

No justice for the poor – Ramatex in Namibia

A reflection on the deportation of Bangladeshi workers

Prepared for The Namibian by Herbert Jauch, 15 September 2004

The Ramatex textile company has been a controversial venture since it started operating in Namibia. Initially praised as a major job creator, its costs soon became apparent. First Namibia provided a host of special incentives including investments of over N\$ 100 million in public funds to create infrastructure for the company. Then followed concerns regarding the threat of water pollutions through the company's toxic waste. Thereafter we witnessed 2 strikes over extremely poor working conditions and the frequent violation of Namibian laws and policies. And now, we see the destruction of the young lives of Bangladeshi workers.

In October last year, the Labour Resource and Research Institute (LaRRI) published a comprehensive report on the experiences of Namibian workers at the Ramatex factory. We alluded to the dangers of granting that company special status and quietly "exempting" it from Namibian laws and regulations. A year later, the situation has gone from bad to worse.

Importing workers

Following newspaper reports in August 2004 about the import of Ramatex workers from Bangladesh, we carried out our own investigations. We spoke to dozens of the Bangladeshis, documented their stories and discovered a network of shady operators, guilty of contributing to gross human rights violations. What we found presented the ugly face of global capitalism as it exists today. Its victims are always the poor – in this case young Bangladeshi workers. They were lured into Namibia by ruthless agents who had promised them the chance to earn better salaries to support their families. In return, each worker had to pay the agents US\$ 3 500 (about N\$ 23 000) which they could raise only by selling all their belongings, including houses, land and livestock. Many still had to borrow additional money from family members, friends and banks.

After only a few weeks in Namibia, these workers were now sent home, condemned to even greater misery than before their ordeal. They lost everything and will not be able to recover their losses.

Who is to be blamed?

Meanwhile those responsible for the workers' misery and the trade in human beings seem to get off lightly – once again. With reference to the horrific conditions endured by 400 Bangladeshi workers at a house known as "Hotel Ramatex" in Widhoek West, the company in a recent statement claimed that "it is not Ramatex policy to provide such living conditions for any of its employees". However, these conditions had already been prominently reported in a local newspaper in mid-August but Ramatex did nothing to alleviate the suffering of the Bangladeshi workers. The company only responded when

public pressure increased through several reports in the media and a strongly worded statement by the National Union of Namibian Workers (NUNW).

Ramatex cannot claim innocence and must take full responsibility for the misery endured by its workers. The company has directly benefited from the human trafficking carried out on its behalf by Eastern Overseas, Bay Eastern Agency and Saujana Blossom Import and Export Namibia. These agencies are responsible for the extortion of large amounts of money from Bangladeshi workers in exchange for work contracts.

Ramatex directly benefited from its agents' operation. The first group of 66 Bangladeshi workers who had arrived a year ago, still earned monthly wages of US\$ 200 – 300 (N\$ 1300 – 1950). They were dismissed last month under the pretext of not being productive enough. At the same time, a new group of about 400 Bangladeshi workers arrived in the country, earning monthly salaries of US\$ 120 (N\$ 780) of which they received only US\$ 75 (N\$ 487) as the rest was deducted for food. Ramatex thus benefited from even lower wages while its agents made millions of US\$ through extorted payments from Bangladeshi workers. These workers now had to return home empty-handed. They paid the price for a game whose rules are set by global corporations. Protected by the blind faith of host countries that foreign investment will solve their development problems, these corporations drive down labour and environmental standards in what has been described as a “race to the bottom”. There are many international examples to proof this point. When will Ramatex and its agents be made to account for the gross human rights violations and the misery imposed on their workers?

Hosting abuses

It is a tragic irony that Namibia plays host to such abuses. For decades, Namibians fought against a colonial contract labour system that condemned Namibian workers to a miserable life in the dreaded “single sex hostels”. Some of our leading politicians started their political careers from there. Throughout the liberation struggle, the migrant labour system was seen as a reflection of the injustices of colonialism and apartheid.

Just over a decade after independence, we now see a return of the migrant labour system in a new globalised, and perhaps even more vicious form. Like under colonial rule, workers who revolt against their inhuman conditions are simply deported to their “homelands”. Previously back to “Ovamboland”, now back to Bangladesh, China or the Philippines. The principle of exploitation and abuse of workers' rights for company profits has remained the same.

Unanswered questions

The deportation of the Bangladeshis does not resolve the problems experienced by Ramatex workers. Treating them as if they were criminals is merely and sending them back empty-handed is merely an attempt to avoid dealing with uncomfortable questions such as:

- Why are no criminal charges brought against Ramatex and its labour agents for the violation of human rights and municipal regulations?

- Why does Ramatex receive work permits for thousands of its Asian workers, many of whom seem to carry out jobs that could be performed by unemployed and trainable Namibians?
- Who shares in the millions of US\$ extorted from desperate Asian workers?
- What is the nature of the links between Ramatex, its labour agencies and government officials in certain ministries and embassies?
- Why does the Namibian government continue to allow Ramatex to violate Namibian laws and regulations with impunity?
- What was done to ensure that Ramatex' toxic waste does not contaminate Windhoek's water resources?

Another battle ahead

Although most Bangladeshi workers have already been deported, there is still a group of 66 workers who remained in Namibia to fight Ramatex in court. Their case will highlight some of Ramatex' abuses and presents perhaps the workers' last chance to see some justice done. However, these Bangladeshi workers have run out of money to pay for food, accommodation and legal costs. As Namibians committed to social justice we have to show practical solidarity and render whichever support we can, be it food or money. Otherwise, Ramatex will simply use delaying tactics and literally starve the workers out of their last chance to hold the company accountable. At the very least, the Bangladeshis have to be refunded for the money paid to the agents, receive some compensation for the hardships endured and a free ticket home. So far, there has been no justice for the poor.

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