

H&M Plans to Raise Pay for Clothing Workers

Welcome to As It Is from VOA Learning English. I'm Mario Ritter.

Clothing workers around the world have demanded higher pay for the job they do. Now, a major clothing seller, H&M has agreed.

"We are one of the biggest brands within this industry, and of course with that size also comes a responsibility."

Then we hear how the Global Fund has helped cut the HIV infection rate in many countries.

H&M Plans to Raise Pay at Clothing Factories

The Swedish clothing seller H&M recently announced a program to increase wages for clothing workers in factories around the world. The move would affect companies that supply H&M, including in Cambodia, where the company is a leading buyer. H&M's announcement comes at the end of a notable year for the international garment industry. June Simms has Robert Carmichael's report from Phnom Penh.

The Cambodian government expects to announce an increase in the current \$75 monthly minimum wage for garment workers. The size of the increase is not yet known. But officials are under pressure to improve wages and working conditions in the country's most important industry.

At least part of that pressure is political. The opposition made major gains in July's election. One reason may have been opposition candidates' promises to double the monthly minimum wage. Their pledge won the votes of many of the country's 400,000 garment workers. Most of them are young women who support their poor rural families.

There are other reasons for the pressure as well. The year 2013 has been difficult for Cambodia's garment industry. Workers have gone on strikes and held sometimes violent protests over wages that have not increased over time.

In October, H&M's CEO, Karl-Johan Persson, discussed wages with Prime Minister Hun Sen in Cambodia. He also met with local labor unions. Shortly after the visit, H&M announced a five-year plan. The plan aims to guarantee a fair living wage for workers and a yearly review of workers' wages.

One factory in Cambodia and two in Bangladesh will try the plan next year. Anna Gedda is H&M's social sustainability manager:

"We are one of the biggest brands within this industry, and of course with that size also comes the responsibility."

Under the plan, H&M will pay its sub-contractor factories what it calls a fair living wage.

Dave Welsh, the country representative of the Solidarity Center, a non-profit affiliated with the U.S. labor movement, welcomes H&M's decision.

Welsh says it is no secret the Cambodian government fears that buyers in the clothing industry might leave the country if wages rise too fast. But, H&M's plan should help reduce those fears.

"I understand that concern [but] they have H&M now on record as saying not only will they not pull out, but that they are committed unilaterally to making sure that at least in their factories a living wage is paid."

H&M expects that by 2018, all 750 of the factories it uses will meet its standard.

At the moment, it is not clear how that the company's plan will work. H&M says it will not charge consumers more, which means the expense will be pushed further down the chain.

The other issue is how many other companies will join H&M. So far none has. H&M admits that making its plan work, especially in factories it shares with other brands, will require cooperation. The plan will also require the support of unions, factories and governments.

Now, Cambodia's garment workers are waiting to hear how much they will earn next year. Already some independent unions are threatening further action unless the minimum wage doubles to \$150.

I'm June Simms.

The Global Fund Fights AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria

In Asia and Africa, the spread of HIV-AIDS has had a disastrous effect on people and their livelihoods. The United States and other donors gave their support recently to the Global Fund, an international financing institution that fights AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria. Officials from many countries credited the fund with helping to bring down HIV infection rates. Christopher Cruise has William Eagle's report from Washington.

Health officials, world leaders and donors from around the world met recently at the Global Fund's Fourth Replenishment Conference in Washington. They met to increase financial support and bring attention to progress made in fighting the three deadly diseases.

Fund officials want to raise up to \$15 billion dollars for the three year period from 2014 to 2016. That would be a \$4.6 billion dollar increase over the last period. The United States has promised to give up to \$5 billion to the fund. President Barack Obama said the U.S. will add \$1 for every \$2 promised by other donors. Other countries that promised large donations include Britain, France, Japan and Canada.

Bill Gates of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation attended the conference. The foundation promised up to \$500 million for the new funding period.

U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry spoke at the conference. He said continued financial support is important if progress is to be made in the fight against HIV, malaria and tuberculosis.

Nigerian Finance Minister Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala also spoke at the conference. She said projects supported by the Global Fund have helped save 9 million lives from the three diseases. She also noted that the rate of infection had fallen.

"On the continent, we've seen new HIV infections have fallen quite dramatically, a drop of almost 40 percent. One million fewer people acquired HIV in 2012, and we had 22 percent fewer AIDS-related deaths between 2001 and 2012"

Similar progress was noted by another participant at the conference -- Jeanette Kagame, the wife of the president of Rwanda. She works on global development and public health issues. She helped create the group Friends of the Global Fund. She praised the increased availability of treatment for HIV-infected mothers in her country.

“We have placed emphasis on prevention of mother-to-child transmission [of] HIV. HIV-positive pregnant women and their children have access to PMCT [prevention of mother-to-child transmission] services in 85 percent of our health facilities.”

Secretary of State Kerry said the fund should spend its money carefully, based on the latest science. He also said the global fund’s partners must consider the effect of HIV/AIDS on women and girls. More than half of those infected in sub-Saharan Africa are women or girls. Mr. Kerry says the fund’s partners -- both private and public -- need to cooperate when buying anti-retroviral drugs in order to lower costs. I’m Christopher Cruise.

And that is our show for today. I’m Mario Ritter. For more programs, English teaching lessons and videos, visit our website at learningenglish.voanews.com.