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H&M, Rana Plaza and Beyond: Fast Fashion under the Microscope

Kristina Nilsson,ⁱ H&M's head of sustainability, looked through her window at the company's Stockholm, Sweden, office and reflected on the company's sustainability progress leading up to August 2021. Interest groups were pressing H&M, one of the world's leading fashion companies, to re-sign a legally binding agreement designed to ensure factory safety in Bangladesh. This document was first known as the Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh ("Accord"), which came as a result of the April 2013 Rana Plaza factory building collapse in Dhaka, Bangladesh. The Accord, which had been renewed in 2018 and set to expire August 31, 2021, was reintroduced as the International Accord on Safety and Health in the Garment and Textile Industry ("International Accord").

The Rana Plaza tragedy killed more than one thousand workers and injured over two thousand more.¹ At the time, H&M believed it did not have clothing being manufactured at the site. However, the company knew that some previous orders were fulfilled by subcontractors at Rana Plaza.² This fact led the company into public discussions surrounding supply chain management and corporate responsibility across environmental and social impacts.

H&M was one of the first companies to sign the original Accord in 2013 and its renewal in 2018. The new International Accord aimed to extend the goals of the Accord beyond Bangladesh and into other garment industry-producing countries. Calls were amplified for H&M to re-sign the International Accord by the August 2021 deadline, before it expired.

In the eight years since the initial signing of the Accord, much progress was made regarding building safety and educating workers on their rights in the workplace. H&M worked to increase focus on sustainable and socially responsible initiatives within its own supply chain, yet criticism mounted that the company had not lived up to its commitments under the first Accord.³ With the International Accord's announcement,

ⁱ Kristina Nilsson is a fictional character.

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