

## RMG workers' pay

*Rational resolution of the issue needed*

It is extremely disconcerting that the issue of the RMG workers' pay is yet to be resolved. The wage board announcement, delayed that it was, is not acceptable to either of the two major parties in the dispute. And that when the board is composed of members of the owners as well as the workers, apart from representative of the government and a neutral representative. Equally of concern is the prospect of another upheaval of the kind that we witnessed in May.

As it is, the board took longer than the time given it to finalise a pay structure, and the output is at best a thalidomide baby that appears deficient in many respects. The owners have questioned the method of finalising the suggested pay scale, and the role of the neutral member. But at the same time one wonders how the new pay scale passed the scrutiny of the workers' rep, since the workers have rejected it too. We are at a loss that after so many months of haggling nobody is willing to leave the bargaining counter yet.

If the suggestion of the board is not consensual, and if the rejection by the owners and the workers are of equal merit, as the parties are making it out to be, why was a half cooked award announced at all? One cannot overlook the importance of the RMG sector and the upheaval that one witnessed, with senseless destruction and deaths and lay offs, the replication of which can hardly be a cheerful prospect for anyone concerned with the sector. But if it comes about at all, regrettable, as it would be, it would not surprise most of us.

We would like to believe that an issue that concerns the largest foreign exchange earning sector of the country will be addressed most objectively; and we would like to hope that no political consideration will compel decisions of the board. While no one contends that the interest of all the parties should be upheld, and that the minimum living wage of the workers must be guaranteed, we should not lose sight of the most important aspect, which is, keeping the interest of the RMG sector at the foremost in our minds. And that calls for flexibility and adjustment of positions of all the parties. Is it too much for the country to ask?

## A tribute to Nitun Kundu

*Demise of a man of sterling qualities*

We deeply mourn the death of Nitun Kundu, a valiant freedom fighter and an artist-turned-entrepreneur of unequalled vision. He passed away on Friday morning following a cardiac arrest.

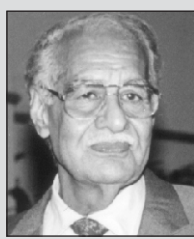
Nitun Kundu was a multifaceted genius who loved to toy with innovative ideas having unique aesthetic nuances. His touch of brilliance amply found expression in the things he created, be it a stone sculpture of freedom fighter or a water fountain symbolising SAARC spirit or an office furniture. In the field of office and household furniture he successfully identified the areas that needed improvement and elevated the business to its highest point of excellence in Bangladesh. His water fountains have also become enviable milestones in the metropolitan city. He has done us proud because the fame of his creation travelled beyond the borders.

Amidst all his entrepreneurial pursuit, Nitun Kundu remained steadfast in his commitment to the socio-political developments in society where his roots ran deep. As a result, in all the progressive movements of national importance he made his presence felt deftly using the medium of art, which was his forte.

Kitun Kundu had reached the zenith of personal accomplishment through hard work, innovation and remaining honest to his profession. He had received many prizes and awards for his works of distinction and The Daily Star feels proud to have been able to confer upon him its best entrepreneurship award.

Amiability and humility were his second nature and he was widely respected for this natural endowment. In a nutshell it can be said that Nitun Kundu has achieved in fifty years of his working life what others would find it impossible to do in a hundred years. It would be saying the least that the nation would feel his absence for a very long time. Our condolences to his bereaved family.

## A secular state



KULDIP NAYAR  
writes from New Delhi

I do not know why after every bomb blast, whether at Mumbai in a Hindu locality or at Malegaon outside a mosque, or elsewhere, we, particularly the media, resoundingly say that there was no communal riot. One leader after another repeats, in more or less the same words, that terrorists have failed in their nefarious purpose to disrupt Hindu-Muslim unity.

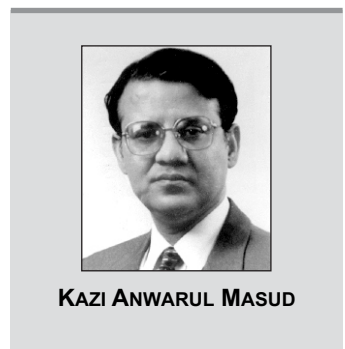
So far the refrain has been that terrorists have no religion. But after the Malegaon blasts, most Urdu newspapers have said that the bomb blasts were the handiwork of Hindu fundamentalists. Probably so, but if in the past the comment has been that terrorists have no

religion, why change the stand now? It does reflect anger, but also smacks of parochialism.

If the blasts are engineered by particular communities, it is bad enough. But the worst is the message it conveys: that Hindu-Muslim unity is superficial. When the two communities, leaving the elite apart, live in their own localities, have practically no social contact and very limited economic dealings, why should we feel that the blasts were meant to cut the unity asunder?

The absence of conflict is not unity. We are confusing it with co-existence. The fact, however sad, is

## Is American policy changing?



KAZI ANWARUL MASUD

DESPITE popular perception that the aggressive foreign policy of the Bush administration has undergone a perceptible change towards multi-lateralism, the Bush National Security Strategy of 2006 does not reflect this.

Lawrence Korb and Caroline Wadhams (Center for American Progress) argue that the 2006 NSS continues to confuse pre-emption with preventive war, emphasizes the unachievable goal of "ending tyranny" throughout the world, and fails to make a realistic assessment of threat to the US and the Western world.

One is truly left wondering as to why an American president in his second term does not make it clear as to the legacy he intends to bequeath the world after he has left his office. President Bush still remains totally committed to what he calls for eradication of "Islamic fanaticism" which is not contested by the Islamic world as terrorism is abhorred by the Muslims as by the next person, but what is being contested is the religious profiling by the Western countries in the name of security.

As it is, many academics of impeccable credentials are worried over the "spiraling alienation" of the Muslim diaspora in the West, though, in the words of Professor David Held, we no longer live in a world of discreet national communities but "in overlapping communities of fate."

It is not known whether Bush administration had made a cost-benefit analysis of the doctrine of preemption before embarking on what is now commonly realized as

### GOING DEEPER

**One suspects, as in the case of Bangladesh, the repression let loose by the authorities on the opposition political parties and the obduracy shown by the Election Commission in the face of collective protests by the saner sections of the society and apprehension expressed about the possible partisan role which could be played by the next head of the caretaker government, is lost in the corridors of the Foggy Bottom due to US policy-makers' indifference to the lot of peoples like those living in Bangladesh.**

an adventure in Iraq that has turned costly both financially and materially (more than 2,400 American military personnel have lost their lives and more than 17,500 have been wounded while more than \$300 billion has been spent).

Bush administration does not appear to be unduly worried over body-bags coming back home because the number is not colossal as was in the case of Vietnam nor the possibility of imminent defeat is staring at the face of the Americans.

Korb and Wadhams in their analysis of Bush administration's fiscal year 2007 national security budget have revealed that the offensive component (Department of Defense) has been allocated twenty times more than the preventive component (State Department). They further assert that the current administration spends twice the amount every month in Iraq than what has been allocated for Millennium Challenge Account.

Though understandably Bush administration is remaining steadfast in pursuing the war on terror and its policy on Iraq as being inerrant because of its appeal, albeit less than before, to the American electorate who will be called upon to elect governors, senators, and congressmen and women in November, it is generally recognized that use by US of hard power (military and economic power) is not endearing the country to people both at home and abroad. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice has now acknowledged that US prestige around the globe is now at all time

low. Contrary to common belief, fundamentalism does lie in Islam alone. Walter Russell Mead of the US Council of Foreign Relations has described the US, the only super-power in the world today, as a nation where religion shapes its character, helps form America's ideas about the world, and influences ways Americans respond to events beyond its shores.

Currently three strains envelop the nation -- a strict tradition that can be called fundamentalists; a progressive and ethical tradition which may be called liberal Christianity; and a broader evangelical order. These three competing streams often influence US foreign policy.

Though evangelicals straddle the divide between the fundamentalists and the liberals, they resemble the fundamentalists in many ways. Self-identified evangelicals accounted for 40% of votes for President Bush in 2004 and the white evangelicals voted 78% in the same election. They also wield considerable influence in the Congressional and Senate elections with the result that the number of self-identified evangelicals in the Congress have risen from 10% in 1970 to 25% in 2004.

On the question of Israel, increasing evangelical political power has translated into deepening US support for Israel in the US administration and Congress as opposed to liberal Christian establishment who prefer to take a moderate view of the crisis in the Middle East.

This support for Israel is not a recent phenomenon. In the nine-

teenth century, the evangelicals repeatedly requested the US administrations to establish a refuge in the Holy Land for the Jews to escape European and Ottoman persecution. This support for the Jews was rooted in the belief of the evangelicals that the Christians are the new and true children of Israel and that the Jews have a place in God's plan in the sense that the Jews would return to the Holy Land before the triumphant return of Jesus Christ.

In the interregnum the Jews would continue to reject Christ, a belief that reduces tension between the Christians and the Jews. "For evangelicals," writes Mead "the fact the Jewish people have survived through the millennia and that they have returned to their ancient home is proof that God is real, that the Bible is inspired, and that the Christian religion is true. They see in the weakness, defeat, and poverty of the Arab world ample evidence that God curses those who curse Israel."

Important evangelical leaders like John Hagee advocates that should Iran move to attack Israel, the US must be prepared "to stop this evil enemy in its tracks." The liberals, however, have come to sympathize with the Palestinian movement because of Israel's human rights abuses in the occupied lands. But the liberal Christians and secular intellectuals have been losing ground simply because evangelicals have been increasing social and political power.

In this scenario, Marxian explanation of religion as an opiate to soothe the pain of existence or Freudian description of religious

beliefs "to exorcise the terror of nature; men's efforts to reconcile to the cruelty of fate, particularly as shown in death, and (that) they must compensate them for the sufferings and privations which a civilized life in common has imposed on them" have been totally displaced from people's mind and consequent political discourse.

But then the Muslim world could, perhaps, try to mitigate the clash of two competing ideologies within the Islamic world, and disengage from the clash of civilizations between Islam and Christianity now being propagated. One way could be further democratization of the Muslim society.

Though doubts remain about Bush administration's sincerity about bringing democracy to the Islamic world, it is, however, believed that the Bush administration has come to the conclusion that the "democracy deficit" tolerated by the successive US administrations in the past, responding to the situations demanded by the Cold War, resulted in dictatorial regimes in many Muslim countries.

Later, the conviction of the liberal thinkers, embraced by the neo-cons, gave life to the belief that democracies do not go to war against one.

The Western world, therefore, has now realized that policies followed hitherto had given birth to failed states in the vacuum left by the Cold War which helped incubate the vitriolic contagion of al-Qaeda. Unfortunately, in the panic following the 9/11 events, new Cold War warriors equated Islamic fundamentalism with political Islam.

Question has, however, arisen whether democratization of Muslim societies would necessarily reduce terrorism and prevent fresh recruits to the terrorist outfits. Vermont University Professor Gregory Gause holds the view that since the al-Qaedaists are not fighting for democracy but for the establishment of what they believe to be a purist version of an Islamic state, there is no reason to believe that a tidal wave of democracy would wash away terrorist activities.

Political reforms, therefore, has

been suggested by some as a possible solution. But liberal thinker Paul Berman states that this approach may not succeed as al-Qaeda ideology and radical Islam are driven by a fear and hatred of liberal Islam, which they see as a "hideous schizophrenia" of the West that divides the state from religion and promotes individual freedom.

Some believe that modernity rather than democracy should be used as the most important tool to fight global terrorism. Since modernity involves more than improved material conditions and entails a transformation in beliefs and philosophies, al-Qaedaists with their narrow interpretation of religious dogmas would lose their appeal.

But then again it has also been argued that al-Qaedaist appeal is not due to lack of modernity in the Islamic society, but due to its excess, which in the view of so-called purists is instrumental in contributing to social "degeneration" of the Western culture having contagion effect on Muslim societies.

In the context of the above, one is not certain whether the Bush administration's current interaction with Islam and Muslim countries is not so self-interested, that the old Cold War policy of coexisting with quasi-military or oppressive regimes has not become expedient, and is no longer regarded as a contradiction of principles and morality which the Bush administration is preaching.

One suspects, as in the case of Bangladesh, the repression let loose by the authorities on the opposition political parties and the obduracy shown by the Election Commission in the face of collective protests by the saner sections of the society and apprehension expressed about the possible partisan role which could be played by the next head of the caretaker government, is lost in the corridors of the Foggy Bottom due to US policy-makers' indifference to the lot of peoples like those living in Bangladesh.

Kazi Anwarul Masud is a former Secretary and Ambassador.

## Cost of doing business



ANM NURUL HAQUE

BANGLADESH has been ranked 88th among 175 countries in terms of cost of doing business in a global survey jointly prepared by the International Finance Corporation (IFC) and the World Bank (WB).

The report titled Doing Business 2007: How to Reform, released on September 6, however, said that Bangladesh is the third easiest country in which to do business in South Asia. The top ranked countries in this region are the Maldives (53) and Pakistan (74). Bangladesh is ahead of Sri Lanka (89), Nepal (100), India (134), Bhutan (138) and Afghanistan (162).

Singapore topped the global rankings, followed by New Zealand, the United States, and Canada. Among the Asian countries, Hong Kong (5th), Japan (11th) Thailand (18th), South Korea (23rd), and Malaysia (25th) have an overall business friendly economy.

Bangladesh was ranked 81st in the global survey of doing business in 2005, but its ranking has slid

### BY THE NUMBERS

**A recent survey conducted by the Dhaka Chamber of Commerce and Industry (DCCI) found that corruption, poor infrastructure facilities, and bureaucratic tangles are increasing the cost of doing business. Nearly 70 percent of the DCCI members, who are small and medium entrepreneurs, are facing problems due to high cost of doing business and lack of access to institutional finance at reasonable terms.**

down seven steps from the previous year. Despite having an untidy business friendly economy, Bangladesh has been ranked third in the overall business ranking among the South Asian countries. Seven criteria have been used to ascertain a country's business competitiveness. These criteria are: starting a business, dealing with licenses, having loans, paying taxes, trading across border, and closing a business.

The WB-IFC global ranking has, however, put Bangladesh at the top among the eight South Asian countries in the areas of protecting investors, ranked 15 in the world. In this category, Pakistan has been ranked 19, India 33, each of Maldives, Sri Lanka, and Nepal 60. Bhutan has been ranked 79 and Afghanistan at 173, lowest in the world.

Bangladesh has undertaken steps to improve its business climate and one notable reform made recently was introduction of a new land registration act to improve security and reduce corruption in land transactions.

The report ranked 175 countries,

covering 20 more countries than last year's report. These rankings highlight significant obstacles to doing business in South Asia, compared to the countries across the world. The report also reveals that the South Asia region ranks behind all others on the pace of reforms, with only a quarter of countries making at least one reform that improved the indicators of doing business.

The Doing Business project is based on the efforts of more than 5,000 experts, business consultants, lawyers, accountants, government officials and leading academics across the world that provided methodological support and review.

In the criteria of enforcing business contracts, Bangladesh has been ranked 174th out of the total 175 countries surveyed under the WB-IFC study: it takes about 50 steps and 1,442 days to enforce contracts. About 1,642 days is required to enforce a business contract in Afghanistan, which has been ranked as the worst in this category. On the other hand, it

takes only 880 days and 55 procedures in India and Pakistan for enforcing a business contract.

Doing business has also become easier in India and Pakistan over the years. Five reforms in India and two in Pakistan have reduced the time, cost and hassle for business to comply with legal and administrative requirements. The WB-IFC study reveals India as the top reformer in South Asia implemented reforms to simplify business registration, cross-border trade and payment of taxes, as well as easing access to institutional credit and strengthening investor protection.

While passing comments on Bangladesh reforms progress and ease of doing business, WB Country Director Christine Wallich said: "We are committed to supporting the government's initiative to improving the business climate in Bangladesh that is essential to generate higher levels of investment and productivity." A number of on-going WB-supported projects of the government are designed to generate employment by improving the business climate as well as

scaling up the private investment in the country.

Bangladesh was ranked 119 out of 135 countries in terms of the factors influencing FDI in a study recently carried out by the renowned international magazine Forbes. It revealed that, the capital hospitality of Bangladesh has been dragged down with scoring only 32.6 out of 100 in the Capital Hospitality Index. The Forbes study has identified that the position of Bangladesh has slipped back relative to its major South Asian neighbours due to rampant corruption, poor competitiveness, and technological backwardness.

According to the LDC Report 2006 of the UNCTAD, Bangladesh could not do well in five sectors including FDI inflow per capita. Bangladesh stood 9th among the 50 LDCs in terms of FDI inflow, which is lower than the average rate. The Board of Investment (BoI) source has, however, a different story to tell, announcing FDI inflow of \$660 million in 2004. In per capita terms FDI inflow in Bangladesh is still the lowest in South Asia. Angola, a poor African country received \$2,047 million FDI during the year 2004 while Bangladesh received only \$660 million.

A recent survey conducted by the Dhaka Chamber of Commerce and Industry (DCCI) found that corruption, poor infrastructure facilities, and bureaucratic tangles are increasing the cost of doing business. Nearly 70 percent of the DCCI members, who are small and

medium entrepreneurs, are facing problems due to high cost of doing business and lack of access to institutional finance at reasonable terms. The DCCI survey also found cumbersome investment rules and regulations, registration and licensing procedure, and low productivity are some of the reasons for high cost of doing business in Bangladesh.

Though Bangladesh is the third easiest country in South Asia in terms of doing business, it still ranks relatively low in the global perspective. So improving business climate is imperative for investment and economic growth. Unfortunately, business competitiveness in Bangladesh is severely affected by persistent corruption, poor infrastructure, shortage of power, bizarre course of politics, and indecisiveness from the government.

The government also needs to address labour unrest through ensuring proper wages, congenial working conditions and protecting labour rights. Special emphasis should be given for providing proper security to the foreign as well as local entrepreneurs against labour unrest and violence leading to damage of industrial and business assets. A fast-track approach in the relevant government agencies eliminating bureaucratic hassles is also essential for improving business climate in the country.

Anm Nurul Haque is a columnist of The Daily Star.

### BETWEEN THE LINES

**The fact, however sad, is that even after 60 years of independence we have not been able to establish a secular polity, which we thought we would, after getting rid of the British rulers and parting company with those who wanted to establish a separate, religious polity. Our freedom struggle projected pluralism as its ethos. Were did we go wrong? This was the question I raised in my maiden speech in the Rajya Sabha in 1997. I still have no firm answer.**

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Either the seed of separatism has been sown so deep that we have not been able to uproot it, or we have left things as they were because we did

not care. Our main interest was independence and, once we got it, we were hardly bothered to establish a secular society.

True, we have adopted a constitution which has given all communities equality before law. But we have done little to make this meaningful, either in the field of education or in employment. The effort to blot out old prejudice, or rectify communal thinking, has seldom gone beyond a piece of paper. We have stayed more as Hindus, Muslims, Christians, and Sikhs than Indians. Our approach has been sectional and it has remained the same, in

one form or another. There were always terrorists in our midst. Otherwise, how do we explain the Gujarat pogrom, the 1984 killings of Sikhs, or even the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi in 1948? We have not imbibed the secular spirit which a secular society demands. That is the reason why most of us do not rise against blatant acts of communalism, and a few even give shelter to terrorists, foreign or Indian. We are barking up the wrong tree.

Take for example, Vande Mataram. It is a song which has stirred national feelings for years. To use it for political purposes is fatal. Union Minister Arjun Singh, a top Congress leader, was the first to throw the brick, making the singing of the song compulsory at government-aided schools on September 7 when Vande Mataram is supposed to be 100 years old. Congress President Sonia Gandhi would have done the country proud if she had said that she was not compelled to sing it. True, she did not sing but the party's explanation was that the date of September 7 was historically wrong for the centenary year. The message that a person does not become less patri-

otic if he does not sing the song went away.

The BJP, which has no other program except to communalize every facet of India, feels happy that it has embarrassed the Congress. This may well be true but by communalizing the issue, the BJP has pulled down the Vande Mataram from its high national pedestal. The question is not whether the Congress has lost, or the BJP has won. The question is whether the Indian nation has won. It has not. The BJP may have scored a point but it is at the expense of Vande Mataram.

I was amused to read the comment by the Muslim Personal Law Board and some Islamic organizations. They do not have to teach the nation that Islam does not worship anyone else except Allah. After living together for centuries, all Indians know that. Yet nearly 70 years ago, a committee comprising Jawaharlal Nehru, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, and Subhas Chandra Bose decided in favour of singing Vande Mataram's first two stanzas. Why didn't these organizations leave the matter at that? They made it a religious issue and played into the hands of the BJP.

Arif Mohammad Khan wrote a commendable article in support of Vande Mataram, and stood by the side of former Prime Minister Inder Gujral to sing the song in public. But some "custodians of Islam" have run him down and compared him with the late Union Minister MC Chagla, a Muslim who joined politics late like Prime Minister Manmohan Singh.

The mullahs and their ilk used to call Abul Kalam Azad "a Hindu show boy" before partition because he was the leader of the Congress which was paraded as a Hindu organization then. They have their pet horse of fundamentalism to ride, though they go on swearing by secularism to hide their real colour.

A society does not become secular by enunciating that it is secular. It requires commitment to the principles of tolerance and accommodation. Above all, it needs conviction that one's religion is not superior to that of others. All people, belonging to different religions, realize that their separate entities merge into one entity, that of India. See America, where there is only one civil code, no personal law of any community.

What is disconcerting is that the Congress is politicizing issues and

institutions and the BJP is communalizing them. Both parties have only election and power in view, and they care a hang about the country. The BJP never had any secular traditions. The Congress has. But the latter's behaviour reflects a bent of mind which is not trying to learn how to retrieve the society from parochialism, but how to down the BJP.

The delay in judgments has worsened the situation. For example, a special court has taken 13 years to convict the first set of guilty people in the 1993 Mumbai serial blasts. The Supreme Court has not yet taken up the case, praying for rejection of the Action Taken Report that called the Sri Krishna Commission report on the 1993 blasts "biased and anti-Hindu."

When there is no odium of guilt in a community which kills people of the other communities, every verdict gets lost in recrimination. A secular society should be made of sterner stuff.

Kuldip Nayar is an eminent Indian columnist.