

## Workers at risk

### Ensure safety in factories

**T**HOUSANDS of workers in Bangladesh put their lives and limbs on the line every day on the factory floors. This is according to a report appearing in a leading Bangla daily lately. In the wake of the recent garment factory collapse, the report paints a very dismal picture of the working conditions in our factories. The casualty figures of factory accidents in the last decade would put any person with a conscience to shame.

Clearly the factory owners are riding roughshod on rules regarding the security of the labourers and that too in spite of the repeated demands of the various labour and human rights organisations in Bangladesh. There are many contributory factors that result in the large number of industrial accidents in our country and much of the blame must rest on the shoulders of governments that allowed such conditions to persist. To say that there is not enough manpower in the relevant agencies of the government to exercise control and oversight of the factories is just not acceptable. It is the collusive arrangement of government agencies and the factory owners, who cut cost at the expense of safety of the workers, that is the cause of so many deaths and injuries in this sector. There are specific and clear-cut rules that, if insisted upon before the factory is allowed to operate, would save many lives every year.

It appears that the garments sector is the biggest defaulter of all. One of the reasons for it is that these have mushroomed in an unplanned manner without fulfilling the criteria. It is a pity that while the maximum is derived from the labourers, and it is a pittance that they get for it, not enough is done to ensure that a modicum of safe working conditions is provided them.

It is the negligence of both the employers and the government that result in so many industrial casualties every year, and it is they that must gear up their efforts to ensure that risks to lives of the workers are eliminated by following the provisions of the existing industrial and labour laws.

No nation can endure such a plight of its workers.

## Koizumi's apology

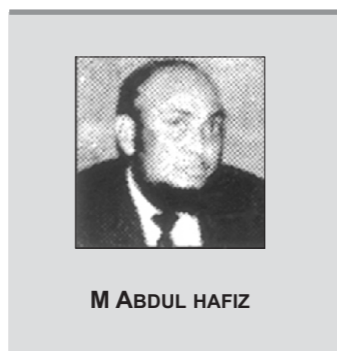
### Never too late

**T**HE public apology by Japan's Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi for the wartime sufferings it had caused 'other Asian nations' is expected to help soothe the 'hot and sour' relationship with its important neighbour China. Recently tensions raged between the two countries over Tokyo's approval of the history book that Beijing says glosses over the atrocities committed by the Japanese military during the war. Japan's refusal to make the changes demanded by China and the accompanying violent protests in various Chinese cities on anything remotely connected to Japan did not make things any better either. Thus, the much-awaited meeting between leaders of the two countries at an international summit in Jakarta which was followed by apology from the Japanese prime minister can be described as a significant progress on mending fences between the neighbouring countries.

They traded accusations and counter-accusations in the past -- China accusing Japan of failing to repent for its wartime excesses while Japan accusing China of always dwelling in the past. But now despite the differences and power game, the two sides seem keen on patching up, probably because of fears and ambitions for the future. Both the countries in a rapidly changing world, want to make their mark. Though Japan became an economic giant in Asia after the war, China's emergence as a big economic power in the contemporary commands attention. Both the countries complement each other economically -- China offers cheap labour and raw material to Japan while the latter has a huge export market in China. Japan aspires to be a permanent member of the UNSC like China, so that there is an undercurrent of rivalry between them that cannot be easily overlooked.

Japan has to take careful steps from now on and stop making comments like calling China 'a scary country'. We agree with the Chinese leader Hu Jintao that both sides would lose if there was confrontation. Japan's tendering of apology over its past role is a step in the right direction, because it seek to pay a debt of remorse to history. At the same time, it could be a signal to other countries in Asia where one owes an apology to the other for reasons embedded in-not-too-distant a history. Maybe they should learn that it's never too late to say sorry.

# The rumpus over UNSC reforms



M ABDUL HAFIZ

**E**VEN if convinced of the dire necessity of reforms in the world body after its founding more than half a century back few have wherewithal to do it. After a protracted period of rather intractable negotiations and behind-the-scenes bickerings the United Nations' member states remain sharply divided over how best to restructure the most powerful political organ of the august body in the organisation: the 15-member Security Council. Long described as an anachronism because of the inequitable geographical representations of its member states and the privileged veto power conferred on its five permanent members, the UNSC is still the only UN component empowered to make war and peace. Last month the UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan at long last decided to force the issue of reforms by setting a deadline. He ruled that the month of coming September would have to coincide with a summit meeting of the world leaders in New York for a radical

transformation of the United Nations and more specifically the Security Council.

Three cheers for Mr Kofi Annan taking the bold initiative! Yet the road ahead for the momentous step is strewn with numerous road blocks although predictably the Secretary General was expecting a positive reaction from the permanent five members (P-5) namely Britain, France, China, Russia and the United States who were likely to be the final

arbiters of a new reformed Security Council. The ten other non-permanent members on the council who are elected every two years on the principle of rotating geographical distribution have no vetoes and remain politically impotent.

However, Mr Annan's initiative is unceremoniously scuttled by two of the permanent members -- the USA and China, in what appears to be a major setback to the Secretary General's politically ambitious plan to reform the world body for enabling it to meet the challenges of 21st century. "No reform of the UN would be complete without reform of the Security Council," Kofi Annan said recently. If that is the deciding factor, Mr Annan's overemphasis on UNSC reform may unhinge his more grandiose plans for the creation of a Peace Building Commission, the launching of a Democracy Fund and the establishment of a more effective Human Rights Council to replace the existing one.

The US Ambassador told the 191-member General Assembly that Washington would like to move

report backs a proposal made by a high-level panel on UN reforms which early this year called for two alternative models. Model A provides for six new permanent seats with no veto power and three new two-year term non-permanent seats divided among Africa, Asia-Pacific as well as Europe and the Americas. Model B provides for no permanent seat but creates a new category of light four-year renewable-term seats divided among four regional groups.

represents either Latin America or South/South East Asia where these countries are located.

Since Nigeria, South Africa and Egypt -- and more recently Kenya -- are vying for two of the six new permanent seats for some of their special attributes the Africans still remain divided as to who should be considered best qualified to represent their continent. But all of their hopes seem to have been shattered by the new dramatic development. Parrying the

membership in the non-permanent category back in 1963 was made by a vote in a divided council. It was further revealed by Ambassador Iftekhar Chowdhury of Bangladesh at a seminar sponsored by Friedrich Ebert Stiftung that the question of equitable representation of and increase in UNSC membership was first inscribed on the agenda of the 1979 General Assembly session at the request of 10 countries including Bangladesh. So, there is nothing new in the move of the Secretary-General.

But according to many the expansion in the number is not really synonymous with reforms. To them the biggest challenge before the Council "is a modus vivendi with the sole superpower" -- the United States. The view such as this is often necessary to provide the dialectical content in thinking process so that the ferment produced will take the world body to better and superior result. There is also the dominant view, according to Iftekhar Chowdhury, that the "constellation of forces is in favour of reform now more than at anytime in the recent past. It is, however, to be seen now if these forces can indeed overcome the hurdles that lie ahead or will surrender to the status quo-ists especially the permanent members, the regional rivals of each of the leading candidate countries and a large group who would see their status diminished still further with the growth of permanent members from the present five to eleven."

Brig (ret'd) Hafiz is former DG of BISS.

## PERSPECTIVES

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Nevertheless, the reservations by the US and China were a great disappointment for four countries dubbed as 'group of 4' comprising Japan, Germany, Brazil and India who supported Model A with the hopes of finding themselves on the Council table at least by the end of the year. While Japan and Germany were staking their claims as key industrial power with major contribution either to the UN budget or for peacekeeping. Brazil and India represent two vast regions in the developing world apart from their status as burgeoning industrial power. At the moment no permanent member of the UNSC

pro-consensus arguments the German Ambassador Gunter Pleuger told the General Assembly that no consensus was possible on this complex issue and lent support to the Secretary General according to whom the absence of consensus should not be taken as a pretext for inaction even if the consensus is desirable.

Ambassador Kenzo Oshima of Japan, another aspirant to the Security Council was blunt: "History tells us that important progresses are rarely made through consensus, but through bold decisions." He revealed that the decision to expand the UNSC

forward in this regard "on the basis of broad consensus" emphasising that his country wouldn't be bound by artificial deadline. The Chinese Ambassador to the UN was equally insistent that China was not in favour of "setting an artificial time-limit for the reforms". China also rejected a proposal that "lacked consensus". "The temptation to force decision at the September summit must be resisted", the Chinese Ambassador warned.

Last month Mr Annan released a landmark 62-page report -- "In larger freedom" described as a blueprint for restructuring the world body. The

word has been said to the woman and not even a hug has been spared to give her some solace.

It's often easy to blame manufacturers for lack of compliance and, of course, it's always easy to blame wealth and comfort as the evil twins of the manufacturing world. Stories of garment manufacturers making it from the supervisor level up to the position of a CEO of a company and the hard work, the sweat invested behind it all go unheard. All that is in focus today is how "greedy" these manufacturers are and how quickly can a few organisations move to drum up enough propa-

specie on earth gets critiqued and scrutinised this way as much as we exporters are. With WTO spirit of free trade unleashed on the globe, with China and its 1500-1700 per cent growth in exports in two major categories, as much as we are trying to survive by our own merits and capabilities, we also need the help of media, the public sector and the understanding of our partners who are in trade with us for the last couple of years. Little pieces of news which carry the threat of buyers withdrawing or placing less quantities in Bangladesh because of an accident like that happened in

pletely simply because they could not have been lying on the face of such a tragedy where they had lost their long time co-workers/comrades and above all, one supervisor was also in tears complaining to me about a dryer that had been damaged by the army who were carrying out the rescue operations. Little did he seem to understand that it was the same army team that was risking health and courage and was fighting its way through the debris, just to save lives.

These innocent surviving workers are still bleeding for the owner who had provided them their food

have been a couple of slips between the cup and the lip and some of them are direct results of the negligence of the owner, but there are other people, other agencies who are also majorly responsible for this tragedy and may they never escape the wrath of the affected families.

A simple statistics will give a worthy jolt to all our sensibilities and understanding.

China has an unofficial record of 144000 industrial deaths over 2003-2004 whereas the official figure stands at an untrue 14000. These deaths are mostly happenings at the coal mines and the local textile

souls. At this he responded saying that it was difficult to even get so many owners to get to the site.

Another suggestion of mine was to form a fund which could take in donations from all factories and I suggested that the charity may kindly begin at home by offering a meager sum myself. To this he replied saying that raising funds on a voluntary basis could be very difficult.

All of it is true. As much as the media focuses on scoops that are negative and easy to live by, as much as the private sector finds its love affair with the establishment fading, as much as the organisations that issue statements with only the intent of incriminating the owner side...we owners too, have not done justice to ourselves or our own credibility. By risking our reputation while avoiding small safety issues, by trying to make our kill at the cost of excessive hours of work, we have endangered our fair rights to appreciation and respect.

Was it not this garment trade which gave rise to a special class of entrepreneurs who have, for the last thirty years fought and positively faced all challenges?

A little bit of awareness and a little bit of focus on the compliance issues combined with a little humanism will certainly do magic for our sector. I carefully choose the word "little" as I cannot afford a dream of being too optimistic.

Let Spectrum sweaters be a lesson learnt for all of us.

And most importantly, may the 12-30 explosion on the early hours of the 11th of April along with the cries of the hundreds of lives trapped inside, trouble our spirit long enough to take all measures to protect, value and respect lives which directly contribute to our existence.

These workers, for us, are next to God.

Let neither God, nor this lesson be ever forgotten and let caution, prudence, and care for these workers bless our lives and livelihood.

Rubana Huq is managing director, Mohammedi group, exporter of ready made garments.

# I cry, you cry: A manufacturer's perspective

RUBANA HAQ

**H**ISTORY may say "alas" but cannot help or pardon...my very favourite line from W H Auden's "Spain 1937" haunts me at 39 minutes past midnight on the first day of Baishakh. I lack what it takes tonight to call a dear one up and wish him or her a very happy new year. In plain words, I don't think the city can afford to wear a festive look this night as a harrowing incident which happened three days back at a factory in Savar, ought to be sending shivers down our spine.

Yet are we architects or qualified engineers, equipped with sufficient knowledge to challenge what our chosen consultants advise us and load us with? Are our architects, consultants accountable to RAJUK or the government? Are there measures taken against them if they go wrong somewhere? What is the case here today? An aggrieved or a negligent client or a sloppy contractor turned engineer?

My visit to the site of Spectrum Sweaters today was riddled with grief, shock, tears, and wrath. As allergic as I am towards spotlight and the high profile concept, I happen to see cameras everywhere, reporters in every corner trying to capture the winning moment -- a single close up shot of a grief stricken mother and gradually trying to stretch the thread of the story from there. I was quietly touching such a woman's shoulders that afternoon, who was weeping about having lost her son in the disaster. She probably has lost him as there were no more bodies recovered today. My camera failed me, I stashed my pen away and looked at her pain closely and felt hapless and helpless at the same time. No sooner had I done this, a reporter had rushed towards this woman and was photographing her, taking the closest of shots that were capturing the lines on her face that bore the inevitable traces of an incomparable tragedy. I hold no grievance against that journalistic brilliance, but what disappointed me was when the reporter, who belongs to the same media world which is responsible for so many good pieces that make and change lives for the better, moves away from the scene as soon as the shot has been captured and not a

ganda to make the headlines and that, too, at the cost of a genuine suffering of a few hundred people, capitalising the ordeal and the pain of the working class and by creating sensation around the globe, shattering our every possible chance of any free trade agreement utopia that we may have been nurturing and have been working at for quite some time now!

I say with regret today that very few concrete suggestions have been made to the manufacturers as to how to overcome and face infrastructural challenges that the public sector should be taking care of. I know not of any single exporter of garments who has the time or the experience to study his structural design of his building. The premises, therefore, that serve as our factory units should bear the safety seal of the building inspectors who should be appointed by the establishment so that some of our responsibilities are shared by relevant quarters.

The exporter who has to abide by the local labour laws, listen and act according to the buyers' requirements, keep the best interest of the workers on mind, and at the same time ensure timely salary and overtime packets within the 7th day of every month also lives in fear lest another negative coverage crops up along the way. I wonder which

Savar upset our better judgement. Therefore, partners placed in Dhaka, representing foreign retailers need to kindly look at scenario like this from all angles. Labour organisations can play a major role beyond the general complaint approach and rather help the industry form a meaningful code of conduct. Media can search for happy trade stories and can launch campaigns like a couple of dailies have done in social and health areas. Every bit will help, I know.

"An accident cannot certainly be a crime" was a statement that was aptly put together by a long time architect friend, Iqbal Habib of Vitt. We were all discussing 'today' and strangely my friend and I had visited the site on the same day, on the last day of the old Bengali year. Both of us agreed that what follows the accident must be carefully handled or else that has all the possibility to turn into a crime. Shahriyar, the owner of the building and the business had allotted taka six lac to be spent for the workers on *pohela baishakh* this time. Every year, Shahriyar, apparently follows the same routine, keeps close contact with his workers, pays their salary packets on time. To top it all, the workers of the day shift were quick to tell me that their owner was a great guy and lacked no sincerity or good intent. I believed them com-

and security for the last couple of years. Then where did Shahriyar go wrong? By perhaps not providing the structural plan immediately after the accident for the fear of being incriminated on accounts of unauthorised construction? This is where most of us go wrong. By trying to cover a mistake, we put more miles on top of that rubbish and try and live with that error. Hoping that time, money, clout and power will be sufficient to cover our traces of a bad conscience. A simple architectural dig revealed that the building had collapsed from the foundation level where the columns have been joined to the flat slabs and were not secured by beams. As a result, the columns have skidded off their original position and have remained intact where as the flat slabs have come crashing in from the lower levels and therefore the ruin wears a slope towards the north eastern direction of the site. The upper floors, at that point, turned to be a load itself and fell on the lower levels and hence the disaster.

The much talked about boiler explosion took place much later after the floors came crashing in, snapping the steam line. Moreover, the building was at the mercy of the canal on which it was built. There were options like shore piling which could have been used for the construction and was not. There must

units. How many times have we heard these stats? Not very many times at all! Yet, Bangladesh, over a period of last 15 years (1990-2005), with 115 factories suffering fire incidents, with number of deceased workers standing at 155, with total compensation given to successors being taka 61,09,000.00, with compensation given by BGMEA being taka 33,09,000 and the compensation given by the factory authority being taka 28,00,000.00 is not really a pathetic picture. I dare say this, risking the anger and brutal criticism of those who are, anyway, very critical of our apparently 'money rich' existence. But let's face it... which public or private sector in Bangladesh can boast of an expensive price tag attached to the lives of their workers? Which developing economy has ever cared for those at the bottom and has ever bled?

But, most certainly, the argument above does not serve as a plea for pardon.

The lives lost, the families distressed definitely deserve a closer call. Question is: who is to take the responsibility to raise awareness amongst the owner class?

A humble suggestion of mine made to the president of BGMEA was simply to have at least a couple of hundred manufacturers visit the site and pay respect to the departed

true that even they did not foresee that their action would plunge Japan's relations with China to all time low. To many in Japan and elsewhere, the reaction in China came as a surprise as the Chinese society is still under communist rule where any public action comes under strict scrutiny of the administration. Japanese are therefore wondering what has been the real motive of the Chinese government in fuelling the anti-Japanese sentiment.

For China the public outrage came at a time when the leadership was increasingly becoming confident of its dominant position in the region. China was anxiously watching various moves taken by the Japanese government in recent days, including Tokyo's closer strategic ties with Washington and Japan's bid to become an important player in regional power politics by becoming a permanent member of the UN Security Council. The textbook controversy provided Beijing with an excellent opportunity to give a clear signal to Japan of her standing on such issue, and the Chinese leadership was quick to grab that opportunity as we have seen how the discontent against Japan

spread swiftly all over the country.

The recent incidents also have shown how vulnerable Japan's position in the region is. It has become clear again that in East Asia Japan does not have a true friend to depend on. Only recently it was the North Korean leadership that proclaimed loudly that Japan was the odd country in the region having serious disputes with all her neighbours. Pyongyang must be feeling relieved that despite a call from some quarters in Japan to impose economic sanction against North Korea, the tide has now turned against the initiator of such a call.

What has started as a relatively insignificant matter of revising textbooks for school children is now poised to plunder Japan's decade-long effort to see the country having a place among world leaders. Putting a barrier on Japan's aspiration to become a permanent member of the UN Security Council will not benefit the world that needs Tokyo's assistance in solving various pressing problems. It would, therefore, be better for all if both, the Chinese leadership as well as the hawkish nationalists in Japan, realise this reality without wasting much time.

# An isolated Japan and fury over textbooks

MONZURUL HUQ writes from Tokyo

**I**T was not long back that everything for Japan seemed to be running perfectly well. The leadership of the country was overwhelmed by the upbeat mood that the long pursued goal of Japan becoming a permanent member of the UN Security Council was now a mere procedure as the Secretary General of the United Nations urged member states to help UN finalize the reform by fixing a time frame. At the same time, the more hawkish group of the Japanese leadership kept no secret of the joy in pushing Pyongyang to a corner of the ring where a deadly final blow in the form of economic sanction, they thought, would ensure a knockout victory against an opponent showing surprising resonance. Japanese leadership was also confident that whatever they do back at home to appease various nationalist groups wouldn't stand as a serious obstacle in the process of closing the gap between Japan and her nearest neighbours. But it now looks certain that such calculations were based on facts and figures running contrary to the reality.

It is a fortnight now that people in the Chinese capital and some other cities are on the street protesting against what they say a failure of Japan in coming in terms with the reality. The present anti-Japanese mood in East Asia showing its extreme form in China, however, did not start in that country. It was in February that South Koreans became angry and extremely annoyed by the decision of a local government in western Japan that called for setting a specific date for observing Takeshima Day. Takeshima is a group of small rocky islets off the coast of Sea of Japan, which is claimed by both Japan and South Korea. The uninhabited rocks on the sea did not carry much significance for any of the two claimants, until it became clear that a revised international treaty allows the extension of a country's exclusive economic zone up to a significant portion, which eventually becomes economically beneficial.

Takeshima, known in South Korea as Tok-do, first became a focus of territorial dispute in early 1950s, when Japan and South Korea both claimed sovereignty over the rocks. The local assembly of Japan's Shimane prefecture adopted a resolution in early Febru-

ary designating February 22 as Takeshima Day. The assembly claims that Takeshima was integrated to the prefecture on that day exactly one hundred years ago, and it was natural for the prefecture to reclaim its lost territory. But the decision angered South Koreans and there is no end of anti-Japanese rallies in the country from then on. The situation worsened further when Japan sent fighter planes that flew over the islets to make observation of the presence of South Korean vessels around its water.

But the demonstrations in South Korea, though in times gearing up by rhetorical calls from nationalist leaders, have so far been kept under control. China joined the rank

of anti Japanese public demonstration a bit later. The fuel in China's case was approval of a number of school textbooks in Japan that take a revisionist line on country's past involvements in the affairs of her neighbours.

The textbooks for junior high school students include some compiled by a nationalist group called the Japanese Society for History Textbook Reform. The texts were first approved in 2001, triggering outrage from China and South Korea. Japan's neighbours were annoyed again when the education ministry recently approved a new set of history and civic studies textbooks that they say justify Japan's past military aggression. A

## CLOSEUP JAPAN

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textbook on civics infuriated South Korea by saying Takeshima Island was a Japanese territory that was being illegally occupied by South Korea. South Korea's foreign and trade minister Ban Ki Moon demanded that Japan delete from the textbook descriptions of Takeshima as Japanese territory.

China faulted the history book by citing an overly positive approach to Japan's past military aggression. The book avoids the word 'invasion' in describing Japan's military occupation of East Asia. It also refers to the 1937 Nanjing Massacre simply as an incident in which 'many' Chinese were killed. Historians usually do not disagree in mentioning the incident as a massacre in which

thousands of civilians were slaughtered by the advancing Japanese troops. New sidebars added in the approved history textbook also say that Japanese action inspired people in Asia and that Indonesians welcomed Japanese soldiers as liberators.

Altogether 124 passages of the book were rewritten under the instruction of the screening committee and most deal with Japan's relations with her Asian neighbours. No doubt the feelings of ordinary Chinese and Koreans were greatly hurt by the action of a group of Japanese intellectuals who are playing crucial role in refocusing on what they call a glorious chapter in country's recent past. But it might be