

Let us be realistic about RMG

This industry, which certainly is the backbone of the country, must be saved under any circumstances, and necessary measures must be taken by the appropriate authority to make the agitators stop asking minimum basic salary of Tk.3,000 per month. If the 98% of the general workers also start dreaming of a salary of that kind, it will be the end of this industry in Bangladesh, making two million direct workers and about another one million indirect workers unemployed overnight.

K MOWLA CHOWDHURY

THE country has for the first time experienced a turmoil in the garment sector at a time when the sector was flourishing in all respects. The turmoil is still continuing here and there at regular intervals.

The present situation in the garment sector is that some of the owners are setting up new factories on a large scale. They do not care or do not have adequate knowledge about the terms and conditions on which factories should run in the global world.

A factory, ideally, should have skilled operators to run the show.

They must ensure regular payment of salary, wages, bank loan installments, and must take care of other recurring expenses.

Due to paucity of skilled labourers, this fastest-growing industry is yet to strike a balance between the rate and the quality of production. On the other hand, the workforce saw a sharp raise in their salary which led them to believe that the owners are capable of giving them any amount of salary they demand.

The growth of factories, therefore, has got to be restricted. Otherwise, the factories will suffer in terms of quality production as well as experience untoward

encounters with their workers.

The workers of the garment sector in Bangladesh are the most responsible class of workers. It is the responsibility of the owners and the government to guide them and help them to move in the right direction so that some interested or vested quarters do not exploit them.

During the tenure of Mr. Anisul Haque as the president of BGMEA, there was a sit-in demonstration by the owners of sick garment factories in front of BGMEA office. They had a lot of demands. But the fact of the matter was that they failed to run the factories and had to seek

BGMEA's help. Because of the rules and regulations of the customs and the banking sector these efforts did not meet with much success.

Very often we see workers demonstrating at different factories demanding payment of their wages and overtime. In the recent past, on more than one occasion we saw such street demonstrations by workers. They are indicative of the failure of the garment factory owners as far as their commitment to their workers is concerned. But how can we expect the sick factories to pay their workforce extra wages and benefits?

Yes, there are a few factories who are doing very well and earning handsome profits. Since these factories are only few in number, a general increase in salary structure will push the other not-so-successful factories into a corner, ultimately making the list of sick factories even longer.

I think we may fix the minimum wage of Tk.1350 only for confirmed workers and introduce

different grades in the salary structure. But the factory owners should not be forced to place the workers in an upper grade so they can draw more salaries, because then most of the factories will have to close down due to financial constraints. Since there will be only few factories surviving, the per capita salary is bound to come down. Meanwhile the closed factories will lose the capacity to reopen and workers will remain unemployed.

I mentioned in my last article in this newspaper that, the wages of the workers go up or down due to the natural economic reasons. For example, the highest salary as per the last recommendations of the Minimum Wages Board is Tk. 2,100 for an operator, but in my factory I pay Tk. 2,700 and the wage-structure is going up very fast for reasons already stated above. I pay because I am not getting adequate number of skilled operators to run my factory without paying that kind of wage. The position of many other factories is similar. This is a natural

economic system.

Again, let us see the things from a different perspective. The worker is asking the minimum basic wage of Tk.3,000 per month, but the question is: for what kind of commitment towards production? You have got to specify it because factories usually pay you out of what you earn.

Say, you are asking for a minimum gross salary of Tk.4,000 which I will be glad to pay against production of 300 pc. of shirts per line per hour using 35 machines.

Yes, paying Tk.4,000 of minimum wage is as impossible as producing 300 pc. of garments per line per hour. Alternatively, I would like to ask the people who are supporting the workers' demand, to arrange for me shirts worth of US\$16 per dozen and the workers producing 100 pieces on the same condition. Again, not possible.

The developed countries like South Korea, Taiwan, and Hong Kong had to close down their garment factories due to increase in the per capita income of the people of those countries from

alternative employments. The garment industry is not a sector where pay is very high. Moreover, we still produce mostly the low cost items from which we get the lowest rate of making charges. The productivity of the workers also is very low.

I would like to suggest that the concerned authority make a separate law governing the service of the employees of garment factories. The bond of responsibilities between the owners and employees should be respected, the health and safety conditions in the factories should be guaranteed in compliance with different Acts and Rules. A different body should be set up just to administer these things.

For example, workers usually do not give notice before leaving the job, but still the owners, for many reasons, have to pay them for all the days they had been present in the factory. The employers can also sack the worker instantly. Even if we legalize the system in practice in most of the factories, I do not think the

workers have anything to lose since they get a better job the next hour. But if the owner has got to sack a worker following the existing law of the country, then workers too must follow the law. Obligation to the law must be bilateral.

This industry, which certainly is the backbone of the country, must be saved under any circumstances, and necessary measures must be taken by the appropriate authority to make the agitators stop asking minimum basic salary of Tk.3,000 per month. If the 98% of the general workers also start dreaming of a salary of that kind, it will be the end of this industry in Bangladesh, making two million direct workers and about another one million indirect workers unemployed overnight.

Considering the gravity of the situation the authorities must take immediate corrective action to rectify the situation before it goes out of control.

The writer is Managing Director of Niponika Garments Limited.

Let the voice of moderation speak

The Lebanese have been damned to repeat this phrase to describe attacks on their country. But in our world, righteousness belongs to the victor. If this is the way of the new world order and international law no longer has a place then, by all means, the extremists on all sides must fight to the death. The question is what can usefully be won in such a scenario? The evils of pain, suffering and moral bankruptcy are all the spoils of our new-world fighters.

HRH PRINCE HASSAN BIN TALAL

HOW much aggression in our region has been justified by the mantra that western interests are under threat? The battle cries claim that all is at stake and every strike is a final defence of freedom and stability. But the premise behind this thinking has become all too obvious. Arabs and Muslims of whatever race or hue are not to be trusted. They are not to be dealt with fairly and the "liberal values" that protect the righteous of Israel or the US are not for our defence or our protection. It seems, even the moderates in Arab societies lack the fibre that would grant them equality under international law. We are all as one, barbarians at the gate, to be cowed and bullied into silent submission.

But we should be thankful that Arab moderation fights on with stoicism. Moderation will continue to battle for the hearts of those millions for whom this war on terror is an offence to their existential realities. Boaz Gonor, the prominent Israeli thinker, addressed the question of terrorism and demanded that there be "no prohibition without definition." Terrorism must be defined objectively based upon accepted international laws

and principles regarding what behaviour is permitted in conventional wars between nations.

The roots of that Arab anger and disillusionment which allows legitimacy to be handed over to extremists cannot be ignored. Terrorism is a tactic borne out of a perversion of lines of representation. If we do not allow the many to speak, then the violent few will scream to be heard. It may be difficult for most Israelis to admit, but the Shia of southern Lebanon became politicized and militarized only in response to repeated Israeli aggression. The citizens of Israel and the other states in the Middle East must be honest about the effects of decades of abuse of people and of international law, unless you believe that we Arabs possess a unique terrorist gene which has ignited our responses in recent decades. If this is the case, then throw firewood on the blaze and let our region burn until you have killed or exiled every last Arab in your neighbourhood.

The founders of Israel and, indeed, the United States, fought what they perceived as an occupation. Last week, Israelis commemorated the bombing of the King David Hotel in 1946 as a landmark act in ending the British mandate, but surely one that must be defined as an act of terror. A statement in the

British House of Commons at the time described the attack, in which 92 people were murdered, as "one of the most dastardly and cowardly crimes in recorded history."

The Lebanese have been damned to repeat this phrase to describe attacks on their country. But in our world, righteousness belongs to the victor. If this is the way of the new world order and international law no longer has a place then, by all means, the extremists on all sides must fight to the death. The question is what can usefully be won in such a scenario? The evils of pain, suffering and moral bankruptcy are all the spoils of our new-world fighters.

The traumatic effects of the collective punishment of civilian populations will be felt for generations to come. The Israeli Defence Forces who occupy have made terror a daily reality for the civilian populations of Palestine and Lebanon, populations who have lived and continue to live through illegal occupation. For the other side of this global war on terror, violence is most often something to read about. The threat of terror is fetishised by media and politicians and provides a scant excuse for policies that make terror a daily reality in the lives of millions of people in the Middle East.

No one can ignore the pain and suffering of the Israeli people in recent weeks but the policies of disproportionate reprisal and abuse of humanitarian norms can only beget further violence. Jordan is a country that fought two world wars on the side of the allies. We have suffered from the shockwaves of aggression on all sides and we have endured threats and terror right up to Zarqawi's terrible attacks on Amman. So do not patronise us by dubbing us allies in the war on terror and then dismiss our words when we question your policies.

The politics you entertain in this region are the product of a false perception. Our regional perspective is being ignored and, all the while, empowered extremists are gaining greater control. We must not be fooled into thinking that a new Middle East can be devised by political strategists and imposed from top down. The promotion of participatory democracy has been curtailed by a fear of empowering moderate Arabs and moderate Islamists. Regimes within the region and powers outside attempt to stifle the protests of dismayed populations, protests that should be aired through banners and the ballot box. But the moderates are now shouting also. The evolution of freedoms cannot be controlled from above, nor blasted into alien forms that poorly represent the needs of those seeking freedom. With the ever-increasing polarisation of hate we should be grateful that exasperation has not stifled the protest of moderates.

The writer, brother of the late King Hussein of Jordan, is president of the Arab Thought Forum. (C) Haaretz.

Bigotry indeed!

For quite a long time, some ministers have shown their acrimonious attitude towards the research bodies: TIB and CPD. It, however, baffles me what damage the research bodies are doing to the country. Are they not serving the common people by truly putting the development and corruption scenario in the right perspective? Is it a crime to keep people updated and conscious?

KAZI SM KHASRUL ALAM QUDDUSI

WHO defamed whom and who rushed to the court to exhibit bigotry? Who used uncouth words such as "shameless liar," "conspirator," "kulangar," and so on? Admittedly, Bangladesh gained independence some 35 years back. Democracy was restored some 15 years back. However, avenues of independent thinking and fundamental rights seem to come under fire quite regularly these days in newer, and shocking, manners. Media people are being implicated -- and even sentenced in criminal cases besides being intimidated constantly.

As our judiciary, especially the lower section, is still tied down by the executive, serious questions regarding such treatments are also being raised regularly, and rightly so. Our technocratic energy advisor and Bol (Board of Investment) chairman Mahmudur Rahman's unexpected invectives against prominent citizens of the country and his dragging them to the dock of a court on a very non-specific and flimsy ground and that, too, in rather an abject fashion entangling them in a criminal case which is rather rare against prominent citizens definitely laid bare the immaturity, as well as insanity, on the part of a so-called

responsible incumbent.

Meanwhile, did Mr. Rahman really knoprior to rushing to the court to file a defamation suit what the principal accused in his suit, Manzur Elahi, said in that meeting and did he (Elahi) really implicate the Bol chairman in his comment? TV footage has given a different account which many say has weakened the ground of the lawsuit. Maybe, that gentleman is now biting his fingers. Anyway, his act might have done the damage already and, I believe, his act of insanity has also pierced the conscience of the nation in no small measure.

In fact, he not only took resort to the law, which is his democratic right, he also sat in on judgment of people's rights to citizenship. How to explain this queer desire of an official incumbent? He invariably claims that he is not under obligation to satisfy anybody other than his government and the prime minister. By the same token, can it not be asked: which free person is under obligation to toe the line of Bol, and who has given him the right to say: such and such person should not be allowed to stay in the country? Is this country a property of any person or for that matter any government?

It is a simple fact that governments come and go, but the country belongs to all the people of the

country. In passing, ministers belonging to the government have made a variety of remarks previously but none was reported to have made such an audacious and, of course, ludicrous remark. Meanwhile, I wonder how a person can have the desire to drag a person like Rehman Sobhan to the dock. I am sure the person that has tried implicating Rehman Sobhan is totally ignorant of his contributions to the cause of rationality, as well as knowledge-dissemination, in this region of the globe and beyond.

It can be said, quite confidently, that the incriminations against the five prominent and well-established persons are highly questionable and highly uncalled-for. While talking to a private TV channel Suranjit Sen Gupta reminded us of an age-old axiom which says: A little learning is a dangerous thing. Did he really go too far in depicting the antics of our precocious energy advisor?

In this regard, I also take the opportunity to quote from the Bangladesh Observer editorial of August 10, which, in all likelihood, puts him in his rightful place: "The energy advisor is not a public representative nor is he a reputed man in his profession. One wonders what his source of power is. If such upstarts start dictating the terms of public discourse in the country, it is

indeed a bad trend. As a so-called technocrat, Rahman should lie low and try to justify his position by delivering the services for which he has been hired. Unfortunately, he is behaving as if he owns the country."

For quite a long time, some ministers have shown their acrimonious attitude towards the research bodies: TIB and CPD. It, however, baffles me what damage the research bodies are doing to the country. Are they not serving the common people by truly putting the development and corruption scenario in the right perspective? Is it a crime to keep people updated and conscious? A section of the ministers has many a complaint against TIB and CPD. But, do the conscious people corroborate the ministers' claims?

The bottom line is that free thinking, freedom of expression and the like are the core issues which have traveled this long to stay. Efforts to curb them were there, are there and, perhaps, will be there. The society we now live in is purely a knowledge-based one where information is power. Bigotry is thus simply ludicrous. One can at best lament one's ignorance but taking recourse to coercive measures to cover up one's ignorance is bound to rebound on the doer. Hopefully, the concerned bears this in mind and acts accordingly to remain immune from unnecessary and, of course, unmanageable fuss.

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Expansion of port facilities

We should consider declaring the entire districts of Cox's Bazaar and Bandarban a "Special Economic Zone," which will be a duty free area. In this area we will have a deep-sea port that would be the main shipping hub for the region, especially for the handling of containers. It would be a starting point for container mainline vessel, and not a container feeder port like Chittagong.

SALAHUDDIN AHMAD

BANGLADESH is small country in size but we are the eighth most populous country of the world. Population density in our country is possibly the highest in the world. Given this scenario, development in only agriculture will not serve the needs of the population. We have to industrialize rapidly and export-led growth has to be our state policy and all state policies must be centered around this.

For our products to be competitive in the world market we have to have efficient port facilities. Unless we can handle goods efficiently and cheaply we might lose much of what our entrepreneurs will earn. Today we have one and a half sea ports, which is, needless to say, quite inadequate for the trading needs of the country.

There is a limit to which the Chittagong port facilities can be stretched and improved. Our total dependence on Chittagong port may put us in serious trouble, should the port be incapacitated due to man-made or natural disaster like sinking of vessel in the navigational channel, blocking of the channel or some other mishap. The country or

its economy cannot afford such losses and we must have alternative plans for dealing with such contingencies.

In order to reduce our dependence on the lone port of Chittagong, I would like to put forward the following suggestions. Due to natural reasons, scope for expansion of Chittagong port is very limited. The current port at Mongla, because of wrong selection of site and also for natural reasons, cannot meet the needs and requirements of a seaport. Therefore it should be down graded to an inland port and the seaport should be established either at Akram point or on the bank of the river Sibsa. This river is self flushing and is more suited for becoming a sea port compared to the Mongla port. This port has to be well connected by road, rail and river so that its hinterland could be extended to Nepal, Bhutan, and north-east India besides the northern districts of the country. The entire hinterland is to have easy access to the port.

We should consider declaring the entire districts of Cox's Bazaar and Bandarban a "Special Economic Zone," which will be a duty free area. In this area we will have a deep-sea port that would be

the main shipping hub for the region, especially for the handling of containers. It would be a starting point for container mainline vessel, and not a container feeder port like Chittagong. As mainline port the freight cost will reduce substantially and transit time will also reduce considerably and this will make our products more competitive in the international market. We must also make an air hub in Cox's Bazaar where the largest aircrafts should be able to land and take off. This airport should become a major airport of this region both to cater to air cargo and passengers.

The development of the economic zone with a major sea port and airport could make the zone an attractive destination for domestic and overseas investors in this zone. I am confident that within next decade this economic zone, which will have separate system of administration than the rest of the country, will attain the same level of development as Singapore. If this materializes, we will not have to look for overseas market for our manpower, as we will be able to find employment for the unemployed people of the country within the economic zone. The air and seaports will be able to meet the trading needs of

Myanmar, north-east India, and south-west China besides our own trade. Massive investment will be required but the opportunities are also enormous.

Apart from the suggestions given above, we should have few inland container feeder ports located at Pangoan, Chandpur, Mongla, and Baghabari from where container feeder vessels should be able to convey containers directly to the container mainline ports.

We have to dredge our rivers so that the cheap river transport network can be extended to cater to the remote areas of the country to take advantage of the cheap and efficient river transportation system. This will help an even growth of all areas of the country simultaneously.

We could also consider utilizing half sized ISO containers of 10' x 8' x 9' size that could be used for multi modal transportation of goods within the country and also within the AARC member countries.

I hope and believe that the government would consider the proposal seriously and have an expert team study the proposal and arrange its early implementation.

Salahuddin Ahmad is a freelance contributor to The Daily Star.

The new space race

The next space race is underway. The market for commercial space tourism is expected to generate more than \$1 billion in annual revenues by 2020, according to a study released last month by Research Reports International, a market-research firm based in Evergreen, Colorado. Billionaire entrepreneurs like Branson and Microsoft's Paul Allen are looking to fill that demand, partnering with governments to build launching pads and training facilities around the globe, and thrill seekers are already lining up to buy tickets.

MICHAEL HASTINGS AND ALLAN MADRID

THE future of the space industry is a 70-square-kilometer piece of desert in New Mexico near the White Sands Missile Range, about an hour's drive from the nearest city, Las Cruces. The skies are clear 320 days of the year ideal for flight and the only marks of civilization are a 22-meter runway and a rocket launchpad. The idea is that civilian passengers from around the world will arrive by plane and depart straight upward into outer space. "I've always been a space nut," says Bill Richardson, who recently broke ground on the \$225 million Spaceport America, which counts Virgin mogul Richard Branson among its investors and customers. "On commercial space travel, I want us to be first."

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Microsoft's Paul Allen are looking to fill that demand, partnering with governments to build launching pads and training facilities around the globe, and thrill seekers are already lining up to buy tickets. While most of the world's 35 functioning spaceports are controlled by governments, at least eight private ones are in the planning or construction stages from Singapore to Sweden. "The market is wide open for private players," says Steven Morris, president of Research Reports International.

So far, the lack of launching pads hasn't been an issue because space trips are so few and far between. That's going to change. According to Futron, a Bethesda, Maryland-based consulting firm, 15,000 passengers will be willing to pay \$700 million per year by 2021 merely for a white-knuckle ride and a few minutes of weightlessness. With entrepreneurs now planning on opening up a market for cheaper flights and more of them the demand for launchpads is expected to soar.

The U.S. Federal Aviation Administration is currently reviewing proposals to build commercial spaceports in several states, including California, Wisconsin and Texas. In June it approved a license for a spaceport built on a former

military base in Oklahoma that is expected to put passengers into space by 2008.

Virgin Galactic has chosen the New Mexico spaceport as its headquarters. The facility is going to be built partially underground with shops, restaurants and waiting areas. Virgin plans eventually to open new launchpads in other areas of the world. It is currently negotiating with the British Royal Air Force to use its Lossiemouth air base in northern Scotland, which has a long runway, low population and controlled air traffic. It's also looking into using a rocket range in Kiruna, Sweden, that could give passengers a "spectacular view of the Arctic Circle," says Virgin Galactic president William Whitehorn.

Other countries have also caught rocket fever. Developers in Singapore and the United Arab Emirates are bent on adding spaceports to their existing economic hubs. Singapore is planning a \$115 million facility funded by Space Adventures, a Richmond, Virginia-based space-travel company, and its partner, Sheikh Saud Bin Saqr Al Qasimi, Crown Prince of Ras al-Khaimah in the United Arab Emirates, as well as some private investors. The port, to be located

next to Singapore's Changi airport, will function as a base for suborbital flights and as a private astronaut-training facility. It will offer zero-gravity flights, high-altitude jet rides, centrifuge rides and space simulations, along with a public education and interactive visitor center. "Singapore developed as a port country," says Michael Lyon, project manager of the Spaceport Singapore project. "Moving into space is a natural evolution for them."

The spaceport being planned for the United Arab Emirates, located in Ras al-Khaimah, less than an hour's drive from Dubai, will be smaller than the Singapore and New Mexico sites. Sheikh Qasimi, the crown prince, has committed \$30 million of the expected \$100 million cost of the project. The deal is part of Ras al-Khaimah's development program to build hotels and shopping centers, improve the airport and attract industrial and commercial firms in the area.

Despite all the hype, the space-tourism business is no sure thing. The private-launch industry was booming in the 1990s, but collapsed because demand for satellite launchers never materialized. Until the \$200,000 ticket prices are lowered, space tourism will be confined to the super-rich. But "that's kind of like saying the computers that people bought in 1978 were only extravagant items for the rich," counters Space Adventures CEO Eric Anderson. With luck, the new tourism boom will put space within reach of the ordinary millionaire.