

Labour Unrest in Bangladesh: Who is Responsible?

by Nurul Kabir

Things show that it is the governments' repeated failure to honour the accords they have signed with the labour leaders, and the state's indifference towards the genuine problems of the workers, that are mainly responsible for the country's labour unrest.

THE jute, textile and cotton sector workers have just enforced a 48-hour work-stoppage, accompanied by a 36-hour road and rail barricade across the country, on November 10 and 11 last. They have recently announced another package of agitational programmes that include a countrywide 48-hour industrial strike and barricade from December 8.

The garment workers have also announced a fresh package of programmes that include a dawn-to-dusk industrial strike in the garments sector on November 30. Meanwhile, the Sramik Karmachari Oikkyo Parishad (SKOP) — a conglomeration of 16 national-level labour organisations — which has enforced similar agitation in the recent past, is learnt to have been actively thinking to announce fresh agitation programmes.

There is no controversy that the entire nation badly needs to get rid of the phenomenon called labour unrest. For this, we need first to identify the factors working behind the labour unrest.

Our investigation shows that it is the repeated failure of government/s to honour the accords signed with the workers that compel the latter to go for strikes. Besides, nothing short of a threat of work-stoppage, or things like putting barricade on the roads, can make the authorities concerned agree to even sit with the labour organisations to discuss ways of implementation of the accords.

It would surprise many who are still unaware of what the labour bodies are fighting for, that the workers have been struggling to implement a few accords signed with the government and private sector industrialists much earlier, in some cases more than a decade ago.

Let us take the example of SKOP which was floated in April 1983. Since 1984 until July 1993, different governments entered into three accords and signed two Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs) with the SKOP.

But the major clauses of the accords and MoUs are yet to be

implemented. The clauses had clearly assured implementation of demands like fixation of minimum wage for the private sector workers, identifying reasons behind making losses by the public sector industries, disinvestment of the 'sick' industries on the basis of consensus reached with the workers concerned, enactment of democratic trade union laws and stoppage of the practice of 'hijacking' trade unions of Combined Bargaining Agents (CBAs) by ruling parties and so on. But these have been ignored since early 80s.

We think any sound mind will find the demands to be genuine.

The first agreement was signed on May 21, 1984 in the face of a SKOP threat of 48-hour strike on May 22 and 23. The second accord was signed on July 6, 1992 — again in the face of the SKOP threat of a 48-hour work-stoppage on July 7 and 8. The third agreement was signed on November 27, 1992. This accord was also signed following the SKOP threat of observing a 48-hour industrial strike on November 29 and 30.

Two MoUs were signed on December 21, 1991 and July 18, 1993. The last one was also the result of the SKOP's call for a 48-hour industrial strike on July 19 and 20 of 1993.

The history of signing of agreements clearly indicates that governments had shown interest to discuss problems of the workers only when exposed to threats of strikes called by the SKOP. However, after signing of each agreement or the MoU, the labour organisations had either withdrawn the strike calls or postponed the pre-scheduled agitations.

But did the governments honour the accords and MoUs they signed with the labour organisations? The answer is a big NO.

The present state of SKOP demand for fixation of minimum wage for both the private and public sector workers would provide a good example: The agreement signed between SKOP and the government of General H M Ershad on May 21, 1984 said "the minimum monthly basic wage for the

workers will be Taka 460". The government strongly maintains that the owners of the private sector industrial establishments would also go by the decision, the agreement added. The irony is that the labour leaders who signed the 1984 agreement included Kazi Zafar Ahmed who later became Prime Minister of Ershad government, but made little efforts to fix a standard minimum wage.

The SKOP is still fighting for fixation of standard 'minimum wage' for both the public and private sector workers, while the labour body has only increased the amount of the proposed minimum wage time to time, of course taking into consideration the rate of inflation and price hike of consumer goods.

The agreement signed between the government of Khaleda Zia and the SKOP on July 6, 1992 said: "The government will announce the 'national minimum wage' for the country's all workers and employees including those working in the private sector factories and business establishments."

The government had failed to honour the accord. While signing MoU in November 1992, the government had again promised that "the minimum wage would be announced by the end of December the same year." The MoU also said that the government would constitute sectoral committees, having representation of the workers, to identify and remove crisis various sectors are confronting with. The commitment is yet to be realised.

The government, however, fixed 'national minimum wage' for the public sector workers — Taka 950 per month — in 1992 and it 'wished' that the owners of the private sector industries would also implement the 'minimum wage' for their workers. The labour leaders say that the private sector en-

trepreneurs, who always wrestle out various concessions from the state to ensure an increased rate of profit, have consistently been declining to fulfil the 'wish' of the government. On the other hand, the governments that always admit that the demand for fixation of a minimum wage is rightful, always keep silence on private sector's reluctance to fix a minimum wage. Ministers and government officials sometimes love to argue that in a market economy, the state cannot impose its decision on the private sector. They, however, prefer to keep mum when asked why the private sector would be provided with various state facilities including regular financial assistance and frequent tax holidays, when it refuses to comply with a 'justified wish' of the government.

Meanwhile, the number of sectoral Minimum Wage and Productivity Boards (MWPB) was increased from 14 to 17 to fix separate minimum wages for different categories of private sector workers. Some of the MWPBs — each a three-member body headed by a judge with one representative each from the workers and the employees concerned — proposed 'minimum wage' for certain categories of industries. Others failed to produce any result, especially due to disagreements between the representatives of the workers and the employees.

In the face of SKOP pressure to implement the old agreements, the government once again entered into an MoU in July 1993 that only assured that the government would 'continue discussion on the ways of implementing the accords.'

Awami League came to power in 1996, and the leader of the party's labour front, which was an active partner of the SKOP movement, the minister of labour ministry, the minister put his signature on the said ac-

ords as a SKOP leader the other day. But, ironically, situation has not changed a little for the workers. What is more interesting is that the Labour Minister is yet to show seriousness about holding an effective discussion with his former colleagues in the SKOP. The SKOP is, therefore, preparing for fresh agitations to see the old accords implemented.

Same is the case with the jute, cotton and textile sectors' workers. They have been struggling to realise, among other issues, the demand for implementation of Wage Commission Award, 1991 in the already disinvested mills. (Readers, please notice that the workers are agitating in the last quarter of 1997 to implement the Wage Commission Award which was announced in 1991 and implemented in the public sector. Earlier, the owners of the disinvested mills staged a back-out immediately before the process of implementation of the Award was completed.)

In an agreement signed with the leaders of jute, cotton and textile sector workers on June 21 this year, the government said: "The government believes in equal wages for equal works in the similar industries and hopes that the owners of the disinvested jute, cotton and textile mills will implement the Wage Commission Award, 1991."

The June 21 accord also promised that the government would make any decision about further disinvestment of any public sector — jute, cotton and textile — industries on the basis of consensus reached with the workers concerned for the greater interest of the nation.

But the hope of the workers was shattered, as the government did not make any effective efforts to persuade the private sector to implement the said Wage Commission Award. Besides, the government went ahead with the process of disinvesting the mills concerned without having discussions with the labour bodies. The labour organisations therefore called for a barricade programme. As usual, the government sat with the labour leaders on August 26 and eventually signed an MoU. The MoU, signed in presence of the Industries Minister, unambiguously assured that "the government will not disinvest or close down any mills of the jute, cotton and textile sectors." The discussion on this subject, however, will continue." The workers called off the proposed agitation following signing of the MoU.

But the government broke the contract again. They disinvested 17 mills without any discussion with labour leaders, exposing the fate of workers to uncertainty. The workers have already enforced a 48-hour

work-stoppage with no result. Left with no other option, they called another 48-hour industrial strike and rail and road barricade across the country in the second week of December.

Garments factories, run solely by the private sector, are no exception. Most of the garment workers are still compelled to live — and work as well — in inhuman conditions, although they contribute to earn 68 per cent of the total export earnings for the country. The labour organisations in this sector are still fighting for the appointment cards of the workers, implementation of Minimum Wage Board awards 1994, weekly holidays, maternity leave and daycare centre facility and so on.

Following series of negotiations between the Bangladesh Garments Manufacturers and Exporters' Association (BGMEA) and representatives of the workers, the former had adopted a resolution in October last that recognised the demands to be genuine. But the BGMEA has not yet shown any sign of implementing them.

Besides, in a meeting with the Garments Workers Unity Council on July 15 last, the BGMEA had agreed to take four steps to avert fire related accidents in the factories. But, reportedly, most of the factories are yet to implement any of the four steps, while others have partially implemented them. In the meantime, several dozens workers have been killed in fire-related accidents taking place in eight factories since last July. But the government, always ready to serve the garment factory owners,

showed no interest to see whether the 'genuine' demands of the workers were met.

The workers had, therefore, called a strike, the only effective weapon at their disposal, on November 30 last, to implement the accord. The workers' demands are yet to be met, but they have at least succeeded to wrestle out a fresh commitment from the BGMEA that it would take immediate steps to implement them. Following the fresh commitment of the factory owners, made on November 29, that the demands would be met by next March, the workers have called off the strike. The labour leaders are convinced that the BGMEA would not have even agreed to discuss the problem, if there was no threat of a strike.

All these things show that it is the governments' repeated failure to honour the accords they have signed with the labour leaders, and the state's indifference towards the genuine problems of the workers, that are mainly responsible for the country's labour unrest.

While criticising the workers for calling frequent strikes, one therefore needs to understand that the workers would not have required to agitate, had the governments been respectful to the accords they signed. One also should not miss the point that fresh strikes to implement old agreements also symbolise the workers' protest against a dishonest state machinery which is habituated to breach contracts with the poor workers striving to keep their body and soul together.

Let's Develop a Tough Agreement on Criminalising Bribery

by William Daley

Corruption has many forms. But, no matter what form it takes, the big losers are honest companies and innocent citizens.

IN the short time that I have been US secretary of commerce, I have watched the following depressing scenario repeated with discouraging regularity: A developing country awards a major infrastructure project — with the supposed aim of bettering the lives of its citizens — to a company or consortium that did not rank near the top for price, quality, or experience. Later we get information indicating that corruption influenced the award.

Corruption has many forms. But, no matter what form it takes, the big losers are honest companies and innocent citizens.

Since mid-1994, we have learned of allegations of bribery by foreign firms in some 180 international commercial contracts valued at nearly \$90 billion. In 80 per cent of the cases where a firm pays a bribe to a foreign official, that firm wins the contract. The Times of London recently quoted a board of a major German multinational as saying that it would take 10 years to replace the overseas staff, contacts and networks that all currently expect to operate on the basis of 'necessary' bribery.

As secretary of commerce, I am incensed when I see business diverted from companies that play fairly to companies that play fast and loose. But I am even more disheartened by the damage that corruption inflicts on the economic development of the less developed countries.

Last May, I met with trade, finance and foreign ministers of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), where the United States joined with the other 28 member-countries to attack the plague of transnational bribery. As OECD ministers, we agreed to complete a convention by the end of this year to come into force by the end of next year — that would obligate all member states to criminalise the bribery of foreign public officials in commercial transactions. The OECD will establish a monitoring procedure to ensure effective implementation and enforcement. This was an historic decision.

After the first round of negotiations in July, conclusion of an effective convention by the end of 1997 appeared to be an attainable goal. However, I am extremely distressed that there was serious backsliding on some critical issues at the October meeting.

Put simply, we must ensure that this convention will effectively prohibit business-related bribes to foreign legislators, political parties and party officials and to public enterprises.

The OECD ministers agreed in May that the bribery of legislators would be covered. But German and Austrian negotiators now insist that only a small category of bribes to legislators should be covered. They argue that the convention either must mirror their domestic laws, which generally prohibit

of pointing the way to "legal" bribery.

Another vital issue is when to bring this convention into effect. Several OECD member-countries, including France, Germany and Japan, insist that this convention come into force only after some critical mass of large nations signs on, citing concerns about undercutting their companies' competitiveness. But surely these key countries would be among the first to ratify and, with the United States, would constitute a real critical mass. Those who delay will come under strong pressure from their trading partners to follow through with ratification.

I remain deeply committed to the ministerial goal we set in May. I know a number of other OECD member countries are equally committed. I ask those others who are failing to fulfill their May pledges, and who are insisting upon unwelcome limitations on the scope of this convention, to do what they know is right.

We have only one negotiating session left before the December deadline we set for ourselves last May. Let's renew our resolve to meet that deadline; let's settle the outstanding issues at the November session and let's develop a tough agreement, without loopholes, that will effectively criminalise bribery of foreign public officials through all possible channels.

The writer is US Secretary of Commerce

Garfield®



IAN FLEMING'S James Bond

by Jim Davis



'Lack of planning keeping the disabled from access to development activities'

Despite a plan of action, policy and draft laws on disability, the people with disability in Bangladesh are yet to get access to the country's mainstream development initiatives, reports UNB.

Lack of planning in implementing the policy or the plan of action left these people without getting proper education, healthcare and communication facilities in the ongoing development programmes.

"The number of people with disability will not increase if there is good planning today to relate all kinds of programme taken by different governments," said Abdus Sattar, executive director of Bangladesh Pratibandhi Kalyan Samity.

Talking to a group of journalists yesterday ahead of the International Disability Day, Sattar said "integration of the policy and plan of action in the

national planning is totally absent here."

Bangladesh as one of the signatories to the United Nations declaration to observe the disability year, decade and day from 1981, approved the policy in 1995 and adopted the plan of action in 1996.

But the country's response to its original commitment for the welfare of the people with disability seems very little, said experts on the issue at an orientation programme for the journalists on the issue of disability.

"Though the Fifth Five Year Plan was formulated after the plan of action on disability, the agenda in the action plan was not included in the FFYP," said Sattar who was involved in formulating the policy and the plan of action.

Lack of accurate survey on

the population with disability, coordination among the 22 ministries responsible for the subject, initiatives in formulating the trustee board, and other bureaucratic complicity refrained the people with disability from contributing to the country's social and economic development.

In Bangladesh, the experts said, the government estimates about 10 per cent of the total population have some kinds of disabilities, but pocket surveys carried out by various organisations have given different picture on the actual population.

Many of these surveys considered people using spectacles as disabled, which the experts said is a wrong perception.

According to such a pocket survey carried out in Narsingdi area, about 7 per cent of the total population have been identified to be disabled.

Though 10 per cent quota in government services has been reserved only for the people with disability, the actual picture is different. According to the experts, the people with disability are getting a lesser number of government service as an order issued by the Ershad government to reserve the 10 per cent quota both for people with disability and orphans.

A recent official order again fixed the 10 per cent quota for the people with disability, but the order during the Ershad period was never scrapped, creating an unnecessary complexity over the issue, the experts said.

Despite commendable steps and commitments from every government, the quota reservation could not be implemented due to the complications arose from the government orders, said Sattar.

Meeting on afforestation, dredging held

Two inter-ministerial meetings on embankment afforestation and river dredging were held at the Water Resources Ministry yesterday, reports UNB.

Water Resources Minister Abdur Razzak presided over the meetings which elaborately discussed the proper maintenance of the embankments and dredging of rivers.

A five-member committee has been formed in the meeting for submitting a report by December 30 after examining what kinds of trees would not cause harm to the embank-

ments. In the meeting, the Water Resources Minister advised the Shipping Ministry to adopt a final plan to dredge rivers for maintaining their normal navigability.

Water Resources Secretary Dr A T M Shamsul Huda, Shipping Secretary Mofazzal Karim, Water Development Board Chairman Syed Moazzem Hossain, BIWTC Chairman Abdul Mannan Howlader, water expert Prof Anun Nishat and concerned officials were present.

Theatre festival ends today

By Staff Correspondent

Six-day theatre festival organised by Theatre, a drama group, will end today. On the fifth day of the festival yesterday, a new production of the Theatre titled 'Meherjan Arekbar' was staged at the Public Library Auditorium.

The same drama will be staged today, the last day of the festival, says a press release.

Chupkatha, a drama group from Calcutta, earlier staged their new production 'Jamadin' at the festival in Dhaka on November 29 and 30.

Truck owners', drivers' team meets Rafiq

A 12-member delegation of Truck Owners' Association and Truck Driver-Workers' Federation called on Home Minister Rafiqul Islam at his office yesterday, reports UNB.

The minister exchanged views with them on various problems relating to traffic and assured them of all possible cooperation to resolve them, said a PID handout.

The representatives told the minister that they had no connection with the transport strike in northern districts, which they termed as illegal.

The delegation members include Truck Workers' Federation president Mohammed Ismail, general secretary Babu Roy Ramesh Chandra, Truck Owners' Association president Christopher Gomez and general secretary Rustom Ali Khan.



A scene from Theatre's latest production, 'Meherjan Arekbar', staged at the Public Library auditorium yesterday.

HERE and THERE

Dr M Ibrahim Smriti Parishad

The annual general meeting and the election of Dr M Ibrahim Smriti Parishad held in the city recently, reports BSS.

According to a press release a 15-member committee of the parishad was elected for two-year term (1998-99).

Murshed Hussain and M Qamrul Islam were elected president and secretary of the parishad respectively.

Deputy Director of BIRDEM Dr M Enayet Hossain conducted the election.

UNAB

United Nations Association of Bangladesh (UNAB) organised a symposium at a city hotel on Sunday in observance of International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian people, reports UNB.

Presided over by UNAB chairman Prof Shalahuddin Ahmed, the function was attended by State Minister for Foreign Affairs Abul Hasan Chowdhury as chief guest. Acting Ambassador of State of Palestine in Dhaka, Faik Hamza was the key-note speaker.

IUB
A three-week General English Course, organised by the Extension and Continuing Education Centre (ECEC) and the Language Centre of Independent University, Bangladesh (IUB) concluded in the city recently. It was conducted by the Director of the Language Centre, Dr Joyce I R Silva, says a press release.

Gayoom invited to visit Bangladesh

Foreign Minister Abdus Samad Azad, now in the Maldives to attend the ninth session of the SAARC Council of Ministers, called on President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom on Saturday, reports BSS.

They discussed bilateral issues and matters relating to the regional body.

During the meeting, Azad extended to Gayoom a cordial invitation of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to pay an official visit to Bangladesh which he gladly accepted, according to a message received in the city Sunday.

The two-day session of the SAARC Council of Ministers, which began on Saturday, was inaugurated by President Gayoom.

Maldivian Foreign Minister Fatullah Jameel, who chaired the plenary session of the council meeting, handed over the SAARC Youth Award 1997 to Bangladesh youth worker Md Sukur Salek. The winner was given a gold medal and a citation.

The council of ministers meeting was preceded by the meetings of the standing and programming committees from November 25 to 28. Foreign Secretary Mustafizur Rahman led the Bangladesh delegation to the meeting of the standing committee.

Abdus Samad Azad also called on the Foreign Minister of Sri Lanka, Lakshman Kadhirgama, before the start of council session and discussed matters of bilateral, regional and international issues of common concern.

Bangladeshi doctor honoured

Dr Sofia Nilufar, a Bangladeshi doctor, has obtained membership of Royal College of Obstetrics and Gynaecology, UK.

Dr Sofia obtained MBBS degree from Dhaka Medical College in 1983 and FCPS degree from Bangladesh College of Physicians and Surgeons in 1991, says a press release.

Only daughter of Dr Humayun K M A Hye, she is married to Dr Sayeed Ahmed and has two children.

DU teacher awarded

A teacher of Pharmacy Department of Dhaka University has won the 'Young Scientist Award' for his outstanding research work on plant-based drug, reports UNB.

The Third World Academy of Science and Bangladesh Academy of Science (BAS) jointly selected Mohammad Abdur Rashid, Associate Professor, Department of Pharmacy, DU, for the award.

BAS president Prof Kamaluddin Ahmed and Treasurer Dr N H Khan yesterday handed over a cheque of Tk 40,000 as award-money to the recipient.