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WORKER RIGHTS CONSORTIUM

## Initial statement regarding fire at Matrix Sweaters Factory

2 February 2016—The Clean Clothes Campaign, the International Labor Rights Forum, the Maquila Solidarity Network, and the Worker Rights Consortium are deeply disturbed to hear of another serious fire breaking out at a garment factory in Bangladesh – the factory supplies H&M and JC Penney, according to public records. The fire service is reporting that some injuries were sustained, but no details have been provided to date.

The incident occurred just days after the four labor rights groups issued a report (<http://www.laborrights.org/hmcapsmemo12016>) raising concerns about long delays in safety renovations at H&M’s supplier factories in Bangladesh.<sup>1</sup> H&M disclosed the factory on its website, with a rating of “silver.” Import records show that US retailer JC Penney was also a significant buyer from the factory in 2015. Other brands that appear on the website of the factory’s parent company (Labib Group/Nice Cotton) include Walmart, Inditex, s.Oliver, GAP, Esprit and Marks & Spencer.<sup>2</sup> The labor rights groups are renewing their calls to all brands buying from Bangladesh to do more to ensure essential fire and structural safety renovations are completed as quickly as possible.

According to local reports the fire broke out at the Matrix Sweaters factory in Gazipur at around 7.30am this morning and took fire fighters around four hours to extinguish.<sup>3</sup> The fire is reported to have broken out on the 7<sup>th</sup> floor of the factory. The timing of the fire meant that most workers had yet to turn up for their shift and the factory was reported as being largely empty, although video footage (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jv9d2W39izY>) of the fire suggests that some people were inside.<sup>4</sup>

Had the fire started even one hour later, the factory would have been filled with more than 6,000 workers, and the risk of death would have been extreme.

According to the Bangladesh Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishments (DIFE),<sup>5</sup> the factory was originally inspected by the US-based Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety nearly two years ago. The full Alliance inspection report was unavailable for download today, but the fire safety inspection report,<sup>6</sup> carried out in May 2014, reveals that a large number of life-threatening safety hazards were found at the factory, including a lack of adequate fire exits, no fire doors, no sprinklers, insufficient smoke alarms, collapsible gates and lockable doors at the exits, non-enclosed stairwells, and numerous electrical safety risks. The Alliance had required that these repairs were to be completed by September 2014 – six months after the initial inspection.

The Alliance does not provide any details on the progress of repairs at their inspected factories, but the Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh, which carried out follow-up inspections,

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.laborrights.org/hmcapsmemo12016>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.nicecotton.net/>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.thedailystar.net/country/huge-fire-gazipur-garments-factory-211288>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jv9d2W39izY>

<sup>5</sup> <http://database.dife.gov.bd/factories/details/4/1848?format=html>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.bangladeshworkersafety.org/files/reports/MATRIX%20SWEATERS%20LTD. Fire.pdf>

provides an up-to-date Corrective Action Plan (CAP) for the factory. This CAP, which was most recently updated yesterday, indicates that none of the hazards that pose the greatest danger to the safe exit of workers during a fire had been fully remedied.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, The CAP shows numerous electrical safety repairs that the factory had failed to complete. Although the cause of the fire is yet to be determined, the great majority of garment factory fires in Bangladesh are electrical in origin.

In total, 63% of the mandatory safety renovations are still incomplete at Matrix Sweaters, with original deadlines long ago breached, some of which extend back to the middle of 2014.

Incredibly, the Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety reports on its website that the process of safety renovation at Matrix Sweaters is “On Track” – which the Alliance defines as “progressing adequately.”

*“We are extremely relieved that this fire hasn’t resulted in another tragedy on the scale of the Tazreen factory fire of 2012,”* said Sam Maher of the Clean Clothes Campaign. *“However this is more down to luck than anything else – had the fire broken out just a few hours later, it is more than possible that workers would have found themselves trapped. We urge all buyers from Bangladesh, including those who signed up to the Accord or the Alliance, to do more to get these vital repairs done without delay.”*

These events once more highlight the importance of the concerns about the delayed repairs that were voiced by the four labor rights organizations last week. Liana Foxvog of the International Labor Rights Forum said: *“In response to our concerns H&M tried to reassure its customers that their suppliers have adequate fire exits, but failed to provide assurances that this work would get done. H&M should be thankful that their complacency in this area has not resulted in another deadly disaster.”*

*“It is astonishing that the Alliance has Matrix Sweaters rated as ‘on track’ with safety renovations,”* said Scott Nova, Executive Director of the Worker Rights Consortium. *“This factory has missed dozens of deadlines to eliminate fire hazards and make the structure safe, with 72 different hazards still uncorrected almost two years after inspection. Just how dangerous does a factory have to be to earn criticism from the Alliance?”*

This is the second major fire to break out at Matrix Sweaters; the first, in 2010, led to the death of one worker.

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<http://accord.fairfactories.org/ffcweb/Web/Utilities/DownloadFile.aspx?id=9449>