



STATEMENT OF THE HONORABLE ROBERT MENENDEZ (D-NJ)

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STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD ON THE 5TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE
RANA PLAZA FACTORY COLLAPSE IN BANGLADESH

Five years ago today, the Rana Plaza building collapsed in Bangladesh, tragically killing more than 1,100 people and injuring thousands more. Rana Plaza, a bustling multi-story commercial building in Dhaka, had housed several ready-made garment factories as well as banks and other businesses. When cracks appeared in the building façade the day prior to its collapse and some stores in the building accordingly closed up shop, owners of the garment factories inside Rana Plaza rather told their workers not to worry and ordered them to return for work the next day. But this was not a time for business as usual. Thousands of garment workers, the majority of them enterprising young women achieving new levels of financial independence for themselves and their families, filed back into the building the next morning. Thousands of them never made it back out. The world was rightly stunned and horrified by the images of the lifeless bodies of hundreds of young women being pulled from the rubble of this man-made disaster.

The Rana Plaza tragedy could have been avoided—and it demonstrated that “business as usual” in Bangladesh’s garment industry inordinately rewarded factory owners and managers while ignoring factory workers’ safety and rights. In the dusty rubble of the building collapse, it became crystal clear that the Bangladeshi government, factory owners and managers, and the global apparel brands all had a grave responsibility to do more, and quickly, to secure the labor rights of Bangladeshi workers. A simple fact remains, five years later – had the Rana Plaza

workers been afforded the ability to organize and protect their interests, the tragedy never would have happened. With collective strength and action they could have stood up to employers to demand basic rights and they could have refused to be ordered back into the building without appropriate safety standards. Five years later, it is also clear that a great deal of work remains to secure these rights.

As the son of a seamstress who worked in the textile factories of northern New Jersey, I knew from watching my mother how tiring and strenuous such work could be. But it does not have to be fatal. The United States' own Triangle Shirtwaist Fire more than a hundred years before Rana Plaza, which killed nearly 150 people, galvanized a necessary workers' movement and subsequent necessary reforms that to this day help protect labor rights while ensuring that American companies produce high-quality products. To this day, the AFL-CIO and other American labor unions work tirelessly to expose the conditions facing U.S. workers, and to organize collective responses and inform government decisions to promote worker protections. Last year, for example, an AFL-CIO report revealed an alarming rate of workplace deaths among Latinos and immigrants to the United States, and provided recommendations to the Department of Labor to address them. Along with many of my Senate colleagues, I am pushing for our government to adopt these recommendations. Put simply, the successes of American organized labor are inextricable from the prosperity of the American economy and have helped to boost the fortunes of countless American workers.

We know that countries and people are more secure and prosperous when workers can operate in safety while pursuing economic success. The proud legacy of the movement for

American workers' rights demands that we advocate for workers at risk around the globe. In the past five years since the Rana Plaza disaster, we have so advocated. We have come together in unprecedented ways to address the factors driving labor abuses against workers in Bangladesh.

As Chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee at the time of the Rana Plaza disaster in 2013, my first hearing explored the tragedy and the consequences of a race to the bottom that had increased companies' profit margins alongside risks to their workers. This was the first SFRC hearing focused on labor rights in more than a dozen years. I called another hearing early the following year to review progress in addressing the labor rights emergency in Bangladesh and conducted rigorous, bipartisan oversight to ensure that the U.S. government was doing all it could to spur change among brands, owners, and Bangladeshi government officials. This included a field visit and a November 2013 majority staff report that examined progress in advancing workers' safety and labor rights since the Rana Plaza disaster and the Tazreen factory fire. We also worked closely with our colleagues on the Appropriations Committee to ensure that funds over three successive fiscal years were designated to directly support the development and capacity-building of truly independent labor unions in Bangladesh that could safely and effectively advocate for worker rights.

Meanwhile, major American retailers who produced apparel in Bangladesh – including Abercrombie & Fitch, American Eagle Outfitters, and Fruit of the Loom joined the effort alongside other global brands, governments, civil society, and labor unions to grapple with the acute challenges facing Bangladeshi workers who produced their goods. The risk of undermined consumer confidence and declines in brand quality helped spur some corporations to join the

Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh—a five-year, legally binding compact to improve safety in Bangladeshi ready-made garment factories through reasonable steps to prevent future disasters. Most importantly, the Accord signatories included labor unions, who were rightly regarded as equal and critical stakeholders in effecting needed change. Five years later, Accord brands have the opportunity to demonstrate a sustained commitment to worker rights by signing on to the 2018 Accord. This iteration strengthens and expands the Accord to cover freedom of association. Other groups, such as the Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety, have also helped to further galvanize American and multinational brands to take greater responsibility for ensuring worker safety in Bangladesh. In any such efforts, workers and their representatives must have a truly equal seat at the table, for without them we cannot make meaningful labor rights reforms.

Governments have a critical role to play as well. Following Rana Plaza, the United States and other governments pressed Bangladesh to take meaningful steps to improve respect for labor rights in the country, including through removing Bangladesh from the Generalized System of Preferences and conducting regular reviews of the Bangladeshi government's efforts to better adhere to international labor standards. I believe the U.S. government can and should do more to ensure that developing countries with which our country trades are taking necessary steps to respect labor and human rights. I was proud last year to introduce the Labor Rights for Development Act with Senator Brown, and the Anti-Trafficking Trade Act with Senator Portman, that together would raise the labor and human rights standards countries must meet to gain preferential access to the U.S. market.

But five years on, the progress made in Bangladesh is simply not enough. Factories throughout the country have failed to meet their binding commitments on workplace safety in the Accord and the Alliance, risking the departure of some global retailers to other markets. Independent unions in Bangladesh remain constrained and subject to increasing harassment and attacks on labor rights activists, which often occur with impunity. And amidst a growing climate of political tensions in Bangladesh, the government too often views independent labor unions as opposition dissenters to punish, rather than key partners that are vital to the country's growth and prosperity.

In the five years since Rana Plaza, I have continued to believe that what happens in Bangladesh to improve labor rights and workers' safety can have a dramatic ripple-effect on the global apparel industry, and that real change in working conditions there can help to change conditions for workers everywhere in a race to the top. But similarly, if not enough happens in Bangladesh, it sends the message that workers' lives can still be systematically undervalued and that working to advance labor rights is an endeavor not worth the risk. That is the wrong message—and on this anniversary, we must recommit ourselves to pushing stakeholders in Bangladesh—whether government, brands, or owners—to continue a path of reform. To do any less harms not just the workers, but also Bangladesh's economic potential, because no one will want to wear clothes stained with the blood of workers.