

Tripartite meetings for competitiveness in the garment industry

[This article, the second in a series of three, is the outcome of a series of tripartite meetings among representatives of the government, the workers and the employers, facilitated by The Asia Foundation, and supported by The United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The third article in the series will appear tomorrow.]

DR. NAUSHAD FAIZ

THE quota regime that governed much of the global market for textiles and apparel for more than forty years came to an end in the United States, Canada, and Europe on January 1, 2005. While no Asian countries to date have experienced the mass exodus of jobs that was previously feared, some countries are seeing early signs of weakness in their export numbers, and many stakeholders in the region now recognize the need to develop competitive domestic economic environments that will encourage investment and preserve employment in the post-quota era.

Labour unions, employers and government

In order to respond to this need for an open dialogue among the actors of the industry, The Asia Foundation (TAF) launched, toward the end of last year, a regional project on *Building Competitiveness through Economic Reforms in the Garment-Exporting Countries*, with financial support from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), in Bangladesh, Cambodia and Sri Lanka. Through this project, The Asia Foundation, with the assistance of a local consultant, facilitated tripartite meetings among representatives of employers and employees of the ready-made garment (RMG) industry, and public authorities to discuss country-specific agendas for domestic reforms that will enhance the ability of Bangladesh to compete with other nations in maintaining a share of the global garment trade. The eight-month program implemented simultaneously in the three countries builds upon active engagement by the international community involved in this sector.

Consulting with other stakeholders

Prior to organizing the tripartite

meetings, The Asia Foundation carried out consultations with a number of stakeholders knowledgeable about and involved in the RMG sector. Discussions were held with representatives of factory owners' associations, labour federations, government departments, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), research organizations, and donor agencies for eliciting information on the state of the garment industry in Bangladesh and identifying the key actors in the RMG sector of the country.

The stakeholder consultations and preparatory meetings helped in building rapport with the three parties – employers, employees and public authorities – and set the stage for holding the tripartite dialogues. Discussions with them highlighted the key issues and concerns of these groups and provided a basis for shaping the agenda for the tripartite meetings.

This consultation with the other stakeholders also led to the development by The Asia Foundation of a matrix on *Who Is Doing What in the RMG Sector*. Developing and updating this matrix is an on-going process aimed at keeping track of the main activities that donor agen-

cies, NGOs, civil society, and government departments have undertaken in the recent past or are currently conducting in order to support the garment industry of Bangladesh.

Engaging the actors

In Bangladesh, the program was launched at a pressing time of high tension and deteriorating industrial relation between employers and employees. However, the first tripartite meeting was held on April 3, 2006, with members of labour unions, representatives of business associations and of the main relevant ministries. During the meeting, all sides of the sector agreed upon the importance of creating a venue for an open and constructive dialogue among the main actors.

All parties agreed that since other venues, facilitated by international organizations or organized by the government, are specifically aimed at tackling issues such as labour compliance or labour dispute, these tripartite meetings should avoid such controversial issues to concentrate on building understanding among the three parties and on discussing areas of reform where a consensus may easily be reached. This first meet-

ing was thus designed to enable the three parties to freely exchange views on the status of the industry in general and how to make it competitive under conditions resulting from the expiry of MFA in particular.

In this meeting, the participants identified and discussed key issues that affect the RMG sector. These issues cover a wide range of areas where improvements and reforms have to be made in order to make the garment industry more competitive. These include inadequate infrastructure (e.g. poor quality of roads, railways and ports, and erratic supply of electricity and gas), inefficient and corrupt facilities (e.g. port and customs procedures), insufficient business support (e.g. high bank interest and charges), low level of labour standards and compliance (e.g. low wages and inadequate compensation, unsafe working conditions, low level of productivity and skills, non-implementation of labour laws), and ineffective policy support (e.g. lack of government initiative to promote setting up of backward linkage industries and "garment villages"). On most of these issues, there was consensus amongst the participants and a willingness to work

together for the betterment of the industry.

In the second tripartite meeting held on May 22, 2006, prior to discussing potential activities to be carried out to better address the issues identified earlier by the three parties, and in order to avoid potential duplication, The Asia Foundation presented the matrix on *Who Is Doing What in the RMG Sector*. The participants then suggested a number of activities that The Asia Foundation and other stakeholders could undertake to improve the competitiveness of the RMG sector of Bangladesh. The suggested activities cover a wide range of areas relating to awareness raising, social compliance, training of managers and workers, campaigning for fair prices, institutionalizing tripartite meetings, facilitating discussions with development partners on their projects, etc.

The participants agreed on two activities that The Asia Foundation could conduct or commission as part of its present program in Bangladesh. Acknowledging the fact that creating an informal venue where the three parties could meet on a regular basis to exchange

information and discuss issues facing the industry was helping the process of creating a better environment for the industry in Bangladesh, the participants agreed that the first activity should focus on how to continue these tripartite meetings after the end of the current USAID-sponsored program, in July 2006. The second activity consists in "publicizing" the outcome of the tripartite meetings through a series of articles in order to raise awareness about the reality of the situation of the post-MFA RMG sector in Bangladesh.

The third tripartite meeting, held on July 13, 2006, focused on the implementation of these two selected activities. Participants confirmed their will to continue this informal dialogue among the three parties and agreed on general guidelines for continuing the tripartite meetings after the end of the program and discussed the content of the articles to be published. This meeting was also the occasion to invite other stakeholders such as international organizations and NGOs, to present them with the outcome of the tripartite meetings and share views about possible activities.

The series of tripartite meetings facilitated by The Asia Foundation between January and July 2006 have provided an opportunity for the participants to frankly exchange views and discuss difficult and sometimes controversial issues in a professional manner. The participants have been sincere in their efforts to understand the problems confronting the industry in general and each party in particular.

Despite the recent workers unrest and agitation, which often became violent and led to widespread disruptions in many factories, or because of this conflict situation, the participants to the tripartite meetings acknowledge the importance of continuing this informal and constructive dialogue. The participants all clearly stated that these tripartite meetings do not aim to create a venue for negotiation or dispute settlement but rather to establish a regular forum for exchanges and discussion on issues that all parties agree need to be reformed to improve the competitiveness of the Bangladeshi RMG sector in the post-MFA era.

The contents are the responsibility of the tripartite meetings and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID or the United States Government.

Are we listening to their dhols?

ASIF SALEH

Preface: Recently there is a huge controversy surrounding who speaks for Muslims with the government in the UK. Journalist Martin Bright, emboldened by some leaked memo from the foreign office, tried to establish in his TV show "Who Speaks for Muslims," that the British government is engaging with the militant wing of Islam bypassing the vast majority of Muslim. The article below was written in that backdrop. "The extremist form of Islam has not been formed by the so-called flag wavers of Islam, but anti-Islamic economic super-power for the longest time has helped in creating this monster. In this critical time, it is essential that Islam and all other religion look for the broader definition of their religion."

THIS is a quote from the back cover of the latest album of the most popular band in Bangladesh, called Bangla. This quote itself gives a broader picture of the struggle that is going on in mainstream Bangladesh for the soul of Islam.

However, when Mockbul Ali, the Islamic affairs adviser to the foreign office, represents Delwar Hossain Sayeedi, the fundamentalist cleric from Bangladesh, as a mainstream Bangladeshi Muslim in his infamous memo that was leaked to the media recently, it not only blatantly misrepresents the real situation, but also undermines this struggle for pluralisms among the Muslims.

By engaging with such "mainstream" Muslims, the government is really getting disconnected from the larger chunk of Muslims who are much more diverse and less political. As more and more Muslims realize that they need to speak up in order to be heard, it is very important that we listen in tuning at the correct frequency.

The underlying argument on the Martin Bright documentary "Who Speaks for the Muslims?" is not about Muslim Council of Britain (MCB), neither is it about identifying the so called "Good Muslims." Rather the question it asks is whether all spectrums of the Muslim viewpoints are being represented in the dialogs with the government or the public. The answer to me is an unequivocal no

and to find the reason we have to look into why Muslims are all being categorized in one bouquet where there is no room for cultural and national identity.

How many people actually know that the largest Muslim gathering every year in London is not a religious gathering at all but a secular cultural festival? This year almost 80,000 Bangladeshis, about 90% of them Muslims, crowded the streets of Brick Lane during the Baishakhi Mela, the Bengali New Year celebration.

Anyone who has experienced the vibrancy, the colour and the spontaneity of this festival realizes how unmistakably the national and cultural identity is stamped on the Bangladeshis. The women are out in their traditional ware in full force while the men chant Bangla folk songs. Herein is the biggest piece of the puzzle which people in both sides of the argument are missing. Both are completely ignoring the geographical affinity of the Muslims -- the very element that along with their cultural roots that shapes their behaviour in the society.

For example, how Pakistani Muslims and Bangladeshi Muslims view Islamic fundamentalism is shaped in many ways about how they see the bitter war in 1971 that separated the two countries. Bangladeshis, in general, hold deep disgust against the party, Jamaat-e-Islami, the party that collaborated against the independence and were allegedly responsible for abating the Pakistani army in killing hundreds and thousands of their countrymen. That is the very reason hard right Islamic elements still can garner on their own no more than 5% of the seats in the parliament in Bangladesh.

Similarly, British Bangladeshis, who had an extremely proactive pro-Bangladesh role during the 1971 liberation war, deeply distrusts religion based politics and fundamentalism in the name of religion. However, for a lot of Pakistani-origin Muslims, this break up between the two Muslim countries happened because of political maneuvering of India. Their views about religion in politics, as a result, are very differently shaped from their Bangladeshi brethren.

So to understand Muslims and

hear their different viewpoints, the engagement will have to start from their geographical and cultural identities. Only then a wholesome picture of their identity will emerge. Organizations that encourage prospering these cultural roots have to be encouraged as well. The community leaders, cultural, secular and religious, need to be engaged in the dialog.

It is interesting to note that that tide is slowly but surely turning. The large section of the Muslims who see religion as a very personal day to day lifestyle choice and who never saw the need to form any organization to highlight their religious identity are increasingly realizing that for the well being of their future generations, the longer they are unrepresented, the chances are more that it will hit their homes and their family members will be represented by people whom they despise. The prospect of the external social elements turning their own children against them into radicalism is so real, that they are beginning to organize themselves.

That's why we see people like Haras Rafiq, an ordinary business man, and Murad Qureshi, a prominent British-Bangladeshi politician, speak out in the Martin Bright documentary against the misrepresentation. We see Fareena Alam, the twenty something editor of the Progressive Muslim magazine Qnews, talk to the young Muslims in a language that they have not heard before. We see Independent Columnist Yasmin Alibhai-Brown form Muslims for Secular Democracy and we see the launch of organization like Progressive British Muslims. In parallel, independent cultural organizations are promoting the cultural and nationalist roots for those Muslims who don't see them represented in the faith based organizations.

While these silent majority need to speak up, they need to carefully pick whose platform they are using. Let's make no mistake about it that there are Islamophobes like Daniel Pipes out there who use Islam as the reason for everything bad that has happened to this world. If one is against one form of extremism of one religion, one should be against extremism of all religions. Let this be the litmus test for everyone who claims that they are not

Islamophobes.

Moderates who are trying to have their voices heard, also should not be lured by the people with right wing agenda either. They risk their own credibility at this. It is imperative that they make it clear that when they speak for a minority, they speak for all the minorities of the world. The same people who criticize the aggression against the Palestinians and Lebanese people, criticize the suicide bombings in London, Madrid or New York. They demand justice for discrimination against the Muslims in the United States. At the same time, they defend the rights of Ahmadiyas to practice their religion even if they don't agree with their views.

In the post 9/11 world, these distinctions are, however, becoming difficult to differentiate, as loud religious jingoism easily overshadows the nuances of these stands. Interestingly, there are remarkable parallels worldwide. While on one hand, in Bangladesh, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) is using the Jamaat-e-Islami and Islam to ride the political wave that has been created by the war in Iraq, we see George Galloway, the Respect Party MP, do the same with success with the East London Bangladeshis.

The potential cost of this alignment is unknown -- at least for now. But the signs are ominous. With incidents like Forest Gate, where two Bangladeshis got almost killed by the police for mistaken identities, it becomes increasingly difficult for a Muslim not to think that they are the victims of a worldwide aggression. The visible damage to the credibility to the government caused by such blunders is obvious but hidden is the long term damage on the Muslim psyche that helps the recruiting of zealous extremists.

However, the good news is that the new year festival of the Bangladeshis in London mentioned before in this piece, which was threatened to be bombed six years ago by the militants, is still thriving and is growing bigger every year. They are singing, dancing and beating their "dhols" (drums). Are you listening?

Asif Saleh is Executive Director, Drihsitpat, a global Bangladeshi human rights organization

IN MEMORIAM

Syed Amir Khasru

S SHAPIR KHASRU

SYED Amir Khasru passed away on July 9 2006. He was 76. At his Qui, a close friend and colleague of over 50 years rose to say a few words about him. He spoke with insight in three particular qualities that most characterised Amir Khasru through his years -- his integrity, his loyalty and his courage. These seem more rare today -- specially in deeds. Amir Khasru embodied them in a truly unique way. He did so each day and in his career as civil servant where he went on to become Secretary of govt. (Ministries of Relief & Rehabilitation, Commerce, Labour and Manpower). So it seems fitting to remember these three qualities that played the most defining role in his first 65 plus years. It is more befitting in his case as he was taken ill in the last ten of his sunset years, when memories dim with time. Around 1995, he was diagnosed with Alzheimer, an incurable condition that gradually but surely ravishes the mind while it does nothing directly to the body.

Above all, Amir Khasru lived his life on integrity. It is explained better by the relief programme "Food-for-Work", which he had started and considered as the proudest achievement of his work life. He started it in 1973 while in Relief Ministry. This relief programme helped millions of victims of the 1974 famine, when he lobbied for and got more relief in millions of tons of wheat valued at hundreds of millions of dollars, than what was offered in cash from donor countries and international relief agencies like FAO (Food and Agricultural Organisation of the United Nations). Till then the relief was given mainly as free cash handouts. But Food-for-Work programme employed the victim on public works projects like canals, embankments, roads. End of day, he or she received over 2 Kg of wheat, half of which they usually sold to buy lentil, vegetables etc., to feed their starving family and children. Amir Khasru started this programme on the simple principle of integrity. This is best described in an inci-

dent during his field trip to a Food-for-Work project in a village in 1974. The local official-in-charge told him that he did not have enough projects to employ all of the victims in his area. Amir Khasru's reply was instant and simple, "Put him (recipient of relief) to do any work ... he can even dig, fill and again dig the same hole for the day... that is better for his integrity and self-respect, instead of getting something (as relief) for doing nothing..."

Amir Khasru lived his life with the same standard of integrity. Couple of incidents explains it all too well. In late 1970s government reduced the allocation of petrol to govt. car from 2 to 1 gallon per day. Amir Khasru was already then a govt. Secretary. Yet he planned his travel each day in such a way that his car would use no more than the allocated one gallon. Then in 1983, Amir Khasru decided to leave service several years before he was due to retire. He was then a Secretary running a ministry -- the top position that all civil servants aspire to reach and remain as long as possible. He left for one reason and no other -- to keep his integrity. He made this decision in one single day -- when events earlier in the day convinced him that he could continue only if he compromised his integrity. He consulted 1-2 friends on this decision. But nothing they said told him that he could retain his integrity the same way. So he left quietly, immediately and at the peak of his career -- only to keep his integrity intact.

Amir Khasru's loyalty to his friends and relatives was unique. It was never affected by long distances in time or place. One such story begins in 1940s when he stopped going to school. He was a student in class eight in Barisal. There was no parent or guardian present to look after his welfare and send him back. He only had some school friends like Ajit, Ashit and Shubash who coaxed and convinced him to go back. From there, he went to graduate with scholarship. During partition of 1947, these friends migrated to West Bengal. For next 25 years, he had no contact with them due to the difficult relations

between Pakistan and India. After Bangladesh was born in 1971, he took initiative to search, find and contact each of them. He traveled to Calcutta only to meet them. His visits became cause for their reunion. He invited and hosted them on visits to Dhaka. This continued till 1994 when he remained well. He had the same unwavering loyalty and support for his other friends and relatives during all his years. There was never a person who came to him for help and did not return with some direct or indirect help if he was in a position to oblige.

The third quality of Amir Khasru was his courage or simply put -- guts. Never did he hesitate for a moment to stand for what he thought was right. Never could any powers or threats dissuade him. This is specially difficult for a civil servant in service to political and civil superiors. An event that illustrates it was during the famine in 1974. He faced intense political and other pressures as Secretary of Relief to reverse the relief policy back to cash handouts that served the interest of those vested parties. He was directed to scale down the new programme of Food-for-Work, if not close it down. His stand was again simple -- he said to his superiors that he would immediately ask to be transferred, if this happened. He said he was even prepared to put in his letter of resignation if he was forced to reverse the relief policy. Fortunately for him, if not for the famine victims in need of relief, his then superiors supported him. The easier and more traveled road is to compromise and to adjust. But Amir Khasru chose the less traveled and more lonely path by choice to stand with guts for his convictions every single day.

Amir Khasru passed away leaving behind what remains a mystery to this day. What was there in this person's formative childhood years that helped to imbibe these values in him, which he practiced to such lengths in his adult years. He had no role model to speak of while growing up. He was like an orphan very early with one younger sister. His mother passed away when he was about four. His father was a lawyer who lived in Calcutta for independ-



ence movement related political interests in 1930-40s. His maternal grandmother brought him up till he went to Presidency College in Calcutta. So he was completely a self-made man who left us with unanswered question of what helped him bring about these values. Meanwhile, his life is an illumination that says that these three qualities can also be there in others who do not necessarily benefit from an upbringing or a role model.

Amir Khasru has now left for another world. He was never a public figure. Rather he shied away from limelight because he believed that was the proper role for a civil servant. So he declined the rare invitations like to write a treatise on and to speak of Food-for-Work to global audiences from the podium of F.A.O. Now he lives in others in their memories of him. Those memories are much about these same three qualities of his integrity, his loyalty and his courage that his friend spoke of. For those among the living, perhaps there could be a few lessons from the remembrances of these three qualities of Amir Khasru. Or perhaps they may relate to and feel less alone knowing of these qualities illuminated by Amir Khasru in a real life in the real world. For Amir Khasru, that would make him feel more happy about his life. He may also feel less alone in the struggles he faced for standing up for his qualities.

Good neighbours

ABMS ZAHUR

IMMEDIATELY after independence many were suspicious about the viability of Bangladesh as a sovereign independent state because it had enormous problems and very little resources and a huge food deficit and very large number of people below absolute poverty level. In addition, Bangladesh was saddled with a not much efficient bureaucracy, very few experienced politicians capable of handling crises at national level, and continuous Pakistani propaganda that Bangladeshis Muslims were more akin to Hindus and less to Muslims (to stop wealthy Middle Eastern countries being sympathetic towards the new state).

For the first couple of years or so Bangladesh had to depend solely on the cooperation and support from India. It is Indian wheat (7.5 lakh tons), Indian lubricant, salt, rice, and clothing (purchased

mainly on credit) which could satisfy to a large extent the need of the Bangladeshis at that time. Even the wheat purchased from Russia (on credit) was obtained on Indian guarantee. Bangladesh, however, could repay this debt within five years' time and never failed to show its gratitude as much as possible.

When many of our top bureaucrats and politicians could not be sure about the viability of a state, how could another state, say, India, be? Even when India signed the Indira-Mujib agreement in 1974 Bangladesh did not have enough capability to understand clearly and fully the intricacies of an international agreement. There was not a single agreement concluded by Bangladesh which went in its favour. Thus it is not surprising that India would take advantage of the clauses of the agreement which went in its favour. The reason behind non-implementation of Indira-Mujib agreement during the last 32 years, broadly speaking, is

the wish of India because such continuation may mainly hurt Bangladesh's interest and not much of India's.

Needless to say, the war of independence brought benefit both for Bangladesh and India. But it is not fair for India to expect any subservience from Bangladesh, a country whose people may be poor but they are always rebellious of undue authority. Perhaps they never could think that Bangladesh can ever take different line from India in its diplomatic dealings when necessary. Because of Bangladesh's lesser experience in the field of diplomacy India always remained the gainer in its dealings with Bangladesh. Indian actions created so many problems for Bangladesh. Among them are Farakka Barrage, Talpatti Island, various border disputes, push in of Indian refugees and recent Tipai Mukh Dam.

There may be various reasons for highly unbalanced trade relationship between the regional

countries but not much good gesture has yet been shown by India to narrow the gap. So far India has denied the facility to develop closer trade relationship between Bangladesh and Nepal and Bangladesh and Bhutan. India is even reluctant to allow easing of some non-tariff restrictions on exports from Bangladesh.

India tried hard to obtain gas from Bangladesh. It also pressed enormously for allowing her transit facility over Bangladesh to facilitate movement of goods to the north-eastern side. Bangladesh could not accept any of these proposals because of uncertainty of quantity of exportable surplus of gas and mainly for security reasons, respectively. Because of political restlessness in its eastern provinces, India has not been able to exploit the gas reserves of eastern provinces (particularly in the state of Tripura).

Desperately energy hungry India could not procure gas from Bangladesh either. Supply of gas

from Iran through Pakistan would be costlier. Moreover, US is opposed to India-Iran gas deal. Its attempt to obtain gas from Myanmar has not yet been successful because of Bangladesh's refusal to allow laying of gas pipeline through its territory without Indian agreement to allow transit facilities for Bangladesh-Nepal and Bangladesh-Bhutan trade. So far Bangladesh has not heard any positive reply.

Saarc, because of its purely regional character, could not help improving Bangladesh-India relationship to any appreciable extent. Thus Bangladesh will have to go only for bilateral negotiations to solve her problems. If the spirit of give and take does not prevail, if there is no mutual trust and confidence, if one party tries to dictate and only gain from the other party no solution can be expected.

Because of lack of understanding with India if Bangladesh has to opt for closer relationship with China it may not be of any advan-

tage to India. Without Bangladesh's cooperation it will be certainly difficult for Indian union government to administer the seven sisters effectively. On the other hand without Indian cooperation Bangladesh may not be able to procure a large number of industrial raw materials at competitive prices, not to speak of certain essential consumer items.

In the recent working group meeting it has become clear that for the first time India is convinced that it needs to settle border and other disputes with Bangladesh early. This is encouraging for Bangladesh. It appears that the past meetings between these two countries during the last thirty-two years at different levels on bilateral issues (except trade) were not of much significance to India.

What is needed now is (a) regular meetings at expert level, (b) exchange of data, (c) joint border inspections to control border smuggling (particularly arms and explosives or materials for manufactur-

ing explosives or other strategic materials), (d) encouraging border trade, (e) relaxing non-tariff barriers as much as possible, (f) signing of extradition treaty, (g) encouraging interactions between the peoples, (h) media to promote better understanding, and (i) (if possible) better mutual understanding between two bureaucracies.

The term of the four-party alliance is going to be over soon. If Jamaat can come again in alliance with any major party it is highly unlikely that Indo-Bangla relations will improve. It has become evident from the recent apparently unsuccessful visit of Khaleda Zia to India.

India may come closer to Bangladesh only when she can convince the world that her fundamentalist elements are fully under control and are incapable of destroying the secular spirit of Bangladesh. The new government, when it comes after the election, must not overlook the prospect of growing danger from fundamentalism in Bangladesh.

ABMS Zahur is a former Joint Secretary.