The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR
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DHAKA WEDNESDAY AUGUST 16, 2006

Disturbance in the garment sector

Fulfil the commitments

IT appears that unrest is again simmering in the RMG sector. And when we had thought that the month-long unrest in this sector that flared up in May had finally subsided, we were surprised to see several thousand garment workers resorting to siege of roads and damaging of public and private vehicles. The recurrence of violence in the garment sector is reprehensible, even more so when the grievances are expressed through violence that causes huge traffic snarl-up and untold sufferings to the commuters. There have been such demonstrations in several other garment factories in the area on the same grounds.

We understand that the workers of these factories were dissatisfied at the apparent breach of commitments made by the owners at the negotiations between them and the workers following the workers' unrest last May, to increase their pay.

If a commitment was made to the workers, it was for the owners to make sure that it was fulfilled. The whole question of salary and benefits has been pegged to the determination of basic salary for the RMG workers, on which there has not been an agreement as yet. The owners insist that the pay and allowances cannot be enhanced unless the minimum salary has been determined. That is an argument seemingly plausible but cannot hold for long, if there is no agreement on the minimum salary ad infinitum. But apart from the regular salary, reportedly, the protesting workers have not been paid for extra hours of work, and that they are having to work under very poor working conditions.

We feel that there is a need to finalise the salary structure of the RMG workers immediately, and the Wage Commission set up for this very purpose must complete its work without further delay. To this end all the parties concerned must sit with flexible minds to arrive at a solution that will meet the requirements of all.

We cannot afford the most important sector of our export industry to be plagued by violence and disruption every now and then. The atmosphere of seemingly never-ending volatility must give way to an amicable atmosphere that will be durable, and causes of all the complaints must be removed, once and for all.

Job offers from Malaysia

Need for handling them carefully

FOLLOWING the withdrawal of the ban on export of Bangladeshi workers to Malaysia, after intervention at the highest level of the administration, several Malaysian companies have recently issued the letter of job demands to their respective agents in the country. As much as we welcome the offers made, it is important that the job is carried out in a transparent way without any undue harassment to the recruits who come from a comparatively poorer segment of our population. As learnt from the media, there is already a problem amongst the various recruiting agents. No less than the president of Bangladesh Association of Recruiting Agents said that it was yet to resolve the issue of distribution of job indents amongst member agencies.

Over the years one of the most contentious issues facing the workers going abroad has been the cost that an individual worker has had to incur before he or she could join the host company. Even to this day, there are no firm rates of charges being collected by recruiting agents from individual workers that differ from country to country.

While the total migration cost per individual worker stands at Tk 85 thousand, an official of the Ministry of Expatriates Welfare and Overseas Employment has already expressed the opinion that it may be on the higher side based on actual break-up of costs covering airfare, payable government taxes, costs of medical check up inclusive of service charges for the agency concerned.

Our workers abroad whether in Malaysia or elsewhere are our prized citizens earning valuable foreign exchange for the country. For long they have been victims of exploitation both within and outside the country due to callousness on our part and non-transparent operations of many a recruiting agent in the country driven by sheer motive of profiteering.

We urge the administration and the recruiting agents to ensure that none of the recruited is subjected to any harassment. We should be particularly careful in handling export of our workers to Malaysia in view of the fact that not too long ago it had banned recruitment of workers from Bangladesh.

A land where tolerance has crumbled

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

GROUND REALITIES

Quite a few editors bristle when you choose to describe Sheikh Mujibur Rahman as Bangabandhu. There are some newspapers which adopt so-called policies wherein Mujib is not Bangabandhu, wherein on November 3, 1975 it was not the four national leaders but four Awami League leaders who were murdered in prison. What you then are left facing is something more than a distortion of history. You are a witness to a crude form of intellectual dishonesty.

PRETTY strange things have been happening in the country lately. All of a sudden there is the feeling in you that levels of intolerance have been going up in Bangladesh, that space for liberal discourse is fast shrinking. The indignation with which Minister for Local Government and Rural Development Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan recently launched his broadside against a report by Transparency International Bangladesh is quite revealing of the extent to which tolerance is on the slide in our social circumstances. The minister was obviously unhappy with the criticism made of the corruption in his department. He had every right to feel unhappy about that, but when he demanded to know, in visible anger, from a representative of TIB who the latter was, he was only making it known all over again that even ministers are sometimes subject to vulnerability.

And as you mull over the irate Mannan Bhuiyan, you just might be drawn to the spectacle of Science and ICT Minister Abdul Moyeen Khan flinging a copy of the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper to the floor right in the presence of the representatives of donor agencies. One certainly understands the ire of the minister, who is otherwise known as a gentle, polite man who could perhaps have done much more good to our world if he had stayed with the teaching of physics at Dhaka University. Where the minister's observations about the PRSP are the matter, many of us by and large agree with him. But not many among us would do what he did with that PRSP copy the other day.

And even as you wonder why so many people in responsible positions are taking umbrage at so many innocuous things these days, you have the rather unsettling matter of the Board of Investment chief's characterization of the Centre for Policy Dialogue as a bunch of shameless liars and conspirators. That was an outrageous act. What followed only left us even more stunned, for when you have such respectable individuals as the five members of the CPD trustee board being compelled to obtain bail over an issue that really has no basis, you seriously ask yourself why the country has come to such a pass.

Anyone who thinks Rehman Sobhan can be treated with manifest indignity will surely need to be reminded of the pre-eminent role he has played in the creation of this country. As one of the young economists who once assisted Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in advancing the Bengali cause for autonomy through the formulation of the Six Point program, Rehman Sobhan remains an iconic figure not just for his generation but also for ours as well as those to come. And those four others? They are all individuals of good conscience and have without question done us proud in their professional fields. Our respect for them, in this post-arrest warrant affair, has only registered a necessary rise.

In these past few years, the very bad precedent of muzzling dissent, or the other person's point of view, has been taking sinister shape in Bangladesh. There are perhaps few countries in the world, at least among those which loudly proclaim their democratic credentials, where editors, publishers and reporters are often compelled to seek the protection of the judiciary only because a few irate men, who incidentally are part of the power process or closely allied to it, are clearly unable to accept criticism of their actions in the media. It is a sign of malaise in a land when senior journalists, who also happen to be eminently respectable members of civil society, must go looking for lawyers only because a few angry men caught in the act of doing wrong are bent on hounding them out of their profession or forcing them into cowering silence.

And just what the state of the law is something you can deduce from the alacrity with which warrants of arrest are issued against citizens without affording the affected an opportunity to explain their positions. And then there are the plainly violent expressions of political intolerance. When a ruling party lawmaker runs news reporters out of town because they have carried out their professional responsibility of upholding the truth, and when no one in the corridors of power thinks it is behaviour most reprehensible, you cannot but realize the sordid levels to which respect for others, for those who do not share your view of the world around you, has sunk in Bangladesh.

On a very broad scale, the liberalism that we watched taking shape in the 1960s and the early 1970s have in these past three decades taken a bad mauling. How do you explain the fact that the widow of General Khaled Musharraf now finds herself in a position where she must vacate the accommodation allotted to her by the Ziaur Rahman regime in 1979? Matters ought not to have turned out this way. Begum Musharraf has in the last thirty-one years gone through much emotional suffering, for reasons we are all aware of.

The biggest difficulty, where the rest of us are concerned, is in coming to terms with the truth that not even the family of a prominent freedom fighter can any more assure itself that it is the recipient of national gratitude, that the country will look upon it with respect because one of its members once took the bold step of going to war to free the land of the wolves that threatened to devour it.

Note, though, that the intolerance we speak of encompasses nearly every sector of Bengali society at this point of time. That includes the media, among which happen to be newspapers only too happy to be economical with the truth or playing truant with history. Quite a few editors bristle when you choose to describe Sheikh Mujibur Rahman as Bangabandhu. There are some newspapers which adopt so-called policies wherein Mujib is not Bangabandhu, wherein on November 3, 1975 it was not the four national leaders but four Awami League leaders who were murdered in prison. What you then are left facing is something more than a distortion of history. You are a witness to a crude form of intellectual dishonesty.

The absence of tolerance assumes a graver form when perfectly good and responsible individuals seek to defend the deaths in "crossfire" of men with alleged criminal records. It is an eerie situation when the rule of law takes a backseat to the caprices of a few when individuals are hauled away by the security forces, eventually to be left dead on open fields as a result of what is generally -- and unconvincingly -- given out as a consequence of a skirmish between the dead man's accomplices and the security forces. The inexplicable part of the story is that all the "accomplices" have "escaped" and no one among the security people has been killed or wounded in that "skirmish." Lest you have missed the point, what has happened here is a simple issue of doing away with an alleged criminal without much of attention being paid to an upholding of the law. Intolerance has stealthily, and sometimes brazenly, taken the place of wisdom. The fury and ferocity with which the police erect barricades all over town every time the political opposition plans agitational programs and the glee with which they break the bones of political workers in full view of the world quite undermine the original objective of Bangladesh being a land of civilized people. A misuse of official power and position is what increasingly strengthens the idea of intolerance.

You can go on and on. The reality before the country today is that the very places where you would normally expect justice and fair play to work for you -- the civil service, the political process -- are swiftly getting to be off limits for citizens. A businessman complains against a newspaper and the result is a prohibition on the dissemination of news about him or his business empire served, of all people, by those who man the Press Council!

And then there is the tale of the seven policemen who would like to be transferred from the local constituency of Law Minister Moudud Ahmed because they do not feel comfortable in their jobs there or, plainly, have come up against impediments. People in trade lodge complaints against ministers and lawmakers, only to find themselves hauled away to face prosecution over a sudden litany of cases.

It is a depressing condition we are muddling through. It is a sad country we inhabit. In the gathering grey of twilight, it is not poetry we read across the expanses of the sky. It is fear of what new travails and heartbreak the coming day will bring that takes hold of our souls.

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Reforms first and election second

ABDUL BAYES

BENEATH THE SURFACE

Politicians, especially the opposition, should realize that it is the people's power that has decided the destiny of the nation all through our history. Be it the liberation war, the movement against the Ershad regime or the upsurge against the February 15, 1996, general election under the then BNP government -- all point to the power of the people in negating the devil's device. It is a time when the combined opposition should respect people's power and mobilize them in realizing their demands.

JUST two days before I left the country for an assignment abroad, by the courtesy of private TV channels, I heard that the Local Consultative Group (LCG) of the donors was meeting with the political parties. Generally speaking, our politicians do not seem to see eye to eye, but it is the donors who hold the power to drive them to dine together.

Such a scenario is both sad and soothing. It is sad because the politicians, themselves, fail to (or are reluctant to) sit together and sort out the problems. It is soothing because, anyhow, they got together. This is unfortunate for, and an aspersion on, our political parties. The perception that the World Bank, Asian Development Bank and IMF, allegedly, dictate our developmental goals springs mostly from our failures to do the right thing ourselves. Whether it is rationalization of energy prices or tariff levels, or reduction of system losses -- everything we do seems to have been forced, and not of our own choice.

However, the main issue on that occasion was the upcoming general election and the ways and means to make it meaningful. As far as I could understand, the LCG assured them of arranging foreign observers, supporting domestic observers and helping the Election Commission (EC) with logistic support, if necessary. In other words, keeping the current caretaker government system and EC modalities constant, the LCG would, perhaps, aim at arranging observers to see that the election game is free and fair.

But we are afraid that, given current composition of the EC and the lack of a power balance between the president and head of the caretaker government during the interim period, the attempts of the LCG in ensuring a free and fair poll might receive a heavy blow. In the election environment, or system, that is prevailing today the result of the election can be taken for granted. It will be in favour of the ruling alliance. I personally doubt whether the CEC, himself, believes that a fair election is possible under his command. Of course, that apprehension does not mean that LCG should come out with a formula to make the elections free and fair. It is purely an internal affair, and only the political parties of the country can sit together for a sustainable solution.

Before delving into the dynamics of an apparently neutral looking election regime that is being projected by the government now, allow me to draw your kind attention to a recent news item. The news has come out in various papers. While the past two heads of the caretaker governments -- Justices Shahabuddin Ahmed and Habibur Rahman -- had to leave (or they had left) their government houses immediately after the stipulated time, the immediate past caretaker head, Mr. Latifur Rahman, clung to that privilege for a period of about five years!

As some newspaper reports tended to reveal, the prime minister was so happy at his performance, or devotion, that she managed the house for him under special arrangements. Our question is: should Mr. Latifur Rahman have accepted that offer in the face of an "ocean of accusations" of election engineering during his tenure? The next question that strikes one's mind is what kind of special services to the party in power Mr. Rahman might have provided to warrant such a "gift" from the government? Critics might argue that Mr. Latifur Rahman played a partisan role during the election and, thus, was allowed to stay in that palacious house for about five years.

The next caretaker chief is going to assume power with no less criticism than his predecessor, Mr. Latifur Rahman. Already, he has been dubbed as a supporter of BNP, and the age limit of the chief justice is alleged to have been raised keeping Mr. Hasan in mind as the next caretaker chief. Thus, not ex post but ex ante, the upcoming caretaker head has already been rewarded with an extension of age, if not with an extension of stay in a government house, under special considerations. Pitifully he is heading with a lot of suspicions about a free and fair election in 2007 conducted by him.

Recently, the PM, and her party men, have been arguing that the last government (implying AL) did not undertake reforms, hence their appeal for reforms amounts to creating chaos in the country. What is lost sight of in this case is the fact that: (a) AL government did not raise the age limit of the chief justice, with an eye on the next caretaker head; (b) the last caretaker chief was not known to have been linked to any political party like the upcoming one; and (c) the then chief election commissioner (CEC) did not play a partisan role regarding the voter list as has been done now by the present CEC. Thus, with the existing CEC, the next caretaker head and manipulated voter list, BNP is in fact handing over power to another BNP in disguise to make the general election so called "free and fair."

The movement that the AL-led 14 party alliance has launched has substantial logic in it. Without making the EC truly independent, selecting the caretaker chief on consensus basis and reforming the existing rules and regulations, it would be suicidal on the part of the opposition to participate in any general election. However, the opposition should also keep in mind that, at the negotiating table, they would have to shed some to gain some.

Our view is that the minimum agreements (without which they should not go for election) that opposition should strive for are as follows: First, the EC must be separated from the PM's office and turned into a truly independent body. It should have its own financial authority, the authority to choose people to conduct the election and the power to call for law enforcing agencies, when necessary. Second, the president of the country -- also a party man -- should transfer some of his duties during the election for the sake of a balance in power. For example, the caretaker chief should hold the command over the armed forces. Third, half of the cabinet members of the caretaker government should be nominated by the opposition. And finally, the defense forces should be used, not with magistracy power, but as and when needed. In fact, this was the system till former president, Shahabuddin Ahmed, amended it. That, allegedly, went to suit the interest of one party at the cost of the other.

Without such reforms in the EC and caretaker government arrangements, participating in election would amount to committing suicide. We hope the opposition would not do it as we also hope that the present parties in power would accept them for their future and for the future of democracy in this country. Politicians, especially the opposition, should realize that it is the people's power that has decided the destiny of the nation all through our history. Be it the liberation war, the movement against the Ershad regime or the upsurge against the February 15, 1996, general election under the then BNP government -- all point to the power of the people in negating the devil's device.

It is a time when the combined opposition should respect people's power and mobilize them in realizing their demands. Ultimately, the movement might turn into a war between the people and the anti-people forces. History bears witness that in such a war the people always won, although temporarily they had to sacrifice a lot. The people should not only cry for free and fair votes but they should also organize themselves to ensure that their votes are not hijacked by hooligans. Let the day dawn on us when the debate over a free and fair election is dismissed for ever.

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Is Mahmudur a worthier citizen than Debapriya?

DR. ABDULLAH A. DEWAN

NO NONSENSE

Challenging Debapriya, who belongs to a minority religious sect, that he had no right to live in his country of birth by a high ranking political appointee is alarming and must not be overlooked as a simple crass and puerile statement -- it must be treated as bigoted in nature, which came from a bona fide Hindu-hater, if I may. On any scale of measurement, Bangladesh would be better off without the likes of Mahmudur but certainly not without the likes of Debapriya.

RIGHT when I started thinking that my "No Nonsense" column has solved almost all the pressing issues of Bangladesh and there are no more topics to write on, crops up the scandalous behavioral disorder of a high official of the ruling cartel. Thanks to the Board of Investment (BOI) Chairman Mahmudur Rahman for keeping me employed.

On Sunday, August 6, addressing a forum of economic reporters at the national press club, Mahmudur branded the CPD as "a conspirator" and "a shameless liar" and accused the think-tank of smearing the country. He also framed contemptible accusation that the CPD fires its research associates if they refuse to engage in political activities.

In a press conference on August 8, Executive Director Debapriya Bhattacharya dismissed Mahmudur's pig-headed accusations that CPD was engaged in a conspiracy to defame the country. Debapriya supplicated that the outrageous accusations were premised on a misreading on the part of Mahmudur about the role CPD plays with respect to the World Economic Forum and UNCTAD.

Newspaper reports and replay of TV footage indicate that Debapriya only referred some "selective statistics" presented by Mahmudur as "bad commodity." The words "bad commodity" was meant to suggest "bad statistics," implying such misleading statistics do not help the country as foreign investors have access to all relevant data.

Debapriya's reference of "bad statistics" may have spared the country from embarrassments to foreign investors. The investor would think that Bangladesh government is not only the most corrupt but also the most deceitful. Instead of appreciating his professional gestures, Mahmudur resorted to vituperative diatribes against Debapriya. His rabble rousing remarks made it obvious that his selective use of statistics was openly deceptive, wickedly manipulative, and deliberately dishonest.

Mahmudur, instead of correcting his deceitful statistics, filed a case of criminal defamation against the five press conference participants: CPD chairman Rehman Sobhan, Debapriya Bhattacharya, and CPD trustee board members, Manzur Elahi, Laila Kabir, and Mohammad Syeduzzaman, who are by any measure considered distinguished citizens for their service to the country.

The lawsuit appears to be a case of "collective guilt," having no specificities of statements made that are alleged to be defamatory and who has said what. The respondents are merely alleged collectively to have made statements against Mahmudur that are: "defamatory, disgraceful, indecent, misleading, conspiratory, false, fabricated, and baseless" plus all others not found in the dictionary. Interestingly, Professor Sobhan and Laila Kabir hardly opened their lips at the press conference and Syeduzzaman had nothing to do with those alleged comments. So for these "lips-closed" personalities, it's a case of "guilt by association."

This lawsuit was not as disturbing to me as the foolhardy statement about some one's right to citizenship. Mahmudur uncouth statement that Debapriya "does not have the right to live in the country" certainly qualifies him to undergo psychiatric therapy for realigning his neurological coordinates at state's disbursement.

Challenging Debapriya, who belongs to a minority religious sect, that he had no right to live in his country of birth by a high ranking political appointee is alarming and must not be overlooked as a simple crass and puerile statement -- it must be treated as bigoted in nature, which came from a bona fide Hindu-hater, if I may. On any scale of measurement, Bangladesh would be better off without the likes of Mahmudur but certainly not without the likes of Debapriya.

Mahmudur, a former manager of Monno Ceramic, drew media spotlight for extracting pay and perquisites from his former employer long after joining the BOI. What does it tell us about his sense of propriety and integrity? No wonder where he would get the money when he indicated that he would bear the costs of his lawsuit from his own source.

Debapriya with his usual venerable composure took the high ground when responding to Mahmudur's offensive name calling (Kulangar) and bellicose statements. He beseeched: "We shall ignore all his crude and brash remarks on subjects beyond his competence as we feel embarrassed to discuss them." What a gentleman; what a classy citizen.

The flimsy lawsuit, as synopsized by Barrister Amir-Ul Islam, "highlights the vulnerability of citizens' civil rights, intellectual freedom and the freedom of expression." Issuance of arrest warrant on defamation suit against distinguished citizens, who under no circumstances would be absconding, heightened people's suspicion that Mahmudur may not be a "lone ranger" to spearhead such a fabricated lawsuit. This suspicion became compelling given that it happened at a time when these distinguished personalities are campaigning to nominate honest and competent candidates for the next parliamentary election.

The pugnacious remarks and the subsequent criminal lawsuit may not be seen as an isolated event -- it is more germane, a patented demeanor of the BNP higher ups. They beat up journalists when unfavourable reports are published against them; castigate intellectuals when their activities become issues of public scrutiny and censure. Remember? LGRD minister Mannan Bhuiyan's jumping around and screaming against the TIB's corruption report in which his ministry scored the ignominious number one ranking in the country. His cris de coeur and the threat about bringing a law suit against the TIB have ended in smoke. Prior to that in 2004, communication minister Nazmul Huda's anger against the TIB's number one ranking of his ministry also evoked a similar outcries and threats.

My friend who knows Mahmudur told me that he is "allergic" to the word "rajakar." Why so? Maybe he feels degraded, serving a government of which Jammat-e Islami, the party of collaborators, is a part. In all essence, he is broker and an aid to Matiur Rahman Nizami, Minister of Industries, in the discharge of attracting foreign investment. If the four CPD intellectuals are guilty by association, what does that make Mahmudur?

Mahmudur and his masters at Hawa Bhaban seem desperate to score jabs against the civil society for its expressed concerns over a few deals involving Asia Energy, Tata and Dhabi Group of UAE, which are stalled now. These deals involve long term leasing contracts of the country's mineral resources, and CPD's uneasiness is about the possibility of the selling of the country's interest by crooks who are anything but praiseworthy.

Some people are asking for Mahmudur's unconditional apology to the five distinguished citizens. I am not one of them. He should not go off the hook with a mere apology. I recommend the following measures:

Bring counter defamation lawsuit with charges of bigotry and name calling;

Every citizen mail a letter to Mahmudur asking him to certify their eligibility of Bangladesh citizenship;

Boycott products from Monno Ceramic until his public apology is accepted (Monno Ceramic is guilty by association);

Write to the prime minister for his removal from public service;

BNP should consider expelling him for his bigoted remarks.

Bringing defamation suits against intellectuals including editors and journalists is a way of infringing on citizens freedom of speech, voices of reasons and dissents. During the liberation war, Al Badr tried to eliminate intellectuals by murder; the ruling alliance's powerful crooks, where some elements of Al Badr are sharing power, are now trying to prosecute intellectuals to cage them in prison and thus steer clear their critiques against misrule and corruption.

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