

Compliance is the issue here

No laid back attitude to EC suggestion for RMG sector

WE note with a touch of dismay that even after signing of a memorandum of agreement (MoU) among factory owners, workers and government soon after the recent carnage, pockets of trouble exist in the sector. We feel possibly the message of the good intent of the MoU has not reached the troubled workers in all the garment factories in the country.

The commerce minister, however, raises the hope of all by saying that the factory owners have been directed to restructure their factories into compliance units within a year, and that the newly formed wage board would fix satisfactory minimum wage for the workers. Here we would like to stress that let the wage board become functional following its own course, but in the meantime, it would be advisable for the government to announce an interim allowance of 10 to 15 per cent across the board so that the workers feel assured that alleviation of their plight is on course.

We would further like to say that now the workers should take the greater interest of the nation into cognizance and resume work with renewed vigour. They have been able to bring their grievances to focus, but from here on, they should refrain from adopting destructive modes of expressing grievances and rather take the path of dialogue to settle issues.

In a recent exchange of opinion with the commerce minister, delegates from the European Commission (EC) have uttered some home truths. They discussed the poor wage structure and took note of the work environment in the factories besides pointing out other relevant anomalies. Terming the EU country buyers as very sensitive about 100 percent compliance with the norms, the EC ambassador as head of the delegation was candid enough to hint at the possibility of the buyers going away from Bangladesh if things did not improve. As an immediate step forward the ambassador suggested arranging a national dialogue involving all stakeholders to reach a quick solution to the lingering problem. This is something that we have been pressing for quite a while now.

The signals coming from the major buyers are ominous indeed and not to be taken with a laid back attitude considering the importance of the contribution of the RMG sector to the growth of our economy. It hardly needs emphasising that if major buyers begin to wander away, it would be catastrophic for the economy of the country.

The tirade against Ahmadiyyas again

It must be stopped once and for all

IT is a matter of great worry that the Khatme Nabuwat Andolon (KNA), a fiercely anti-Ahmadiyya outfit, is again planning to attack a mosque of the beleaguered community in Uttara next Friday. Twenty-two Ahmadiyya families are now apparently at the mercy of the organisation which wants them to be declared non-Muslims. It is an exact repetition of incidents in which the Ahmadiyyas were targeted in the past. The KNA activists usually select an Ahmadiyya mosque, launch a massive hate campaign, and then try to evict the Ahmadiyyas from their own mosque.

Now, this is a kind of outburst of religious fanaticism which could only create a sense of great insecurity not only among the Ahmadiyyas, but also among all small sects or religious communities.

The right to pursue any religious faith equally and freely is guaranteed to every citizen both by our constitution and religion -- a point that we have raised several times in the past while commenting on such issues. There is absolutely no room for such persecution of a small group of people in the name of serving Islam. Islam does not need the service of the people who don't know that it is a religion which treats oppression of any type as an unpardonable offence.

The KNA modus operandi deserves a closer look. They try to revive the issue of Ahmadiyya bashing whenever it looks like losing its tempo. And they have been putting pressure on the government to declare the Ahmadiyyas non-Muslims. They seem to be quite well organised.

The government should not evade the issue as the KNA activists are adopting a more and more threatening posture. The violation of law is so blatant in this case that one doesn't need to be a legal expert to understand that the rights of a small group of people are being encroached upon by zealots having no authority to decide who is a Muslim and who is not. These self-styled custodians of Islam must be reined in before they start intimidating the followers of other faiths as well.

All eyes on Nepal



Brig Gen
SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN
ndc, psc (Retd)

NO wonder that is so. And it is so not only because of the stupendous developments in the political landscape of the Himalayan kingdom, Shangri La to many western travellers, since 6 April 2006, but because of the way those changes have been tackled and the manner in which a prospective long drawn affair successfully concluded, with the potential of lasting peace in the country. However, the speed of the changes have been characterised by some observers as bewildering.

Changes in Nepal should attract our attention too, because the happenings of the month of March and April in Nepal bears strong similarity to the tumultuous period of Dec 1990 in Bangladesh, where the government of the day had too stoop to the might of the people's power just as King Birendra had to in the face of the mass upsurge of the Nepalese people. And we should also take special note of how the parties, both in and outside the normal political spectrum in Nepal, have come together to see that the gains achieved through the coordinated efforts, that brought politically disparate elements on the same platform

against the monarch, did not go waste.

Some important, vital and brave decisions have been taken by the reconstituted Parliament under GP Koirala, that are not only landmark decisions in Nepal's long national but short democratic history, they are bound to have long term consequences in Nepal's venture on the path to democracy, which, one hopes would be lasting and beneficial for the country.

All will agree that perhaps the single most important step, and which has been made even more remarkable by the sheer boldness, is the decision of the parliament to declare Nepal, the only Hindu kingdom in the world, a secular state. Of course, such a policy is not without its detractors, and critics, both inside and outside, have questioned the prudence of such a move.

Nepal parliament's proclamation declaring the world's only Hindu Kingdom as a secular state has evoked a mixed response with the majority Hindu groups saying the decision has hurt the community. In fact Arun Subedi, Shiv Sena Nepal President, sees an international ramification of the decision of what he terms the 'so-called Parliament', which he says

STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING

What is worthy of note also is the way that the parties concerned have decided to proceed with sagacity and statesmanship that has kept the interest of the nation in the forefront. Even more noteworthy is the display of maturity and self-respect by the politicians that did not brook the intervention or even the friendly suggestion of any 'Monday,' 'Tuesday' or 'Wednesday' groups or intercession of the head of any supra national organisation for mediating between parties that were once up in arms against one another.

has hurt the faith of 'the 900 million Hindu populace across the globe and brought about possibilities of a religious crusade in Nepal.' Others of the same ilk feel that the parliament panicked and moved faster than it ought to have in declaring the only Hindu Kingdom in a world -- where 52 countries are Christian and 46 Muslim -- secular. The move though has the support of some minority ethnic groups who have welcomed the decision suggesting that this declaration would move the nation towards ensuring social justice and harmony. But it must be put on record that declaration or no declaration, religious tolerance had always prevailed in Nepal. It is not important whether secularism is written into the constitution, what is important is how its spirit is carried in the hearts of the people. When secularism comes to mean tolerance of other religions there are very few that can match the Nepalese, a very deeply religious and God-fearing people indeed.

The other aspect that draws our attention is the way political acumen has guided the policy of the Nepalese leaders. What had worried many observers, particularly its neighbours, is the man-

ner and means of accommodating all the parties in any future political arrangements, post April 2006. And the role of the Maoists in any future negotiations was an unknown factor in the political landscape of Nepal. Although the realisation that neither the government nor the Maoists could gain strategic superiority to dictate terms might have been the compelling factor to shun the path of violence, it must be said that both the Seven Party Alliance and the Maoists have displayed tremendous farsightedness in this matter too. In spite of the position of some in India, whose concern of the Maoist insurgency in Nepal and how it is handled stems from its own Maoist movement that has infested several of its states, some of which border Nepal, the government has agreed upon a landmark deal with the Maoists that most predict will move the country in a new direction.

The Maoist deal has demonstrated two important things. One, that national interest should be the main criterion in addressing national issues, and two, one-time enemies can shun stated positions and concede grounds for the sake of national unity and national interest. And the parties

have done more than concede grounds. For the Maoists, to give up a position of strength that they had gained and displayed through the control of about seventy percent of rural Nepal is an enormous compromise as is their abjuring the path of violence and putting their faith in the people's choice of government. They no longer believe that power i.e. establishment of a communist from of government in Nepal can come through the barrel of the gun. The government, similarly, in reaching the accord and agreeing to not only dissolve the present government but also make the Maoists a part of the new interim government that will oversee the election to the constituent assembly, has acknowledged the indispensability of the Maoists in any political arrangement.

Not only has not the ten-year long insurgency been brought to an end with one stroke, the Maoist rebels have been brought into the political mainstream, from where it will be difficult for them to revert to their old position. What makes the matter significant is that while the Maoists have dispensed with their underlying political philosophy the Seven-Party Alliance

has taken the Maoists on board, in spite of outside pressures, particularly of the US, to renounce any link with the rebels.

The government has also taken the bold step of shearing the monarch of all executive authority including the control of the army; inevitable one feels if the road to a republican Nepal were to be reached quickly.

However, one recognises that there are several issues that need to be ironed out by the parties. The most significant of which is the future of monarchy. Not only the Maoists have rejected Mr. Koirala's preference of a ceremonial king, even some of his party colleagues have also denounced his remarks. But this, and other small issues, overseeing of which has been reversed on the United Nations, will not prevent reaching agreements, given the demonstrated intention of the parties to resolve the issues.

What is worthy of note also is the way that the parties concerned have decided to proceed with sagacity and statesmanship that has kept the interest of the nation in the forefront. Even more noteworthy is the display of maturity and self-respect by the politicians that did not brook the intervention or even the friendly suggestion of any 'Monday,' 'Tuesday' or 'Wednesday' groups or intercession of the head of any supra national organisation for mediating between parties that were once up in arms against one another.

One hopes that the developments in Nepal have not escaped the eyes of our politicians.

The author is Editor, Defence & Strategic Affairs, The Daily Star.

RMG SECTOR

Respecting and implementing MOU in national interest



M. ABDUL LATIF MONDAL

IT is heartening to see that a 10-point memorandum of understanding (MOU) was signed on 12 June between the government, and workers and owners of the apparel industry towards institution of minimum wages and legitimate facilities for workers within the next three months. The state minister for labour and employment, seven leaders of the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters' Association (BGMEA) and the Bangladesh Knitwear Manufacturers and Exporters' Association (BKMEA) and 17 leaders of different labour organisations signed the memorandum. Although this MOU is an ad interim instrument, its implementation and turning "it into a binding accord" is expected to help solve the labour unrest and bring back normalcy in the promising readymade garment (RMG) industry in the country. Well begun is half done, let us hope so.

The media reports reveal that the 10 conditions agreed upon in the deal are:

-Regret the damage of property and reach a consensus on immediate end to unrest.

-Withdraw the cases filed against the workers at Gazipur, Ashulia and Savar and release the arrested workers.

-No workers to be terminated.

-Reopen closed factories immediately.

-All workers to be given appointment letter and identity card.

-No obstruction in fair trade unionism and combined bargaining.

-One-day weekly holiday to be given and other holidays as mentioned in the existing labour law ensured.

-Overtime remuneration to the workers enjoying regular salary to be provided as per the labour law.

-Maternity leave to be given with pay as per the labour law.

-Minimum wage board to be formed to fix wages.

The meeting held on 12 June under the chairmanship of State Minister for Labour decided to declare and implement the minimum wage structure for the garment workers within three months of the formation of the wage board. (The garment workers have demanded for fixation of minimum wage at Tk 3,000/ against the existing Tk 950/ per month.) On the other hand, the

other terms of the MOU would be implemented within not more than one month's time.

Now the most important task ahead is the timely implementation of the MOU and declaration of minimum wage for the workers by the minimum wage board. The people and the media have welcomed the signing of the MOU. The Daily Star in its editorial on 14 June wrote: "No foot-dragging in implementation, please!"

A redeeming feature of the otherwise horrifying month-long labour unrest in our garment industry has been the three-party MOU that seeks to redress the grievances of the workers and address the concerns of the owners.

The most positive aspect of the understanding is the time-bound plan for the implementation of the accord. The wage board formed on May 31 will declare a minimum wage for workers by August-end. The other terms of the MOU will have been implemented by 30 June. These are features, which we would like to think display the urgency of the parties concerned in resolving the problems that generated the crisis in our RMG industry."

Another daily (New Age) in its

editorial on June 14 wrote: "...The issue now is implementation of this accord and close monitoring round all the factories in the country. As the owners have not agreed to pay any interim relief, the wages revision should be implemented as soon as possible within the stipulated time."

It needs no repetition that uninterrupted and smooth running of the country's 4,000 garment factories employing about 2 million workers -- 90 percent of whom are first generation women -- and earning more than \$ 6 billion in 2005 which amounts to about 76 percent of our foreign exchange earning, is in the best interest of the owners, workers and the government.

The owners have to admit that our RMG workers are unbelievably poorly paid. As reported in the media, the Brussels-based International Textile, Garment and Leather Workers' Federation, on May 24, termed the BGMEA's reaction to the May labour unrest 'divorced from the reality of the industry' and observed that such reaction 'makes the employers of Bangladesh a laughing stock internationally'. In their estimation, in February 2005 a garment worker in Bangladesh received

only 6 cents as wage per hour, when the figure is 20 cents in India and Pakistan, 30 cents in China, 40 cents in Sri Lanka and 78 cents in Thailand. The organisation described the wages as 'truly scandalous'.

In spite of the signing of the aforesaid MOU, there were, unfortunately, fresh disturbances in 11 RMG factories in DEPZ and outside on 18 June because of some misunderstanding between the workers and the management of those units. The BEPZA chairman is reported to have held meetings with the management of the factories in the DEPZ and the Workers Representatives of Welfare Committees (WRWCs) and requested the management of the factories to solve such isolated problems. The workers in the RMG industry, who have so far been deprived of their due, should wait to see the implementation of the decisions of the MOU, including the fixation of minimum wage by the minimum wage board.

In order to implement the decisions of the MOU, the Ministry of Labour has reportedly formed 15 committees of which 10 will work in Dhaka and the rest

outside Dhaka. The government must ensure that decisions in the MOU are implemented as per agreed time schedule. While recommending minimum wage, the minimum wage board may take into consideration the minimum wage for the workers of the public sector.

Knowledgeable people have attributed the success of the RMG industry in Bangladesh to a number of factors which, among other things, are:

- Government's constant concern about the sector's growth and playing an active role as a catalyst to solve various complex problems.
- Contribution from the cheap, disciplined and regimented workforce.
- Emergence of a dedicated entrepreneur class.
- Quality manufacturing of apparels.
- Encouraging response from the foreign buyers.
- Flexible and friendly import policy for import of accessories.
- Support from the financial institutions, nationalised and private.

In view of what has been discussed above, time has come when all concerned must exercise their judgement, patience etc not only to bring back complete normalcy in the RMG industry, but also pave the way for further promotion and development of the sector in the highly competitive international market.

M. Abdul Latif Mondal is a former Secretary to the government.

OPINION

Character assassination: Who is next?

DR MOAZZEM HOSSAIN

OVER the last ten years, in my humble way, I have contributed to this daily mainly on the issues of Bangladesh's contemporary politics. Today's topic is not about politics but an issue that has made the corridors of Dhaka University stained not by blood letting but through assassination of character of a distinguished staff member of this prestigious institution. Yes, I am referring to the issue surrounding highly respected academic, civil society leader and activist, and eminent citizen Professor Muzaffar Ahmed. The vested quarters have unfortunately taken a simple

matter of an academic campus to the national level with the courtesy of the print and electronic media. I see this as grossly unjust, distasteful and an attempt to tame a high profile national and international activist against corruption.

On June 16 and 17, nine 'eminent citizens' had collectively protested the acts against Professor Ahmed through the print media. Every one knows that the nine signatories have been serving the nation in distinguished capacities over the last half a century. Through this protest they tried to restore the reputation of one of their colleagues currently under threat on a flimsy ground. Through this

media release they tried to let the nation know the truth about a highly respected professor.

The case of Professor Muzaffar Ahmed clearly suggests that this is a new ploy against the nation, against the civil society and above all against the integrity of a university academic. Unfortunately, nowadays, all the campuses are divided along political party lines. In this environment, attack from outside both in physical and intellectual terms have been common in the campuses. Although the majority of the academics are not politically motivated along party lines, only a handful of them with neutral stand have the courage and dedication to keep the interest of

the civil society alive.

The enemies of the civil society have been taking full advantage of this divide in all campuses and have now started character assassination of honest and dedicated members. In this regard, even the high profile academics with political colour do not escape from the wrath of the outsiders. For example, the recent case of the UGC chairman immediately comes to mind. The readers would recall that Professor Assaduzzaman was a victim of some controversies few weeks earlier. The way Professor Zaman's case was reported in the media seemed simply unprofessional. It is now clear that all the details about this controversy

were made available to the media by the courtesy of his professional rivals at his former place of work. Even a layman would understand why the UGC chairman had been a target of character assassination.

As I recall, the major aims of these two distinguished academics in the past was to combat corruption in all walks of life. Professor Ahmed, in particular, during the last ten years has been fighting corruption through the formation of TIB, while Professor Zaman has been trying recently to root out corruption from both public and private university campuses.

In view of the above, it is clear now that no one is safe from the

activities of the vested interests whether one does or does not follow a particular party line. By all means, this is an alarm bell for the campuses. We know that, in recent years, there were some politically driven academic appointments in almost all universities. However, we know well that the majority of the academics have entered this profession on their own merits. The time has come for the majority to join the 'eminent nine' to protest the actions of the vested groups. If we don't, who knows who would be the next victim?

The physical extermination of academics at campuses began during the liberation movement and this has continued. The latest

victim of this atrocity was Professor Taher of Rajshahi University. Since 1971, none of the perpetrators has been caught and punished for such gruesome crimes. With the courtesy of the selfish politics, some of the alleged assassins were elected to the Republic's parliament and have been ministers since 2001.

In this environment, the high profile academics must forget their political affiliation for the greater interest of the profession and unite to maintain the sanctity of the campuses at any cost. Without a strong bond and unity among the genuine academics, it will be impossible to prevent the politically appointed part-time educators from capturing the

administration. We must recognise the fact that already the campuses are infested with bogus educators without adequate credentials to become university teachers. The future of higher education in the country is now at stake. It is time to think seriously about keeping the campuses free of national politics and thus avoid becoming hostage to so called academics.

Finally, may I remind our civil society leaders a quote from Jean Sibelius that "Pay no attention to what the critics say..... Remember, a statue has never been set up in honour of a critic!"

Dr Moazzem Hossain is a freelance contributor.