Bangladesh garment industry is presently in turmoil, because rather than the investors and the profits, it is the workers who are capturing the headlines. By sacrificing their lives in the struggle for revision of minimum wages, they conveyed the investors and the state that they were no more willing to perish in the profit machine, and instead have been attracting the attention of international communities towards the hardships of the garment workers. The workers were demanding nothing special, but to implement the wage revisions (which are still not satisfactory) declared by the government itself. By sacrificing their lives in this struggle, the workers have raised a big question—why should they be compelled to perish in a profit machine? This article aims to shed some light on the wages and working conditions in the garment industry and the recent struggles on minimum wages in Bangladesh.

**Wages and Working Conditions in Garment Industry**

The Garment and textile sector in Bangladesh is actually the lifeline for both urban and rural poor in terms that it is the only major labour intensive sector with huge employment generating potential. Half of the Bangladesh population is still dependent on agriculture, facing the worst poverty situations. There is a fast growing service sector and it contributes about 50 percent of GDP, but its contribution in employment is only 34.6 percent. The growth in labour intensive industrial manufacturing is mainly represented by the textile and ready made garment (RMG) sector, which employs about three million workers directly and 20 million indirectly (transportation sector earns US$70 million from RMG, 80% Chittagong port deals are with RMG, 60% private bank loans go to RMG units). RMG and textiles are also the major source of
foreign exchange earnings. The other major source of foreign exchange is remittances from Bangladeshis working overseas.

Bangladesh's textile sector is concentrated in export processing zones in Dhaka and Chittagong. The textile industry includes knitwear, ready-made garments and some specialized textile products. The export from textile sector accounts for about 80% of the total exports from Bangladesh.\(^1\) Bangladesh has overtaken India in apparel exports in 2009, by exporting worth 2.66 billion US dollar, as against India’s 2.27 billion US dollar. Now it ranks 3rd in world textile exports (by value), only lagging behind with Turkey and China. Now the Bangladesh is considered to be the most formidable rival of China. US and Europe are the major export destinations for Bangladesh garments.

Wages of the garment workers in Bangladesh are the lowest in the world. The first minimum wage board was constituted in 1994 and on the basis of its recommendations the minimum wages for garment workers were fixed at Tk950 (US$15) per month. This very low level of wages remained without change until a long struggle of workers achieved the second minimum wage board being constituted in 2006, which set the minimum wage at Tk1662.50 ($24) per month.\(^2\)

Thereafter again the workers had to struggle for four years for wage revisions and lastly in 2010 the minimum wages for garment workers were fixed at TK3000 (about $43). However, the workers and trade unions were demanding to fix the minimum wages at TK5000 ($72).

Department of Nutritional Science of Bangladesh says that minimum food intake to keep an individual able to work costs Tk60 daily (in 2010). Bangladesh workers normally spend about 45% of their income on food and 55% on other necessities. Therefore, total daily cost for one person may be about TK 133 and average daily cost for a 4 member family will be TK 532 (TK 7980 per month). But trade unions and workers demanded only TK 5000 ($72) minimum wage and that was also denied.\(^3\)

Investors and their mouthpieces cry in chorus against any demand for right to collective bargaining or increase in wages of garment workers as if the whole

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Bangladesh will be ruined if the living and working conditions of garment workers are improved. However, on the other hand, investors are not only reaping super profits by comparative advantage in terms of cheapest wages, but also bagging huge subsidies and incentives; including 10 years tax holiday, duty free import of capital goods, exemptions on income tax on salaries paid to foreign nationals for three years, dividend tax exemptions for 10 years, goods produced in the zones exported duty free; and benefits guaranteed by generalized system of preferences in US, European and Japanese markets, and most favored nation status from the United States. Moreover, there is no ceiling on foreign investments in EPZs and full repatriation of profits is allowed.

Even after enjoying all these benefits if the investors are arguing so openly for maintaining the inhuman comparative advantage in terms of maintaining cheaper labour costs in Bangladesh, then this is always a big question-how much comparative advantage they want to maintain? Crude fact is that even if the wages are increased to $72 dollars per month; it is still one of the lowest in the world. The wages in China are about $300, in India about $106, in Vietnam about $92, in Pakistan about $116, and in Sri Lanka it is about $92. While in Bangladesh it is only $43, and the demand for workers is also only for $72, which will be still far below the wages in major garment exporting countries.

According to a study conducted by Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies, value added by workers is about 31 for every 100 in value in Bangladesh and out of this 31, only 7 is paid as wages and 24 goes as profits to investors. The World Bank estimates also raises the issue of exploitation by exposing that a Bangladesh garment worker gets US$ 290 by producing 2,536 T-shirts per year; on the other hand, an Indian worker gets 668 dollar by producing only 56 pieces more than his Bangladeshi counterparts.  

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Fire Accidents Killing Many Workers Every Year

The recent fire accident in Ha-Meem group’s sport wear factory in December has freshly exposed how fatal the working conditions are in the Bangladesh garment industry. Media investigations revealed that the number of deaths increased because the exits were locked. “Strangely, piecing together the circumstances of each such garment fire, one would find more or less a familiar pattern. As reported, some surviving workers of the burnt factory said that they found the security men had closed the collapsible gates at the staircase by which they could escape. Many workers even complained that the front doors of the factory rooms under fire were also closed, a situation that forced them either to jump through the window or climb down water pipes to safety. However, unlike in the past cases of garment fire in which victims were mostly burnt to death, the overwhelming number of the casualties at the Ha-meem group's garment unit were due to fall from the 10th and 11th floors of the 11-storey building.”\(^6\) About 29 workers died in this fire accident.\(^7\) It reflects on the inhuman attitude of investors towards the workers – as well as on the ineffectualness of the local labour movement and international solidarity groups so far, to ensure that such tragedies do not repeat. Yet it was only one in a series of several tragic fires in recent years, in garment factories in Bangladesh.

The overall working conditions in Bangladesh garment industry is one of the worse and it is bluntly reflected in the alarming number of deaths of garment workers in fire accidents in the factories. Following data on deaths in fire accidents in garment factories in Bangladesh can give a hint about the disastrous conditions:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>No of deaths</th>
<th>Factory</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Saraka Garments Dhaka</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Shanghai Apparels Dhaka</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Workers</th>
<th>Factory Name</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Lushakh Garments Dhaka</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Jahanara Fashion Narayanganj</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Globe knitting Dhaka</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Macro Sweater Dhaka</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Choudhury Knitwear Narsingdi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Shan Knitting Narayanganj</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>KTS Garments Chittagong</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Ha-Meem group sports wear factory Chittagong</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The above is only an incomplete list gathered and published in media (Daily star).\(^8\)

According to Bangladesh’s Fire Service and Civil Defence Department, 414 garment workers lost their lives in 213 factory fires between 2006 and 2009.\(^9\)

**The Issue of Right to Association and Collective Bargaining**

The first phase of struggles of the Bangladesh garment workers was mainly for trade union rights. BEPZA Act 1986 declared that Industrial Relations Ordinance (IRO) was not applicable in the EPZs, which actually amounted to suspension of trade union rights of garment workers since the majority of the garment industries got located in EPZs. Thereafter a long struggle started for restoration of right to association for garment workers. Bangladesh Garments workers Unity Council (BGWUC) called a national strike in Bangladesh garment industry in 2001 and raised six demands before Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA), including new wage structure on the basis of a basic minimum wage, insure health and safety of garment workers, implementation of trade union rights in EPZs, settlements, schools and hospitals in the zones, and implementation of the Agreement signed between the BGMEA and the BGWUC in 1997 and 2000 (to

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\(^8\) Enemies of the Nation or Human Rights defenders: Fighting Poverty Wages in Bangladesh; SweatFree Communities 2010; www.sweatfree.org

provide workers appointment letter, identity card, service book, weekly holiday, maternity leave, etc.).

The generalized system of preferences agreement signed between Bangladesh and United States also ended in 2001 and therefore on the pressure of US labour groups the US government extended it for another three years only on the condition that the trade unions will be allowed to operate in the zones.\(^{10}\) Bangladesh government issued a declaration in 2001 to withdraw restrictions on trade union rights in the EPZs from January 1, 2004. Therefore the struggle and campaign for restoration of trade union rights in EPZs got extraordinary momentum in 2004.\(^{11}\)

Lastly, The EPZ Workers Association and Industrial Relations Act (2004) came into existence which provided for the formation of trade unions in EPZs. But actually in the initial stage (till 31 October 2006) the workers were only allowed to set up Worker Representation and Welfare Committees (WRWC) and in the second stage they had the option to transform their WRWCs into trade unions, referred to as Workers’ Associations in the law.

After consistent struggle of the workers, referendums were held in various factories in 2008, and in 69 units the workers voted in favour of Workers Associations rather than Workers Welfare Committees. Referendum was to be held in another 120 eligible units in 2010.\(^{12}\) However, the Act was amended in 2009, and the term ‘Workers’ Association’ in the legislation was replaced by the ‘Workers’ Welfare Organization’. Thus, the government had again moved backward on the issue. Moreover, a ban on strikes and lockouts was imposed in EPZs which was due to expire on 31 October 2008. But the rules allowed the Bangladesh Export Processing Zone Authority to extend it until 31 October 2010.

However, the overall issue of the right to association and collective bargaining is still unresolved. It is also still not clear whether (after October) the ban on right to strike ended or not.

\(^{10}\) Surendra Pratap 2009: SEZ Rush in India; Working Paper, CEC, New Delhi.

\(^{11}\) The New Nation, February 01, 2004

At plant level the workers have still no actual right for collective bargaining and also no actual right to form their associations. It is in this background that very special and unique collective bargaining strategy was evolved in Bangladesh. The workers NGOs emerged as an effective organization for organizing the garment workers. Even the international trade unions formed/promoted NGOs to help the garment workers. Strategy of Bangladesh trade unions to organize the garment workers is also different from that of traditional shop floor unionism. Rather than unit based organizations, the emphasis is on organizing garment workers on a general platform, and rather than organizing in factories, the emphasis is more on organizing them at residential centers (some sort of community organizing). The whole focus of collective bargaining is also at general industry level bargaining rather than plant level bargaining. The whole struggle of garment workers for right to association and also for wages focuses on general industrial level bargaining rather than at plant level.

In these situations, the garment workers struggle in Bangladesh always emerges more as political struggle (industry level or national bargaining on common demands of workers of various factories or industries) and not economic (bargaining with particular employers) and also adopts forms and strategies of political struggles like general strike, blockade of roads etc. to compel the government to intervene and take initiatives to resolve the problems.

The key organizations working with garment workers and playing role in the garment workers struggle included Bangladesh Garments Workers Unity Council (BGWUC) which is a common platform formed by 21 registered garment workers’ federations (including National Garment Workers Federation-NGWF, etc.), Bangladesh Independent Garment Workers Union Federation-BIGUF (established with the help of the Solidarity Center, the international department of the AFL-CIO union federation in the United States), Garments Workers Unity Forum (GWUF), and Garment Sramik Trade Union Kendra federation (GSTUKF) etc.

**Struggle for Basic Minimum wages and the Recent Clashes**

The first phase of the major struggle for minimum wages emerged in 2005-2006. On May 22, 2006, thousands of workers joined the demonstrations and marched in north of Dhaka with 11-point set of demands including an immediate pay rise, a guaranteed basic wage instead of piece rates, payment of wage arrears, overtime rates and an end
to employer harassment. Police and paramilitary forces unleashed unimaginable repression on workers and thereafter the demonstrations turned violent. Finally, a minimum wage board was constituted and the minimum wages was fixed at TK1662.50 (US Dollar 25) per month, while the workers were demanding TK 3000.

From 2008 to its culmination in later half of 2010, worker resistance began to swell again. Growing discontent among the workers against the low wages and inhuman working conditions burst out on the streets in April 2008 when the increasing prices of food commodities virtually threw the workers virtually in the conditions of hunger. The basic minimum monthly salary of the garment workers was actually less than $1 (51p) a day, and a family of four persons were unable to survive on it, since the prices of the rice went up by almost three times (mainly due to devastation of crops by a cyclone last year).

On April 14-15, 2008 thousands of garment workers in Dhaka went on strike protesting mainly against spiraling food prices and demanding increments in their salaries to stop downward pressure on their real wages.13

The situation became more complex when a virtual price war started in 2008-09 among the main competing garment exporting countries particularly Bangladesh, China, Pakistan and India. With the prices of garments going down due to this competition the investors tried to put the entire burden on workers, and resorted to wage cuts, nonpayment of wages and overtime, not paying wages in time etc. Since the 2008 to 2009, the wages of the workers were cut by almost 30 percent. The wage cuts affected not only the workers in the cities, but also their families living in rural areas.

The government's Factory Inspection Department exposed in 2009 that 14.7 percent factories (122 of 825 surveyed) were not paying wages on time, and some factories were not paying even the minimum wages. On the other hand, excessive workload and mental pressure at the workplace increased the health problems and medical expenses.14

13 Randeep Ramesh (April 15, 2008): Bangladeshi garment workers strike over food prices; http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2008/apr/15/bangladesh

14 Shafiq Alam (AFP) 2009: Bangladesh textiles unravelled by price war, protests http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5iZ97IWqs0MOdGJe7uLm-bLg_08g
It was in this background that the widespread unrest in the garment industry started emerging in 2009 and this time with clearly articulated demands including the demand for a minimum wage of TK 5000. There were a series of strikes and protest demonstrations in 2009. The demonstrations took violent shape in last days of June, in reaction against the state’s repression. In the year 2009, 6 workers died in police firing during a series of demonstrations over unpaid wages. However, even after these incidences, neither the investors nor the state bothered to take any initiative to make increments in wages and improve the working conditions in the garment industries. It seems what the workers experienced in 2009 was decisive for them on many counts. First and foremost they lost their faith in the investors and the state and were compelled to realize that any betterment in their life can come only by their collective strength. After 2009, we find lesser incidences of spontaneous outburst of protests, the strikes and demonstrations appear far more organized, more planned and with more long-term perspectives. Particularly in a situation when the garment workers are actually denied the right to form trade unions, their growing organized strength and their well planned organized actions reflect on this fact.

In whole year of 2010, protest demonstrations of garment workers were more widespread and more radical and more decisive than before. Many times it turned violent in reaction against the unprecedented repression unleashed against them. From January to June there were about 72 incidents of labour unrest in which about 988 workers were injured in clashes with the police. In June 2010 about 40 workers were injured in a clash with police in Savar EPZ. Police lobbed tear shells to disperse the protesters. There were hardly a peaceful day for garment industry in June and July. On the pressure of these violent protests demonstrations and a series of strikes lastly the government was compelled to set up a Minimum Wage Board to revise the minimum wages of garment workers. It is to be noted that the demand put forward by the workers organizations included not only to set basic minimum wages at TK 5,000, but also for ensuring safety at workplace, Tk 1 million compensation for the family of each worker who died in fire incidents or other accidents that took place inside the factories, system for adjustment of real wages to the price hike of essentials and inflation, amendment to Bangladesh Labour Act 2006 in line with ILO conventions, punishment of non-compliant factory owners and shutting down the factories lacking basic safety measures and ensuring proper supply of gas and electricity to the factories etc. But the wage board was set only to address their wage

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15 Enemies of The Nation or Human Rights Defenders: Fighting Poverty Wages in Bangladesh; www.sweatfree.org
16 Enemies of The Nation or Human Rights Defenders: Fighting Poverty Wages in Bangladesh; www.sweatfree.org
18 RMG workers demand Tk 5,000 minimum wage; http://www.thedailystar.net/newDesign/news-details.php?nid=133856
demands. Finally the Wage Board came out with its recommendation (after 14 round of talks) in the last days of July and recommended TK3000 as the minimum wage for garment workers, applicable from November 2010. The board also recommended retaining all existing facilities such as attendance bonus, etc.

Despite the workers’ obvious dissatisfaction with the basic minimum wages declared by the wage board, the major trade unions and therefore the workers were still ready to accept this wage for the time being to restore normalcy. But there were three major problems which again compelled the workers to go on protest: first, the investors were not ready to pay the wages declared by the board; they demanded to fix the wages at TK2500 rather than TK3000. Second, the new wages were declared to be applicable from November rather than August, and this was unacceptable to the workers. Third: the employers started cutting various allowances and denying seniority benefits that amounted to actually reducing or denying the wage increments.

Since the employers were not willing to pay the new wages and the state was in no mood to compel the employers, the workers had to again start their protest demonstrations demanding the implementation of the new minimum wages from July 30, 2010. From last week of July wide spread protest demonstrations of garment workers started in Dhaka and surrounding industrial belts. In continuous protest demonstrations starting from July 30, the workers blocked the roads, set up the barricades and attacked the factories. The factory owners actually started cutting/denying the bonuses, overtime payments and other financial benefits in order to reduce the impact of new wages on total labour cost. Therefore from August to December 2010 there were a series of demonstrations many times taking violent shape. Thereafter the Labour Minister urged the garment factory owners to pay all wages and all other due payments to the workers. However, the problems were not resolved and therefore wide spread protests of workers continued in December 2010. There were fatal clashes between police and workers on December 12, 2010 and four

19 Garment workers’ minimum wage fixed at Tk 3,000; http://www.thedailystar.net/newDesign/news-details.php?nid=148544

20 Garment workers' minimum wage fixed at Tk 3,000; http://www.thedailystar.net/newDesign/news-details.php?nid=148544

21 Thousands protest Bangladesh wages for fourth day; http://www.mysinchew.com/node/42750

22 Enemies of The Nation or Human Rights Defenders: Fighting Poverty Wages in Bangladesh; www.sweatfree.org
workers were shot dead\(^{23}\) by the police during demonstrations in port city of Chittagong. In the meantime, on 14\(^{th}\) December, there was a major fire accident in a sports wear factory of Ha-Meem group near Dhaka which killed about 30 workers.\(^{24}\)

Only after these incidences, fearing even more wide spread labour unrest, the factory owners in general started accepting the new wage and also promised at least in words to correct “some mistakes in the calculations of salaries”\(^{25}\) (non payments of bonuses, overtime etc). Trade unions also rather than calling for protest demonstrations against these incidents, appealed the employers to respect the July agreement of wages in order to calm down the workers. It is said that in the second half of December, particularly after the above sad incidences the normalcy was restored and most of the factories resumed their production.

**What Actually Happened in the YoungOne**

Korean company Youngone Corp is the largest garment maker in Bangladesh with a total of 17 factories in Chittagon and Dhaka. It has established a Korean export processing zone at Chittagong to facilitate more Korean investment into Bangladesh.\(^{26}\) As a leading outdoor garment and equipment maker in Korea, it has supplied goods to some 30 global brands, including Nike, in original equipped manufacturing (OEM). The company has also held the selling right of Korea's No. 1 outdoor brand, The North Face. Its total sales last year were 437.7 billion won.\(^{27}\)

The Chittagong workers were at the forefront in the current struggle for implementation of the minimum wages. The YoungOne workers were playing a leading role in this struggle, probably because thousands of workers from about 14

\(^{23}\) W.A. Sunil and John Chan (16 December 2010): Factory fire and police killings fuel discontent among Bangladeshi garment workers; http://www.wsws.org

\(^{24}\) W.A. Sunil and John Chan (16 December 2010): Factory fire and police killings fuel discontent among Bangladeshi garment workers; http://www.wsws.org

\(^{25}\) W.A. Sunil and John Chan (16 December 2010): Factory fire and police killings fuel discontent among Bangladeshi garment workers; http://www.wsws.org


factories of the YoungOne in the zone were more close to each other and therefore more organized against the antilabour practices of the common employer.

The main demand of the workers was to implement the new wage structure announced by the government in July. But the anger of the workers burst out when YoungOne stopped paying lunch allowance as a new labour cost saving measure, after the new wage scheme was introduced. YoungOne workers stopped the work and started demonstrating and demanding reinstatement of a 250-taka (3.5 US cents) lunch allowance. Police actually attacked on peaceful demonstrating workers after the South Korean-owned YoungOne group closed its 11 factories in retaliation for stoppages.28

How concerned is the state for the YoungOne is clear in the brutal repression that was unleashed on Chittagong demonstrations and particularly against the YoungOne workers. The police fired 550 rounds of rubber bullets and 95 tear gas shells on December 12, 2010 and four workers were shot dead29 in this firing. Naturally the workers went violent after this incident and they damaged about 20 factories in the area.

Concluding Remarks

It is to be understood very clearly that the wage struggle in garment industry in Bangladesh is not a general kind of wage struggle and collective bargaining. In a situation of cut throat competition among all major garment exporting countries for winning more and more foreign investments and export orders from the same set of developed countries, the growth of garment industry in these countries depends on another inhuman competition among them to provide unrestricted supply of cheapest labour to insure super profits for investors. Ultimately it becomes a war against its own working class, its own people. This is why the garment workers in Bangladesh face brutal repression whenever they raise demands for wage increase. This is why, the right to association and collective bargaining is systematically and forcefully denied to them.

28 W.A. Sunil and John Chan (16 December 2010): Factory fire and police killings fuel discontent among Bangladeshi garment workers; http://www.wsws.org

29 W.A. Sunil and John Chan (16 December 2010): Factory fire and police killings fuel discontent among Bangladeshi garment workers; http://www.wsws.org
This is becoming so inhuman that the garment workers are thrown in the conditions of virtual slavery. It is worth mentioning that the generally the minimum wages set for rural workers is lowest, but here in Bangladesh the minimum wages of rural workers is also more than the garment workers. In 2008, the minimum wages for rural workers were set at TK 150 per day (TK 4500 per month).\(^3^0\) On the other hand, the wages for garment workers were not revised after 2006 and they were getting only TK 1662.50 in 2008. The garment workers had to go for long protest demonstrations and sacrifice their lives to compel the government for a wage revision at the end of July 2010 and then also the minimum wages declared for garment workers was only TK 3000 that is still far below the wages for rural workers declared in 2008.

To maintain the ‘comparative advantage’ of garment industry, the state machinery is going to the extent of unleashing brutal repression on the workers. Rapid Action Battalion (an elite police unit that normally deals with organized crime and terrorist threats) was deployed to deal with the workers’ demonstrations and more than more than 4000 workers were arrested from 2008-10 including the executive director of BIGUF Babul Akhter and executive director of Bangladesh Centre for Workers Solidarity (BCWS) Kalpona Akhter, president of GWUF Moshreфа Mishu, and leader of Garment Sramik Trade Union Kendra federation (GSTUKF) Mr. Montu Ghosh faced repression along with workers and were among those arrested in the mass protests of 2008-2010. Labour leader Aminul Islam was even tortured and compelled to sign a confession to “inciting worker unrest.”\(^3^1\) There was also a crackdown on NGOs engaged in organizing the garment workers. The NGO Affairs Bureau closed down some 334 NGOs during this period alleging support of militancy in many cases.\(^3^2\) The legal status of Bangladesh Center for Workers Solidarity was stripped.\(^3^3\)

The ‘normalcy’ is any how restored but only in terms of ending of demonstrations and workers returning to factories. But actually the workers, trade union leaders and

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\(^3^0\) Enemies of The Nation or Human Rights Defenders: Fighting Poverty Wages in Bangladesh;[www.sweatfree.org](http://www.sweatfree.org)


NGOs are still facing victimization in terms of criminal cases etc. Moreover, the overall logic of growth in garment industry (inhuman competition among the garment exporting countries to offer more super profits to investors by providing the cheapest labour) still continues. Therefore no one knows till when this ‘normalcy’ will continue.

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