

# Plight of retrenched garment workers



Garment workers form a human chain carrying red flags in protest of the closure of small garment factories, demanding government intervention to ensure employment to those affected.

## Many garment workers fall prey to the hands of poverty as small factories close down with the dawn of the post MFA era

SABRINA KARIM MURSHED

Reena Begum could not hold in her tears. "Nothing could be worse than what I had to do. I was compelled to withdraw my children from school," she said.

Living with their grandmother at Khagrachhari, Reena's children were studying in school with the money Reena sent from Dhaka. But now she cannot send money because the garment factory, which employed her, is laid off.

The factory on Green Road was shut down recently without any notice. Even the factory owner did not pay salaries of the workers, mostly women.

"Now the future of my children is totally dark, because I cannot send a single *paisa* for them," said Reena, one of many retrenched garment workers.

Minu Akter, a worker of Fayenaz Garments, faced similar experience. On the pay day in last July, the workers came to collect their wages only to find the factory closed.

Minu alleged the factory management did not pay three months' wages to the workers. "Had they told us before, we would have looked for jobs elsewhere," she said.

Now Minu's landlord is threatening to evict her, as she could not pay the rent.

Not only Reena and Minu, a large number of garment workers have been rendered jobless at the closure of garment factories in recent months.

According to National Garment Workers' Federation, Bangladesh has now around 3,600 garment

factories, 2,000 of them are situated in Dhaka and its adjacent areas.

Around 200 factories has been closed in the city recently, said Aminul Haque, president of the federation. He could not say why these factories were closed.

As the post-MFA (Multi-Fibre Arrangement) era has just begun in the New Year, many garment workers fear for their job despite optimistic views of experts.

Aminul does not agree with the experts who believe the readymade garment industry in Bangladesh would not be affected much in the post-MFA era.

"It depends on how the government handles the situation. The situation can be managed if the business in European market is ensured," he said.

"But of course there will be some adverse effects and some workers would definitely become jobless," the labour leader said.

The workers expressed their anxiety over the possible closure of more factories. Some of them believe big factories will survive but the small ones will not.

The retrenched workers of some of the laid off garment factories in the city have meantime sought legal help to get their outstanding wages.

Bangladesh Legal Aid Services Trust extended legal assistance to the workers of 10 factories to file case in the labour court.

"We know we won't get our jobs back, but at least they (factory owners) should pay the wages we earned," said Ayesha Khatun, another worker.

## New traffic rules fail to check congestion

SULTANA RAHMAN

The city's new traffic rules that restrict right turning of vehicles on Farmgate-Shahbagh road have hardly made any impact on traffic congestion, rather created trouble for many commuters.

"I stopped using my car to go to office. Now I walk to my workplace, every morning to save time," said Sajed Hasan, who works in a private firm at Panthapath.

It takes around 10 minutes for him to reach his office from Farmgate on foot while it is at least a half-an-hour ride in a car.

The two-kilometre stretch of the city's one of the busiest roads always experiences severe congestion that forced the authorities to restrict right

turning of vehicles in a few intersections including Sonargaon Hotel.

The new traffic rules were made effective from December 9 to adjust the traffic movement with automatic traffic signals, although the automated signals have proved ineffective to contain the heavy traffic pressure.

Earlier, Sonargaon intersection was the only crossing where vehicles coming from Farmgate and Shahbagh had the option to take right turn.

Now the traffic coming from Farmgate are not allowed to make right turn at Sonargaon crossing. The vehicles have to turn to the left toward Karwan Bazar and then take a U-turn to proceed toward Panthapath.

The traffic coming from Shahbagh are also not allowed to make right turn there. If

anyone wants to go to FDC or Tongi-Diversion Road, he has to turn to the left at Bangla Motor and then reach Sonargaon crossing.

But the vehicles coming from Hatirpool and those making left turn at Bangla Motor have to wait for 15/20 minutes to get a green signal for crossing the Sonargaon intersection.

According to Dhaka City Corporation (DCC), during the peak hours around 10,000 vehicles pass the Sonargaon intersection an hour while its capacity is 4,800. Each vehicle has to waste at least three minutes at the crossing and it costs Tk 7.6 crore a year in the wastage of fuel.

Project Director of Dhaka Urban Transport Project (DUTP) Abdul Quaium said the suggestion for prohibiting right turn has come from the

traffic police who work in the field.

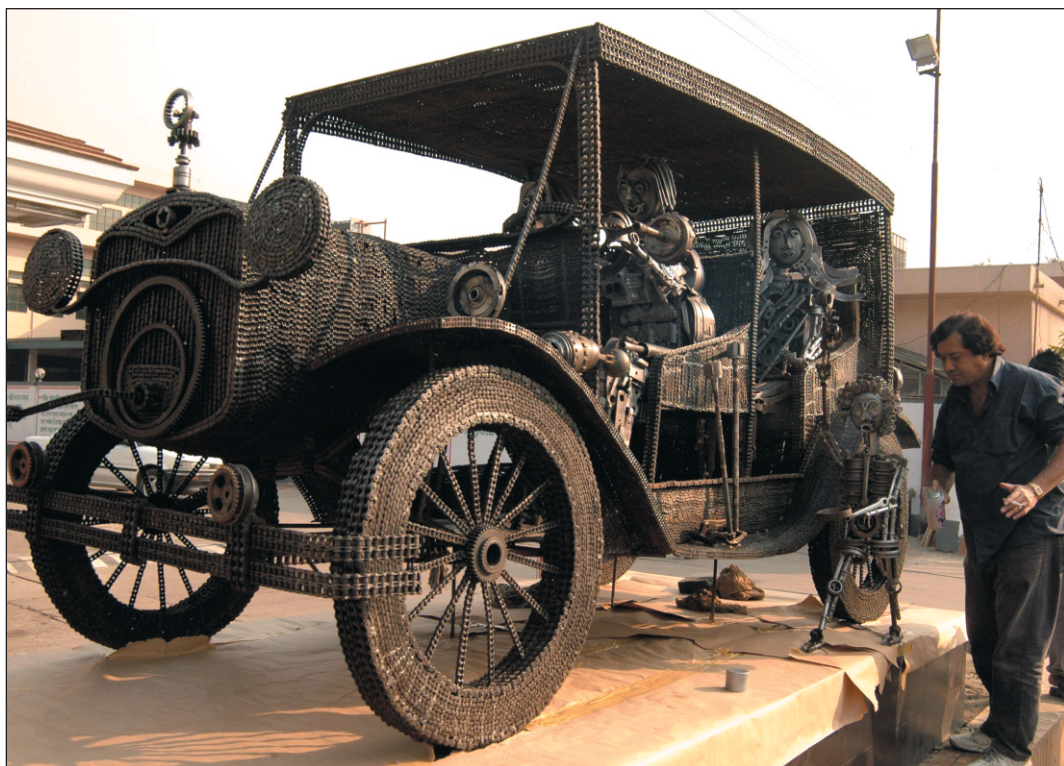
"Before constructing another alternative route or flyover, prohibiting right turn is the only solution to make the traffic manageable," Quaium said.

"As the city lacks an east-west road network, a huge number of vehicles rush to Sonargaon intersection, which is used as the only link between the eastern and western Dhaka," observed professor Nazrul Islam of the Department of Geography and Environment at Dhaka University.

"If it is possible to build a road from Bijoy Sarani to Tejgaon, then the pressure on Sonargaon will be reduced," he added. "It is possible if few unscientific and unauthorised buildings are removed for the sake of public interest."



With a right-turn forbidden at the Sonargaon roundabout, vehicles go as far as the U-turn point in front of the Tejgaon police station in order to get to Karwan Bazar.



## SCULPTURE OF PROTEST

Mrinal Haque, a eminent sculptor, mural and terracotta artist, has made this piece of art in front of a CNG conversion station in Tejgaon protesting the recent massive beautification drive, which is underway mostly in the new part of the city. He accused the city authorities of wasting money in the name of beautification and said it would not last for long. The sculpture named 'Junk Yard Family' has been made with castaway iron and metal items like chains from rickshaws and motor cycles, collected from Dholaikhal and other big cities. The piece of art, which has been set up privately, will be formally inaugurated this week. Mrinal Haque is also the sculptor of well-known Balaka set up in Motijheel, six sculptures in front of Bangladesh Rifles Gate, which brought fame to the artist.

## Is he the culprit?

STAFF REPORTER

Shortly before midnight on New Year's eve, a mob of around 20 mercilessly beat a young man of about 20 at Road 12A in Dhanmondi. There were two counts of allegations against the terrified young man in relatively decent outfit. A few people said he had just snatched a gold chain from a rickshaw passenger and to others he was a car thief.

It so happened that on December 30 evening, a private car was stolen at gunpoint in front of the local Member of Parliament's office. The driver of the stolen car was sitting in front of the office gate on New Year's eve, when the young man walked by. The driver pointed his finger at the

young man and shouted he was one of the thieves who stole the car.

As the mob beat the boy up mercilessly, he bled profusely from his ear, nose and head. The rage of the mob and the indiscriminate beating on his most sensitive parts, were such that the boy faced almost certain death if the beating continued for a while more. Amidst the drama, a photo-journalist, who claimed to work for a national Bangla daily, took photographs of the violent proceedings.

Two armed policemen on foot patrol, hardly 50 feet away stood in the dark and watched. Suddenly a resident of a nearby house intercepted. He approached the mob and inquired what had happened. Thinking that foul play might have been in progress, the

resident immediately took out a whistle from his pocket and blew it as hard as he could.

The beating suddenly stopped and some of the enraged members of the mob backed off and disappeared. The powerful bursts of the whistle puzzled the policemen who had stood as bystanders from the very beginning. Now they had to intervene. The young man was unconscious and lay on the road. A police car soon picked him up and eventually admitted him to the Dhaka Medical College Hospital.

Hospital sources said that ASI Mustak of Dhanmondi police station brought Alamgir to the hospital, but the Dhanmondi police could not confirm whether a case was filed against him.