

## A Step in Right Direction

THE government's decision to institute welfare committees at the export processing zones in the country with representation from the employees and the employers is, in our view, a step in the right direction. So, we are heartened by the American Chamber of Commerce's call to the US government and the International Labour Organisation (ILO) to back our government on this and put an end to the uncertainty over continuation of GSP for Bangladesh. When implemented, the arrangement would uphold labour rights and, at the same time, dispel doubts from the investors' minds over creation of Frankensteins in the name of trade unions.

Right from the start, the government has been in a dicey position, in the middle of two contrasting pulls. At one end, the US government, the ILO and AFL-CIO, the largest single labour organisation in the United States, want unconditional practice of trade unionism at the EPZs in accordance with the agreements signed in 1993 and 1995. At the other, the major stakeholders of the EPZs, investors from Japan and Korea, won't have anything to do with trade unions. The dilemma has been between the US withdrawal of the generalised system of preferences (GSP) on our products and a rollback of investment from Japan and Korea. It has been a lose-lose situation and deserved measured steps from the government to bring about a turn-around. The government may well have succeeded on that count.

A liberal democracy is professedly protective of the interests of the workers and thus, the dispute should not have arisen in the first place. Unfortunately, years of blatant politicisation and diabolically perverse trade unionism made a mockery of 'protecting the workers' rights'. The vile brand of trade unionism practised in the country has been beneficial to a handful of people and worked as their own stairway to material prosperity. While the unscrupulous few have fattened their wallets, the workers and, needless to say, the country's economy have inevitably borne the brunt.

The US government and AFL-CIO need to be appreciative of our constraints and look at the issue with dispassion and objectivity. They better listen to AmCham, which is aware of ground realities, stop arm-wrenching the government into implementing the agreements and endorse the mooted welfare committees.

## No Looking Back for Biman Now

THE paralytic locking of horns between the management of Biman and its employees on the question of converting the state-owned airlines into Public Limited Company (PLC) has ended on a buoyantly harmonious note. The stand-off has been amicably settled. And what is extremely heartening to note is the formalisation of the terms of settlement through the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding between both sides.

The salient features of the accord sound novel, even path-breaking in our context. While Biman retains its status as corporation it will have a 'strategic partner' with 40 per cent of share offered to it under a World Bank aided privatisation plan. The radical part of it is the nine per cent share being earmarked for the employees, for the first time in the history of public sector corporations in the country. No employees will be declared surplus. As well as allaying the fear of losing job the whole lot of them are now being given a collective stake in the corporation. Both liabilities and profits will be shared by the workers depending upon how they had performed in a given financial year. This is an ace in the hole or chestnut in the fire that we have taken an unusually long time to draw. When employees are given a stake they are expected to work responsibly. For it is a 'deliver or perish,' 'punishment or reward' scenario for them.

Two other positive elements of the MOU are: (a) the employees will have a director of their own to represent them on the Biman board; and (b) they will be kept informed of the negotiations with any of the foreign airline bidding to be a strategic partner with Biman.

The MOU bears an eloquent testimony to the maturity of the workers and the flexibility of the management in Biman Bangladesh Airlines. These are worth emulating by other corporations in trouble. Rather than resting on the laurels of an accord Biman should now get its act together, improve its services with confidence in the future, and of course, implement the terms of the MOU to derive maximum benefit from it. Finding the right partner will be a crucial test that Biman must brace up to in right earnest.

## Watch out for Flood

FLOOD situation in the country, especially in some northern districts, has turned serious over the past couple of days. Apart from loss of lives a huge number of people have been marooned in the affected five districts. The situation is further aggravated by erosion along the mighty Padma and Jamuna rivers which have devoured about a thousand homes and establishments, according to newspaper reports. Vast areas having been inundated in the upper catchment area of the Brahmaputra in Assam, the position downstream into Bangladesh is likely to deteriorate.

We would therefore like to raise caution for the government and its agencies to be in complete readiness for any eventuality. Let us not be caught napping when the real emergency appears. Rescue operation should start right now to move the already marooned people to higher and safer places in the five northern districts. Relief operations should also begin immediately to lessen the sufferings of the flood victims. Flood shelters have to be readied alongside food hand-outs and medicines. Make sure no one dies from starvation or malnutrition. Medical teams would need to be despatched to outlying areas on a short notice. All these measures and precautions must be taken well in time to attend to SOS calls when they start ringing.

# Humility and Honesty: Great Virtues of Humanity

*What do we perceive of politicians of today? Politicians today, despite many notable exceptions, are generally seen as a group of people, who are more prone to fulfill their self-interests than to work for the common good of the people. In the matter of party mandate, they would try to work in such a way that their actions would be discriminatory, if not destructive, against other political parties. They would tend to use their prestigious office for personal aggrandizement, both for power and material benefits.*

A few days ago, a big news came under a small headline, that too only in one or two publications. The report published related to the Prime Minister of New Zealand and his car. The car that transported the Prime Minister to a place was not spared by the traffic warden, who fined the head of government for parking his car in an unauthorised place.

About the same time, appeared the news that the driver of the British Home Minister, Jack Straw, was charged for speeding while transporting the Minister was liable to lose his driving license. That the car was a police car and the driver was a policeman of the Special Branch did not prevent the traffic police from taking due action.

The reports may have little news value, but appear highly significant for more than one reason. Does not the Prime Minister of a rich and developed country enjoy immunity from such mundane matters as violation of traffic rules? May be, the Prime Minister did not have to pay the fine ultimately, but the fact of the matter is that in that country law had to take its own course and did not brook any obstacle on account of the position and power of the offender. Even the law of the same country must have envisaged immunity from prosecution for the Prime Minister in matters relating to any action during his legitimate discharge of functions. But knowledge of such right to immunity did not deter the warden to perform his or her own duties.

The slain Prime Minister of

Sweden, Olof Palme, fell to the bullets of an assassin on his way home on foot with his wife following a theatrical performance. In the course of non-official business, the Swedish Prime Minister was normally seen to have shut state facilities, including transport, to which he was entitled. The great freedom fighter and founder of the Irish Republic, the late Eamon deValera, liked to travel on bicycle even after he became President. Many European and other leaders still like to use bike as a mode for short travels. I once attended a meeting on a social issue in Johannesburg in South Africa where the then Vice President (now President Mbeki) was the principal speaker. But there was no mention of Mbeki on the banner hung behind the rostrum, even though he was the Chief Guest. Several Ministers also came to the function absolutely unannounced and took their seats among the audience.

If we wish to travel far in the past, during the period of the Khalifa Sayyid Rashedeen, the Great Caliph Omar, who ruled a vast empire, was seen to have travelled on camels sometimes with camel-boy seated on the camel and the Caliph doing the job of pulling the camel's rope as the camel-boy. Much later, the legendary Abbaside Caliph of Bagh-

dad, Haroun al Rashid, was made immortal, inter alia, on account of his habit of going out in disguise to get a first-hand knowledge about conditions of his subjects. This method of operation enabled him to punish the evil and reward the good.

What do we learn from these illustrations? Many things, pro-

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