



Speaking with Style: Fazlul Hoque, president of the BKMEA

8 June 2010 | By: Joe Ayling

Bangladesh faces labour, cost and infrastructure challenges as it matures into a key global garment exporter. But as Fazlul Hoque, president of the Bangladesh Knitwear Manufacturers & Exporters Association (BKMEA) tells just-style, "the game is just starting."

It's cocktail hour at Prime Source Forum, but just-style is more excited to be interviewing one of the men leading Bangladesh's charge forward as a vibrant apparel exporter.

Fazlul Hoque has an intensity in his eyes, especially when discussing the needs of garment workers in Bangladesh.

Upon meeting we are ushered into the media room at the Hong Kong exhibition centre, where classical music blares out from the adjacent party.

As Mozart plays out in the background, Hoque pulls no punches when it comes to buyers. "We don't get any real support from the buyers, they are always trying to squeeze us," he says.

He stresses that factory workers need money for "food and shelter" first and foremost, and that brands need to share this responsibility.

Hoque says: "I think the main goals should come from the buyers, they should say 'OK, I paid you \$1 last year, this year I would like to pay you \$1.10, and you have to make sure that extra 10 cents is being spent on the workers'."

According to BKMEA figures, Bangladesh's knitwear exports have slowed by 3.35% over the eight months to March 2010, after growing around 15% in each of the past few years.

Although the downturn has slowed progress, knitwear still accounts for 77% of the country's exports.

Power struggle

Hoque says: "We have observed a small decline in growth rate, but not so much as to force closure of good garment factories. Other than the economic crisis we have another problem though, which is the struggle to get power - gas and electricity. Without power it is a redundant industry."

He tells just-style that the Bangladeshi government is looking into alternative energy sources, together with plans to build a deep seaport to handle the country's booming exports.

Hoque is also keen to drum up business with emerging consumer markets in Asia, including China and India. Although Bangladesh has a number of multi-lateral trade agreements in place, Hoque wants to push for a bilateral deals with these two countries.

He says: "If we had bilateral agreements with India and China then we'd have more chance to explore, but the problem is we don't have sufficient agreement to move forward."

"We have so far been concentrating on the Western markets, but the game is not over yet, it is just starting."

The BKMEA represents 1,700 factories in Bangladesh, mainly in and around the capital city of Dhaka. Hoque tells just-style the industry started out supplying basic garments, but is now moving into mid-tier products and functional textiles too.

Low cost labour

Retail buyers are generally lured to Bangladesh by virtue of its cheap prices, but are the country's labour practices up to scratch, just-style asks?

"Statistically we are doing well, otherwise the international buyers and the big names wouldn't be participating. There's Nike, Adidas, Marks & Spencer, Gap, Wal-Mart - everybody's there. I don't claim it is 100% perfect but where is?" Hoque says.

And it is the subject of living wage that Hoque seems most passionate about, insisting that buyers are often asking for the impossible.

"Unfortunately, the irony is that the buyers are pressurising us to increase the standard of labour, working conditions and the living wage while always trying to reduce the price," he says.

Hoque believes that Western investments in the country, like [Wal-Mart's new learning centre](#), would be better spent improving garment worker wages.

"Some buyers open schools and charities but this is indirect support," he adds. "Ask them to pay extra and make sure that money is paid in cash to the workers."

When it comes to knitwear production, Bangladesh is learning fast. The country was identified along with Vietnam and Indonesia as the [supply chain destinations with most potential](#) by delegates at this year's Prime Source Forum.

Furthermore, it seems with Hoque at the helm, the country will be no pushover for Western brands.

© 2010 All content copyright just-style.com. Published by Aroq Ltd. Seneca House, Buntsford Park Road, Bromsgrove, Worcs, B60 3DX, UK. VAT No: GB785642391. Registered in England No: 4307068. Tel: Intl +44 (0)1527 573 600. Toll Free from US: 1-866-545-5878. Fax: +44 (0)1527 577423. Email: info@aroq.com.