



BUSINESS

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Wal-Mart suspends India staff members amid bribery probe

Wal-Mart, the world's largest retailer, has suspended a "few associates" at its joint venture in India amid an ongoing probe into bribery allegations.

Wal-Mart did not provide further details.

But various reports said the chief financial officer and members of the legal team were among those suspended.

The firm is conducting an investigation into possible violations of a US law that bans US firms from paying bribes to win or retain business abroad.

"We are committed to conducting a complete and thorough investigation. Wal-Mart and Bharti have suspended a few associates pending the outcome of the investigation," the company said in a statement.

Committed to India

The investigation comes as Wal-Mart is eyeing an expansion in the lucrative Indian market.

Earlier this year, India allowed global supermarket chains to invest in retail stores in the country.

Under the government's proposals, multi-national retailers such as like Wal-Mart, Carrefour and Tesco will now be able to buy up to a 51% stake in India's retailers.

The move had been strongly opposed by tens of thousands of small businesses and cornershops who fear they will be put out of business.

The government was initially forced to back down on retail reform after the cabinet first undertook to open up the retail sector last November, but revived the idea as a way to boost India's slowing growth.

Wal-Mart, which currently operates only wholesale stores in India via its joint venture with Bharti, has previously said that it plans to open retail stores within two years.

The firm said the latest developments will not affect its expansion plans.

"We are committed to the Indian market," a spokesperson said. "We remain excited about the opportunity to grow our business in one of the world's most vibrant economies," it said.

The US Foreign Corrupt Practices Act makes it a crime for US corporations and their subsidiaries to bribe foreign officials.

In April, the retailer said that it was investigating claims that its Mexican subsidiaries used bribes to secure permits to build new stores.

Wal-Mart said it is carrying out investigations in various other countries as well, including Brazil and China.

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Fire at second factory scares Dhaka again

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DHAKA: Fire fighters on Monday doused a fresh factory fire near Dhaka, a day after one of deadliest blaze razed a readymade garments unit, killing 124 people and raising questions about the safety standards in the world's second largest garment exporting nation.

Officials and witnesses said the latest fire did not claim any life as most workers jumped out, breaking safety grills in the 10-storey building housing three garment units. The fresh blaze came as the nation conducted a mass burial for victims burnt in Saturday night's fire at Tazreen Fashion as police said they had opened a "murder case" after the incident attributing it to "criminal negligence". Thousands of workers staged a protest, demanding better protection as the two fires trapped thousands of staff forcing them to jump from upper floors.

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DAWN

November 25, 2012 by AFP



Firefighters try to control a fire in a garment factory in Savar, on the outskirts of Dhaka November 24, 2012. — Photo by Reuters

DHAKA: The death toll from a fire at a Bangladeshi factory soared to at least 121 as rescue workers recovered 112 bodies Sunday, the national fire chief told AFP.

"We've found 112 dead bodies this morning," fire brigade director general Brigadier General Abu Nayeem Mohammad Shahidullah told AFP.

"We resumed our search this morning and found the bodies lying on different floors of the factory building," he said.

The fire broke out in the ground-floor warehouse of the multi-storey Tazreen Fashion factory 30 kilometres (18 miles) north of Dhaka on Saturday evening, trapping hundreds of workers on the upper floors, police said.

Police inspector Mostofa Kamal had previously told AFP that nine workers died and about 100 workers were injured.

Kamal said many workers jumped from the factory's upper floors to escape the flames before firefighters arrived to put the blaze out.

The cause was not immediately known but fires as a result of short circuits and shoddy electrical wiring are common in Bangladeshi garment plants, which use cheap labour to produce clothes shipped to Western countries.

Flyover collapse

At least 13 people were killed and dozens are feared missing after a flyover under construction collapsed in Bangladesh's southeastern port city of Chittagong, police said Sunday.

"So far 13 dead bodies have been recovered," sub-inspector Mohammad Alauddin told AFP, adding that military rescue teams had been called in to help with the search for victims.

The number of missing could not immediately be confirmed but police constable Shakakhawat Hossain told AFP from the scene that dozens could be trapped under the debris.

Hossain said about 20 people were injured, including some during clashes between police and an angry crowd that attacked the site offices of the construction company after the flyover collapse on Saturday evening.

In September the World Bank said it was concerned about corruption in Bangladesh, reiterating that it would not get new funding for a bridge project until a credible probe into corruption around the project was undertaken.

The Washington-based institution said it was not yet prepared to reactivate financing for the \$3 billion Padma road and rail bridge which was intended to connect the capital Dhaka to coastal districts.

Walmart hit by strikes across 46 US states

NEW YORK: Retail giant Walmart has been hit by protests and staff walkouts at stores across the US on Black Friday, the busiest shopping day in the retail calendar.

The actions began on Thursday, as workers protested the retail giant's decision to open on Thanksgiving, which is traditionally a national holiday. Industrial action continued on Friday, with organisers claiming 1,000 protests in 46 states.

Walmart workers in Miami, Dallas, Wisconsin, California's Bay Area, Chicago and Washington DC took part in the walkout, protesting wages and work conditions. The demonstrations were co-ordinated by OUR Walmart, a workers' group that last month led the first strikes that the retail giant had experienced. Walmart countered that it had had its best Black Friday ever and that the majority of protesters were not Walmart workers.

"Only 26 protests occurred at stores last night and many of them did not include any Walmart associates," said Bill Simon, Walmart's US president and chief executive officer. "We had very safe and successful Black Friday events at our stores across the country and heard overwhelmingly positive feedback from our customers," Simon said.

He added that the retailer estimated less than 50 Walmart workers had taken part in the protests. "In fact, this year, roughly the same number of associates missed their scheduled shift as last year," Simon said.

"Walmart has spent the last 50 years pushing its way on workers and communities," said Mary Pat Tifft, an OUR Walmart member and 24-year associate who led a protest on Thursday evening in Kenosha, Wisconsin.

"In just one year, leaders of OUR Walmart and Warehouse Workers United have begun to prove that change is coming to the world's largest employer."

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ASIA

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Bangladesh factory fire 'troubles' Walmart

US retailer Walmart says it is troubled that a supplier subcontracted work without authorisation to a factory hit by a lethal fire in Bangladesh.

Walmart said it was cutting ties with the supplier.

The fire at the Tazreen Fashions plant outside the capital, Dhaka, killed more than 100 people last weekend.

The deaths triggered large protests in Dhaka, and many factories are shut ahead of a day of mourning on Tuesday. The cause of the fire is unclear.

Walmart did not name its supplier, which it said had subcontracted work "in direct violation of our policies".

"The fact that this occurred is extremely troubling to us, and we will continue to work across the apparel industry to improve fire safety education and training in Bangladesh," the firm said in a statement.

'Safety neglected'

Witnesses said the building in which the blaze happened lacked emergency exits. A number of people reportedly leapt to their deaths from windows as they tried to escape.

Workers and relatives of those who died vented their anger on Monday as thousands protested in Dhaka, demanding better protection.

Fatal fires are common in Bangladesh's large garment manufacturing sector.

Lax safety standards, poor wiring and overcrowding are blamed for causing several deadly factory fires every year.

"This disastrous fire incident was a result of continuing neglect of workers' safety and their welfare," Amirul Haque Amin, the president of Bangladesh's National Garment Workers Federation, was quoted as saying by Reuters news agency.

"Whenever a fire or accident occurs, the government sets up an investigation and the authorities - including factory owners - pay out some money and hold out assurances to improve safety standards and working conditions. But they never do it."

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