

Hundreds of Cambodian garment workers faint

At least 200 workers hospitalised after mass fainting at factories that make products for major sportswear companies.

3 Apr 2014



Fainting is frequent in Cambodia's growing garment industry [Reuters]

More than 200 Cambodian garment workers have been hospitalised after episodes of mass fainting at three factories, highlighting problems within an industry that is critical to the kingdom's fledgling economy.

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It was hot and I began to vomit, I had diarrhoea and others had the same problems

Nguon Sarith, garment worker

The three factories make clothes for brands such as sportswear giants Puma SE and Adidas.

Puma and Adidas said they were investigating the incidents and would respond soon, a Reuters news agency report said.

Tainted food, poor working conditions and the spraying of insecticide are suspected causes, AFP news agency reported, citing Khim Sunsoda, deputy governor of Pur Senchey district, where the incidents

happened.

"We don't know why but one worker was sick and others just saw them and began to collapse," district police chief Khem Saran told Reuters.

About 650,000 workers form the backbone of Cambodia's garment industry, which draws in more than \$5bn a year in revenue and is a key source of income for the breadwinners of impoverished families in the countryside.

Poor conditions

Mass fainting is common in Cambodia, which has become an important manufacturing centre for many high street fashion brands including Gap, Nike, H&M and Marks & Spencer.

Garment makers have often complained of poor ventilation, strong chemicals and the use of potent glue for footwear, although official investigations in recent years have been largely inconclusive.

"It was hot and I began to vomit, I had diarrhoea and others had the same problems," said Nguon Sarith, 30, who was attached to an intravenous drip at a hospital in the Cambodian capital, Phnom Penh.

She said she did not know the cause.

Disputes over pay

There were more than 1,000 reports of fainting in 2011 in factories mostly owned by Chinese, Taiwanese and South Koreans. Most workers earn less than \$100 per month and many volunteer for overtime to boost their income.

"The health of Cambodian workers is generally poor because with the current wages they cannot make a good living," said Seang Sambath, head of the Worker Friendship Union Federation.

The problems do not stop at fainting. The industry has been plagued by unrest in recent months, with long-running disputes over pay escalating into national strikes and anti-government protests that have been violently suppressed by security forces.

About 18 unions plan to hold a week-long strike on April 17 to demand a minimum wage rise to \$160 monthly, up from \$100. The previous strike, held in January, was firmly dealt with by the authorities. Live ammunition was used to disperse crowds, killing five workers.

SOURCE: AGENCIES

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