

Bangladesh factory fire: The Wal-Mart factor

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U.S. companies are scrambling to figure out whether clothing they sell was made in the Bangladesh garment factory where at least 112 people died in a fire. Though officials are looking at arson as the cause, there are a number of allegations about the building and how it was operated that may have contributed to the death toll: dummy fire extinguishers, at least one locked door and bosses who ordered the employees back to work after fire alarms went off. There were no emergency exits.

Wal-Mart reports that the factory did make some clothes for its stores, but without the discount giant's knowledge or authorization. Wal-Mart officials say they used to do business with the Tazreen Fashions Ltd. factory but cut the company off. They didn't say why, but according to the Associated Press:

"In its 2012 Global Responsibility report, Wal-Mart said it stopped working with 49 factories in Bangladesh in 2011 because of fire safety issues. And online records appear to indicate the Tazreen factory was given a 'high risk' safety rating after an inspection in May 2011 and a 'medium risk' rating in August 2011."

Wal-Mart contracted with another company that, without its knowledge, subcontracted with Tazreen.

U.S. corporations are showing at least somewhat more awareness and concern about the conditions under which foreign factory workers toil, as Wal-Mart apparently did by cutting off its relationship with Tazreen. The question is whether that's enough.

Thousands of miles away, contractors are going to look for ways to cut corners, and a signature on a piece of paper isn't always enough to ensure that the agreement is being followed. Should a company as big as Wal-Mart be conducting its own inspections of all of its foreign contractors? Or did the company take all the steps it reasonably could to be a responsible corporate citizen in this matter?

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P.S.

* From The Los Angeles Times. November 27, 2012, 3:02 p.m.:
<http://www.latimes.com/news/opinion/opinion-la/la-ol-bangladesh-fire-walmart-20121127,0,2193699.story?track=rss>