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**REMARKS BY
U.S. AMBASSADOR MARCIA BERNICAT
RANA PLAZA TWO YEARS ON: TOWARDS A SAFER RMG
SECTOR FOR**

APRIL 23, 2015

It is with profound sadness that I join you here today to remember the lives lost, and the many lives altered forever, by the collapse of the Rana Plaza building two years ago. We remember those workers and their families and grieve their loss today.

The tragedy was a clarion call to action, a call that brought all of us in this room to work together in an unprecedented way to prevent such a tragedy from happening again.

As the speakers before have already noted, amazing progress has taken place to address workers' safety in the RMG sector. Many have worked tirelessly to advance workers' safety and towards bringing the best factory conditions in the world to Bangladesh.

But that is only one part of our collective response to the tragedy. Those who died that day lost their lives not only because the building was not safe, but also because they did not have a voice.

Young women come to the cities seeking opportunity, a chance to earn a living for the first time. Many find factory work, start to receive a paycheck, and see their lives changed forever. The RMG sector has played a key role to empower women and to help Bangladesh and its economy grow.

But many of these women -- and the men who work with them -- still face some very daunting conditions in the workplace.

Many workers want to organize a union because they have concerns about the factory, about getting paid on time, about getting paid the right amount, and even about such fundamental issues

as having access to clean water, a clean place to eat, and a safe place to work. These are some of the issues workers want to discuss.

The U.S. stands ready to work as a partner with the government, the workers, and the employers to show the world Bangladesh can set new standards for workers' rights, that no worker need to fear retaliation for speaking out about a cracked wall. If we can achieve this dialogue by having empowered workers as well as employers, the sector will more easily and quickly reach \$50 billion and beyond. Why? Because studies around the world demonstrate that employees who work in safe environments and whose concerns are fairly addressed are more productive.

The world is looking to the Government of Bangladesh to show its commitment to ensure that these women and men in the garment sector can enjoy one of the fundamental labor rights -- the right to freedom of association -- the right to decide to form a union or not, to elect union leaders, and to collectively bargain with an employer.

The Government of Bangladesh has already begun to take steps to protect workers' rights. The Ministry of Labor and Employment has registered over 300 unions and just added to its website an online union registration process. We applaud this effort I encourage you all to check out this site and study the development of its content: dife.gov.bd/tradeunion READ WEBSITE

But more needs to be done. We know that certain actors have resorted to illegal tactics to prevent unions from forming, such as firing, threatening and even beating suspected union leaders. These are illegal and criminal acts and the Government of Bangladesh has been slow -- or unable -- to respond. We also know the Ministry of Labor inspectors have interviewed workers about their union in front of management and these workers were afraid to confess that their support for the union. Is this a surprise?

Unions who have tried to register and are unjustly rejected -- workers who try to engage with management and are unjustly fired -- workers who try to speak and feel unheard -- their voices are not silenced and their needs do not cease to exist.

These workers will be heard by the press; these workers will go to the street; these workers will reach out to whomever is willing to listen to express their frustration, their fatigue and their fear. But it doesn't have to be this way.

All actors should come together to establish a transparent process to protect workers' legal rights to organize, as well as a ways to help the parties mediate difficult discussions, and when -- I say when not if -- agreement becomes impossible, to turn to a mechanism to resolve disputes in an independent, transparent and timely way.

Tragedies can lead to transformation. That is the only true way to honor those who lost their lives or livelihoods at Rana Plaza.

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The message today is that those of us who heard the cries from Rana Plaza on that tragic day two years ago are still listening. Consumers, student groups, workers, as well as brands and buyers are watching closely. Amazing things are happening in Bangladesh, and we hope this progress will continue. Today, let us re-commit to ensuring that readymade garment workers enjoy the rights and safety that they deserve.

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