

Hello and welcome back to the program that helps you learn and improve your American English. I'm Jim Tedder in Washington. Today we return to Bangladesh, one year after a terrible accident. How have things changed since many people lost their lives?

Then we're off to New York City for an international automobile show that features electric-powered cars that are made to be more environment friendly.

Let's get started!

It has been one year since a deadly building collapse in Bangladesh. More than 1,100 factory workers were killed in the collapse of the Rana Plaza building, near the capital, Dhaka. Since then, efforts to improve safety have begun. But many families of victims are in need of financial help. And hundreds of survivors remain unemployed.

Jonathan Evans has more on the story.

Rezwan Selim is the owner of the Softex Sweater plant. For 15 years, his company manufactured clothing in a rented building in Dhaka. But in March, production halted when international inspectors told him to stop work because the factory was not structurally safe.

The closure is a result of an agreement called the Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh. One hundred fifty retail businesses signed the accord after the building collapse last year. Many of the companies are based in Europe.

The Rana Plaza had structural problems, with cracks appearing in the building. But garment workers were told to continue making clothing. Hundreds were crushed to death or injured when the building collapsed.

The disaster put pressure on clothing retailers to make sure that the garment factories making their products are safe. The accord led to measures designed to protect garment workers.

Inspectors have examined about 300 of the 1,500 buildings they plan to inspect by September. Eight have been completely or partially closed in an effort to prevent another Rana Plaza-like accident.

The accord is not the only effort to improve building safety. More than 20 American and Canadian retailers are leading a similar effort. And the group has ordered one factory to close.

Rob Wayss is the executive director of the Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh. He says the factory closures are a sign that change is taking place. But he admits that there has been some resistance.

“I think in some ways, in many ways, though it is unfortunate, the requirement that suspension of production and evacuation of factory buildings is another indicator that progress is being made. There is a price tag on the fixes, and so there has been, I think, a little bit of anxiety and a little bit of an effort to try to push it back or slow it down.”

Bangladesh is the second largest supplier of clothing in the world. Critics warned last year that retailers would reduce their presence in Bangladesh because of the disaster. But activists say this has not happened, and business expanded over the past year. The activists are calling on garment factory owners to do more to improve the industry.

The attention since the building collapse has put pressure on the government to improve working conditions for garment workers. The lowest monthly wage has been raised from \$36 to \$68. And Bangladesh has passed a law enabling workers to form labor unions.

However, many people feel that the condition of those who were working in Rana Plaza has been overlooked. The question is whether the Rana Plaza disaster will become a turning point for the garment industry, or will it be business as usual?

I'm Jonathan Evans.

Electric Cars on Display at Big Auto Show

The 2014 New York International Auto Show is underway at New York's Jacob Javits Convention Center. This year, many automakers are demonstrating electric-powered or hybrid vehicles to meet a growing demand for cars that are friendly to the environment. Experts believe more people will want these new kinds of transportation, but there are still some technological problems to solve. Steve Ember, who just loves cars, joins us with more.

The Japanese automaker Toyota manufactures a hydrogen fuel cell vehicle. The car is said to start quickly, offer a smooth ride and produce no carbon monoxide gas. Wade Hoyt works for Toyota Motors.

"We think that hydrogen is the future of electric vehicles because they're so much more convenient. And the way it works is the hydrogen wants to combine with the oxygen in the air.

It forms H₂O, which is water vapor, is the only exhaust, so it's a true zero emissions vehicle. And you get electricity out of that combination."

Few automakers are producing electric and hybrid vehicles. Hybrids depend on at least two power sources, like electricity and traditional fuel. At the auto show, Ford demonstrated an all-electric powered Ford Focus. Chevrolet spoke about the environment-friendly qualities of its Volt.

Electric cars are easy on the environment. And they can also offer strong performance. Tesla Motors showed a car that can go from zero to about 100 kilometers an hour in 3.7 seconds. The car has a top speed of just over 200 kilometers an hour.

Electric cars can start up quickly on the road because their motors offer more torque than comparable gasoline engines. Torque is a turning or twisting force in the engine.

But the move from gasoline to electric cars is a slow process, says James Bell of General Motors.

“I think the mistake that many people in the industry and in the media maybe thought was that – you know, when the Nissan Leaf came out or the Chevrolet Volt – was that suddenly people would drop their gasoline powered cars and rush for them. No, it’s not that way. This is going to be a slow evolution, but it’s also a ‘Pandora’s Box’ moment. It’s not going to go back in. Electrified vehicles are the way to meet those emissions in the future.”

More than 60 million cars are produced worldwide each year. But only one million of them are electric vehicles or hybrids. But last year, the number of such cars rose 100 percent.

Automakers still do not earn a profit on electric cars because of the high cost of battery technology. For example, Tesla’s battery costs \$50,000. That represents about half of the vehicle’s total selling price. But manufacturers pay the costs because they believe electric vehicles are an important part of the industry’s future.

Matt Miller is a reporter for Bloomberg News. He says a mixture of old and new technology is a winning combination.

“Really, the key for the future, I think, is hybrid technology, so rather than having a car like a Tesla, that’s completely electric power, you have a car like the BMW I-3 or I-8, which has a small gasoline motor to help charge the battery when it’s needed and electric motors to drive.”

The issue is to produce a car with a long, low-cost battery life. This will enable the driver to travel a long way before having to add more electricity. Automakers expect many millions of Americans will then decide to move from a traditional car to an electric or hybrid vehicle.

I’m Steve Ember.

And I’m Jim Tedder in Washington. More Learning English programs are headed your way, and there is world news at the beginning of the hour. We’ll see you tomorrow on VOA.

