

Dhaka, Saturday, December 9, 2000

Reform Imperatives in Garment Sector

THE announcement that three garment owners associations, including the BGMEA, will compensate the victims of the recent garment factory fire in Narasingdi on November 25, is a pathetic gesture that can only be described as too little, too late. The fire at Chowdhury Knitwear Ltd was the worst of its kind in this country. It was the third fire in a garment factory since August. In this incident, no less than 48 young workers, mostly girls, were trapped and killed because the factory authorities had cold-bloodedly padlocked the only exit door from outside. In other incidents that have claimed more than 100 lives in the last ten years, fatalities have occurred because of the same callous attitude of owners and the absence of basic safety measures inside. We can only express our outrage that yet another tragedy has been allowed to occur and that once again the only visible reaction has been of compensation from the owners, and that only after precious, innocent lives have been lost.

We would like to know what has happened to the many assurances that we have been given that the relevant authorities would ensure safety standards in these factories? We would further like to know why no one, not one single factory owner, has been charged or convicted of criminal negligence to date, although the factory deaths have been clearly due to negligence. The government is fast losing our confidence for failing to ensure the most basic of working conditions for workers.

As for the garment factory owners, whose umbrella organisation, the BGMEA, has been so consistently supported in all its quests and endeavours, by this newspaper in particular, we have a message: they are in danger of destroying their credibility and support unless they undertake measures to upgrade conditions in the factories immediately. They know what to do. We ask them to get on with their side of the bargain. This lucrative export sector brings the BGMEA members millions of dollars in earnings every year -- but at what price? If it comes at the price of young and innocent lives, at the consistent exploitation and abuse of workers' vulnerability, then the price is simply too high. Both the BGMEA and the concerned authorities will lay themselves open to public outrage on a massive scale if they do not act quickly and heed the writing on the wall. Reform the garment sector thoroughly, now. Before it is really too late.

Environment Courts in Bureaucratic Tangle

WHILE mindless degradation of the environment continues unabated, special courts to prosecute the eco-offenders remain a distant reality, some eight months after the Jatiya Sangsad passed the bill for their establishment at the five divisional headquarters. The whole concept appears to have got caught in red tapes and passed around from one ministry to the other. Immediately after the passage of the law, the environment and forest ministry intimated the law, finance and establishment ministries to take necessary actions towards creation of facilities, allocation of funds and recruitment of personnel respectively. Each of them, it seems, declined to make any move. They had their reasons all right: however refutable those might seem. For example, the finance ministry argued that since the request had been made at the end of the budgetary exercise, it could not be entertained. Logical indeed and technically foolproof, too; however, given the crucial significance of the proposition, couldn't there have been some exceptional arrangements?

Let us remind the government of some facts and figures. Indiscriminate logging has decimated the country's forest covering from 14 per cent in 1996 to less than ten per cent at present. The rivers and other natural water bodies have not been spared either. The river Buriganga, lifeline of the capital city, is nearly choked, with more than 200 illegal structures straitening its flow. Then there is indiscriminate dumping of industrial effluents. The Buriganga aside, the Shitalakhya, Turag, Dhaleshwari, etc are all victims of one mindless act or the other. On top of it, there is air pollution, by industries and flawed motorised vehicles, particularly autorickshaws. Brick kilns have become a major threat to environment these days.

The environment minister has repeatedly called for establishment of environment courts to combat environment degradation. Now that the JS has passed a law clearing the way, why is the bureaucratic pillow-passing? Are we to infer that the minister's self-proclaimed commitment to environment is just empty rhetoric? The people have the right to know what is impeding establishment of the environment courts. The minister must immediately come out in public with an explanation on the cause of the delay and what she's planning to do about it.

To the Editor ...

Piracy and blacklisting

Sir, The abrupt, unbridled rise in piracy as reported in the news and print media speaks volumes against the relevant Ministry of Shipping, MMD, nay our armed forces especially the Navy. Will they only react when the international shippers' community blacklist our ports for such deadly piracy, corruption, negligence at the container terminals, unscrupulous trade union activities with the blessings of political parties both in power and out of power?

The only silver lining insofar as action is concerned apparently stems from the Master Mariner's Association, which held a press conference, according to various reports in the media on November 21. Heartiest congratulations to their President, Captain M Anam Chowdhury for his outspoken courage, which deserves unqualified support and cooperation from the various chambers, trade and industrial bodies to face this deadly menace unitedly.

Recently, on the directives of the Prime Minister the CPA also agreed to furnish 2 patrol ships to the Coastguards, undoubtedly a very commendable effort which we hope will not become mired in

red tape.

Let us be aware that international energy companies have been repeatedly cautioning the relevant authorities in the Ministry of Shipping about the lurking menace of piracy, and also to the huge potential dangers to lives from hazard plying of marine vessels near and over their offshore gas pipeline. This, as stipulated in the international maritime laws must be earmarked with red flags to caution mariners. To be forewarned is to be forearmed. Furthermore, the navy should play a much bigger role in combating this menace as, indeed the navy(s) of Indonesia, Philippines, Malaysia and even tiny Singapore are doing. We do hope concerted efforts will be made sooner rather than later by the authorities to nip this Frankenstein in the bud, lock stock and barrel.

Stop free advice

Sir, Is the AL chief running the BNP also (DS, Dec 2 report)? There is no point in giving unwanted advice as to when BNP should take action or react. It is

all right for the opposition to wait for the government's official reaction and action before responding to an issue. In many cases the opposition takes the initiative when the ruling party and the government are silent on issues vital to public interest. Sane criticism has a limit and boundary conditions.

Our politicians are very much devoid of humility; and tongue-lashing cannot provide good governance.

An Irritated Citizen Dhaka

Vibrio parahaemolyticus: A new diarrhoea causing agent

Sir, Diarrhoea is a common disease in Bangladeshis. The disease can be caused by many different agents. The most common are bacteria and viruses. Cholera-like diarrhoea is caused by a bacterium, *Vibrio cholerae*. It has about 200 sero-groups but only two groups (O1 and O139) are very commonly associated with diarrhoea and others rarely cause the disease. Another bacterium, *Vibrio parahaemolyticus*, which caused

the same family (Vibrionaceae) is also associated with diarrhoea. *Vibrio parahaemolyticus* has 13 sero-groups (O1 through O13) and almost all the groups can cause diarrhoea. These bacteria are mainly transmitted through contaminated water (mainly river and seawater) and foods.

Recently, a O3 sero-group (K6 type) *Vibrio parahaemolyticus* is causing diarrhoea in many countries including Bangladesh, India, Thailand, Laos, Taiwan, Korea, Japan and USA. This O3: K6 serotype was first detected in Calcutta, India in 1996 and thereafter in other countries. In Japan there were 43 *Vibrio parahaemolyticus* outbreaks involving 1131 patients during the summer of 1998. Thirty of the outbreaks (70 per cent) were due to serotype O3: K6. The same serotype has also been detected from the stools of many international travelers in Japan. Recently, a research report from Taiwan showed that the occurrence of food-borne disease outbreaks in Taiwan increased dramatically in 1996, and the incidence has since remained elevated. This increase in outbreaks is correlated with a high rate of detection of *Vibrio parahaemolyticus*, which caused

total outbreaks for the period 1996 to 1999. The O3: K6 serotype could have emerged in Taiwan as early as October 1995 and at that time accounted for only 0.6 per cent of the *V. parahaemolyticus* infections. This level increased suddenly to 50.1 per cent in 1996 and reached a peak (83.8 per cent) in 1997. Comparison of the outbreak profiles for the etiology groups indicate that the high incidence of food-borne disease outbreaks during 1996 to 1999 can be attributed to the extraordinarily high O3: K6 infections. In 1999, the O3: K6 serotype was still prevalent, and accounted for 61.3 per cent of all *V. parahaemolyticus* infections. Due to its extraordinarily high infection frequency and its capability to spread globally, this organism needs to be intensively monitored internationally. More important is that everybody should eat safe food and drinks. Proper cooking (sufficiently heated foods) may protect people from this and many other food-borne infections.

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Pakistani Diplomat's Remarks and its Reaction

If the Pakistani diplomat became ignorant of the susceptibilities of the people of the host country and decided to deride and belittle such historic issues on his own, he would be devoid of the acceptable norms and recognized attributes of a diplomat. If, on the other hand, he thinks he was reflecting the thought process or policy of the present Pakistani regime, it would be another matter to reckon with.

national press and the community termed it as a genocide. It is a well-known fact that the great liberation war of Bangladesh was a sequel to Islamabad regime's pre-planned military crackdown on March 25, 1971 and perpetration of a reign of terror by Pakistani troops. If the Pakistani diplomat became ignorant of the susceptibilities of the people of the host country and decided to deride and belittle such historic issues on his own, he would be devoid of the acceptable norms and recognized attributes of a diplomat. If, on the other hand, he thinks he was reflecting the thought process or policy of the present Pakistani regime, it would be another matter to reckon with.

The Bangladesh Foreign Office

called the Pakistan High Commissioner, apprised him of the gravity of the situation and asked for the recall of the diplomat. Islamabad heeded the demand and Irfan Raja with family have since left for Pakistan. There has been widespread demand for the withdrawal of remarks by the diplomat which has not been complied with. Nor any reaction has emanated from Islamabad to the demand led by the Awami League for Pakistan asking for forgiveness for having committed atrocities on Bangladeshi people during the liberation war. In spite of that, a section of both the people and the press in Pakistan itself became critical of the conduct of Irfan Raja as unbecoming of a diplomat and expressed happiness at his recall.

The question of expressing

regret and asking for forgiveness by one nation to an aggrieved one is not new. This has happened in the past and will, obviously, happen in future. It took over half a century for Japan to express due regret for the atrocities and repression committed by its occupation forces in China and also in Korea. The recent visit of US President Bill Clinton to Vietnam is interpreted as an exercise to convey remorse for the enormous loss of life and property.

[Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto] having asked

for forgiveness and to forget the "mistakes" of the past and the Prime Minister of Bangladesh (Sheikh Mujibur Rahman) wanted the people of Bangladesh to "forget the past and to make a fresh start, stating that the people of Bangladesh knew how to forgive." The relevant Articles of the Agreement are quoted fully as under:

Article 13. The question of 195 Pakistani prisoners of war was

in fact, appealed to the people of Bangladesh to forgive and forget the past mistakes and then the then Prime Minister of Bangladesh wanted his people to forgive and forget the past atrocities and destruction committed in Bangladesh, and to make a fresh start.

The latter also took pride with what he believed that the people of Bangladesh knew how to forgive. It may be noted that only 195 Pakistani prisoners of war had been selected for trial by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's government on crimes committed on the people of Bangladesh and the rest of the 93,000 prisoners of war were set free and allowed to go back to Pakistan.

It is strange and difficult for ordinary people to understand why the general public, the intellectuals and the media appear quite oblivious of the existence of this important international treaty concluded by three sovereign states or, worse still, refuse to take due cognizance of what bind the governments and people of three major countries in South Asia on these important and relevant issues of forgiveness and clemency.

This demonstrates lack of objectivity and straightforwardness of many in our society which hinders building of a healthy and democratic society, transparent and accountable politics as well as impartial and objective journalism. As for the Foreign Office in Islamabad, following enactment of Irfan Raja drama, they reportedly asked Bangladesh to forget the past, but at the same time Islamabad also forgot to ask for forgiveness for which the Prime Minister of Pakistan Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto had appealed to the people of Bangladesh almost three decades ago and got it immediately from no less a person than Prime Minister Sheikh Mujibur Rahman himself.

discussed by the three Ministers, in the context of the earnest desire of the Governments for reconciliation, peace and friendliness in the subcontinent. The Foreign Minister of Bangladesh stated that the excesses and manifold crimes committed by these prisoners of war constituted, according to the relevant provisions of the UN General Assembly Resolutions and international law, war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide, and that there was universal consensus that persons charged with such crimes such as the 195 Pakistani prisoners of war should be held to account and subjected to the due process of law. The Minister of State for Defence and Foreign Affairs of the Govern-

ment of Pakistan said that his

Government condemned and deeply regretted any crimes that may have been committed.

Article 14. In this connection the three Ministers noted that the matter should be viewed in the context of the determination of the three countries to continue resolutely to work for reconciliation.

The Ministers further noted that following recognition, the Prime Minister of Pakistan had declared that he would visit Bangladesh in response to the invitation of the

Prime Minister of Bangladesh, and appealed to the people of Bangladesh to forgive and forget the mistakes of the past, in order to promote reconciliation.

Similarly, the Prime Minister of Bangladesh had declared with regard to the atrocities and destruction committed in Bangladesh in 1971 that he wanted the people to forget the past and to make a fresh start, stating that the people of Bangladesh knew how to forgive and forget mistakes of the past, the Foreign Minister of Bangladesh stated that the Government of Bangladesh had decided not to proceed with the trials as an act of clemency.

It was agreed that the 195 prisoners of war may be repatriated to Pakistan along with the other prisoners of war now in the process of repatriation under the Delhi Agreement.

These three Articles in the Tripartite Agreement amply describe the fact that the then Prime Minister of Pakistan had,

Currents and Crosscurrents

by M M Rezaul Karim

OPINION

The Biggest Robbery of the Century

by Rafiq A Tschanen

mission.

In April 1991, shortly after the defeat of Iraq, the UN security council decided that according to international law Iraq will be liable for all losses, damages ... which other states, individuals, or foreign corporations have had as an immediate result of the Iraqi invasion and occupation of Kuwait. For the determination of such damages the UN compensation commission was created.

The board of this commission is made up of representatives of the 15 members of the UN security council. There is no end in sight in this situation. On the contrary during the US election campaign both candidates were eager to outdo each other in their anti-Iraq feelings. And quietly the robbing of Iraq continues as the work of the UNCC United Nations Compensation Commission shows, an obscure entity, which sucks off one third of all Iraqi export earnings.

The UNCC has existed for the last ten years and remains nearly unknown to the public. But actually this discretely operating institution is one the most important instruments in the destructive strategy against Iraq. The economic sanctions against Iraq are being covered by the media. We see on TV malnourished children and hospitals where the most basic items are missing. We see a whole country and a whole culture being permitted to deteriorate further and further. But hardly any journalist seems to be interested in the work of the UN Compensation Commission and in their doubtful legality and their dubious practices. And this in spite of the fact that since December 1996, 11 billion dollars, approximately one third of the export earnings of Iraq, have flown into the coffers of this com-

mission class are financed. For the first time in the history of countries since the Second World War a state has absolutely nothing to say about a juristic case that directly relates to it.

Iraq has no right to vote at the UN because it did not pay its dues. At the same time the USA is in arrears for over one billion dollars. Just another small example of the double standards prevailing today. One law for the super power and another law for the rest of the world.

No doubt Iraq does have a duty to provide compensation. But how can a law case be fought and presented without giving the other side a right to present their own case? For instance: The state of Kuwait had presented a claim for 21.6 billion dollars in 1994. Baghdad was given a summary of the claim five years later in 1999. The Iraqi Government was given a deadline of 19th September 2000. Iraq requested permission to use some fund out of the commission's funds, actually Iraq's own export earnings! to pay for a legal office to scrutinize all the documents. The commission refused.

After a long discussion finally Iraq was given one hour on 14th December 1999 to present its point of view. One hour to treat a 20 billion dollar claim! In spite of Russian and French reservations the compensation was fixed at 15.9 billion dollars.

The UN Secretary General had recommended in 1991 that Iraq be informed about all claims and to be given the right to present to the commission their point of view. The commission did not follow the Secretary General's directive (or probably thought they could claim to follow him by giving that one hour to Iraq to discuss a multi billion dollar

billion dollars in claims was still outstanding. A large number of them are totally absurd and might well be rejected. Friends of the USA, such as Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Israel, are receiving preferential treatment. A good example how the commission works may be given in these instances: Many Israeli shops and businesses were compensated for lack of business during the war as for instance they were able to sell less flowers or less cinema tickets due to the political tensions of the Gulf war. Who would have got the idea that Great Britain could have claimed from Germany compensation for cinema tickets not sold during the Battle of Britain from 1939 to 1945?

The total value of claims amounts to 320 billion dollars. Out of this amount 180 billion are claimed by Kuwait, that is 9-fold of the gross national product of the USA for 1989. Considering that for these claims one third of the export earnings of Iraq is being confiscated it would mean that Iraq might have paid off these claims by the year 2060. What will be left of the hospitals and schools by then?

Even more scandalous was the direct intervention of the US government to the executives of the commission to reinterpret the parameters in which the commission works. The practices of Washington remind one of the work of the UN special commission for the destruction of arms which were infiltrated by the CIA and totally manipulated by them (UNSCOM).

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Who Wins the Race the Good or the Evil?

Engr. Shaheedul Islam

Who wins the race? The one who is in the good or right path or who is in the bad or wrong, to get things done in his/her favour, in the fulfilment of one's own good wishes or evil design, is now a big question in the human rights situation in our country. The country's justice system in the line of the adage justice delayed is justice denied' is going by an unnecessary procedural delay. Why? It is not understood. The ultimate time, however, proves in most cases that the good or the right prevails upon the evil or the bad. But, more often than not it is the long drawn process or the time that it takes, makes one eventually worried, impatient and frustrated. The best part of one's life is lost by the time the war is won. The system unless reformed, will continue to cause immense sufferings to the common man and in the process strengthen the hands of the evil. Really, the weakness in the existing judicial system, inherited from the colonial past is giving rise to social ills and it is now time for the civil society to rise to do away with these ills so as to bring frustration to an end. It is the national demand in general and of the sufferers in particular.

And it is such a case of frustra-

tion to some that perhaps prompts one to highlight through the media for the necessary realization by the authorities concerned in the matter of law and justice with a view to mitigating the sufferings of the