

CHARITY TARGETS FACTORIES IN INDIA AND BANGLADESH

NEW DELHI: One of the most effective ways to curb forced labor in the garment industry is to target cotton spinning mills, where workers can provide valuable information about the source of material in the fashion supply chain, an anti-slavery charity said yesterday. The apparel industry has come under pressure to improve factory conditions and workers' rights, particularly after the collapse of the Rana Plaza complex in Bangladesh more than three years ago, when 1,136 garment workers were killed.

Following the tragedy, numerous initiatives were launched by global brands and charities to promote openness and safeguard employees, from ensuring the safety of buildings to providing better pay and working hours. But while most projects

focused on farmers growing cotton in the fields or factory workers stitching clothes, few work with the spinning mills in the middle of the supply chain. Run by the California-based charity As You Sow, the Responsible Sourcing Network (RSN) on Sept 1 launched a project focusing on mills in India and Bangladesh that altogether employ hundreds of thousands of workers.

"Located in the middle of the supply chain, spinning mills are uniquely positioned to identify cotton produced with forced labour and prevent it from entering corporate supply chains," Patricia Jurewicz, RSN's director, told the Thomson Reuters Foundation. "Our initiative targets the most opaque place in the supply chain, where yarn spinners blend different types of cotton

together," she said. "They are the key to knowing if the cotton that gets spun and woven into our clothes was harvested under forced labor conditions."

Also, Jurewicz said thousands of young women are kept in bonded labor in spinning mills in southern India, where they have been lured from their homes with the promise of a good job but in reality work in appalling conditions. A 2014 report by the Dutch Centre for Research on Multinational Corporations (SOMO) found women in mills were forced to work long hours for low wages with no contracts, no paid leave and little freedom of movement. The United States and Britain have adopted laws that ban the import of goods produced by forced labor or require companies to report action

taken to address slavery and trafficking. As consumers and investors become more socially aware, they are demanding ethical manufacturing and weighing companies on human rights records. RSN said its initiative, the Yarn Ethically and Sustainably Sourced (YESS), will train workers at spinning mills to identify forced labor and trafficking. It also will help mills implement policies to improve worker conditions, assess their compliance and provide certification. Major brands such as Adidas, Hudson's Bay Co, BJ's Wholesale Club and Woolworths Holdings Ltd have expressed support and less than a week after the launch of YESS, a mill in India got in touch to ask how to become certified, she said. "This demonstrates there is industry demand for this type of verification," she said. — Reuters



PHNOM PENH: Cambodia's main opposition Cambodia National Rescue Party Deputy President Kem Sokha, left, gestures as he speaks at the party headquarters. — AP

CAMBODIAN OPPN LEADER GETS 5-MONTH SENTENCE

PHNOM PENH: A Cambodian opposition leader was sentenced to five months in jail yesterday in the latest faceoff between the government and opposition as political tensions over challenges to Prime Minister Hun Sen's longstanding autocratic rule show no signs of easing. Sam Sokong, a defense lawyer for Kem Sokha, deputy leader of the Cambodia National Rescue Party, said they will appeal the verdict, which followed a trial that lasted only several hours. "The trial conducted today did not comply with procedures," he said.

Kem Sokha, who was not in court, was convicted of twice ignoring a summons to answer questions related to a case involving his alleged mistress. He refused, saying the legal moves were part of the ruling party's attempt to cripple the opposition. Riot police were outside the court, and nearly 1,000 opposition supporters gathered in front of their party headquarters, with riot police watching them from about 500 meters (yards) away. There were no reports of violence.

Opposition lawmaker Ou Chanrith said the party was not surprised by the verdict, and urged supporters to continue challenging government suppression. The case is one of several hanging over opposition leaders in what is generally seen as an attempt to disrupt their organizing efforts ahead of local elections next June. The next general election is not until the middle of 2018, but holding power at the local level is an advantage when national polls are held.

Atmosphere of intimidation

Before the verdict, Kem Sokha appeared before his supporters and

accused the government of using the courts to stop him from speaking out and prevent him from taking part in the elections. A statement issued this week by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights expressed concern "about the escalating atmosphere of intimidation of opposition politicians, their supporters, civil society, and peaceful demonstrators in Cambodia."

It noted "a host of legal charges" faced by Kem Sokha and 29 other opposition supporters. It said 14 of them had been given heavy prison sentences despite raise serious concerns about the fairness of the proceedings. "We urge the authorities to adhere strictly to international fair trial standards during the criminal proceedings," it said. One victim of the legal moves has been opposition leader Sam Rainsy, who did not return from a trip abroad last November when an old conviction for defamation was restored and his parliamentary immunity was stripped by the government's legislative majority. It had been generally assumed that the conviction, carrying a two-year prison sentence, had been lifted by a 2013 pardon which allowed Sam Rainsy to return from a previous period of self-exile. He also faces a stack of separate charges that could put him away for 17 years. Activists and non-governmental organizations, which are generally critical of the government, have come in for similar kinds of legal pressures. Physical force has also been applied. Two opposition lawmakers were beaten up by a pro-government mob last year, and the murder in July of a prominent social critic, Kem Ley, allegedly by a man to whom he owed money, is widely regarded with suspicion. — AP

BRITISH PM RIDES ROW OVER SCHOOL SELECTION

LONDON: British Prime Minister Theresa May set out bold plans yesterday for more selection in schools, raising a deeply divisive issue two months into a premiership that has so far been defined by Brexit. The Conservative leader announced the end of a two-decade ban on new grammar schools, which only accept the brightest pupils, as part of a package of reforms intended to build a "truly meritocratic Britain". Her proposals, described by the press as an "education revolution", delighted many Conservatives but are opposed by Labour, and there are questions about whether they will get through parliament.

The campaign ahead of Britain's vote in June to quit the European Union exposed divisions within the Conservative Party, which only has a small majority in the House of Commons. May took over in July and her first two months have been dominated by questions over how and when she will implement Brexit. But she has vowed to use her office to make Britain a fairer country, and laid out yesterday her first steps to address what she said was a widespread desire for change. In her first major domestic policy speech, she said she wanted to "give ordinary, working-class people the better deal they deserve".

She added: "In a true meritocracy, we should not be apologetic about stretching the most academically able to the very highest standards of excellence." Grammar schools had their heyday in the 1950s, but were phased out from the mid-1960s and a ban was introduced on new schools in 1998. Some 163 survive in England, and most are oversubscribed. Supporters say such schools offer poor, bright students an academically rigorous education. But critics say they are divisive and take far fewer poor pupils than other schools.

The chief inspector of schools, Michael Wilshaw, said the proposals risked two decades of progress in education. "We will fail as a nation if we only get the top 15 to 20 percent of our children achieving well," he told BBC radio. Labor education spokeswoman Angela Rayner said the plan would "entrench inequality and disadvantage". May said new grammars would be required to take a proportion of children from poorer backgrounds. — AFP