Dhaka, Monday, January 18, 1993

Unwanted Garment Workers

A bill to be placed at the next US Senate session seeking a ban on imports of garments from factories employing children below the legal age has set the alarm bell ringing in garment factories of Bangladesh. Already, the process of retrenchment of employees has started. But apart from the impacts on the industry itself, the step is going to adversely affect the socio-economic life here. In one of her illuminating articles published in this newspaper on Saturday, Hameeda Hossain has described the consequences. We also editorially commented on the issue only the other day.

Considering the importance of the issue, we once again take the opportunity to elaborate the points. It is clear that the US concern is based on the social standard it has set for its people. But Bangladesh's problems are not similar to America's. The difference in the qualities of life in the two countries must not go out of sight while taking the punitive measure. The obtaining reality in Bangladesh is that no less than 30 per cent children remain uncovered by primary education or are dropped in the way. Their families' poverty forces them to take up jobs unfit for their age. It is such hard and hazardous works that give them and their families the means of livelihood. Compared to other labour-intensive works, the service they put in a garment factory is much easier and more dignified. The contentious issue however is the wages they receive for their job.

Little though the wages may be, the earning by the children who might otherwise be rag-pickers, brick chippers, or else idle is a sure way of a better life. The fate of an estimated 55,000 children is going to be thrown into further uncertainty; and almost an equal number of families are going to be worse off. If a better opportunity for these children cannot be opened, none should have the right to force them out of job on the pretext of illegal child labour. The US applies its own gauge in determining the factory rules and its concern is understandable. It is, however, our responsibility to let the Senate know that for these working children, there is no better option. Child labour, in worst form, continues in other areas of society and the application of the rules only in the garments industry should be considered discriminatory.

A drastic retrenchment measure is not going to solve the problem. What we need is a more caring and humanitarian approach to the issue. With the establishment of garment factories, it is the women of the lower social rank who have risen in esteem. About 80 per cent of the workforce in the garments industry are women. It is, therefore, the girls of the children who will, driven out of jobs, be further disadvantaged. Even in a limited way the support they have had could open up new possibilities before them. More importantly, the momentum created in the process could go a long way in changing society for the better. Women's participation in income generation activity brings more benefits to families and societies than man's participation can do.

What ought to be done under the circumstances is that the under-age girls working in garment factories ought to be given a better pay and working condition, including congenial times. Work and education should be combined together, preferably in or around the working place. The facilities for functional education at the working establishments will be costly but if the employers, the government and some NGOs share the cost, the return may be highly rewarding. The argument that cheap labour provides for the competitive edge enjoyed by our garment factories is only true up to a point. Skill development and education are the key to a real success. The garment workers deserve all such supports, not retrenchment.

Containing the 'Bad Master'

Fire, as the old saying goes, is a good servant and a bad master. Because it is such a bad master, we take all sorts of measures to keep it in control under normal circumstances, we also plan special measure when it gets out of hand. A Star report published on Thursday, however, punches a big hole in our belief that our preventive measures are adequate to control fire when it does become the 'master'. According to law, all business houses dealing with inflammable material are to take necessary safety measures and obtain a certificate from the Fire Department to that effect. The report says that of the two hundred thousand such firms, only 6,000 have licenses. In the face of such a stunning lapse, the Fire Department, for whatever reason, has been nudged back into action, and is about to issue notices to 1,400 for having violated that particular public safety law.

Many questions have been raised by this report. First is obviously that of corruption. How could things come to this pass? For how many years have the Fire Department been sitting on this fact that so many firms do not have fire safety certificate? Since when do they know about the violations, and what have they done about it? Is there no supervisory mechanism to check this? Or is the whole structure corrupt to the core? Other than corruption we also need to find out if the Department is equipped to monitor and supervise, whether or not, the firms that take out license at the beginning, maintain the safety equipment? Then there is the question of adequate staff and facilities to carry out the task that is expected of the department. What about proper · training? The test of a good fire fighting team is during an outbreak of fire. But then it is too late to find out how well trained the personnel are.

We urge the government and especially the Fire Department to take a very serious look into the whole question of safety from fire hazards. According to the Star report, congested areas in the old part of Dhaka are potential fire disaster areas. It is quite possible that whole localities could burn down once there is a serious outbreak. Instead of waiting for such a disaster to spur us into action, preventive measures should immediately be taken to make the city areas safe. The recent rise in departmental stores and shopping malls should be under special scrutiny. Places where there are hundreds of shops selling clothes, sarees and other cotton products should be investigaed by fire experts to make sure that adequate measures existed to protect the public in case of fire. Absence of proper fire exits is not really uncommon in many concrete and highrise structures in the city.

The government should immediately investigate the whole question of fire safety in the city and make public its findings and take immediate

steps to solve this problem.

Of Columns and Columnists

Of the multitude of columnists, a few have risen to certain heights, if not on the strength of arguments, arguably on the power of their pen. If you put your opinion first and if you are relatively unaware of the fact that there may be, in fact there are, other points of view, the ideal will be wellnigh impossible to attain.

dailies - and they are some of the best - that I read has written a word about it. But I will admit, 'of the English dailies, I read only the Star', was my faint defence. And then was told that the news and/or the opinion came out in one or two of our English was not interested to find

is one thing to have

opinions, quite another to

be an opinionated person.

I have always considered un-

derstanding to be more impor-

tant than opinions. Once you

have your understanding of a

thing, you may or may not pass

an opinion on it, and very

likely your opinion will be at

best tentative. The world, if

not the world at least the news-

paper world of Bangladesh,

clamours for opinion. There is

now, in the Bangla language

papers, a regular craze for

columns. A whole new breed of

columnists have appeared on

the scene. They are in great

demand. They are sought after.

They are pampered. They are

offered payment at a rate

which has been steadily on the

rise. It shows that columns,

post-editorials are highly

prized because there is a per-

ception that the readership of

a particular paper depends on

the quality and diversity of this

component of our dailies

There are so many of them,

and such a rush on newcomers

that one senses they are

locked in a deadly battle for

survival. But that is not my

The columns and the post-

editorials have attracted an

impressive number of writers

contributing more or less

regularly to the Bangla datlies.

The English language dailies

are not so much in the game. I

offer this opinion with

hesitation because I cannot

claim to have the necessary

facts. I am writing on casual

knowledge. Only the other day

I was sort of taken to task by

my long-time friend, the

editor of this paper, for my

ignorance of something

concerning himself and the

Ekushey Prize. 'Don't you know

what they have been writing

about this supposed

nomination by the Ministry of

Culture?' But which paper?

Not one of the five Bangla

district postmaster. At 19,

while a student in Lahore, a

chance meeting changed his

life. He came across an old

man weeping in the street and

Baba Kullan was a debt-

bonded worker in a brick kiln.

Too old and ill to work, his

owner had sacked him and

sold his daughters (11 and 13)

Khan took up his case and

made so much fuss that the

police went to find Kullan's

daughters, who were reunited

with their father. Kullan told

his story to fellow workers

who then asked Khan to help

them. Appalled by their tales of

beating and rape, he realised

Khan left college and

founded Bhatta Mazdoor

Mohaz, the brick-kiln worker's

union. Today it is called the

Bonded Liberation Front of

Pakistan (BLLFP) and Khan is

known internationally as its

had revealed the age-old sys-

tem of debt bondage which

still enslaves millions of poor

people and their families in

many parts of the world. He

estimates there are 20 million

debt slaves in Pakistan, eight

a man takes an advance on his

wages from a brick-kiln owner

until pay-day, but the interest

rate is high and the rate per

1000 bricks is low. Although

his whole family work a life-

time of back-breaking toil,

they can never repay the debt.

When the man dies, the debt

kilns work under armed

guards, and are beaten if they

fail to meet their quota. They

The debt slaves in the brick

falls on his wife and children.

The system works like this:

million of them children.

His meeting with Kullan

President.

he had found his life's work.

stopped to help him.

to recoup the debt.

HSAN Ullah Khan was

born in 1947 in Balu-

chistan, his father a

point at the moment.

out what they had written about my friend's nomination for the Ekushey prize. While I thoroughly approved of his gesture, his letter to the State Minister of Culture indicating in advance his refusal to accept the honour, I had other thoughts at the back of my mind. I wondered how the confidentiality of this nomination was violated and by which interested individual or group? Also, was it quite proper, on the part of The Daily Star, to print a substantial part of S. M. Alt's letter to the Minister? Unless there has arisen some doubt about the letter itself. about which again I know nothing, wasn't a news about the letter sufficient?

To come back to opinions and to the popularity of the regular doze of opinion on which newspaper readers are being fed. As I see it, this is a new trend. I am afraid that such a lavish display of opinion on national issues has helped only in making all of us opinionated, a little more opinionated than we were. It has not helped us as much in improving our understanding.

It may be objected that I am drawing a false line, separating the one from the other. My an-

swer to that objection will be, no. I was only suggesting the precedence of the one over the other. You have your understanding of politics first. Your opinion on what a political leader said on a particular issue, or did not say on the issue, and your interpretation of the leader's utterance or silence, based on your understanding will then be meaningful. Most of the columns and post-editorials fail to meet this condition.

Still, however poorly supported by analysis and understanding, the mere fact of

found vent more in the posteditorials than in the editorials. Editors were happy, yield ing place to people who were less inhibited in expressing opinion than themselves. We must remember that the editor, as an institution of free press and democracy, had also suffered an eclipse under au-

The decline of the editorial, together with the eclipse of the editor, still persists, with honourable exceptions here and there. Of the multitude of columnists, a few have risen to certain heights, if not on the

PASSING CLOUDS Zillur Rahman Siddiqui

opinions being in great demand is not bad in itself. That so many writers, young and old, have turned into columnists, has added a dignity to columns. (A columnist, by the way, in the majority of Bangla dailies, become Columist, as if the final n the word column, did not exist. A few have corrected themselves, but others have ignored my advice.)

Over the years, there has been a perceptible decline of the editorial as a vital feature of a daily. This has underlined the decline, in a regimented society, in the power of the press. The gathering strength of the movement for democracy brought political opinion to the fore, from its retreat under martial law, both overt and covert. Political opinion, once more in circulation.

strength of arguments, arguably on the power of their pen. Verbosity and longwindedness characterise most of them and even the best of our contributors are not free from this common flaw. And I regard it a flaw for a columnist whom I expect to be terse. with an arrow-like swiftness. And I expect of him a certain sense of humour.

If you put your opinion first and if you are relatively unaware of the fact that there may be, in fact there are, other points of view, the ideal will be wellnigh impossible to attain.

While I say this am I trying to find an excuse for a personal shortcoming? -my inability to arrive at a certitude about many things. I have held a few dogmas firmly for many years but about many other things, if

have held one opinion at one time, I have changed or revised it later. On the question of the appropriate stage for the introduction of English in our schools - in my view it should by the first year after a fiveyear Primary - I find that despite the fears and doubts shared by many well-meaning men, my views have hardened. if any thing. English from a lower stage is neither necessary, nor feasible. The kinder gartens I consider an anomaly. and unless they are made to conform to the curriculum prescribed nationally, there should be a campaign to reject

I have not changed my views about affiliating universities. I believe, rather I fear, that the affiliating university which has been elevated to the name and style of National University, will find playing the guardianship role difficult. A university without faculty will be like a chariot without wheels. But we will wait and see. An opinion is not a judge-

My non-committal stance about private universities remains unchanged. I attended the recently held seminar on liigher Education, Trends and Direction. Between the keynote paper of Professor A F Salahuddin Ahmad and the trend of talks delivered by others, I failed to find any correspondence. Others talked about, rather concentrated their criticism on, the nonperformance of the existing, statemanaged universities. One

ple who spoke, the UGC Chairman, the Minister for Education among them, have in their eagerness to bless the Independent University (College), Bangladesh, have written off the existing ones. It is as if they existed in a limbo. There was hardly any suggestion that the state-university system was the main structure. and will always remain so. The private universities could at best play a peripheral role. If they had really despaired about the future of the main system, they had no business to be there.

could eastly draw the conclu-

sion that the responsible peo-

I have not formed any opinion yet on private universities. It is not important to have an opinion on something which is yet to start functioning. On the question of legitimacy; if I once believed that private universities were unwanted because unnecessary, I have revised that opinion. I can visualize the private university system as complementary to the main system, and not threatening it in any way.

I hate communalism but I am not sure if I should like to see Jamaat-e-Islami banned. One day I may but for the moment I would be content to see the government laying down political norms in clear terms and this should include trading on religion and religious sentiments a punishable offence.

I salute those who have readymade opinions on most things and who are not shy at all in expressing these opinions. I am not one of them. With this self-distrust haunting me, I cannot continue as a columnist for long because, in terms of Bangladeshi journalism, a columnist is a man who has an opinion on almost everything, including things he decsn't understand.

Eight Million Children Call Him Mother

by Marcus Harrison

There are an estimated 20 million debt slaves in Pakistan, eight million of them children. Although the government of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif has passed a law banning debtbonding, the practice continues. Ehsan Ullah Khan has organised bonded labourers and raised the issue of their plight at national and international forums. Gemini News Service profiles the man many refer to as "the Mother Teresa of Pakistan".



EHSAN ULLAH KHAN IN LONDON 'Debt bondage is the whole world's problem'

have little food and no medical care. Women and children are subject to sexual abuse. If they leave the compound they are recaptured and punished. The local police often collude with the owners to enforce the sys-

Although debt bondage is banned under article 11 of Pakistan's constitution, there is no back-up in statute law and the government has turned a blind eye to the practice since it guarantees a supply of cheap labour.

Khan worked as a journalist while supporting the union from his own pocket. He fought for the interests of its members against those of the brick-kiln owners. When his parents were harassed he left home and lived in the union office, his life in danger from hired thugs.

During the 1980s he was imprisoned 12 times and put in solitary confinement for six months. The jailers tried hard to break him, but he said: "To struggle for human rights in Pakistan is to play with fire expected imprisonment and torture when I began." Khan became influential. In 1988 he brought a debt-bonded family before the Supreme Court to test the weakness of constitutional law. The court cancelled the debt and freed them. However, while confirming

that debt-bondage was illegal, the court acknowledged it was

endemic and that the law had

no power to stop it.

He campaigned in Parliament and in the media for a statute law against debt bondage. Embarrassing items about debt bondage in Pakistan appeared in the international media. Anti-Slavery International, the world's oldest human rights organisation, backed his campaign.

In 1992 the government finally passed the Bonded Labour Abolition Act. However, its critics say that the act is only cosmetic, since its enforcement depends on local police and courts which are often corrupt. It had taken 25 years fighting to get the new law passed. During this time, Khan also freed thousands of bonded workers, and founded 122 primary schools all over Pakistan, where 5,000 children learn the three Rs and

their human rights. Although he loves children, his dangerous work means he dare not marry and raise his own family. But he laughs and says he has eight million children, who love him as if he

were their earthly and spiritual

Khan is hero-worshipped at home and respected abroad, and if the debt-bonded workers could use their vote, he could be a viable political force. The opposition Pakistan People's Party (PPP) of Benazir Bhutto has asked for his support, but he told them first to support his cause. Said Sardar Mazar, an ex-

iled member of the Provincial Assembly: "Khan is greater than any of our politicians, and those who love our country should follow him. He will lead the downtrodden children of Pakistan to freedom."

Mian Iqbal, an exiled senator and founder member of the PPP agreed: "He gave fresh hope to the children of Pakistan - it takes a great heart like his to fight on when your life is threatened and I

pray God he will be saved." However, the Pakistan government has accused him of damaging its export trade by organising a ban on carpets produced using child labour. Right-wing agitators have called it a foreign plot and demanded his arrest for treason. His life continues to be

threatened.

The last time he was in London, he summed up his life's work thus : "Debt bondage is the whole world's problem. We must help the helpless, and especially the children - they can reward you only with their prayers."

MARCUS HARRISON is a free lance journalist and pho-

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

The press and journalism

Sir, It appears that about 66% of the readers of The Daily Star belong to Awami League or at least are support-

ers of Awami League.

Recently, out of three letters, two in support of Awami League gives me this impression, I may be wrong. But the sharp worded rejoinder by Zillur Rahman and subsequent letter published under opinion column of The Daily Star on January 7, reaffirmed my belief. That is why Zillur Rahman wants to clear the background. I am surprised when I see AL leaders never react on any news item/commentary or any other writing published in some other papers. It may be that the subscribers of those papers are definitely not pro-

Zillur Rahman's attempt to teach S M Ali ethics of journalism leads me to my earlier belief that it is the internal affairs of AL, and Zillur Rahman wants S M Ali to remember it. Natasha Kamal and another also tried their level best to teach S M Ali what is journal-

But as a student of journalism I think the conventional trend of giving skeleton news are not followed now-a-days. It is now to inform, educate and entertain, in news. People want to know more, they want news behind the news and lots

We want freedom of information so far it relates to others. We want press should always criticise Government and oppose it in its every step, even if, in the heart of our heart we believe that in some of the cases Government is on the right side of the fence. But for our selfish end we cannot come out of party politics and call a spade a spade. At this point journalists like S M Ali come up and discharge their responsibility even at the cost of their career and what not.

Md Fazle Rabbi Ibrahimpur, Dhaka.

Democratic

responsibility Sir, Congratulation to Mr S M Alt for the wonderful and thoughtful commentary "Hasina should take a respon-

sible line in her statements"

published on December 20. 1992 in The Daily Star. It has been perhaps a splendid declaration and advice as well, which could possibly be applicable to many of the leaders of existing political parties of the country. Meanwhile here are some of the observations including the once on SAARC.

1) SAARC was formulated for the economic development of the people of its member countries. However, should we make a careful study of economic development and cooperation from 1985 to 1992, it will be really difficult to find anything as adequate as development and the co-operation among the SAARC countries during these last six years.

2) There are 203 political parties and a few hundred of newspapers, journals etc. in the country where the population shall not be more than 120 millions and that means on an overage, about 500,000 people have an "ism" and many of the newspapers are dominated by 203 "isms" of the political parties. When Hasina follows an

"ism" of irresponsibility, consequently an advice has been extended to her and certainly such an advice may create a credibility for all the leaders of the country for the future. Prior to 1990 a leader of the country used to say to the people "make my hands strong" etc. Now the same slogan has come back in the newspaper. Certainly the physicians

(political columnists) may avail the scopes and prescribe the vitamin for the good health of the hands.

3) Democracy and the democratic responsibilities grow on the following principles: a) Freedom of the conscience and the good works as have been contained in the holy books; b) "Do unto other people that you would have them do unto you"... the beginning of democracy; c) 'Only on the balance of the good works thou shalt be saved' ... Democracy and the democratic responsibilities are expressed through the language of the good works that bring benefit to the people of the country in general

4) However, the principles are not generally followed by journalists, news media, political and social leadership etc. of the country and consequently we see: a) The journalism of the country has overlooked the rights of readers and the people. b) Newspapers, radio and television are filled with the parade of the honourable ministers, MPs, and even sometimes the honourable Speaker, Vice-Chancellors and so on, while the 'meetings' are at random as the Since Qua No conditions of democracy in Bangladesh as if Bangladesh is the only country in the whole world to practise democracy, in the "As you like it" style.

Andrew D'Costa Hemendra Das Road, Dhaka

OPINION

I Want to Meet my MP

My democratically elected MP from Dhanmondi/Mohammadpur was Khaleda Zia. She forsook us, retained her Feni seat and is now the PM. Jamiruddin Shorkar (Nee Sircar) got elected in the byeelection from the same constituency. We don't see him in our constituency much, if at all. He is the Minister of Education in the present Government. Fine, no problems.

My question is, who, when and where do we go to, in order to get the problems of our locality redressed? Are the MPs supposed to maintain an office in their constituencies? Do they have any stipulated time when they meet their constituents? If not, why? I have not seen any physical or socio-economic cultural improvement worth mentioning in the area since the advent of democracy in the country. So, if I want to talk about it, how do I go about it?

I have a few of suggestions: Barring emergencies, during parliament sessions, absence from the country on official duty, all MPs, by LAW, should spend at least 2 hours, 2 specific days a week in his or her constituency specifically to meet with the electorate and try to ameliorate the problems of the area as and when pointed out by the latter. The MPs must have a per-

manent office in a prominent place in the area with a telephone, office staff, filing system (No MASTANS) and a fullfledged PA who will take notes, make appointments and act on behalf of the MP if and when required. The address of such office should be announced in the local press or

through miking. A post of a "surrogate" MP or an "Assistant" to the MP may be created by the MP himself (After all, MPs are generally rich enough spending lakhs just to be elected. I am sure they will not shirk from spending some money to actually do something good for the constituents and thereby providing employment to at least a few people) to monitor public opinion and to keep the MP (or Minister) abreast of the situation in his/her constituency. There is a danger here though. This appointee might become more popular than the appointer! How many MPs/Ministers do we have who

I suppose some of my suggestions may seem a bit far fetched to some, but the idea behind suggesting them, is to nudge the parliamentarians into "a thinking".

will take the risk?

In a similar vein, I had some months back, written to the leader of the opposition, Begum Hasina Wajed, about forming a "Shadow Cabinet". Unfortunately she hasn't been able to reply to it as yet.

Talking about democracy and believing in democracy are two different things. Believing in democracy and practising democracy again are two different things. I don't really know if we actually need the pluralistic democracy which is advocated but what we do need, is to see that those who profess it, practice it.

> Javed Helali Mohammadpur, Dhaka