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West under scrutiny over Bangladesh's garment trade DHAKA: Orders from Western brands such as Gap, H&M and Zara are flooding into Bangladesh's low-cost garment sector but experts and campaigners warn blistering growth masks deep problems in the industry. Deadly riots over pay, and workplace accidents - including a factory fire on Tuesday that killed 25 - are on the rise as export companies expand rapidly to meet demand. "The industry is growing so fast now but we are failing our garment workers," Khondaker Golam Moazzem, senior research fellow at local think-tank the Center for Policy Dialogue, told AFP.

clothes stores Gap and JC Penney were among the factory's clients - and labour rights groups have accused Western buyers of long ignoring dangerous working conditions in the drive to cut production costs. Scott Nova of the Worker Rights Consortium said brands had been constantly warned about the "grossly substandard fire and building safety standards" at factories they use in Bangladesh. Dozens of workers jumped to their deaths as the fire tore through the Hameem factory, where workers allege that exit gates had been locked to prevent theft. Police say an electrical short circuit may have triggered the blaze, which spread quickly through piles of garments, filled the factory with smoke and caused panic among thousands of workers. "People couldn't see, they were terrified, they panicked and ran to the roof

but the doors were locked and they couldn't get out except to jump," Hazrat Ali, who works at the factory, told AFP. The Clean Clothes Campaign lobby group said Western labels had failed to act on warnings, even after a fire in February that killed 21 at a sweater factory that fulfilled orders from Swedish giant H&M. "We've warned the brands repeatedly that this would keep happening again and again, but they've chosen to respond only in a minimal fashion," CCC spokeswoman Ineke Zeldenrust said. "Workers keep dying while the brands, the government and the employers drag their feet and try to shift the responsibility upon each other." Bangladesh's garment industry - which employs three million people and is crucial to the impoverished country's economy - has also been

rocked by deadly protests over wage demands in recent weeks. On Sunday, four workers died after police fired live ammunition into a thousandstrong crowd protesting over low wages at a major factory zone in the southern port city of Chittagong. Riots spread to Dhaka and into the north of the country, with scores of cars burned, factories barricaded and equipment vandalised. Workers were protesting that a minimum-wage hike, which came into force in November, has been unevenly implemented with a strong bias against more experienced staff who were left out of pocket. "These sort of incidents - the fire, the violence - they send the wrong signal to international buyers," Moazzem, from the Centre for Policy Dialogue, said. "It is time to change. We are flooded with orders, it is time to ensure workers also benefit from this." — AFP