could not have forced them back into the building when collapse appeared imminent. Similarly, if the workers of Tazreen Fashions had been organized, managers could not have made them work through a fire alarm or kept exits padlocked. While I applaud the many initiatives in the Alliance’s action plan to ensure fire and building safety in its members’ factories, it does not adequately empower the workers in those factories to ensure their own safety. Bangladesh’s factories will be truly safer when the workers can organize, speak and act together, without fear of retribution from factory owners or managers.

This fear is justified: in its recent article “Bangladesh Workers Face Fight to Form Unions,” the Wall Street Journal reported how one unionizing worker was hospitalized after being attacked with cutting shears by pro-management staff, while others were reportedly harassed, beaten and fired. These workers only wanted decent, safe and healthy working conditions. While the factory in question may not have produced for any Alliance members, the attitude of its owners and managers can be found in many factories throughout Bangladesh, including those that supply Alliance members.

Due to Bangladesh’s troubled history of labor relations, factory owners and managers have serious misperceptions regarding the role of unions and the potential of constructive labor relations. And owing to a lack of education and experience, many Bangladeshi garment workers are uninformed of their rights and responsibilities as workers and the benefits of having unions in the workplace. Simply put, owners are scared of unions and workers are scared to organize; both

sides appear to fear what they do not know. The vice president of the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association's said it well when he remarked: "Unions in the garment sector are a new thing and both owners and workers need to get a better idea of how to make unions work."

The formation of the Alliance has created a tremendous opportunity to resolve this problem in a large number of Bangladeshi garment factories. According to its plan, by this time next year the Alliance will have sent training teams into all of its 500-plus factories to educate both managers and workers on fire and building safety. As the Alliance continues to develop its training program and curriculum, I strongly urge you to expand this important program to include education of workers on their rights and responsibilities with regard to organizing and, more importantly, education of owners and managers with regard to accepting unions in their factories and cooperating with union leaders to improve working conditions. This training could easily be included within the current safety training regimen and carried out by qualified union representatives.

By working directly in its factories to dispel the ignorance surrounding the proper role of unions, the Alliance will improve the safety of its factories and, consequently, the reputations of its members. I hope you will be able to work with the Alliance board and its members on this issue and help make a lasting contribution to the safety of Bangladeshi garment workers and the sustainability of Bangladesh's garment industry. Thank you again for your leadership, and I look forward to working with you closely in the future.

Sincerely,



Robert Menendez
Chairman