



February 21, 2017

The Honourable Chrystia Freeland, P.C., M.P.
Minister of Foreign Affairs
House of Commons
Ottawa, ON
K1A 0A6

Dear Minister:

The leadership and membership of our organizations continue to be concerned with the rights of women and men to earn living wages in safe workplaces, free from sexual harassment and bullying, in a sustainable garment industry in Bangladesh. Real progress toward realizing the rights of women in this industry must include the freedom of women to join democratic unions, so together they can gain their own voice and advocate for their own vision of a changed industry.

Following the factory fire at Tazreen Fashions Ltd. and the building collapse at Rana Plaza, the attention of the world resulted in significant positive initiatives for building and fire safety of factories and labour rights. However, in the last several years, it has become apparent that the commitment in Bangladesh to freedom of association and collective bargaining has not measured up to international standards or obligations.

Since late December 2016, there has been a further serious setback with a crack-down on labour activism in response to workers' widespread demand for increased minimum wages. A December 23, 2016 letter from the Canadian Labour Congress brought to the attention of your predecessor the short-sighted and repressive actions of the Bangladesh government: the arrest and detention in criminal cases of at least fourteen union leaders and worker rights advocates, and the mass suspension and termination of 1,500 workers. These actions send a clear signal to workers that employers and government will retaliate, if they exercise their rights.

Over the last several years, the Canadian High Commissioner in Bangladesh has played a constructive role in promoting progressive change, including participation in the Sustainability Compact and the so-called "3+5" meetings.

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Several of the industry organizations representing international clothing brands have communicated to the Government of Bangladesh their concerns.¹

In the context of the current crisis, we urge you to also communicate Canada's concerns for respect of human and worker rights to the Government of Bangladesh.

In particular, we would request Canada urgently support calls to:

- Immediately release any trade union leaders and labour rights activists who may still be under detention.
- Advocate to drop the criminal cases against hundreds of garment workers.
- Intervene to put an end to all forms of harassment and intimidation of labour activists.
- Help facilitate the reinstatement of dismissed workers in the Ashulia district, with no reprisals.
- Institute a wage review process which will fairly and transparently address workers' wage demands.

As well, pending the withdrawal of charges, the High Commissioner in Bangladesh could play a very positive role by ensuring Canadian observers are present during court proceedings against the detained labour activists.

The current crisis underlines how fragile the foundation is for human and worker rights in Bangladesh. Discussion of post-2018 arrangements toward building a sustainable industry that provides fair employment for thousands of Bangladeshi women and men will be undermined unless the current crisis can be resolved.

Our members want to be sure the \$1.4 billion clothes entering the Canadian marketplace duty free from Bangladesh under the General Preferential Tariff are sourced responsibly and manufactured under conditions which respect international human rights obligations.

Canada can and must play a strong role, now and into the future, as a voice for human rights throughout the supply chains of the Canadian retail brands.

Please let us know if you share our view on the opportunity for Canada to play a progressive and positive role, and what steps your government has taken and will take to address the current issues.

Yours sincerely,

¹ For example, see the January 19 [letter of the Accord](#); or the [January 12 letter](#).



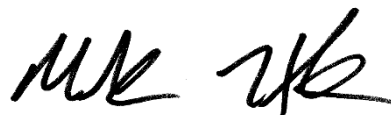
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National President
Public Service Alliance of Canada



Jerry Dias
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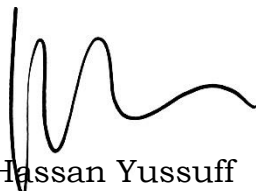
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United Food and Commercial Workers



Kenneth Neumann
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Hassan Yussuff
President
Canadian Labour Congress



c.c.: Benoît-Pierre Laramée, Canadian High Commissioner in Bangladesh

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