



Retail Council of Canada

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September 20, 2010

Mr. Lawrence Cannon
Minister of Foreign Affairs
Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade
Government of Canada
125 Sussex Drive
Ottawa, ON, Canada K1A 0G2

Dear Minister Cannon;

I am writing on behalf of the Retail Council of Canada (RCC), the national association representing over 40,000 retailers from coast to coast, many of which are businesses who source products from around the world, including Bangladesh.

As such, I write to express our grave concern about recent events in Bangladesh and to urge the Government of Canada to join many other countries to take the appropriate steps to ensure that garment workers in Bangladesh are treated with fairness and respect.

As the New York Times reported on August 16th of this year, the government of Bangladesh arrested the leaders of a globally respected labour rights organization: the Bangladesh Center for Worker Solidarity (BCWS). BCWS Executive Director Kalpona Akter and Babul Akhter were held in detention for almost a month before being granted bail.

The arrests came in the wake of widespread unrest among Bangladeshi garment workers, who were demanding an increase to the country's minimum wage. Bangladesh has the lowest wages of any major apparel producing country.

Unrest peaked on July 30th of this year when an announced wage increase for garment workers was significantly less than many anticipated. Unfortunately, instead of dealing effectively with the poor working conditions that underlie the recent turmoil, reports indicate that the Bangladesh government responded by blaming peaceful, respected labour rights advocates, falsely accusing them of inciting riots.

This June, the Government of Bangladesh also cancelled the BCWS' NGO registration and froze its bank accounts, alleging the organization was provoking unrest in garment factories. Civil society groups, like the BCWS, play an important role in meeting our industry's goal of providing garment workers safe and equitable working conditions. Thus RCC joins other business associations around the world to express its grave concern regarding these recent events in Bangladesh.

The crackdown on BCWS and its leaders has also been condemned by leading human rights organizations, including Human Rights Watch, which has described the government's actions as "part of a campaign against labor right activists, union leaders, and workers who have been pressing for the right to organize unions and demanding increases in the minimum wage."

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We ask that the Canadian High Commission in Bangladesh lodge an official protest concerning the arrest of labour rights advocates Kalpona Akter and Babul Akhter, and, on behalf of the Government of Canada, ask that the Government of Bangladesh to:

- review the charges against Kalpona Akter and Babul Akhter and dismiss any charges that rely on insufficient evidence or coerced testimony;
- restore the organization's official NGO registration; and
- refrain from any further intimidation, repression and harassment of peaceful labour and human rights advocates.

Thank you for your time and consideration in this matter. We look forward to the Government's support. Please do not hesitate to contact me at 416-922-0553, extension 238 or by e-mail at djbrisebois@retailcouncil.org if you have any questions or would like additional information.

Sincerely,



Diane J. Brisebios
President & CEO

cc: Mr. Mortoza Tarafder, Senior Trade Commissioner
The High Commission of Canada to Bangladesh - Email:
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