

# A factory's fainting crisis

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## Probe showed multiple cases a day

**I**N A single factory that supplies some of the biggest international brands, faintings occurred every day for five years, a new investigation by the Cambodian Legal Education Centre has found.

Until just weeks ago, when the management installed new fans, three to four garments workers were fainting or collapsing at the M&V garment factory in Kampong Chhnang province, CLEC uncovered through interviews with nearly two dozen employees.

The workers, line leaders and union officials were split up into different

groups and interviewed by CLEC on October 20 at M&V; all provided the same response. Those results were corroborated by the *Post's* own interviews with workers who said at least one or two workers fainted each day for years.

M&V has had its reputation dogged by repeated mass fainting incidents, including two in August alone. The factory supplies major clothing brands such as Gap and H&M, which is now the target of a media campaign in Sweden opposing exploitative labour practices.

Moeun Tola, head of the labour program at CLEC, said workers had told him the factory had begun acting swiftly to remove workers immediately after they fainted in a bid to avoid hysteria-driven mass fainting, but the individual cases had continued.

"When we talked with the line leader or ordinary worker, union leader, they all confirmed that three or four workers fainted every day," he said, adding one worker said this had been happening for the duration of the five years they had been at the factory.

Workers said the causes of the fainting included lack of food, uneven ventilation in the factory, bad smells and excessive hours, with some employees working overtime seven days a week, Tola said.

Yin Nak, administrative director at M&V in Phnom Penh, denied employees had ever seen widespread fainting at the Kampong Chhnang factory and said the cause of the fainting was the workers themselves.

"The factory did not cause the fainting; it is because of the workers' feelings. They are scared every year when

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the month of August comes, because the workers always faint in that month," he said, adding that poor diets were also a problem.

Anna Eriksson, from H&M's Communications and Press Department, said the company had devised a remediation plan with M&V that introduced a grievance system to the factory, an environmental health safety committee, temperature monitoring and other improvements to ventilation.

"This is an industry-wide problem that needs to be addressed. Similar incidents have happened at a number of garment factories in Cambodia at suppliers producing for several different companies, also at factories where H&M is not present," she said in an email.

Routines had been introduced to ensure overtime was strictly voluntarily at the Kampong Chhnang factory, while top management were holding monthly meetings with workers and middle managers were being trained in how to prevent heat stress, Eriksson added.

Gap was unable to respond immediately.

One worker from the M&V factory, who declined to be named, told the *Post* yesterday she had herself collapsed twice at work and seen one or two others faint every day in the four years that she had been there, though this had stopped in October.

"I do not know why I got a headache and became dizzy when I stepped into my workplace. Now I know the reason was because the environment in the factory was stuffy and hot," she said.

"Everything has changed, and no more workers faint after the factory officials added more ventilation in the room to get more air," she said, adding that M&V had also put a stop to excessive overtime.

But she still survives off 1,000 riel (25 cents) worth of food a day, and workers remain forbid-

den from bringing food into the factory or getting food during any time other than in their two breaks, forcing them to endure hunger for long periods until the end of their shifts.

Another worker, Kim Sreang, said he wasn't really worried about his health but was concerned for his wife, who had already fainted four times in two years at M&V.

"The environment at the workplace and the not-so-good food are the reasons that caused my wife and other workers to faint," he said.

Sreang added that he knew the 5,000 riel the pair spent on daily meals did not give them enough energy, but they had no choice.

Ken Loo, secretary-general of the Garment Manufacturers Association in Cambodia, said the number of faintings reported by CLEC sounded highly improbable given that about 1,900 were reported by the International Labour Organisation to have fainted in the shoe and garment industry in all of 2011.

"Over the last three to four years, M&V have had some fainting incidents, and even if we assume the worst and say they have one every year, three to four every day [over] a year would be about 1,500," he said.

"That would be quite a big story."

An unreleased discussion paper from the ILO's Better Factories Cambodia program written earlier this year and obtained yesterday has also found that a number of garment factories are perennially ignoring advice for improvements from BFC assessments.

For the 8 to 10 per cent of garment factories with export permits, continual monitoring did not lead to change, it found.

In one case, an unnamed factory was given 59 suggestions of improvements that should be made by BFC in 2010. At its next assessment, in 2012, it was given 58 suggestions. No factories were named in the paper.

The main reason factories did comply with labour standards

was because of pressure from buyers sensitive to public opinion and the public disclosure of compliance levels by BFC, a practice that ceased in 2006.

The discussion paper also said BFC was proposing to make public select information from assessments of factories that did not comply with labour standards.

For perennially noncompliant factories, BFC proposed requesting assistance from the Ministry of Labour and Vocational Training to enforce Cambodian law.

Dave Welsh, country director of the American Center for International Labor Solidarity, said the garment industry had grown less transparent in recent years, which was in no way the fault of BFC.

"The more transparent [BFC] becomes and any steps [they take] toward actually enforcing its findings, the less likely it is it will remain in the country," he said. "It's the perfect relationship for the brands. I blame the brands, they use the ILO BFC for cover, but they don't give it any teeth."

Welsh said he had high praise for the work BFC had done over the years, but said it had been stymied by its structure, in which BFC gives brands private information, then leaves it up to them whether or not to act.

Chief Technical Adviser for ILO-Better Factories Cambodia Jill Tucker said the organisation had been in talks with the Ministry of Labour to improve enforcement.

"That discussion will now likely result in the formation of an Inter-ministerial Commission on Labor Compliance. The commission would consist of representatives of the Ministry of Labour, Ministry of Commerce and Ministry of Social Affairs who will work on cases where factories are perennially non-compliant," she said, adding that it was too early to discuss details, but the commission would address the issues highlighted in the discussion paper. ■