

Editorial

The Daily Star

Founder-Editor : Late S.M. Ali

Dhaka, Friday, December 1, 2000

Punish the Callous Garment Industry Owners

WITH many a garment factory suspected to be a potential death row in the wake of the knitwear factory disaster in Narsingdi a week ago, it sounds well that a JS body is to probe the safety standards maintained by the apparel industries. The parliamentary standing committee on labour and employment ministry will inspect the garment factories and report their conditions to the mother committee on or before December 20. It will not stop short at merely identifying the safety gaps but also go to recommend measures for bridging them.

One good feature of the five-member sub-committee seems to be the inclusion of one MP each from the BNP and Jatiya Party which gives it a representative character of some functional import.

Much as the involvement of the relevant parliamentary standing committee, or for that matter, of the sub-committee formed under its authority in matters of streamlining the danger-prone security situation at the garment units is welcome we cannot fail to see the adhocracy aspect to it. True to the pressing nature of the task a time-bound assignment has been given to the JS sub-committee to complete its job in 21 days. It will cease to exist after having submitted its report to the parliamentary standing committee on labour and employment ministry, which needless to say, will take its time to map out any future course of action as dictated by the findings.

The first question to arise here is: why such a sub-committee has not been a part and parcel of the main committee when the job of factory inspections should have been a matter of continuing concern for us. That said, as far as we knew, the parliamentary committees or subcommittees constituted by them to respond to a particular situation have a recommendatory role so that the approach seems incomplete to us; for, it has not spelled out, in the first place, what the implementational authority or machinery would be like.

We believe the standing committee on industries ministry should have been drawn into the exercise for the sake of an appropriate homing in on the issues involved. For, the licences of the recalcitrant industrial units may have to be cancelled eventually if they don't change their ways, a step that the industries ministry alone is empowered to take.

The BGMEA is to help the work of the probe committee by supplying a list of factories which failed to meet the minimum safety requirements despite reminders. That is all very well; but what is it going to do about the industrial units - and there are so many of them including the ill-fated Narsingdi factory - which fall outside the pale of BGMEA membership?

The government has liberally given fiscal incentives to the RMG sector and the latter makes a good deal of profit out of the business as well. Why should not a part of their earning go to improve the working conditions of the employees?

How weak the government is to take charge of the sector is borne out by the fact that it has only 13 factory inspectors for Dhaka Division. How are they supposed to oversee several thousand industrial establishments in that vast area. Obviously, the government has to answer that question before it can proceed to improve the security situation in the factories.

Friday Mailbox

British Airways: Was it a great way to fly?

Sir, The British Airways is supposed to be one of the top Airlines. However with great dismay, I would like to express my experience while flying from USA via London to Dhaka on 15 and 16 November, 2000 by flight BA 145.

The services from USA to London was excellent both in schedule, cabin and customer services. However as soon it reached London and we were preparing for the flight to the subcontinent of India and Bangladesh things took turn for steady deterioration.

We were asked to board the flight No BA 145 (in the morning around 9:30 am) from London to Dhaka and we were kept seated in the aircraft for more than three hours while the captain with the help of the engineers was trying to repair a major engine failure. Knowing fully well that this sort of repair takes a very long time, we were not allowed to disembark, only to suffer sitting inside the aircraft at Heathrow tarmac. However after a long time, they decided to send us by another aircraft and we were asked to disembark.

The time of the departure of our next flight was never announced and we could not know the time of our flight till late in the evening. However, we were asked to board our new flight for departure at 7:30 pm.

Again we were kept waiting in the aircraft for quite sometime as it was announced that some of our baggage could not be traced, so the flight was cancelled and we were asked to disembark from the aircraft.

After we got down from the aircraft (for the 2nd time) we were in utter confusion what was our next step as nobody was immediately available to guide us or inform us.

At last, at about 10 pm at night BA authorities kindly agreed to give us hotel accommodation but we were told only limited hotel accommodation was available. To our utter surprise, we were not given any accommodation in London but in Brighton. We were told by British Airways authorities that it will take 50 minutes to reach our hotel in Brighton, whereas it took 2 hours 30 minutes. We reached our hotel around 1 am at night. There was no food for us in the hotel. We were asked to leave for London before 6 o'clock in the morning after staying in hotel for hardly 4 hours and we left without breakfast to reach Heathrow Airport.

Again we had to run to complete the formalities to board the plane (3rd time for same flight). Being without food for more than 18 hours we were fortunate to have our regular lunch on board the flight about 12 noon on 16 November.

Delays in flight are sometimes inevitable, but could we not expect a little better deal as passengers? None of us had a free ride on the plane and we think we could expect a little better care from authorities of British Airlines, a globally reputed airline.

Dr M S Islam, FCCP (USA)
Consultant Physician
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Our tribal issues

Sir, One gets the impression after perusing the analysis in the perspective column (DS Nov 27) that Dhaka cannot presume that the various dor-

FREE trade areas are galore nowadays. They range from the robust to the lacklustre. The European Union evolved from the Steel and Coal Community of post-war Europe into a common market with free movement of labour and capital and a common currency to boot. NAFTA got off to a flying start with the USA, Canada and Mexico on board. Mercosur and the Andean Pact in Latin America, on the other hand, are struggling to keep their heads above water. African Economic Community mired in squabbling is yet to get off the drawing board. ASEAN, established as an institution for maintaining security interests of the members, is of late groping for an economic role. In spite of SAPTA, neighbourly enmity and suspicion hobble SAARC to a degree that makes its emergence as a common market not only remote but almost impossible. And then there is APEC, the latest and the biggest of them all, touted to herald the pacific century at the time of its formation in 1989. Every year thereafter the organisation has celebrated its anniversary with a dash of razzmatazz and due panoply.

It now seems that except water of the Pacific and the shirt of uniform design worn on special occasions by the heads of state attending the annual summit there is not much in common among the members of APEC. Both during the ministerial level meetings and the subsequent summit of heads of state held last week in Brunel the air was rife with a whiff of drift. At one stage hubris and recriminations almost threatened to scupper the annual congregation. The eleventh summit of APEC's leaders finally squeaked through with an innocuous declaration for greater economic co-operation and freer trade. The summit this year would not be much different from the past was a foregone conclusion.

APEC, the Asia Pacific Economic Co-operation, was formed in 1989 with great fanfare by 21 countries of the Pacific rim. It immediately became the largest trading bloc in the world accounting for 60 per cent of the global gross domestic product and 45 per cent of world trade. With this formidable clout the new trading bloc seemed destined to become a major player on the global economic scene. Its immediate and single most important objective was to gradually reduce tariff barriers among the member countries reaching the goal of free trade by 2020. Eleven years after the momentous inauguration APEC has very little to show by way of achievement as a free trade

block except the routine annual minister-level meetings and the ritualistic summit of heads of state. The last summit confirmed the suspicion that the idea of a regional free trade area in the Pacific rim may have come unstuck. During the summit last week in Brunel the supposedly mighty APEC was seen helplessly adrift in a sea of uncertainty and misunderstanding.

Though theory trumped reality at its birth APEC was a non-starter by the most telling of indicators. It did not take long for reality to come home to roost. The hard fact, either ignored or minimised in an atmosphere charged with euphoria, is that the 21 member countries of APEC are so disparate in political and economic terms that they have more divergent than common interests. The economic fundamentals and political dispensation that prevail in each country (or groups of countries) at present critically overwhelm the few common interests even in the long haul. Between the distant common future and the divergences of the present is a divide that is hard to be bridged by high-minded declarations.

A quick look at the politico-economic profile of the members reveals the predicament of APEC succinctly. The USA, Japan, Korea, Australia are economic giants with stable democracies and unbridled market economies compared to the rest of the members. China and Vietnam remain wedded to communism politically while lurching gingerly towards market socialism. Oil producing countries like Indonesia, Malaysia and Brunel have different interests (raising oil price) and compulsions (joining the OPEC line) than the other members who are vulnerable to oil price hike. Russia is an Asian country only in name with very weak economic ties with the Asian countries particularly in the south. The smaller countries are not only

APEC Adrift

The fact that the developed countries belonging to APEC were not preoccupied with thoughts about freeing trade among the members and were more concerned with resumption of global round of talks under WTO reveals their actual intent. They want to use the APEC forum to promote their global interests through WTO. One may not go as far as calling them Fifth columnists. But they very well stand indicated of setting the ship of APEC adrift through their myopic view.

IN MY VIEW

Hasnat Abdul Hye



wary of America and Japan but of China also, particularly after its WTO membership is concluded. For the countries in Southeast and East Asia subjected to the sudden economic jolt caused by the financial meltdown of 1997 liberalisation and opening up of

the economy has suddenly become an anathema. Under the circumstances progress towards a tariff free trading arrangement has been tardy and lackadaisical.

To make matters worse, the developed member countries like the USA and Australia insisted on



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including global round of trade talks in the agenda for the APEC meeting this year. The proposal could not have been made at a more inopportune time. With the lurking doubts in their minds about the benefits of an association among the unequals and the memory of the nightmarish experience of the financial crisis of 1997, the South Asian countries joined hands in opposing a resolution that would have called for resumption of the global round of trade talks under WTO. While USA, Australia and New Zealand tried to persuade the other members that WTO should resume the global trade talks by 2001, the Asian countries, led by Malaysia, were against a specific date to be mentioned in the Summit resolution. The difference in the approaches of the developed and developing members to the issue has its origin in the dispute among the two blocs in general within WTO. The developing countries have been critical of their exclusion in matters of decision-making in WTO, like agenda-setting, participation in strategic committees, etc which are allegedly monopolised by the developed countries. The WTO conference in Seattle last year was disrupted and cancelled not only by demonstrations on the street. Frustration and indignation among the developing countries attending the conference over what was perceived as their blatant sidelining and marginalisation by the developed countries contributed not insignificantly to the ignominious collapse of the first round of trade talks. Like all the other developing countries, the South Asian countries belonging to APEC now are insisting that decision-making in WTO be more broad-based giving equal voice to them. More specifically, they too would like to de-link issues like environment and labour standards from the WTO round of talks.

The fact that the developed countries belonging to APEC were not preoccupied with thoughts about freeing trade among the members and were more concerned with resumption of global round of talks under WTO reveals their actual intent. They want to use the APEC forum to promote their global interests through WTO. One may not go as far as calling them Fifth columnists. But they very well stand indicated of setting the ship of APEC adrift through their myopic view. Unless they make common cause with the developing countries in holding the helms steady and steering APEC to its designated destination (i.e. free trade among the members) there does not seem to be a future for the organisation. A house divided against itself cannot stand. It is an old proverb that has not lost its shine.

Having failed to adopt the agenda of their preference and go

The Narrow Wide Gaps

All narrow gaps are widening but one. It's the gap between the rational and the animal. While the void is filling our existence, it is failing our essence. Hence, the ultimate contradiction: the widening gaps are narrowing us as humans.

THINGS can be narrow and wide in length, depth and height. For example, there are fossils called *Fusulimella* and *Cepicephalus*, which are narrow in time range but wide in geographic distribution. In the Aegean coast of southwestern Turkey, Melas carpets have unusually wide borders in relation to their narrow fields. Whereas the Lough lake in Northern Ireland is long and wide, with a very narrow entrance. But what about the narrow rifts, which are widening in our minds everyday as truth and reason drift away from each other like tectonic plates in an earthquake?

What about the deep swathe of perplexity running along our sensibilities like a fault line searching through surface of the earth? What about the truth encroached by travesty, the good infringed by evil, and the reason forfeited by razzmatazz? There are narrow little gaps in our subconscious minds, which are stretched daily by our absurd manners. We love our country, yet we would do everything to jeopardise its future. We abhor politics, but inculcate its outrage in our passions. We adore religion, while admonishing its precepts for restraint and moderation.

In Dhaka, several home work need to be completed for better integration of tribal life into national current. If the politicians side-track the basic approaches, the problems will linger and assume more volatile outlets. Nip it in the bud. The present regime has done some preparatory work, but the political will may be severely tested during the next few years. Whether to make it an election issue is for the political leaders to decide; but the informed citizens would continue careful monitoring of the nuances displayed from time to time in the national press.

AMA
Dhaka

Alternative form of government

Sir, Even Bangladeshis living abroad in faraway countries are getting the feel of the dubious standard of politics in capital Dhaka. One such letter from the USA (DS Nov 21) has proposed the formation for neutral caretaker form of government for a longer period of 10 to 15 years, to allow the wallowing politicians some rest period for recovery of their normal sense of direction in guiding the affairs of the country.

In life, it is necessary sometimes to replace and displace the existing system of working, to bring about a change in the environment. Now it appears, the politicians are themselves encouraging the public to think of alternatives. One such move, initiated by the politicians themselves, was the formation of neutral caretaker government to conduct the general elections after every five years. This precedent may now be enlarged to cover the current problems.

Now it seems, we have to go a step further and allow this neutral non-political caretaker government to remain in power, for an extended period of say five years. That is, have alternate terms of CTG every five years; and the politicians are elected for a five year term once every ten years; for a limited period, of say 20 years.

Let there be a referendum on the issue. But the point is that the local politicians are never mentally prepared to lose and take it in good grace. The people themselves must teach them a lesson by making them wait before contesting for the seats. Power lies with the people, not in their representatives.

A Mawaz
Dhaka

CROSSTALK

Mohammad Badru Ahsan



her violators gutted her body with lewdness.

Likewise, there is a gap called dishonesty, which is a disparity between integrity and indulgence. The meter-reader from the electric- or water-supply office and the income tax inspector in your tax zone slip through this gap unless you will strike a special deal with each of them. You must not only pay your dues, but also must ensure the payments are recorded in appropriate books. If you don't do that and your receipts are lost, they can come years later with heaps of fines and blame it on you.

Another gap is greed, the yawning

discrepancy between want and need. It's the mother of all gaps, which gives succour to both cruelty and dishonesty. The policemen, the bureaucrats, the politicians, and who-not are constantly thrashing out their unbridled desires, which supercede their means. Of late, a court has condemned to death a son, daughter, and mother of the same family for killing a young housewife over dowry. Thus greed has become a family enterprise.

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As the morning sun rises the horizon further above one thing is sure to happen: the lawyers representing Al Gore and Joe Lieberman would head towards courts in Florida and elsewhere challenging the validity of Florida's official election result. Florida's Secretary of State, Ms. Katherine Harris, had been a partisan supporter of Governor Bush from the very beginning and her decision to declare Governor Bush the winner in vote counts in Florida is purely based on partial hand re-count. The court will soon decide whether she has been fair and square to both the Republicans and Democrats. As I said it earlier, 'It ain't over till it is over.' Brace for a querulous week. We will hear a lot more in the media about Katherine Harris's arbitrary decision to give Florida's 25 electoral college vote to Texas Governor Bush, which he needs so desperately to become the 43rd president of this great republic.

The author, a senior research scientist, writes from New Orleans.

The Race for 43rd Presidency in the USA

It is Far from Over Although Bush Declared the Winner in Florida

by A.H. Jaffar Ullah

brother, Mr. Jeb Bush, is the governor of Florida. The Secretary of State of Florida, Ms. Katherine Harris, is also a staunch Republican. Therefore, there is a definite bias in favour of Bush, as far as the state administration is concerned. Immediately after the election result was declared in Florida for the first time (November 8, 2000) and later when it was revealed that some serious voting irregularities took place in heavily populated counties in southern Florida, Al Gore asked for manual recounting of the entire state of Florida. The Bush camp knew that it would spell disaster for their candidate. They immediately shot down the proposal. Later, litigation and counter litigation took place in various courts (Florida State Court, Supreme Court of Florida, and even at Federal Supreme Court).

So much voting irregularities were documented in Florida, especially in three metropolitan counties in southern Florida, that the outcome of Florida's official result was far from clear. For one thing, it was far from complete. Why pressure was applied from the state's election board to rush the hand re-count (first the state of Florida tried to block it, but the court intervened)? It is so apparent that Florida's officials have

politicized the issue of manual hand re-count. Therefore, it remains to be seen how this arbitrary decision by Florida's Secretary of State to declare the election in favour of Bush plays out among the voters of Florida and the rest of America.

Immediate reaction from Gore has not come as of this writing, but Gore's running mate Senator Joe Lieberman reacted by saying, "This evening, the secretary of state of Florida has decided to certify what by any reasonable standard is an incomplete and inaccurate count of the votes cast in the state of Florida." He further said, "How can we teach our children that every vote counts if we are not willing to make a good-faith effort to count every vote?" Senator Lieberman concluded by saying, "Because of our belief in the importance of these fundamental American principles, Vice President Gore and I have no choice but to contest these actions."