

Apparel exporters express frustration over buyers' mistreatment during pandemic

The customers just changed their “so-called relationship” with the apparel suppliers when the Covid-19 crisis started, alleged the exporters

TBS Report

21 April, 2021, 10:15 pm

Last modified: 22 April, 2021, 11:42 am



Picture: Mumit M/TBS

Mostafiz Uddin, founder and CEO of Bangladesh Apparel Exchange, has expressed his frustration over the way the buyers mistreated the garments suppliers since the pandemic hit.

He said he was surprised when his client of 20 years ignored his calls and did not clear the payment during the coronavirus pandemic.

The customers just changed their "so-called relationship" with the apparel suppliers when the Covid-19 crisis started, said Mostafiz at an international webinar titled "Recovery of the Apparels Sector of Bangladesh and Sri Lanka: Is a Value-Chain Based Solution Possible?" on Tuesday.

"When the Covid-19 pandemic started, all the orders were cancelled, and payments were delayed for the goods I already shipped," said Mostafiz, managing director of Denim Expert Ltd, a Chattogram EPZ Based denim garment and washing plant.

"One of my USA customers, to whom I shipped goods about a year ago, has still not paid the price which amounts to around \$2 million. Another buyer, Arcadia Group, cancelled orders worth \$3 million," said Mostafiz.

"The most disappointing and painful experience for me was that I could not even get a reply from my so-called long term partners," he said.

"They have not been accountable, while they talk a lot about accountability. They did not even send an email saying 'hello Mostafiz, this is the thing happening. Can we talk on it?'" said the Bangladesh Apparel Exchange CEO.

"We would have overcome this type of situation if we could really have a small conversation and cooperation between us – the buyers and suppliers. That is the only way to go forward," he continued.

"I have zero hope of going forward as in the last five years I have spoken at 94 conferences in 17 countries on it, and I still ask myself 'what am I doing?'" said Mostafiz at the webinar.

When the Covid-19 pandemic started Mostafiz talked at various media including the BBC and the Guardian. Consequently, he experienced a lot of problems because of his comments and criticism of the foreign buyers but he continued talking on the issues.

"Now if you ask me what had been changed, I would say nothing has changed – contract, payment terms and lead time still remain same," said Mostafiz.

The webinar was organised by the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD), Bangladesh and the Institute of Policy Studies of Sri Lanka (IPS), in partnership with Southern Voice on the findings and recommendations of their a recent study.

Dr Khondaker Golam Moazzem, research director of CPD and Kithmina Hewage, research economist of IPS, Sri Lanka jointly made a keynote presentation, while Professor Mustafizur Rahman, distinguished fellow at the CPD was moderated the programme.

Husni Salieh, director of Strategic Transformation of MAS Holdings, Sri Lanka, Binu Wickramasinghe, co-founder and managing director of The Design Collective Store, Sri Lanka, Pierre Börjesson, head of Sustainability - Global Production of H&M Group and Craig Churchill, chief of Social Finance Programme of ILO, Geneva were distinguished panelists at the webinar.

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