

Time to solve RMG impasse

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TOWARDS the middle of 2006, a pervasive unrest prevailed among the readymade garment (RMG) sector workers of our country. The government, garment factory owners, and representatives of garment workers later signed a tripartite deal, fixing a minimum wage of Tk. 1662.50. This was the result of intensive negotiation amongst all concerned parties. It was decided that the last date for implementing the new wage structure would be June 30. In May this year it was found that 1,197 out of 4,600 garment factories were not paying the minimum wages. The BGMEA then revisited the factories last month and found that 757 out of the 1,197 had fixed minimum wages for the workers as per the deal. 419 units did not comply with the agreement, and the other 21 factories were closed down last month, BGMEA sources reported. However, the garments workers' leaders complained that about 50% of the factories were yet to comply with the deal. Whatever the percentage, the grievance among the readymade garments workers of the country continues. If things do not improve, we may be waiting for another bout of worker unrest in the garment sector. The first industrial revolution took place in England in the middle of the eighteenth century, and later spread to other countries of Europe. Although feudalism was abolished by

the industrial revolution, the working conditions in the factories were very poor. Suffocation, polluted air, constant standing on wet muddy ground, quick taking of meals, fluctuation of temperature, frequent industrial accidents, lack of cleanliness, gas light in a closed room in winter, continuous sufferings from different types of diseases, etc., were regular features in the work places. Use of child workers was widespread, and they were frequently physically tortured. Under-aged children and women often worked for twelve hours at a stretch, in mines, pin factories and textile mills, in exchange for small meals and cramped shelters. The workers formed trade unions, and the trade unions used to call strikes to bring change. But the law prohibited formation of trade unions, and the striking workers were treated as common criminals when arrested. Robert Owen, an early nineteenth century British industrialist, created an extraordinary example at his factory. He provided good physical working conditions, shortened the working hours, raised minimum age for hiring children, and introduced meals for workers. He also provided loan to the workers, and facilities for free and compulsory education for their children which was unknown elsewhere. He gave a proposal to the parliament for minimizing the working hours, raising the minimum age of hiring children workers, and provid-

ing facilities for education, etc. Some of these proposals were accepted as laws in England in 1819. If some of our present day industrialists would have this consciousness! When the industrial revolution took place in USA in the middle of the nineteenth century the workers faced the same problems, and formed trade unions like their predecessors in eighteenth century England. Workers in the US, before they were hired, were often required to sign pledges that they would not join any trade union. These pledges were called "Yellow Dog Contracts" because the workers felt that only a yellow dog could compel them to sign such a contract. The post-industrial revolution workers had to work under inhuman conditions because there was absence of labour laws. The government of England, seeing the sufferings and misery of the early factory workers, tried to ensure good working conditions for the workers by enacting new labour laws, and enforcing them. A Royal Commission in 1867 established the legal status of trade unions in Britain. The same thing happened subsequently in other countries where industrial revolutions took place. If we focus on the working conditions in the garment factories, we see that the workers do not enjoy weekly holidays in many factories. There is absence of job security, gratuity, and provident fund for the workers. In most of the cases the authorities do

not issue appointment letters, ID cards and service books. Sometimes the workers are forced to work for 14 to 16 hours per day. Factories do not provide basic medical facilities, work floors have insufficient lighting, and there is lack of sufficient drinking water and adequate toilet facilities for the workers. Women workers are often made to work until late at night, sometimes till dawn. In most of the cases they do not get maternity leave. Many factories do not pay the monthly wage and overtime payment even within the 7th of the month. In many cases workers do not get the monthly wage and overtime for 2 to 3 months at a stretch. The management does not ensure the security of women workers, who face sexual harassment in their workplaces and outside. There are other forms of sex discrimination. Women workers often are deprived of equal wage, equal dignity, equal rights and promotions. In most of the cases, supervisors of garment factories lack human relation skills, which is one of the basic requirements of human resource management. Thus, they cannot communicate with the workers properly, and do not understand that a worker is not only the most important element but is also the most difficult and complex one in the entire production process. Unlike machines, they have personal lives, hopes, emotions, attitudes, etc., which have an impact



on their performance. Due to the lack of human relations skill supervisors cannot motivate the workers properly. Trade unions do not exist in all of the garment factories, and where they do exist they do not work as enlightened trade unions. Rather, in most of the cases, the unions tend to manipulate the workers for their own interest. Unfortunately, in most of the cases, the workers of garment industries, like workers of other industrial enterprises, are not aware of their legal rights. When organizations respond to

social requests and do something for the benefit of the society that is the starting point of the real discharging of social responsibility. When organizations do something for the society without any request from the society that is real discharging of social responsibility. In our country, although there are labour laws, the workers are being deprived of minimum facilities because there is absence of proper monitoring and implementation of the laws. So, it is very frustrating that most of the garment manufacturers

of our country are not discharging the minimum degree of social responsibility. The trade unions of garment sector should try to be enlightened trade unions, and the workers should have awareness of their legal rights. Another very important factor is government interference. There should be regular and strict inspection by the government to check whether the garment factories are complying with the legal provisions or not, and there should be exemplary punishment for non-compliance of legal provisions.

We would like to see the garment factory owners and the government take corrective measures (regarding the working conditions of their factories), not under the pressure of international buyers, but out of their own awareness. The garment manufacturers, at first by discharging the minimum degree of social responsibility (legal compliance), then by covering the starting point of real discharging of social responsibility (reactive role) and then the highest degree of social responsibility (pro-active role), can create a win-win situation, i.e., they, and other stakeholders, can both be benefited. The readymade garments sector is a little over three decades old. It is the major foreign exchange earner of the country, and employs more than two million workers of whom about 90% are women. It has brought about a silent social transformation by allowing women to come of their traditional work in kitchens and the agricultural sector, and work in modern day factories. Our RMG sector has become competitive, and has great potential for further growth. It is a golden goose that lays the golden eggs. It has to be protected in full earnest. The principal responsibility lies with the owners. For their own interest, they cannot afford to fail.

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Pursue pestilence to the end

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SCENARIO 1, the Vito Corleone of our business, the Basundhara chief, buys his way out of a murder charge for 50 crores Taka, with the knowledge of the outgoing prime minister. Scenario 2, former prime minister, the AL chief, orders the siege of the capital with "logi" and "baitha," casualties 9; the sequel, AL "Brown Shirt" Jubo League chief orders torching of a double-decker bus, casualties 11 passengers burnt alive. Scenario 3, the outgoing prime minister's son and his buddy had their hands in every pie, running into hundreds of crores of Taka. Scenario 4, the outgoing prime minister's once personal security staff turned media mogul turned bank owner has a king's fortune in estates, properties, and money at home and abroad. Scenario 5, prominent businessmen of the power and energy sector (Westmont, Mobil and Unique) lodge extortion cases against the AL chief. Scenario 6, former FBCCI chief divulges that he funded the "Janatar Mancha" with 4 crores

Taka; his piece of the cake, the frigates from South Korea. Scenario 7, our Chaebol chief (Partex) has so much land in and around the capital that the counting job tires him. Scenario 8, the nabbed chief conservator of forest plunders the forest resources with gleeful abandon because his trail kept the gods happy. Scenario 9, thugs of city corporation commissioners send the lawful contractor packing, and lord over Gabtoli terminal, and the DCC Mayor does not know about it. Scenario 10, The Daily Star photo showing putrefying fish bred illegally in a Wasa sewage lagoon, which were subsequently killed chemically. These scenarios cover the entire spectrum of our society, from Sahib-Bibis to Gulams. What do we make of them? They are the pestilence of blatant abuse of power and office, of rampant greed and plunder, and of wholesale contempt for the system. There have never been such hideous disclosures in the nation before. A pestilence is an emergency; removing it demands commitment of the highest order, and is

a task that has to be performed with courage and constancy. Any weakness or haste will make the effort open to question, leading to vulnerability. The task has to be carried out fully. The constituents of the task are setting the goal, clearing the playing field, putting the new rules in place, ensuring that the rules are followed and, finally, doing it in time. Half-hearted measures, haste, or retreat, will doom the effort. The nose "constant gardeners" of foreign embassies and international agencies are all around to badger the CTG with sermons of all kinds. Stay the course. And remember Gabbar Singh, "Jo dar gaya woh mar gaya," to be precise take fright and fail. The goal should never be in doubt. National polls in 2008, to return Bangladesh to a constitutionally elected government. However, the polls should mark a definite qualitative change in politics and governance, ushering in a national renewal. Every nation gets the chance to rebuild its destiny. This is the time for Bangladesh. The CTG should not let it fall into doubt. There will be icy comments, and acidulous observations about

un-elected government and repressive measures. The hard, eyeball to eyeball contest has to be won. It is the duty of the CTG to ensure that the old order of the pestilential time, or "Annus Horribilis," is buried, for the good of the nation. The next two elements are all about reforms or changes. Leaving aside all the hyperbole of minus two or minus three hundred, they are more about the judicial arraignment and conviction of the wrongdoers, and, most of all, about setting the standard. The confessional statements that have come to light speak of a devilishly horrible time that reared, patronized, and rewarded remorseless greed and wholesale plunder, and of spiteful crimes. The system plummeted in functional integrity, and governance grovelled in front of partisan interests. Indeed, a crime can always take cover from a mere allegation, unless and until the judicial procedure establishes it as a crime. The entire process of public representation has been tainted. How can one sensibly restore honour and credibility to it and still retain the maligned tribe in one whole piece?

It is all about a tribe that did not learn the wisdom of dialogue during a period that saw each of the two winning and losing, and yet not trusting each other. The animus and the perfidy in them wrecked the system. Nevertheless, let there be no scruples about the judicial correctness of the accountability process. One popular realization from the last winter of despair is that the fuming ladies would do well to spare the nation from the scourge of their jawboning contest. They have to be followed by the scheming and venal sultans, the warmongers and the bullies. Let the reckoning go ahead full speed. And, yes, keep raising the marker. It will be in the interest of the functional health of the political system that the standard should matter, not something to be trashed around. The standard is to test the moral fibre and good breeding. And the screening should certainly be done by the political parties. That is what reforms and changes are about. It is a fact that the legal framework for functional discipline and transparency in our political parties is far from being respected, as far practice

is concerned. In a way it brings a considerable part of the exclusion process back to the surveillance and penal bodies, and certainly to the Election Commission, to apply the guillotine of their marker. And what is to be done has to be done with firmness. Bangladesh is passing through a time of building faith. The task of the CTG is about restoring the faith of the people in the system and in the political process. The faith that, after all these years of deception and drift, Bangladesh can still turn around. Indeed, the right to rule has been compromised and feasted on. The decline in the integrity and standard of public office was lamentable. All through this age of despair the potentiality of Bangladesh was never in doubt. The success of the CTG will depend on its ability to restore this faith and renew this hope. Constancy should be the hallmark of its effort. Not fright not haste, but courage and constancy to see the pestilence to the end.

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Brown should make a difference

IMRAN KHALID

AFTER spending 13 years in the shadow of Tony Blair, he has finally been able to clinch the coveted slot. When seen against the long list of missed opportunities attributed to him during these years, Gordon Brown, the new British prime minister, appears to be a good example of patience and clemency, with little eagerness to "grab the moment." Throughout his career, Mr. Brown, the 56-year-old Scot, had exhibited a kind of reluctance to exploit the opportunities to his advantage. First he missed the opportunity to lead the Labour Party in 1992, when his reluctance to openly challenge John Smith enabled the later to win the job. Political circles believe that Brown had enough clout at that time to knock out John Smith, but his inhibitions kept him from entering the fray. Then again, in 1994, when party boss John Smith died, being dubbed as the obvious choice to take the job of the Labour leadership, he missed this opportunity over a dining table in a trendy London restaurant by making way for Tony Blair, with an understanding that he would take over the Labour leadership halfway through a second term in the government.

That moment came and went, but Brown could not capture the moment to turn the matters his way. Once again, in the spring of 2004, when Blair's popularity was touching the lowest ebb and time was ripe for his exit, Brown fumbled, and restrained himself from giving the required full-throttle push to topple the Blair camp. Last September, when things had reached the boiling point for Blair, instead of turning the Labour revolt into a decisive political storm against Blair, Brown allowed him to drag on for another 10 months. Nonetheless, regardless of his natural knack for "self-restraint" at the right time, and habitual inclination to wear the badge of "heir-apparent," Gordon Brown has eventually stepped into Downing Street as the new British leader. Here lies the real test of political acumen and leadership that have remained hidden behind the curtain of chancellor of exchequer for over a decade. He has to do away with his tendency of missing-the-opportunity. This is the opportunity for him to differentiate himself from his predecessor, who was forced to throw in the towel because of his erroneous Iraq policy. Obviously, the people will continue to compare him with Tony Blair. He is expected to

make a difference because, despite being the major architect and stakeholder of the Blair policies for ten years, he is an altogether different person, with his own, distinct political vision and personality that need to be reflected in his policies as the premier. The most immediate task for him should be the overhauling of the flawed Iraq policy that devoured the political career of Tony Blair. The exit of Blair does not mean that all is well now on the Iraq front. Instead, it has further heightened the flaws that envelope the Iraq policy. This is where Brown needs to work, and take full advantage of this opportunity to compensate for the lost moments, and to have a long stint as the British premier. He has to make drastic decisions with regard to the British involvement in Iraq and to quickly differentiate himself from Blair. There is only one option for him to establish a difference on the Iraq policy, and that is the withdrawal of British troops from Iraq. This is the only step that, in actual sense, will justify Blair's premature removal from the scene. Three factors coerced Blair to quit; invasion of Iraq, establishment of Western occupation, and refusal to make a correction in the Iraq policy. Being Bush's poodle, Blair, for fear of slighting the White House, kept on refusing to listen to demands for disengagement of British troops from the Iraq operation. Blair's personal relationship with George W. Bush was perhaps a key factor that kept him from taking any bold decision on Iraq, despite intense pressure from the British public. Blair opted to lose the job rather than annoy his good friend Bush by calling back the British troops from Iraq. Interestingly, Spain, Italy and the Netherlands, staunch Nato members, have withdrawn their troops without affecting their ties with Washington. So, in the same vein, the withdrawal of British troops should not hamper the ties between the White House and Downing Street. Unlike Blair, Brown does not have personal relations at stake while re-drawing his Iraq policy. He has a golden opportunity to establish his leadership by taking the bold decision of withdrawing from Iraq. And if he misses the opportunity this time, he may find himself in the political wilderness much earlier than expected.

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The double edge of globalisation

NAYAN CHANDA

AN electrician who came to my house to repair some lights asked what I did at Yale. He was shocked that I worked at the university's Center for the Study of Globalisation. "Isn't it true that globalisation destroys the rainforest?" he asked, explaining his surprise. Although I do not work for globalization, his concern is valid and shared by many who take to the street protesting globalisation. That charge holds if, by globalisation, one simply means expanded international trade. The other charge, that multinational companies wreak havoc on the global environment by moving operations to countries where environmental regulations are weak or nonexistent, is a little more difficult to prove. A recent World Bank study shows that clearing forests to grow crops accounted for some 20 percent of global carbon emissions. But the bank has found little evidence that companies choose to invest in such countries to shirk pollution-abatement costs in rich countries. Instead, the most important factor in determining the amount of investment was the size of the local market. It has also been found that within a given industry, foreign-operated plants tended to pollute less than local peers. The World Trade Organisation, and by extension globalisation, also stands accused of destroying the global environment. Expanding trade driven by globalisation has brought about increased fishing, destruction of forestland, and the spread of polluting industries to the



developing world. In a November 2005 report, the UN Food and Agricultural Organisation reported that each year about 18 million acres of the world's forestland area the size of Panama or Sierra Leone are lost due to deforestation. Serious critics of globalisation acknowledge that deforestation cannot be laid at the door of globalisation alone. But they rightly point out that globalisation does serve as both a conduit and an accelerator for many of the forces that cause the loss of forest cover worldwide. By encouraging trade, globalisation encourages consumption, which leads to more logging worldwide. Governance at both local and global levels has failed to promote conservation and reforestation. China is a case in point. A major beneficiary of globalisation as the world's factory, it increasingly turns

to other countries to meet its burgeoning demand for food. That is good news for Brazilian farmers who want to cash in on China's growing demand for soybeans: The environmental organisation Greenpeace estimates that more than 2.5 million acres of tropical forest have been cleared in recent years to plant soybeans. Greenpeace also claims that there is "a 7,000 km chain that starts with the clearing of virgin forest by farmers and leads directly to chicken nuggets being sold in British and European fast food restaurants" and labels the British import of soy animal feed from Brazil as tantamount to "forest crime," according to an article in the Guardian. China's blazing economic growth, supplying cheap products to the world, has other costs, too. Accelerated burning of coal and use of chemicals to fuel the export machine pollute not only China's

air and water but the world's environment as well. A 2004 study found that the jet stream dispersed chemicals like mercury, spewed by factories in China, to locations thousands of miles away. A researcher traced a plume of dirty air from Asia to New England, where analysis of collected samples revealed the chemicals had originated in China, reported the Wall Street Journal in 2004. A major change between past globalisation and its present state is the visibility of the connections. In today's hyperconnected world, the backlash can rise and proliferate faster than in the past. The instantaneous transmission of news and images has turned the thoroughly connected and even marginally connected citizens of the world into spectators and consumers of ideas and information. Images of natural disaster and human suffering elicit instinctive human sympathy and support in the wake of a tsunami or an earthquake. The threat of global warming, a matter of increasing concern, increasingly claims front-page attention in newspapers around the globe. A New Haven electrician is globally aware, worrying about destruction of the Amazon rainforest and how that might impact the world's climate. Global warming has the potential to shrink the global economy by 20 percent and to cause economic and social disruption on a par with World Wars I and II and the Great Depression, according to a report prepared by economist Nicholas Stern. The connection between carbon-emitting economic growth and increasing trade and indus-

trialisation brought by globalisation is unmistakable. As world trade grows and millions of factories join the global supply chain, as mines are exploited and timber is felled to meet rising consumer demands, increased pollution is often the price. Pollution hits the originating country first, contaminating its soil and water, but soon is absorbed in the atmosphere, where it becomes a global problem poisoning the air and bringing acid rain to other parts of the world. The millions of migrants who might be forced out of their homes because of flooding caused by global warming are still in the realm of speculation. Surprisingly, despite the availability of energy-efficient technologies and know-how, little use is made of them. The world seems paralyzed about how to face the threat of global warming. The world's top emitter of greenhouse gases, the United States, has refused to sign the Kyoto Protocol, and the nations that have signed it have been inconsistent with its implementation, making only perfunctory attempts to grapple with the challenge of global warming. Yet there is dramatic evidence that with the commitment of nations and effective global governance, it is possible to avert dangerous trends. Thanks to concerted action taken in combating ozone depletion through the Montreal Protocol, the ozone hole has shrunk. There are even signs that as a result of economic growth, urbanisation and enlightened public policies born of global awareness, more nations are reversing the longstanding trend toward destruc-

tion of their forests. Life in every country today is so inextricably intertwined with the rest of the world that failure to appreciate this interdependence and its long-term effects could risk the world's drifting toward a major crisis. The international system is lacking institutional capacity to address the issues we face. The current ineffective state of the United Nations in tackling some of the major humanitarian disasters illustrates the dilemma. Blaming the UN makes little sense, however. Rather, the root cause is the unwillingness or inability of key actors on the global scene and their constituencies to empower the UN to a level that corresponds with tomorrow's global realities and possibilities. A multitude of non-governmental organizations worldwide the new preachers have performed valuable services in addressing many problems raised by interconnectedness. But nothing can replace the power of sovereign governments working in concert to tackle global challenges. Although no one is in charge of globalisation, history shows that political power can channel or obstruct the multitude of currents that feed globalisation, and lead to a change in course.

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