

Let the Murder Not be a Trend-setter

Yet another grisly murder — this time of a schoolboy — in an apartment of the city has sent shock-waves all around. Coming closely on the heels of the double murder in Lalmatia, this one terrifies the city people beyond measure and, worse still, they will from now on start smelling rat in everything involving a domestic helping hand. With wards to leave in the care of a domestic help, parents in a two-job family — in spite of their best intention not to mistrust these low-paid people — will now spend anxious hours at their offices.

The fact that in both the murder-cases, both was used as a weapon should make most people wary of it. A kitchen tool of a sharp cutter, needed for a wide range of domestic chores, both has suddenly become overly suspect. Whether the basis of this suspicion should be strong enough to include any domestic help of every house of the city is however a completely different issue. The arguments for and against such a general fear of domestic employees may go on endlessly but a rational approach to the problem should never be allowed to take a tumble.

Well, compared with the more crime-prone cities in the West, ours are still at a very rustic stage; and these two murder incidents — despite their highly macabre mould — must not be viewed as more than isolated cases. In a megalopolis like Dhaka, people get killed in very many ways once they are out of homes. Those are disturbing enough but yet not as much as the cold-blooded ones committed in the secured environment of a house.

This feeling of sudden insecurity from quarters least expected to cause it has shaken the faith of citizens of this metropolis. But at the same time don't they have something to search in their own hearts? Perhaps we are past even the twilight era of the traditional master-servant relations. So the need for a review of the family-domestic help relations. If they are employees of any sort, they ought to have duty hours and a modest, if not decent enough, remuneration. Like in any other professions, there ought to be rules and regulations in this also. To materialise such an idea, our society need go through a lot of changes. We know we are asking for too much.

All this is however not to mean that we have already assumed anyone to be the murderer in those two ghastly incidents. Nor should these two cases be a trend-setter for a perpetration of the macabre murders any more. Killing is a serious crime and not all people are made of the same elements to commit such a crime. We look at this problem of employer-employee relations from an objective, long-term point of view.

Our heart goes out in sympathy for the parents of the brutally murdered child. We urge the police to redouble their efforts to ferret out the culprit or culprits for punishment, at the earliest, so that public confidence in the police insofar as handling such cases goes does not take a dip.

Honour for a Dhaka film

A Bangladeshi film has recently earned a best film award in an international festival in France. Morshedul Islam's 'Chaka' was presented with the new laurel at the Dunkirk — of the World War II fame — film festival only last week. Last December 'Chaka' was honoured with awards in a German festival.

We congratulate Morshedul Islam on his achievement and take the occasion to hope that this would herald many a trophy to come our way in film-making. Morshed's good work hasn't come as a result of Bangladesh's overall development in film-making. Chaka is indeed almost a freak, done in spite of the mainstream of Bangladesh's enterprises in this medium. Even a casual glance at the film situation of this nation would convince one to keep one's hopes on such 'wayward' films for any cinematic achievement till far into the future and absolutely not on what the film industry produces at the cost of people's money and taste, government patronage and cultural sensibilities. Morshed's recognition is also the recognition of the film-society movement in Bangladesh as also of a hesitant and tentative start of a parallel cinema here.

This is indeed a tortuous and torturous road — this development of a parallel cinema which is more a bundle of unrealised wishes than any tangible store of merited creations, and, that done, to go and make of the whole business of film-making come to some average standards of social and artistic relevance and excellence so that the hard crafted parallelism becomes irrelevant and exits duly. It is interesting to see that there is no parallel cinema movement not only in such leading film-making countries as France or Britain or Italy or America but also in, say, Spain and Portugal, Greece or Brazil. It is more in the poor countries of Asia that the need is felt for artistically significant films with relevance to life and society to be set apart and given a special deal without which these would die pressed under a welter of jejune celluloid production. Our societies here can benefit only from good and truly entertaining and meaningfully deep and liberal films and be harmed by the dross that are being churned out by the hundreds. But a protected and sheltered life for the good and poor-selling films would be standing in the way of their becoming national films, only consign these to at best a blind alley with no future development. The paradox that parallel cinema presents can be solved if the brave attempts connoted by it can, helped on by political and intellectual leaderships of our poorly nations, act on the mainstream industrial production as some catalytic agent rather than only bringing in prizes from abroad.

There is no doubt we have talent here and the society is yet appreciative of a good film when it sees one. An unformed capitals market for films is responsible for very unconstructive investment in films, investment that is shy of talent and goes eternally for the safe pasture of a formula film. Our sufferings in this sector of what should have been a supremely creative aspect of national life is but a small reflection of the situation in the subcontinent. But because of the smaller physical parameters of our nation and a rather close-knit society, we stand a better chance of getting out of the filmic and other cultural limbos. Morshed's creditable work should be a good contribution towards that important journey.

ONE of the best sellers in the fifties was A Postman Rings Twice. It was a story of a man who murders his wife and goes scotfree, proving that he died in an automobile accident. A few years later, his second wife actually dies in a car accident but this time he gets the electric chair because he could not establish his innocence. The lesson was that the nemesis catches with you sooner or later.

Months ago, the Supreme Court's upbraiding of Chief Election Commissioner T N Seshan reminded me of the book. When he compared India's presidents with a parrot in cage, he went unnoted. But his comparatively less offending words — the various organs of democracy including the judiciary have degenerated — caught the country's eye. And he was rightly asked "to keep his mouth shut if he does not know how to talk." The judges went to the extent of saying: "If he continues to overstep his limits, we know how to deal with him. If necessary, we will summon him here and set him right." Seshan deserved the admonishing.

There is hardly any leading Rotary Club, university or such other forum where he had not denounced one institution or the other or run down somebody by name. The problem with Seshan is that he often gets lost in words and anyone can make out that most of his pronouncements are for effect. In a society where the little-tattle passes for intellectual discourse, his banal allegories and bawdy comparisons go

down well. He knows about the latest films and their songs to stay in fashion.

Initially he was amusing, then stale and lately boring. But he does not know that he has ceased to be anything but a juicy copy. He does not even realise that he is not taken seriously. Probably that is Seshan's tragedy. If only he knew when and where to stop!

His record as a civil servant — he belongs to the Indian Administrative Service (IAS) — was not enviable. He was not valuable and knew his bounds. "He was servile to his superiors and expected servility from his subordinates," said one of his ex-colleagues. He was very close to Rajiv Gandhi and carried out all types of order without demur. This is noteworthy, because he was now critical of civil servants for kowtowing before political bosses.

There is no example anyone knows of when he said 'no' to Rajiv Gandhi or the other ministers he served. The bureaucrats' desire for self-preservation is the motivation of most official actions and behaviour, Seshan was no exception. His knowledge of palmistry has stood him in good stead and brought him many times near to the seat of power. (He had reportedly carried his 'lucky' chair to the different jobs assigned to him.)

During the emergency, he was not at a post where he could have committed excesses. But since he was sermonising on values and norms

Polls are the End, Not Seshan

all the time, he was senior enough in the government hierarchy to have spoken out against highhanded and arbitrary actions which were carried out with impunity. If the nation is to preserve the fundamental value of a democratic society, every person, whether a public functionary or a private citizen, must display a degree of vigilance and willingness to sacrifice. None heard of Seshan at that time.

Taking a moral posture in his sinecure like the election commission is nothing ex-

traordinary. Many can do likewise because the constitution protects the position. Had he done so when he was the cabinet secretary he would have been considered a bold man. Some time sermonising becomes a second habit. Seshan is prone to that. Had some institution like the Supreme Court ticked him off earlier, his boisterousness might have been curbed. And he could have gone down as one of the best chief election commissioners the country ever had.

Some of his work had been of the highest order. The last assembly elections in northern India were tribute to his single-mindedness and devotion. He virtually blunted the politi-

cian-mafia combine and enabled the electorate vote freely. He made unnecessary fuss — Seshan's trait — and spread the polling process over 32 days. But the orderly manner in which the elections were held exonerated him from the tardy schedule he followed.

Seshan's objection regarding the Rajya Sabha members had a point. Members have to be residents of the states whose legislatures elect them. They represent the states; the house is the council of states.

BETWEEN THE LINES

Kuldip Nayar writes from New Delhi

The way political parties had used the chamber to reward the favourites from different parts of the country was indeed reprehensible. Those who could not be elected directly or had been even rejected by people were brought to the Rajya Sabha and appointed ministers. (Pranab Mukherjee has never faced the electorate.)

Whatever Seshan was doing for restoring the spirit of the constitution — making the Rajya Sabha a real house of the states — was commendable. But he was himself violating the spirit of the constitution by refusing to share work with the two other members on the commission and making them

redundant. The constitution provides for their appointment and, accordingly, M S Gill and G V G Krishnamurthy, were inducted. The constitution expects the chief election commissioner to act as the chairman, not to monopolise power.

As Gill had pointed out in his affidavit to the Supreme Court, Seshan had "not even acknowledged the presence of the other election commissioners, what to speak of working in a spirit of harmony and collectively." No official paper was sent to them, not even press releases, and the election commission staff did not cooperate with them fearing Seshan's wrath.

The Supreme Court, on the members' plea, had asked Seshan to consult them before taking decisions. It had held his pre-eminence position. But that did not mean that he should ignore the constitutional position of the commission as much part of the commission as Seshan was. By not recognising their existence, Seshan was only transgressing his constitutional authority.

It did not behove Seshan to criticise the administration — his hobby horse — when he behaved like a dictator in his own office. The key to good administration is the team work; the greater the top man brings cohesion to his set up, the more successful he becomes. Seshan does not know the art of knitting.

Gill's affidavit showed how within a few days of the mem-

bers' appointment, he pleaded with folded hands to "let little vanities go by" and "cooperate to work with the multi-member commission". But Seshan did not relent. He came out like a spoiled child who must have everything on his plate alone.

The election commission is meant to conduct the polls fairly and independently. Who heads it is important to the extent that he should not be a person who will violate the sanctity of voting. The polls are important, not Seshan. When the commission had been expanded, the responsibility rested on the shoulders of all the three to conduct free elections. Together they constituted the commission. By keeping the two out, Seshan was only devaluing the commission.

Seshan should have realised that the opposition showed loss of faith in him when it brought a motion of impeachment against him. It did not suit Prime Minister Narasimha Rao to extend his support at that time. By expanding the commission he too had indicated that he did not have faith in his judgment alone. On top of it had come the chiding of the Supreme Court.

Seshan should have done a bit of introspection — the follower of the Gita as he is. He should have found out himself where he had gone wrong and whether all that he had been saying was part of his duty or had he been indulging in theatricals to hog publicity? Those who live in glass houses, Bernard Shaw cautioned, should not change their clothes with the lights on.

THE Philippine press has run stories on President Fidel Ramos' supposed affair with a socialite, feasted on an official's alleged sexual harassment of a female colleague, and quoted officials who publicly blamed each other for letting suspected foreign drug dealers out of the country.

Call it what you want, but the Philippine press can never be called boring. The press' excesses notwithstanding, Filipino journalists would not have their media any less unshackled.

That is despite the theory that the country has a surfeit of democracy, which some observers link to why the Philippines has so far remained a cub to South-east Asia's tiger economies.

Vergel Santos, associate director of the Philippine Press Institute, says the Philippines stands out in the Association of South-east Asian Nations (ASEAN) when it comes to media.

He adds that the common perception is that "the Philippine press is free, the Thai press is free enough, the Malaysian press could use more freedom, Indonesia is losing what little freedom it had and Singapore and Brunei are not free at all."

In June, the Indonesian government revoked the publishing licences of Tempo, the country's best-known and most respected newsweekly, and two widely-read publications, Detik and Editor.

The government said Tempo violated journalistic

Philippines: Free Press Free-for-All

The Philippines offers no apologies for its rowdy press, touted to be the freest in Asia. Johanna Son of Inter Press Service reports from Manila

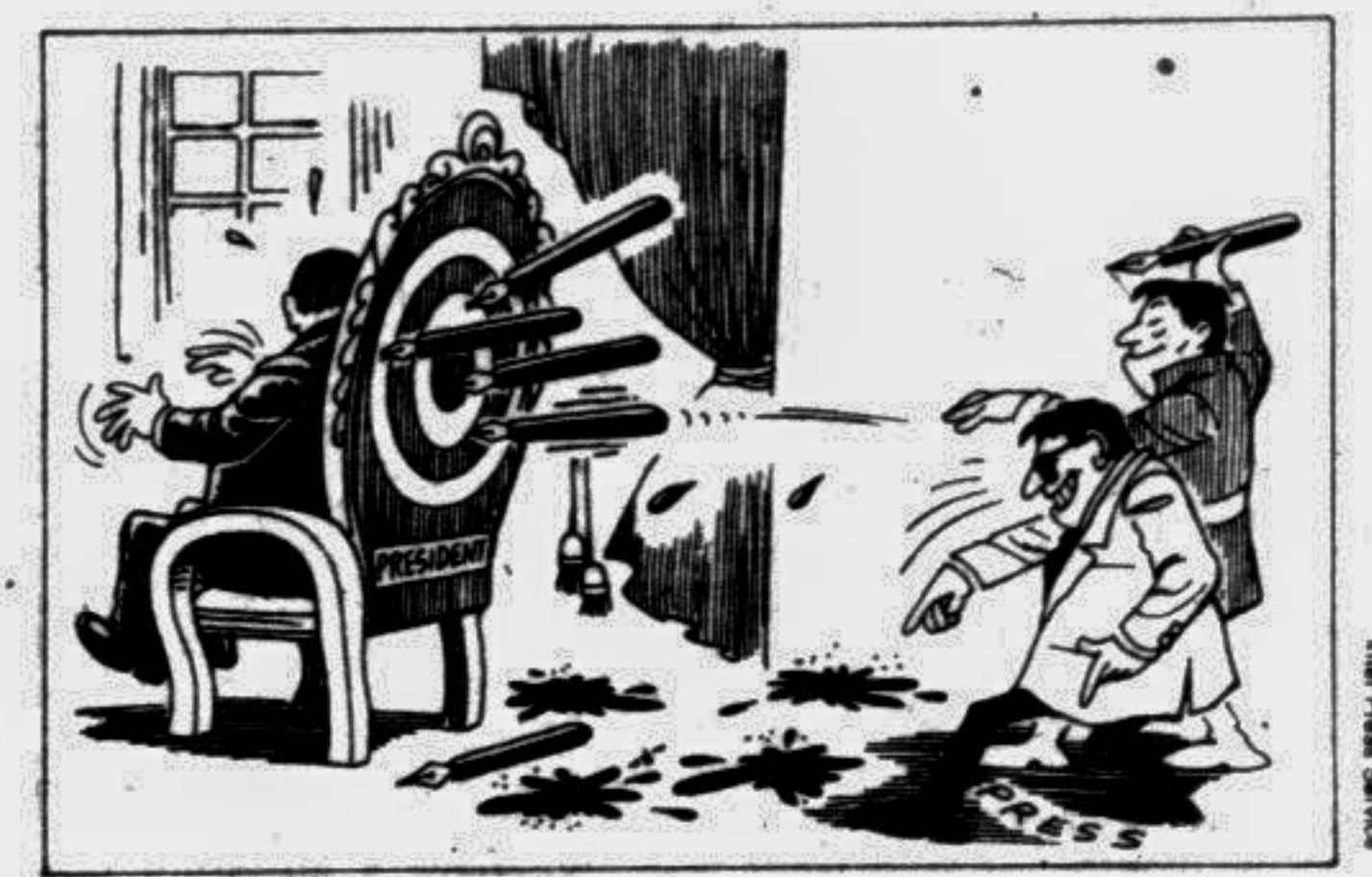
ethics by pitting Finance Minister Marle Muhamad and Research and Technology Minister B J Habibie over the purchase of warships from the former East Germany. But no one in the Philippines would bat an eyelash over such a conflict played out in the media.

Philippine newspapers eagerly track feuds among government officials, which at times create the impression of a squabbling government unable to rein in politicians or forge a national consensus on vital issues.

Filipino officials themselves routinely complain that the press goes overboard in reporting kidnap incidents and gory crimes, which hurt the country's efforts to attract investments.

There are at least 10 national broadsheets here, along with many more tabloids that focus on sex, crime and violence, in addition to provincial papers.

Comments Antonio Samson, a businessman who writes for Business World: "Maybe sensational stories with gore sell papers better than factories expanding, foreign investments coming in and the economic growth rate hitting an amazing five percent."



Zafiro Respicio ordered them deported although all were facing charges.

That triggered a scandal that led to the resignation of Respicio, who had figured in a word war with the National Bureau of Investigation over who was to blame for the fiasco.

Newspapers and tabloids also had a field day with Election Commissioner Remedios Fernando's claim that colleague Manolo Gorospe planted an unwanted kiss on her cheek in June.

But media watchers say the cheekiness of the local press

was most apparent last year, when Ramos himself was asked point-blank if he had an affair with a socialite and had a son by her. Diplomats in Manila were shocked he entertained the questions, saying the same could not happen in places like Singapore or Malaysia.

Indeed, some of the Philippines' neighbors find the country's free-for-all press disconcerting. Santos, though, says they hold up their respective media as model, "but only as a theoretical one". The Philippine version, he says, "disturbs Malaysians and

Indonesians — but (still) not enough to dampen their longing for a free press."

Still, because South-east Asian countries with varied degrees of controlled media are outperforming the Philippines, popular wisdom says there is a link between the lack of progress and a free, independent press. But media analysts say this may be a fallacy.

The Philippines is always cited as an example (of this theory). Indeed, who can argue with success?" says Luis Teodoro, mass communications dean at the University of the Philippines.

He notes that the Philippines press is the way it is due to its painful history of repression under Ferdinand Marcos's 20-year rule. Many of today's newspapers were the 'alternative press' in the last years of Marcos's reign that played a key role in his ouster in 1986.

Melinda de Jesus, director of the Manila-based Centre for Media Freedom and Responsibility, also says the perceived trade-off between economic development and democracy might work for other South-east Asian countries, but the Philippine perspective has to be "respected".

"In the Philippines the primary value of the press is its independence," she says. "Independence is the measure of its credibility."

But the real issue in the Philippines may be less on the question of whether an independent press is an asset or liability, and more on whether it is a credible, responsible one.

When Malaysia's Abdul Samad Ismail, adviser to the New Straits Time Group, spoke in Manila recently on the pros and cons of an independent press, he observed: "Freedom in any area of human life is never offered in a silver platter."

"Press freedom is not for the uncaring, nor is it for the opportunists," said Samad, who was in Manila in September to receive the 1994 Ramon Magsaysay Award for journalism.

"We owe it to society and to our people to exercise our rights responsibly and judiciously for... our nation's survival as an independent and sovereign entity should be our supreme and overriding concern as citizens," stressed the veteran journalist, who was jailed under Malaysia's Internal Security Act in 1976 and knighted by the Malaysian king in 1992.

But for Filipinos, a rowdy — at times petty and unfair — press is better than a regulated one. "Whether an independent press helps or hurts a nation is an issue that will never be resolved according to a universal standard," Santos remarks.

He muses: "It is, in fact, only part of a greater ideological issue that itself will never be similarly resolved: Are nations better off free than dictated on?"

To the Editor...

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 much awaited dialogue

Sir, All eyes are focused on Begum Khaleda Zia-Sheikh Hasina Wazed summit and the talk of the town now is Khaleda-Hasina dialogue.

All that glitters is not gold. And so all the public speeches and pronouncements made by Prime Minister Khaleda Zia and the Leader of the Opposition Sheikh Hasina in recent months do not appear to be solid, logical and acceptable.

We are neither pro-Hasina nor anti-Khaleda and vice versa. As our independent and sovereign right to franchise we are of the opinion that for the sake of democracy and welfare of our people the boycott of the Jatiya Sangsad by Awami League and other opposition parties must be withdrawn forthwith, the issue of caretaker government must be compromised between the government and opposition members of the parliament and the politics of strike, hartals, siege and street agitation must come to an end.

We feel that holding of three consecutive general elections as demanded by Jamaat-e-Islami, Jatiya Party and Awami League is not a bad idea.

We however strongly feel that replacement of a people's elected government by an undemocratic and unparliamentary caretaker government for a long period of three months may create serious administrative, legal and constitutional problems. Moreover, since the caretaker government would not be elected by the people, it

would not be held responsible and accountable for any lapses, omissions, irregularities and abuse of power during its tenure of office. We cannot always expect a neat, clean and pristine general election like the one under the erstwhile caretaker government headed by Chief Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed. But it seems better if decided and agreed upon that three consecutive general elections would be held under a caretaker government. The proposal must be carefully studied and examined by all concerned and a consensus of opinion must be arrived at as to who would head the caretaker government and what would be the powers and functions of such government. In case of war, any emergency and socio-economic and political crisis in the country how the caretaker government would handle the situation? If the caretaker government commits any irregularities or offence and abuse its powers, who would be responsible for that and how the caretaker government would be taken care of? We are further of the opinion to be sure, that whether a general election under a caretaker government or a people's elected government, would always be held under the supervision and control of Election Commission. So why not the opposition leaders formulate and decide all the duties, formalities, functions and powers which are required to be exercised by the Election Commission and the code of conduct to be followed by government and opposition party members and submit it to Sir Ninian Stephen for ex-

amination and consideration? Similarly the party in power may also prepare a separate list of duties, responsibilities, powers and code of conduct and submit the same to Sir Ninian for examination and consideration.

We further feel that Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia may be legally and constitutionally allowed to complete her five years term of office. Failing which it would become a routine affair in our country that whoever comes to power the opposition would oppose it, demand its resignation after sometime, and ask for fresh general election and crisis and impasse would continue for ever.

Let Begum Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina shake hands with each other with a broad smile and help solve multifarious socio-economic and political problems of the country. Sir Ninian Stephen, the former Government General and the emissary of Commonwealth Secretary General Emeke Anyaoku, is a highly qualified and experienced personality. We wish Begum Khaleda Zia, Sheikh Hasina and Sir Ninian goodspeed and all success.

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II

Sir, By dint of hectic parleys by the Commonwealth Secretary-General's envoy Sir Ninian Stephen with the Government and the Opposition leaders the much awaited final 'dialogue' seems to begin at last.

It appeared to me that the Opposition on the one hand, was adamant on their stand while on the other, the Government was trying to gain by delay tactics.

I think a compromise formula may be worked out keeping the BNP Government in

power for the sake of continuity of the constitutional government, and not amending the constitution.

The parties may agree on such points as: a) BNP will remain in power and next election will be held under them; b) the BNP persons or group of persons (MPs) forming the Government which may be declared as the caretaker government, shall be disqualified to file nomination papers in the elections under them; c) the aforesaid caretaker government will hold office for two months and shall not be empowered to transfer or appoint any official during that period; d) the members of the cabinet of the caretaker government shall not be entitled to make any allocation of money for new project nor they shall be allowed to attend any meeting of their political party and shall not visit any polling centre anytime during the whole period of election; e) the caretaker government shall cease to be in power on the first day of session of the Parliament.

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Smart shopping!

Sir, Four river mine sweepers purchased from Britain by SAARC pioneer Bangladesh will have bolstered her defence confidence a great deal.

The functions of those support vehicles are obvious but the purpose of their probable use is not quite indicative of her strategic situation except for a likely UFO attack or for a parallel to Kuwait and Afghanistan.

A shopping of this class can be thought-provoking, when the rivers in the western region of the country are drying up and all others crisscrossing this delta flow below level required for heavy duty rivercraft

during lean period.

In the prevailing condition, why military hardware is preferred to more urgently needed river training stuff including dredger and bank builder, should be mindboggling.

Having located adjacent to a nuclear powered neighbour sharing experiences of irritating relations over water problem should this poor state have a realistic reason for such a spending.

In line with the nation's defence policy and arms shopping accordingly, it might occur to the citizens that it is neither too late nor too early to go for something like Stealth Tracer even, if that be, a down-to-earth approach to the persisting situation of this LDC.

Like everything else that have been happening to this 9th largest nation, who knows better than this "smart shopper" when it comes to imports will rest with time to tell.

Until then, how to stand by such a deed will be up to the personnel involved who owe it to themselves to keep the voters abreast with the state's balance sheet.

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Free import of fabrics

Sir, It is reported that the authority has decided to delegate powers to Bangladesh Garments Manufacturers Association to import fabrics and accessories to the garments industry to boost export of ready-made garments. This decision may directly hit the local textile industries.

Under the liberal industrial policies, the NCBs, DFIs and private banks have financed lot of new textile industries, label

industries and button) industrials etc. And composite units of very big size have also been financed. New spinning mills, sizing machines and looms with latest technologies are being imported under bank loans to produce quality fabrics in Bangladesh. Many old textile mills have been financed under BMRE. These mills already opened L/Cs to bring modern machineries to meet the demand of quality cloths for the garments industries. What will be the fate of these industries in the event of free import of cloths and accessories?

At present the garment industries are bringing cloth under back to back L/C arrangement. Here direct foreign exchange payment is not involved. In the event of free import of cloth direct foreign exchange payment will be required. Again, if any portion of the imported cloth gets access to local market for local consumption, the nation will have to pay in terms of hard currency for the same and the same will result in imbalance of payment. We are already burdened with the smuggled clothes. The free import will then further aggravate the situation. It will be very difficult to plug the rush of irregular cloths in the market.

The government should also think for those textile industries which are already in operation. And as per govt decision many new textile industries have been financed. These industries will face marketing problem when started functioning. Because the foreign buyers will be habituated to purchase apparels made with their own manufactured cloths, it will take time to make them familiar with our products. The government should think all aspects of the economy before taking any decision.

Mahbul Haque Chowdhury Kalabagan, Dhaka.