

Onslaught on embassy

How could such a thing ever happen?

THE storming of our embassy in Kuwait, unexpectedly by a large body of Bangladeshi expatriate workers, has been an act of vandalism and is, therefore, highly condemnable. But, why did such a thing happen in a foreign land after all? That the Embassy was not aware that our workers had not been paid for five months by their Kuwaiti employer is difficult to believe even if we should stretch our imagination. There are labour counsellors and ministers posted in foreign missions to keep a tab on the affairs of our expatriate workers and to act promptly to redress their grievances. Thus, such an excuse of ignorance about their sufferings cannot be accepted. This appears to be a shoddy attempt to avoid responsibility by the people at the embassy.

Our workers seek greener pastures abroad after having sacrificed much at home. They endure severe hardship abroad in the hope of a better future if not for them then at least for their progeny. That they will resort to violence and that too against our embassy on a foreign soil defies logic and only demonstrates the sheer point of desperation that they must have been driven to, to resort to such an act. Their exasperation apparently crossed the threshold of endurance to the point where neglect over time towards them and their sufferings caused them to burst at the seams.

We feel that the PM should order an independent inquiry into the matter since it is also the omissions and commissions of the embassy in Kuwait that must be brought under the purview of the inquiry, and must also unearth the causes behind this act of vandalism. It must also find out why there was a communication gap between our embassy and the Bangladeshi workers in Kuwait that precipitated the incident.

We would hope that relevant persons and authorities would take lessons from this sad episode and do the needful so that the welfare of those on whose sweat our foreign exchange earning is so largely dependent feel taken care of and that such incidents, which bring slur upon our image, could be avoided.

Pathological disorder

Post-accident insanity must stop

THE incidents that took place at Mirpur after a school boy's tragic death in a road accident on Sunday indicate how bad the problem of lawlessness has become in the city. If an accident is followed by wanton violence with vehicles of every kind getting bashed or set on fire, there must be something awfully wrong with crowd response to any tragic happening. Not that the accident was an unavoidable one, nor can we trifle with the grievous nature of the crime, but that can by no means preclude the responsibility for the on-lookers to be refraining from taking the law into their own hands.

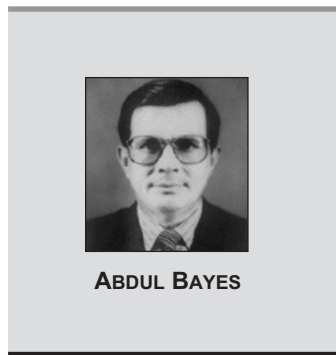
They destroyed vehicles owned by people who were by no means responsible for the accident. Public property is also damaged for no reason whatsoever. Such rampaging obstructs traffic for hours together and, again, the innocents suffer. Finally, violence creates panic and life is disrupted all around. Moreover, it belittles the memory of the dead.

Regrettably, many such post-mishap attacks were carried out in the past on vehicles as a possible way of releasing the anger caused by an accident. But nothing has been done to stop such mob frenzy.

The best way of handling the situation is to cordon off the area after an accident. That would require a quick deployment of the law enforcers which shouldn't be difficult to ensure on a short notice. This is how such situations are handled in big cities around the world. Given the recurrent incidence of street violence, it is absolutely necessary that the home ministry top brass devise a response or reflex mechanism to get an accident spot and thereabouts cordoned off in quick time.

Since a whole mob is not easily punishable they take advantage of the crowded anonymity to go about their destructive forays unafraid of consequences. An awareness campaign should be mounted on radio and TV to sensitize people about the self-destructive consequences for the society if any of its segment should take law into its own hands.

Apparels, anxieties and actions



ABDUL BAYES

ON the heels of the heightened hypes hovering around the phasing out of Multi-Fibre Arrangements (MFA), quota-fed exporting countries are trying hard to cope with the crisis. Bangladesh is one of those likely to be hurt by the withdrawal of quota and the damage could be insurmountable in terms of foreign exchange earnings. The adverse impacts on women employment can hardly be overlooked given the fact that over four-fifths of the employees are women. Inter- and intra-sectoral linkages are also likely to be harmed. By and large, the ensuing crisis in the garments sector, as argued by some, may put the economy in perils.

The fact that the cloud could be in the horizon, is not a new news. A wake up call has long been sounded to develop the sector in tune with

competitive and non-quota environment. Unfortunately little seems to have been done to this effect. And that is really the problem with protection and quota systems: infants never grow old and matured to withstand bad weather. It appears from the existing researches that there will be winners and losers but hardly the winners would be able to compensate for the losers. This seemingly indicates to a potential loss for Bangladesh as a result of

discussed the implications of the phasing out among Commonwealth developing countries and suggested as to how firms can remain competitive in the face of evolving sourcing policies, technology and practices complemented by related framework at government and other institutions.

Marlon et al submits a succinct summary of the structure of the garment industry in Bangladesh. According to them, there are four

an estimated 1,993 production units each with a capacity of 5,000 dozen pieces per month are mainly engaged in sub-contracting. (d) About 1500 units are sick and most of them are not even operating.

"The research findings indicate that countries that are particularly at risk in the changing apparel industry environment are those where apparel accounts for more than 50 per cent of exports and where market shares are less than 3 per

costs throughout the supply chain as opposed to simply seeking lower cost for cut, make and trim". That is, they try to optimise macro costs (e.g. tariffs and doing business), indirect costs (delays, late delivery etc.) and direct costs (costs of inputs). It is being argued that there is little scope to reduce costs on account of labour but attention needs to be thrown on other points in the value chain.

To mitigate the anxieties of the

Many of the observations made by the authors are relevant for Bangladesh and hence needs to be appreciated. Bangladesh has to integrate with the world market not on the basis of cheap labour alone but on the basis of taking total costs into account. Hassles at ports and grappling with courts could be costly for the survival of the industry. Bangladesh has progressed well but not enough. Bangladeshi mills now meet close to 80 per cent of their yarn requirements for knitwears and some 30 per cent of fabric needs. The country has to devise alternative arrangements, in addition to, or in lieu of, the current ones. The apparel industry should also move towards collaborative efforts both domestically and regionally for furthering the gains from trade.

The book by Marlon Lezama and others should be read by the quarters concerned in apparel industry. It gives a brief background to the challenges, an elaborate presentation of choices faced and suggests steps to overcome the crisis. The case studies cited in the book are interesting and insightful. Bangladesh apparel industry needs some food for thought from the book. It is not a time for anxieties but for actions as postulated in the book.

Abdul Bayes is a Professor of Economics at Jahangirnagar University

BENEATH THE SURFACE

Bangladesh has to integrate with the world market not on the basis of cheap labour alone but on the basis of taking total costs into account. Hassles at ports and grappling with courts could be costly for the survival of the industry. Bangladesh has progressed well but not enough. Bangladeshi mills now meet close to 80 per cent of their yarn requirements for knitwears and some 30 per cent of fabric needs. The country has to devise alternative arrangements, in addition to, or in lieu of, the current ones.

the phasing out of MFA.

Allow me to draw the attention of the readers to a seminal book on the issue. Marlon Lezama, Brian Webber and Charles Dagher (2004) wrote if on the prospects, problems and policy implications of the apparel industry. Titled as "Sourcing Practices in the Apparel Industry - Implications for Garment Exporters on Commonwealth Developing Countries", the book has been published by the Commonwealth Secretariat. The authors mainly

groups of companies. (a) Roughly 15 companies or groups owning a total of about 220 manufacturing units with a capacity of 10,000 dozen pieces or more per month. These groups have offices in US, Europe or in Hongkong. (b) There are about 550 production units with a capacity of 5,000 or 10,000 dozens per month. They mainly work for importers and agents, about 60 per cent on cut and make basis and 40 per cent on FOB basis. (c) Seven to eight thousand companies owning

cent". Luckily, Bangladesh and India reached the threshold level of market share in 2001. More than half of the exports of Bangladesh constituted apparels and the market share crossed 3 per cent.

Based on survey results, the authors are of the view that low wages alone would be no longer enough to justify high exports. Nor the growth of the apparel industry would hinge on low wages from labour abundant country. "Increasingly buyers are moving to optimise

apparel industry in the wake of a phase out, the governments have to come up with actions. The macro costs fall within the domain of the government. Government can help build infrastructure, train labour, creating good business environment etc. It is here governments and industry could work hand in hand. Governments of Commonwealth countries can also go for strong lobbying for their country clients. Lobbying has vast importance in American and European systems.

Parliament in peril

Walk-out, boycott, quorum crisis, clipped-wing speaker...

AHMAD MAHMUDUR RAZA CHOWDHURY

THE shift from an autocratic presidential form of government to the West-minister type of parliamentary democracy in Bangladesh was the outcome of expressed aspiration of its people. But it is frustrating to witness that their hopes for a vibrant parliament still remain a mirage. Parliament has been boycotted by opposition parties in a row. But now a new dimension has been added -- it cannot function for lack of quorum (only 60 members needed) notwithstanding the ruling alliance wielding enough strength with more than 200 seats in the parliament. Newspaper reports indicate that bills were passed in the absence of quorum. This has prompted some analysts to suggest that the ruling alliance itself has now joined the 'boycott' and hence there is no sense in keeping this parliament alive. Rather one would argue that in such a situation it would be in the best interest of the nation to dissolve the parliament and go for a mid-term poll. This will avert the crisis and save the nation from incurring huge expenditures from its exchequer needed to run this lifeless parliament and pay for the hefty emoluments to its members.

Recently held numerous workshops, round tables and seminars attended by political leaders, academics and sitting MPs from both sides have identified black money, muscle power and abuse of administrative machinery as dominating elements that play the notorious role in winning an election. Muscle power and local administration/election machinery are allegedly bought by money. Hence black money is the prime culprit that begins its footwork at the time of securing nomination from political parties and culminates in manipulation of election results. An MP wields enormous power over local administration, local government institutions, development agencies and police. He can influence decision makers at the helm of affairs by exploiting the unfettered access and immunity that he enjoys as an MP. For him this spending is an investment which would pay attractive dividend. So, from the day-one his

only agenda seems to recoup the money he invested in the election (in multiple terms). Time available is five years.

The notorious influence of black money doomed the prospect of seasoned politicians, selfless leaders and men/women of vision getting elected who could propel the parliament with dedication, the professionalism and vision. Hence by far the majority of MPs have no interest in the business of the parliament. They vie for more power, authority and control over the local government bodies, development projects, administration and law enforcing agencies. One may argue that as a people's representative he must have the final words in the affairs of administration and development activities of his area. But it should be borne in mind that the

in the society by ensuring participation of people. This concept of participatory or bipartisan politics is fast waning in our society. The opposition must be heard in the parliament and it has to be given a space to manoeuvre and vindicate its position vis-à-vis national issues as a matter of right since it, too, has received mandate of people. But the malignant winner-take-all syndrome hindered the desired cohesion and further deepened the political and social divide. Points of Order, adjournment motions, notices and amendments raised by the opposition members, however reasonable or relevant, are summarily dismissed in the parliament. Ruthless suppression of opposition's political programmes and denying them street rallies led to suffocation thereby making the opposition more

Speaker. He needs to be extricated from the clutches of mercy of a brute majority in order to make his two babies (treasury bench and the opposition) glisten with equal lustre.

The Gresham's law of money supply has now come to play in the political arena of the country when good people are driven away by the holders of bad money. In order to reverse the situation here are some points that may be considered:

1. Since black money and muscle power have been found to dominate the Parliament elections and this is done with ulterior motive of extracting heavy dividend from the membership in the parliament, it is pertinent that possible windows that fetch questionable incomes be identified and members of parliament stripped of all those overt and covert manoeuvring scopes. An

age wild election spending by those outlaws grazing happily in the political pasture of the country. Secondly, three years term will remind an MP that in not too distant a future he will have to go back to his voters to seek fresh mandate. Thirdly, since we are living in a culture of winner-take-all, the loser party will have lesser heart burning and may be prepared to give three years time to the winner. One may, however, argue that three-year is too short a period for a political party to deliver results to the people and that the country cannot afford such huge expenditure from the national exchequer to conduct parliament elections so frequently. But the expected benefits -- political, economic and social -- to be yielded by three years arrangement will outweigh the cost in the long run.

lously practiced. The former Prime Minister no hesitation to meet the Speaker in latter's office in the parliament whenever needed. Ostensibly, this may sound mundane but these aspects have a demonstrative effect that moulds people's perception, enhances confidence of the Speaker and shores up image of the parliament.

The quality of democracy prevailing in a society is ultimately epitomised in the performance of its parliament. The output of a parliament or its excellence depends upon the quality of its members, their perception and a clear understanding of their prime responsibility as law makers. If and when winning a seat in parliament means a passport to amassing more wealth and an protect black money, the fundamental work of law making is thrown overboard. The Speaker's wisdom and neutral role make a parliament's deliberations meaningful and help dismantle the wall that divides political parties of the country. But the Speaker can only be effective when he feels that his lifeline no longer depends on the caprice of the Treasury Bench. Also the position of the Speaker has to be insulated against insecurity and black mail.

Demands for reforms in care taker government, Election Commission and election rules are increasingly gaining momentum. Let there be a total approach to incorporate a reform package that would address all the snags. We only hope that wisdom prevails. Otherwise, an enduring democratic culture will remain a sound of the distant drum. The Constitution of the country is not something ordained coming from Heaven, nor a *fait accompli* that cannot be amended for the sake of our posterity.

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development work should be the primary domain of the local government and other development agencies of the central government. Local administration and law enforcing agencies must be kept out of the ominous influence of any black money-holder, law breaker and muscle brandishing MP to ensure that law takes its own course and local judiciary is not vitiated.

An MP's primary role is law making in the parliament and ensure accountability of all agencies through meaningful and vigorous deliberations in parliamentary committees. It is incompatible that the same person will perform the development work, lay hands on executive machinery and simultaneously sit in the parliamentary committees as an MP to ensure his own accountability. This separation of power must be guaranteed. If one is really interested to lead development activities in his area, he should vie for a position in Upazila or Zila Parishad. The parliament should be an exclusive premise for law makers.

The beauty and very strength of democracy is that it diffuses tension

desperate and arrogant. There are allegations that Upazilas having opposition MPs are deprived of development resource allocations. Thus people are being punished for not voting for the party/parties in power. This narrow and malicious attitude of the ruling parties gives birth to an isolationist syndrome. People of the deprived localities feel alien in their own country. They are being punished for exercising their right of franchise.

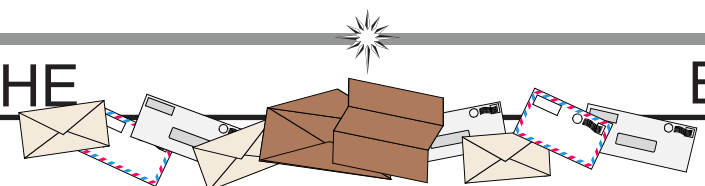
The functioning of a vibrant parliament depends largely upon how the Speaker conducts the business of the House. As to a father all children are equal (rather he extends his protective hands more to the weaker offspring), so is the expectation from a Speaker that his weaker child sitting on his left will receive encouragement for more active participation in the business of the House. But the Speaker seems timid and shaky because his position depends on the mercy of the treasury bench. While memory of unceremonious exit of President B. Chowdhury continues to haunt, one cannot expect a magnanimous or strictly neutral behaviour from the

MP's primary responsibility is law making, providing guidelines through deliberations in parliament, formulate budget, exert tight control over public spending and ensure accountability through vigorous activities in parliamentary committees. But any such move has to be supported by stringent amendments and strict adherence to changed election rules coupled with a genuine desire of the top notches of political parties.

2. Presently the term of parliament is five years. Once elected, the Treasury Bench MPs allegedly develop a feeling that they have been granted irrevocable lease of the country for five years. This long tenure not only acts in the back of their mind while making calculations of election spending and possible return but also make them oblivious of the fact that they will have to return to the constituency for fresh mandate. In our context five-year seems too long a period and the culture of snap (mid-term) election is unknown. So, if the term of parliament is reduced to three years (at best four years) it will lower the rate of return and may tend to discour-

3. The Speaker is the prime mover who gives life to the body of parliament. He is expected to be a neutral person conducting the business without discrimination. But the soil under his feet is too soft to peddle fearlessly and rise above partisanship because his tenure as Speaker depends on the pleasure of the majority. The statutory posts like those of Supreme Court Judges, CEC, Chairman of PSC, or the newly formed ACC have been insulated from any such capricious actions. Their removal has been made difficult. Similarly, tenure of Speaker should not lie at the mercy of simple majority of MPs. His removal should require either three fourths of MPs or follow the procedure applicable to Supreme Court Judges. The Speaker has to be demonstratively neutral in the discharge of his responsibilities which not only the MPs but the people at large should feel as well. The Speaker is not expected to run to Prime Minister's office at his/her call. Both PM and the Leader of the Opposition should call on him at his office. During the immediate past regime this etiquette was scrupu-

TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR



Letters will only be considered if they carry the writer's full name, address and telephone number (if any). The identity of the writers will be protected. Letters must be limited to 300 words. All letters will be subject to editing.

Building collapse

Without indulging in the blame game on who gave permission, who went for building a vertical type instead of horizontal type of factory or who was involved in the money whitening process in a high-rise building, the Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (BUET), Armed Forces Division (AFD) of the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) and the Ministry of Industries should evolve a safe method of evacuation in the event of a building collapse.

A balloon would inflate on compression of a falling ceiling which would turn like a lifesaving compartment withstanding heavy weight of a crumbling building and the inmates would rush for safety. These life saving compartments would be fitted in every floor with emergency lights, food supplies and oxygen

kits for helping the survivors until the rescuers reach them.

Experts on the subject should come forward with specific suggestions to prevent loss of lives in future.

Golam Ashraf
DOHS Baridhara, Dhaka

A shocking revelation!

As I was surfing the Internet on the afternoon of April 13 through yahoo search engine to gain latest information on the casualties of the deadly building collapse of Savar, I was stunned, rather horrified, to find something totally unexpected and greatly shocking regarding Bangladesh's identity on a particular web site of Scottish origin.

It contained a news item on the

Savar garments factory catastrophe where the name of the country was printed as Pakistan, instead of Bangladesh!

A. Amirul
Uttara, Dhaka

Laudable support

To be able to express our deep gratitude to you and your whole team for the relentless support you have shown to us against the radicals. Your prestigious daily has performed a marvel in maintaining the balance against all odds that we are facing.

Abdul Awwal
Dhaka

Bangladesh and EU

On the New Year's Day of 1412, the European Union produced a 'good' gift for this ill-fated nation of 143 million people. The European Parliament adopted a Resolution to

condemn the government for its failure to bring the law and order situation in the country under control. What is most striking is that, in doing so, they have echoed the voice of the opposition demand for reform of the caretaker government system. Why? They have reasoned that such reform will lead to good governance. How? They have not explained.

The hon'ble Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) also did not explain the allegation raised by a section of the national newspapers of the country that the original resolution was drafted in Dhaka in consultation with the Ambassadors at the behest of the opposition activists who were lobbying for the opposition parties.

I read in a Bangla newspaper how some opposition activists took part in the lobbying, by travelling to Brussels and staying there for months. True or not, now the burden of proof is on the MEPs that

they acted in a fair way and didn't sell themselves to the opposition party of Bangladesh.

Bangladesh is going through a critical phase in its history of democratisation. The ruling government despite much of its inaction and failure in many instances took some commendable initiatives in the recent times. The law and order situation has certainly improved during the last six months. Rab is doing excellent work. In my view, this is the time for encouragement, and not unwarranted criticism. Instigated by the opposition activists, the MEPs have become blind about the timing.

The MEPs have been critical of the police of the country. But will they sanction 100 million Euro for the reform and modernisation of the police force which this poor country cannot afford? Well Excellencies, then bring a Motion for a special grant of Euro 100

million for Bangladesh, to be disbursed in one instalment by 1 July 2005, without any strings or conditionalities.

I know European Parliament is nothing more than a paper tiger and such Resolutions are the ways that MEPs must adopt to justify their fat salary, but two words, namely, morality and ethics, still exist in the dictionary without their meaning lost.

Md. Didarul Alam
Nakhla Para, Dhaka

Savar tragedy

The building collapse in Savar showed that safety of workers is still something totally ignored in this society. It is not at all clear how a nine storey building could be constructed without clearance from the authorities concerned. It was no doubt a criminal offence.

Now condemning the owner and all others will not help the victims

of the tragedy. The law should take its due course. But at the moment we have to help those hundreds of families which have been pauperised by the disaster. Newspaper reports say that the family members of the dead workers were not allowed to get inside the factory premises to collect their salaries. How inhuman! They have killed the workers and are now trying to deprive the families of their dues. The government should intervene immediately and ensure that nobody is further victimised by the management of the factory.

A Citizen
Dhaka

Ban on smoking

It sounds very impressive. After all, nobody expected that such concern for public health would be demonstrated by the government. The ban on smoking in public places and transports is all the

more necessary in a country where most people do not have the slightest regard for others. They will smoke on your face and will react violently at the slightest peep of protest. They do not even bother about the presence of children or women in a bus or any other public transport.

So the ban was necessary. But the question is, how can it be enforced? The risk of people being harassed unnecessarily is always there. The only way to make things work is to create awareness among the people regarding the law and its enforcement. There should be no ambiguity in the language.

Finally, I would congratulate the government for clamping the ban, but at the same other sources of pollution must be eliminated for the benefit of people in general.

Mansoor Raja
Dhaka