

From VOA Learning English, welcome to As It Is. I'm Steve Ember.

Today we tell about efforts to strengthen the rights of about four million garment workers in Bangladesh.

And we hear about conditions in the Congo Basin rain forest. A new report says the area is losing fewer trees than a few years ago.

Finally, from the Model T to the Mustang, we celebrate the 150th anniversary of the birth of the man who brought the assembly line to automobile building.

But first, to the clothing factories of Bangladesh:

Garment workers' rights strengthened in Bangladesh...

Recent actions by the government in Bangladesh and western companies are leading to changes in the country's garment industry.

More than 1,100 workers died last April after the Rana Plana garment factory fell down in Bangladesh. The incident led to international pressure to improve conditions in factories. The pressure led Bangladesh to amend its labor law.

Akramul Qader is the Bangladeshi ambassador to the United States. He says the new measure will strengthen the rights of his country's four million garment workers. Most of them are women. Mr. Qader says the legislation will let the workers form labor unions and receive other benefits, like financial aid after they retire.

Kimberly Elliott is with the Center for Global Development. She says the law may help prevent another building collapse. Ms. Elliott says the measure takes steps to try to improve building safety requirements.

Such improvements can take place only if there are enough inspectors. Ambassador Qader says Bangladesh has at least 5,000 factories. But he says the government does not know where they all are.

"We're taking different steps now to insure that a good number of inspectors are in place so that they can go and inspect the factories and submit their reports and the government can take action."

The new law bars unequal treatment based on sex and disability. Factories are required to place five percent of profits into an employees' welfare fund. However, that requirement does not include the export workforce, which involves a large number of workers.

Kimberly Elliott says that under the law, workers no longer need approval from factory owners to form unions.

“There were provisions to try and avoid a problem that has been a big one in the past - (the problem of) the labor ministry sharing the names of union supporters with management who can then fire them or move them to a different factory. So that has been changed.”

The measure was passed soon after the United States said it was suspending favorable trade treatment for Bangladesh.

European retail companies recently approved a plan to accept legal responsibility for safety. The companies have ordered inspections at their factories in Bangladesh. North American retailers recently announced a separate agreement that does not hold them responsible for factory safety.

As It Is is coming to you from VOA Learning English.

Congo Basin rain forest losing fewer trees...

A new report says loss of trees in the Congo Basin rain forest is slowing down. The Congo Basin is the world’s second largest rain forest after the Amazon in South America. Scientists say the report has good news about the environment. Christopher Cruise has more.

Researcher Simon Lewis is with the University College London. He says Central Africa lost about 285,000 hectares worth of forests each year during the 1990s. In the 2000s, he says, the area lost about 100,000 hectares of trees each year. He called the big drop in deforestation, "quite surprising."

The new study is based on examination of satellite images. It found the loss of trees in the Congo Basin is lower than in other major tropical forest areas.

Simon Lewis says the way that Central African countries have developed their economies may be partly responsible. He says the countries depend heavily on oil and mineral wealth, and are investing less in agricultural expansion.

"So we have not seen the big increase in industrial agriculture like we have seen in the Amazon for soya and in Southeast Asia for palm oil. That is not yet happening on a large scale in Central Africa, hence the low deforestation rates."

But he says that could be changing. He notes that Central Africa is at an important period in its development, with better living conditions, more people and growing demand for food.

As these changes influence demand for commodities from agricultural land, he believes deforestation is likely to rise.

“In the Amazon and in Southeast Asia, really large areas of what were rainforests have been converted to do this industrial-scale agriculture. And that may be counted as the first signs that this might be coming to central Africa.”

I’m Christopher Cruise.

From the Model T to the Mustang, we remember Henry Ford...

Finally, Tuesday is the 150th anniversary of the birth of Henry Ford.

Ford’s ideas about automobile production changed the world’s way of making cars.

Ford was born on his family’s farm in Wayne County, Michigan on July 30, 1863. But farming was not for him. At age 16, he left home to learn the trade of machinist in Detroit. His talent for mechanics and engineering earned him several good jobs. But while he worked at his jobs, he was planning to build a horseless carriage.

Ford created the first model in 1896. A few trial versions of the car later, he established the Ford Motor Company in 1903. The famous Model T came five years after that.

Henry Ford was a major American industrialist and businessman. But he probably is best remembered for the conveyor belt and assembly line.

This way, workers were able to put together cars by adding parts that are carried on a moving conveyor belt. The parts went directly to the worker, or workers, responsible for putting them on the vehicle. This permitted many automobiles to be produced quickly. It also enabled Ford to sell cars generally at a lower price than his competitors.

Between 1908 and 1928, almost 17 million Model Ts were produced throughout the world.

Well, we've certainly had a good ride today, but my arm is kind of tired from cranking that Model T. But I think a little spin around the hills of San Francisco in the Mustang is just what the doctor ordered. Move over, McQueen.

[Car chase from "Bullitt"]

We had help today in the pits from Jeri Watson and Chris Cruise. And final inspection of our shiny new vehicle was by editor George Grow.

And that's As It Is, from VOA Learning English. Steve Ember here. Thanks for joining us. See you next time...if I still have my driver's license.