

Trouble in the garment sector

Address the real cause

It cannot but be a matter of concern that off and on our garment factories are subjected to vandalism. Only the other day Savar EPZ came to a standstill following clashes between the workers and the law enforcing agencies. And the reason for the workers going on a rampage, ostensibly, had to do with the rumoured killing of a worker and their arrear salary. Not only were several garment units damaged the highway traffic came to a standstill also for a long time. These acts are highly reprehensible

There is a pattern that we notice in these actions of the so-called workers that started way back in June -- July last year in the garment sector. We cannot understand why these incidents are repeated when it is given to understand by the EPZ authority that the underlying reasons that caused workers' unrest last year have been resolved

Therefore, we would not be amiss in asking whether there is more to the incidents than we have cared to go into. Is it a case of a rumour being exploited with some ulterior motives? Why couldn't the management and all the relevant persons preempt the workers' outburst when, according to the police, the story of the killing of the worker had turned out to be false? It is even more disquieting when we are told that most of those who had participated in causing the damages didn't belong to that EPZ.

We are not sure whether there was any enquiry into last year's unrest that spread to a very large part of the garment sector, and if so, what had been the findings and remedial measures taken to prevent recurrence of workers' unrest.

It is important to realise, both for the workers and the owners that anything which adversely impacts on our RMG sector will impact on their interest too, not to speak of the serious consequences that it will have on the country's economy. And it is for both to ensure that any situation that can be exploited to hamper production in the garment factories is avoided.

We call on the government to conduct a thorough enquiry into Friday's incident and expose the cause and the persons behind the violence and vandalism at Savar EPZ. The findings must be made public and stern actions taken against those whose actions and inactions resulted in the acts of damage and destruction of the garment factories.

Agitating workers in Malaysia

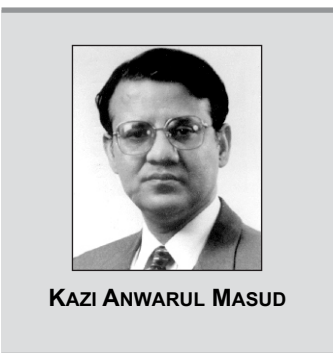
Those responsible for their misery must be dealt with

MORE than a hundred Bangladeshi workers in Malaysia have been agitating for the past several days in protest against the poor working conditions they face in that country. They have been on a hunger strike on the premises of the Bangladesh high commission in Kuala Lumpur. The adviser in charge for expatriate welfare and overseas employment, as we understand, has directed the Bangladesh mission to resolve their problems at the earliest. It has also been reported that the Bangladesh authorities plan to bring back the agitating workers, should a solution that can satisfy them not be found, to the country.

It would be fairly easy to bring back the workers from Malaysia on the ground that their continued agitation for better work and better pay, in the opinion of some, might affect Bangladesh's image abroad. But such a step, if taken, will only mean dealing with surface conditions rather than going to the bottom of the issue. One does not need to be reminded that for the past many years, our workers in Malaysia (as also in the Middle East) have been subjected to much exploitation and discrimination. They have often been swindled by agents here in Bangladesh and once they have found themselves in Malaysia discovered that agents there too put them through innumerable difficulties. Most of these workers sell their meagre property at home and even take out loans from others in order to pay recruiting agencies for lucrative jobs abroad. Ironically, they soon discover that not only have they not been given the jobs promised earlier but have in fact been given a Hobson's choice of accepting far more lowly jobs or go without any job altogether. Worse, these workers are often subjected to ill treatment by their employers.

The problem, therefore, is not always of the workers' making. It is clear that recruiting agencies in Dhaka as well as some companies in Malaysia are responsible for the issues the agitating workers in Kuala Lumpur have highlighted. There are now two steps that we can suggest. In the first place, as part of its drive against corruption, the ACC can investigate any recruiting agency responsible for workers' plight. In the second, as the recipient country, Malaysia can undertake similar action against its own companies, which have been responsible for the plight of Bangladesh's workers. Our workers need a fair deal. Why must they be deprived of that, especially when their contributions to the host country's economy is undeniable?

Equality in the right to vote



KAZI ANWARUL MASUD

ELECTIONS to parliament and local bodies are generally regarded as the first step towards a democratic set up. In ancient Greece all free men, and in Rome even commoners called plebs had voting rights. Till recently, women did not have the right of franchise. Even today, to be a voter one has to have certain qualifications like age, education (in certain countries), etc.

In short all citizens, under certain conditions, have equal right to vote and get elected. The question that can be raised is whether the number of votes a candidate gets should qualify him to represent majority of the voters who did not vote for him (assuming he got only 30% of the votes which constituted greater number of votes cast compared to other candidates) on questions affecting all the people living in the constituency.

One could also ask if the majority number of votes would necessarily represent the best judgment of and for the people, since all voters do not possess similar level of education and intelligence but have equal weightage in voting. After the elections a number of small constituent parties can get together to form a majority and bring to reality Edmund

Elections are good so far as the wish and frustration of the people are expressed (if they are allowed to vote in a free and fair manner while understanding the issues confronting the nation). Countries like ours, burdened particularly with the experience of the last five years, would be better served by one or several institutions and civil societies monitoring the activities of the elected representatives.

Burke's apprehension of the cruelty that can be inflicted on the minority by the majority in a democracy.

In Bangladesh, we had experienced during the BNP-Jamaat rule for five years unaccountable repression on the minority parties in and out of the parliament because the alliance government had a massive majority in the Jatyjo Sangshad that, coupled with Article 70 of the Constitution, rendered the democratically elected government into a dictatorship of then prime minister and the infamous Hawa Bhavan.

Even if one were to accept the massive victory of BNP in the last election as a result of the voters' disenchantment with the Awami League rule, the fact remains that people themselves through adult suffrage had unwittingly installed dictatorship of the majority parties in parliament as under the present system the voters totally relinquish their power to the elected government till the next elections.

Since in our system we do not have the luxury of refusing to give up complete mastery over our fate, like Henry David Thoreau advocated in his treatise on Civil Disobedience in which he quoted: "Paley, [English theologian William Paley 1743-1805] a common authority with many

on moral questions, in his chapter on the 'Duty of Submission to Civil Government,' resolves all civil obligation into expediency; and he proceeds to say that "so long as the interest of the whole society requires it, that is, so long as the established government cannot be resisted or changed without public inconvenience, it is the will of God ... that the established government be obeyed - and no longer. This principle being admitted, the justice of every particular case of resistance is reduced to a computation of the quantity of the danger and grievance on the one side, and of the probability and expense of redressing it on the other."

Besides democratic precepts like rule of law, fundamental human rights, and rights of minorities etc, i.e. all the rights that we have as a nation entered into contract with the international community to respect, but have not yet made a part of our domestic law (albeit many had been put in our 1972 Constitution), appear to be abstract concepts to great majority of the people of Bangladesh.

Unfortunately, unlike developed countries (Margaret Thatcher's ouster and the "forced" resignation of Tony Blair, or the resignation of the

US Senate majority leader and Newt Gingrich, former speaker of the House of Representative, for alleged malfeasance), leaders of the Third World countries are prone to continue their rule through dynastic politics by using money and muscle that can be easily converted into votes in poverty stricken country like ours.

Rule of law is more often a slogan than a reality for the poor who cannot buy justice, so they have to rely for protection on mostly anti-social elements who incidentally are also rich people of the area having accumulated wealth through questionable means. The debate is now rendered to the question of morality of seeking protection of the "rich and the powerful" (many of whom are now behind the bars due to the overturning of the apple cart designed by the alliance government for winning the sham election scheduled for January 22 thankfully by the events of 1/11), and the reality of the dehumanisation of the poor in all aspects of life under the present political system.

This situation flies in the face of Michael Walzer's contention that since the people "are subjects of law, and if law is to bind them as free men and women, they must also be its

makers (Philosophy and Democracy)."

Despite the messiness and compromises that one has to deal with in real politics, eminent political scientists have advocated deliberative democracy where "political decisions are collectively binding" and the people have supposedly the opportunity to participate in the decision making. From Winston Churchill to John Rawls, democracy has been variously described as the best available system to a "fair system of cooperation."

The debate is not about the philosophical underpinnings of democracy as a concept but its practice in underdeveloped societies where normative democracy is not always the rule. In such cases one wonders about the truth of Francis Fukuyama's assertion that democracy has to be culturally rooted in a society that should have a reasonable level of development, having a sizeable number of land/house owning people to form a society of stakeholders for sustainable democracy, and that people should have an intrinsic desire for freedom and democracy.

This can perhaps explain historian Bernard Lewis' broadside at the Muslims that democracy is a peculiarly Western way of dealing with public affairs that may or may not be suitable for others. Undeniably, most of the members of the OIC cannot boast of practicing democracy largely because the societal foundations of these states are tribal, and authoritarian transition to democracy is difficult due to resistance by the present beneficiaries. In a few Islamic countries where democracy is practiced, the demographic structure of those countries is mostly

multi-ethnic and multi-religious.

The inferences drawn, particularly during the colonial period, that the white man has to carry the burden of "civilising" the native population of the colonies, undermined by the 1911 Paris Universal Races Congress' demonstration of "monogenism" -- the idea that there is only one species of man living on earth today -- and the 1951 Unesco Statement of the Nature of Race and Racial Differences stressing the influence of environment being far more important in shaping behaviour than inherited genetics and denying the validity of hierarchical classification of human beings, putting cold water on Immanuel Kant's stress on non-rational and intuitive form of thought, though expressed in a different context, that can be attributed to any particular segment of population.

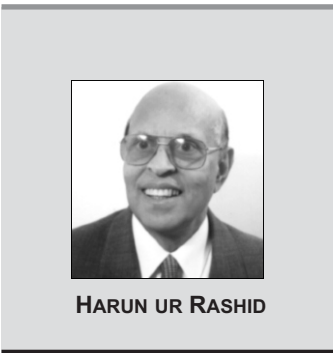
Just as economic development is desired by all, but can be achieved only through a process that takes time, democracy, likewise, cannot be achieved through Aladdin's magic lamp unless institutional frameworks that would sustain democracy are first made foundational.

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Countries like ours, burdened particularly with the experience of the last five years, would be better served by one or several institutions and civil societies monitoring the activities of the elected representatives.

Kazi Anwarul Masud is a former Secretary and Ambassador.

Why did he do it?



HARUN UR RASHID

FORMER prime minister Nawaz Sharif showed his guts on September 10 by returning to Pakistan, where he was born 57 years ago. Some say that the irony is that General Musharraf, who was born in Old Delhi in 1943 and migrated from India in 1947 with his father, took the decision to deport Pakistan-born Sharif from his birthplace.

The deportation to Saudi Arabia within a few hours of arrival of former prime minister Nawaz Sharif demonstrates not only the fragility of President Musharraf's hold on power, but may also constitute contempt of court.

It was the Supreme Court of Pakistan which ruled that no Pakistani citizen could be barred from returning to his/her country, and that any understanding or agreement not to return by a citizen went against the constitutional guarantees of a citizen, and could not be legally tenable.

Supporters of Nawaz Sharif have reportedly filed a challenge

The deportation may prove to be counter-productive in the long run. It may derail the deal that Musharraf wants to make with another leader, former prime minister Benazir Bhutto, to become the president. Bhutto may withdraw from the deal because it would be unpopular for her party to make a deal with the military president under the changed circumstances. When a leader becomes unpopular, he or she tries to survive by all devices and means, but ultimately none succeeds.

against his deportation to the Supreme Court for its ruling. Let us await the verdict of the Supreme Court.

Furthermore, rule of international law does not permit such a scenario because the protection given by the government to a citizen abroad is not available to that citizen in the circumstances, and that citizen becomes stateless.

President Musharraf seems to have convinced the Bush administration that he is the safest bet for war against terrorism, both in Afghanistan and Iraq. Any change of government in Pakistan would escalate the activities of Talibans, both in the Pakistan tribal belt and in Afghanistan.

Observers believe that the Musharraf government could not have deported Sharif without the support of the US and Saudi Arabia.

Observers believe that the Bush administration has influenced Saudi Arabia and Lebanon to

intervene in Nawaz Sharif's case. Two emissaries -- one from Saudi Arabia and the other from Lebanon -- went to London to impress upon Nawaz Sharif not to return to Pakistan. Such action was regarded by Sharif as direct interference in the internal matter of Pakistan, and he rejected it.

President Bush wants to sell his "surge plan" effective in Iraq to the Congress and to the American people and, at this point of time, the US supports President Musharraf's military government, although the administration talks about defending democracy and freedom for people in other countries.

That is why Nawaz Sharif's deportation is seen by the US administration as "an internal matter," while the EU took an appropriate stance saying that Nawaz Sharif should have been given the chance to defend himself before the court for the new charges of tax evasion and corruption.

By supporting a fragile military

regime in Pakistan, the Bush administration has disappointed many people and leaders in South Asia. In the long run, it will prove counter-productive to the US influence in the region, especially in democratic Pakistan.

General Musharraf ousted Nawaz Sharif, an elected prime minister of Pakistan, through a military coup in 1999. It was Sharif who had appointed him as the army chief over other generals of the army. Musharraf owes his present position to Nawaz Sharif, and he does not want to meet Sharif face to face. And Sharif has to go.

The deportation manifests the extreme nervousness of the Musharraf government in allowing Nawaz Sharif to stay on in the country. They do not want him in Pakistan because his presence in the country, even though in custody, may bring the downfall of Musharraf's rule. What a situation! the "strong man" faces in Pakistan!

Why has Musharraf's

government become fragile?

First, his tenure as army chief expired in August 2003, when he reached retirement age, but a special law was passed so that he could keep both the posts -- army chief and president -- until November 15, 2007. He wants to be re-elected for another term as president, retaining the post of army chief as well.

This could be challenged in the Supreme Court, and he may have to relinquish the army chief position. He knows very well that all his powers emanate from being the army chief, not as president.

Second, he became very unpopular with the ill-conceived act of suspending the chief justice of the Supreme Court in March this year. His moral standing was severely undermined when the chief justice was reinstated by his own peers to his position in July. The independent-minded chief justice could be a thorn in the attempts to legalise Musharraf's future actions. The Court might not approve his retention of two positions.

Third, Musharraf wants to be elected by the current parliament in which his supporters hold the majority. But there is a view that he should be elected by the new parliament. This issue may ultimately reach to the Supreme Court for a ruling and he may lose the case.

Fourth, with all his powers he

has had no luck with the militants who are increasing in the country. Bomb blasts have become a regular feature in the towns and cities. Moreover Baloch nationalists are a big headache for the government. His standing as a successful fighter against terrorism is being diminished, both in the country and in the outside world.

If the Supreme Court rules contempt of court against the government, it would be another severe blow to the president's standing and credibility.

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When a leader becomes unpopular, he or she tries to survive by all devices and means, but ultimately none succeeds. It is the people whose sentiments are important, and once they lose confidence in a leader there is no way that that the leader can survive for long. A leader must know when he/she should depart from the political scene, but in South Asia that is a rarity.

Barrister Harun ur Rashid is former Bangladesh ambassador to the UN, Geneva.

Aftermath of DU violence



A.N.M. NURUL HAQUE

THE violence that flared on the Dhaka University (DU) campus from August 20 to 22, erupting from a brawl between an army man and a student during a football match is now over. But its aftermath, which is still continuing, is taking heavy toll on the general students.

The government had to shut down all universities and university colleges to crush the violence that engulfed other campuses. Meanwhile all the closed universities and colleges have resumed classes except the DU, Rajshahi University and Rajshahi University of Engineering and Technology.

The DU syndicate, the highest decision-making body of the univer-

Education is the area, which has been kept above all political rivalry in most of the countries in the world. Sadly, the politicians of Bangladesh are conspicuously devoid of such sense. Naked politicisation in every field of national life has not spared the education sector and political nepotism in recruiting unfit teachers has also contributed to the decline quality in higher education. It is appreciable that the caretaker government has initiated a move for a permanent ban on politics by teachers and students of public universities and colleges, in a bid to restore proper academic atmosphere in the institutes of higher education. The government must do it.

sity, took decision to reopen the DU on October 28, that was closed on August 23 sine die after an order issued by the government in the wake of widespread violence in the campus.

The DU authority has postponed as many as 518 examinations of the DU itself and also the examinations of the affiliated colleges under 26 categories during its closure till October 27. Of the examinations, 254 examinations were scheduled to take place at Arts Building centre, 164 in Curzon Hall centre and 100 in Business Faculty.

According to an official of the DU Controller of Examination office, the

students will have to face an acute session jam because of the unscheduled closure of the university for 66 days. The session jam in the DU is sure to aggravate further as the worst situation of the session jam has been prevailing in the DU over last several years.

DU, the highest seat of learning of the country, practically became crippled during the tenure of immediate past government. The academic activities of the DU had been tottering for the last several years due to frequent strikes by the student organisations, political violence, hartals, and work abstention by the teachers, resulting in enormous

session jams leading from two to five years delay in academic schedules.

In a rare event of the 86 years history of the DU, it remained closed for 22 months in the last four years and a quarter from July 2000 to September 2004. Apart from the annual scheduled vacations of some 90 days, the university lost over 75 days a year on an average due to strikes and other impediments during the aforesaid period.

The overcrowding created by the session jam has also made the students deprived of many other facilities like transportation, accommodation in the residential halls, instruments in the laboratory, and

reading materials in the library.

The daily Jugantar carried a sensitive report on the academic affairs of the DU a few years back. The report said, country incurs a financial loss of Tk 150 crore each year due to forced stoppage of academic activities and session jams in DU. The government spends Tk 87 crore each year for 30,000 students of DU and each student is required to spend Tk 2,000 per month as their educational expenses, which is borne by poor parents.

Prof. Syed Rashidul Hasan, the former treasurer of DU said in a statement that the DU loses around Tk 45 lakh a day in the event of forced stoppage of academic activities.

There is no place for free thinking in the universities nowadays, as the teachers have got involved in partisan politics abusing the autonomy of the universities and they are even getting promotions wielding political clout, said Dr. Kamal Hossain, the eminent jurist of the country, while speaking as the chief guest at a roundtable on Education: Students and Expectation, held in the city on September 7.

"Did I commit any mistake by drafting the University Ordinance

1973" asked Dr. Kamal in a rather ambivalent mood observing the excesses committed by the teachers abusing the Act.

The speakers at a national seminar on 'Improvement of the standard of public universities: In connection with DU' also observed that the politics in the campus is never going to stop if the vice chancellor is appointed by the prime minister. DU-67 club organised the seminar in the city on March 24. The speakers also termed the DU as a victim of deadly student politics.

The caretaker government is also contemplating to introduce a new system for appointing vice chancellors (VCs) in a bid to check the practice of political appointments. The education ministry is likely to amend the existing Public University Ordinance 1973 soon following the recommendation of the UGC. The UGC has also recommended for formation of a six-member committee for searching honest and competent candidates for the posts of VCs.

The spread of violence outside the DU campus clearly indicates that some elements were out to destabilize the government using the students' unrest as an opportunity. The government formed a one-member judicial inquiry commission

led by a retired High Court Judge to investigate the violence.

Police arrested Prof. Anwar Hossain, the secretary general of the DU Teachers' Association (Duta) and Prof. Harun-or-Rashid on August 24 and remanded for eight days for questioning about the violence. A court on September 13 has issued arrest warrants against two DU teachers -- Prof. Sadrul Amin, the president of Duta and Prof. Neem Chandra Bhowmik. Arrest warrants have also been issued against 14 students of DU.

These sorts of action against the DU teachers and students may further aggravate the congenial atmosphere in the campus. Meanwhile a DU delegation of about 20 members led by VC had a meeting with some senior army officers on the issue. We urge the government to be compassionate and considerate towards the respectable and elderly DU teachers and go for action on the basis of judicial inquiry commission's report, which is yet to be completed. We think that it would not be wise to go for harsh action against the teachers on the basis of police report, who were a party in the incidence.

The most silent decay in our national life has occurred in the sector of higher education, which is

due to the teacher student politics. Frequent strikes, violence and other impediments have been taking a heavy toll on the general student of the public universities. We also think that government should go for amendment of the University Ordinance 1973 to bring back the universities to the right track.

Education is the area, which has been kept above all political rivalry in most of the countries in the world. Sadly, the politicians of Bangladesh are conspicuously devoid of such sense. Naked politicisation in every field of national life has not spared the education sector and political nepotism in recruiting unfit teachers has also contributed to the decline quality in higher education.

It is appreciable that the caretaker government has initiated a move for a permanent ban on politics by teachers and students of public universities and colleges, in a bid to restore proper academic atmosphere in the institutes of higher education. The government must do it.

A. N. M. Nurul Haque is a columnist of The Daily Star.