

# INVISIBLE VICTIMS OF DEVELOPMENT

WORKERS HEALTH AND SAFETY IN ASIA



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## **Asia Monitor Resource Centre**

The Asia Monitor Resource Centre is an independent non-governmental organization focusing on Asian labour concerns. The Centre provides information, research, publications, training, labour networking and related services to trade unions, labour groups, and other development NGOs in the region. The Centre's main goal is the support democratic and independent labour movements in Asia. In order to achieve this goal, AMRC upholds the principles of workers' empowerment and gender consciousness, and follows a participatory framework.

## **The Asian Network for the Rights Of Occupational and Environmental Victims (ANROEV)**

The Asian Network for the Rights Of Occupational and Environmental Victims (ANROEV) is a coalition of victims' groups, trade unions and other labour groups across Asia, all committed to the rights of victims and for overall improvement of health and safety at the workplace. The industrial disasters of Kader and Zhili, that killed more than 250 workers led to a campaign by the labour and victims groups in Asia towards better health and safety rights of the workers and the victims. ANROEV was formally constituted in 1997 and now has members from 14 Asian countries and territories including Japan, Korea, China, India, Pakistan, Thailand, Indonesia, Vietnam, Bangladesh, Hong Kong SAR, Taiwan, Nepal, Vietnam and Cambodia.

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# FOREWORD

Just as this report was being printed, in the space of three months two devastating fires engulfed garment factories in Karachi and Dhaka, killing more than 500 workers, tragedies that rank not only as the worst industrial disasters to occur in Pakistan and Bangladesh but in the whole of Asia. The Asian Network for the Rights of Occupational and Environmental Victims (ANROEV) -a network linking more than 14 Asian countries, was founded following two identical devastating fires almost two decades ago – in Kader in Thailand and in Zhili in China, which killed more than 260 workers. The network started as accident victims’ network, reflecting the real situation in Asia when accidents were a daily occurrence and occupational diseases, even though present in large numbers, did not take priority because of their invisibility. Over the years the network has taken a more comprehensive approach and more occupational disease victims have become part of it, something reflected in its new name as stated above.

Just when we thought we had buried the ghosts of the past, the Karachi and Dhaka fires have brought the nightmare back, and this time it is even more painful. History keeps repeating itself in very gruesome ways. We cannot control fires, as accidents happen. However, these fires should not have killed so many workers; fire safety is the minimal basic requirement that workers deserve from their employers.

The need to provide a safe fire escape route has been well known since the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire in New York more than a century ago in 1911. Any deaths occurring in an operation that does not provide such a passage or makes existing facilities impassable henceforth should be seen as ‘murder’ and not an accident. The perpetrators, including the manufacturers, the brands, regulators (governments) as well as the self-regulatory monitors and auditors who certify a premise as ‘safe’ need to be held criminally responsible.

This report is dedicated to all those victims who have lost their lives to fire in Karachi, Dhaka and many other places, to victims who have died due to cancer from working in electronics factories from Korea to Indonesia, to victims who died due to their lungs being clogged with silica and to those who died of cancers contracted due to deadly asbestos. This book also salutes the survivors and their families, who struggle every day for justice and a hope that no one else faces the same fate, that workplaces become clean, and that history does not repeat itself again.