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PRESS RELEASE

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ETI Chair calls for joint action to protect poorest workers

ETI members Gap, Asda/George, Marks & Spencer and Levi Strauss will be joined by other leading global retailers and brands including Walmart, the Cotton Group and Karstadt Quelle at a major conference in Dhaka, Bangladesh (Textiles and Garments: Forum on the Future, 27 and 28 June) to discuss the future of the country's textiles and garments industry in the post-quota period.

On 1 January this year the Multi-fibre Arrangement, which governed clothing and textile exports to the US and the EU through a system of quotas, came to an end. For garment workers in poor countries like Bangladesh, the end of MFA brings fears of large-scale job losses as well as downward pressures on working conditions. Estimates for job losses in Bangladesh range from 100,000 (Oxfam) to 1 million (UNDP) workers.

Says Alan Roberts, Chair of ETI and conference speaker: 'ETI believes passionately that all stakeholders have a key role to play in helping protect the poorest workers in the poorest countries from the worst effects of restructuring. We call on countries like Bangladesh to prioritise the rights of their workers while seeking to maintain their export market share. We call on retailers and brands to maintain their current country supply base where feasible, to collaborate with their suppliers and governments to help create employment opportunities for displaced workers and to help ensure decent working conditions in their current supply chains'.

Says Neil Kearney, Board Director of ETI and General Secretary of the International Textiles Garments and Leather Workers Industry: 'With the world clothing and textile industry in turmoil, countries like Bangladesh that are highly dependent on the industry for employment and export earnings, must develop strategies to stabilise and grow their industry. This conference provides a springboard for all concerned – government, employers and workers alike – to develop such a strategy'.

Over 150 participants including national and international government and trade union representatives, the World Bank and the International Finance Corporation are expected to attend the Textiles and Garments: Forum on the Future

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Conference, which has been organised by the United Nations Development Programme and the International MFA Forum.

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Notes to editors:

1. The Multi-Fibre Arrangement (MFA), also known as the Agreement on Textiles and Clothing (ATC) which governed textiles and apparel imports to the USA and the EU through a system of quotas, came to an end on 1 January 2005.
2. The MFA Forum is a group of brands and retailers, international institutions, trade unions and NGOs formed in early 2004 to better understand the implications of the end of the MFA, particularly for workers and communities, and to explore how best to promote collaborative approaches to mitigating negative impacts and taking advantage of new opportunities.
3. Garments represent 68% of all Bangladesh's product exports. Experts predict that in the post 2005 period, Bangladesh garment exports will fall by as much as 25%. Predictions of the number of jobs that will be lost in Bangladesh in the wake of MFA phase-out range from 100,000 (Oxfam) to 1 million (UNDP) workers.
4. The Ethical Trading Initiative (ETI) is a labour standards initiative. It was established in 1998 to improve the lives of workers and their families in global supply chains. It believes that companies producing, supplying and selling goods for consumer markets should observe national and international labour laws. Its purpose is to identify and promote responsible corporate practice that will help make this a reality.