

Why labour unrest in RMG sector again?

Go by the agreement, stop vandalism

THE highly sensitive issue of maintaining productivity and avoiding labour unrest in the RMG sector is being mishandled. The workers of three RMG factories in Chittagong damaged at least 50 vehicles on Tuesday, while agitating for a pay hike which the owners had turned down.

While such incidents can only lower our image as an RMG exporting country and cost us market abroad, it is evident that the factors responsible for widespread labour unrest in 2006 are yet to be fully eliminated. The tripartite agreement among the government, factory owners and workers was supposed to lay the foundation for a just solution to the problems that the workers were facing. But the workers claim that many of the factories are yet to comply with the provisions incorporated in the agreement, including payment of the minimum wages. And if that is true, the owners are keeping a highly potent source of trouble alive. All the more so, because the price hike is putting unbearable pressure on the workers getting a meagre wage.

The owners have to realise the simple truth that the workers play the pivotal role in running the sector. And, as such, there is no way of ignoring their genuine grievances; for, it is both morally and legally untenable. The owners have to go by what they have agreed to and avoid labour discontent which has already caused great damage to the sector.

The representatives of the BGMEA and the garment factories, where the latest trouble erupted, managed to bring the situation under control after holding a meeting with the agitating workers. And it has been reported that there was an understanding in favour of accepting the workers' demands. The trouble shooting mechanism should have been activated well before things went out of control. But no such move was made until the workers turned violent. Why the same lapse over and over again?

However, the workers' decision to swoop on vehicles and pedestrians was highly reprehensible, which would only lessen the sympathy that people have for them. Obviously, flaws and irregularities in management cannot be countered by taking the wrath out on other people.

The RMG sector is too important to be left to callous and insensitive management or violence-prone workers. The government has to ensure strict compliance of the industry owners with the tripartite agreement and even seek an improvement in these days of economic hardship while the workers kept their sanity in tact.

Army's no to dialogue participation welcome

The issue should not have been raised at all

WE welcome the unambiguous statement from army headquarters regarding the absence of any desire on the part of the military to be part of the negotiations between the government and the political parties. The statement, made in the light of some recent statements by politicians and speculations in the media, strengthens our collective belief in the need for the armed forces to remain absolutely professional. We are heartened at the fact that the army, a vital component of our security structure and now providing crucial support to the caretaker government, has acknowledged such professionalism as its priority. In other words, the statement is further strengthening of the reality that the institutions of the state must necessarily be administered by an elected civilian authority and so provide added substance to democratic governance in Bangladesh.

Even as we appreciate the position taken by the army, we fail to understand why the issue of military participation in the planned dialogue between the government and the political parties needed to be raised at all. It is indeed extremely surprising that a politician of Mr. Suranjit Sengupta's experience and acumen should have thought it necessary to propose that the army be part of the dialogue process. A few other politicians across the spectrum took up the refrain, conveniently forgetting the fact that such calls not only embarrass the army itself but also, and more importantly, undermine the concept as well as reality of civilian authority over the institutions of the state. In the past, we have seen our political classes expressing their unwillingness to allow any action (read that as military involvement in politics) that can leave democracy frayed at the edges. And yet some of them have now raised a highly sensitive political issue with hardly a thought to the repercussions of their action in the public arena. Truth be told, it was preposterous and at the same time scandalous of Mr. Sengupta to raise the issue when the national goal is a holding of proper, free and transparent general elections and a transfer of power to an elected government.

Such bizarre workings of political minds cannot but leave the country in a state of confusion. But now that we have a clear statement from the army on the issue, we feel the sagacity demonstrated by the military stands out for a round of appreciation. Let Mr. Sengupta and others like him keep their mouths shut on issues whose implications they do not seem to understand.

Public diplomacy

Public diplomacy differs from traditional diplomacy, which remains engaged in dialogues and negotiations on bilateral and regional matters with foreign governments and multilateral fora. Public diplomacy seeks to promote national interests and spread the policy of the government beyond the periphery of traditional diplomacy.

MOHAMMAD AMJAD HOSSAIN

THE officers of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on the basis of political guidelines and constitutional provisions of the country formulate foreign policy. Diplomats working in different missions are instructed to carry out the policies. Diplomatic work generally is divided into three categories: representation, reporting, and negotiations.

On the other hand, public diplomacy has assumed importance in the 21st century in promoting the image of the country. The United States has attached high importance to it because of its (US's) shattered image around the world. The United States has a problem in far too many parts of the world.

The editor of the prestigious Foreign Affairs Journal, James F. Hoge, has identified these problems. In a speech at John Hopkins University in 2004, Hoge attributed the growing anti-American feeling to the administration's activities in Iraq and its support of the Sharon government in Israel.

Dean Edmund Gullion of the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University first used public diplomacy in 1965.

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tional diplomacy.

The main purpose of public diplomacy of the Bush administration is to interact with different strata of society, particularly in Muslim dominated countries, in the third world where there is a lack of understanding of the policies of the American administration. The Bush administration has emphasised public diplomacy to bring about changes in the attitude of the people -- in the Middle East or in South East Asia or Africa -- towards the United States.

The administration has been focusing on establishing contact with the younger generation and religious leaders to encourage them to embrace American values, and reaching out to a wider audience with broad policy information as well as specific US initiatives abroad.

An under-secretary of state heads public diplomacy in the State Department. It appears that the Bush administration's public diplomacy did not produce the desired results under Karen Hugh, a friend of the president, who left her job under criticism by the media on her failure in the Middle East and in Muslim countries, where she met hostile audiences angrily challenging US policies.

For the most part, diplomats from Bangladesh concentrate on reporting developments in the country they are stationed in, as well as the network of events hosted by foreign diplomats and the ceremonial functions of the host country. As representatives of their countries, they are responsible not only for making views of the government known to

that country but also for ensuring that the Bangladesh government knows and understands the policies of the host country on political, economic and commercial aspects.

The most important part they play is projecting the opinion of the government they represent on bilateral, regional and international affairs.

In the Bangladesh context, there is no scope for expressing dissent if the policy of the government does not suit the mentality of the diplomat, whereas diplomats in the United Kingdom or United States are free to express their opinions on policy matters. For example, the consul general of the United States in East Pakistan wrote dissenting notes to the State Department during the War of Liberation. As a result, he was forced to return to the United States.

In the case of Bangladesh, a diplomat in the mission could not dare to differ with the ambassador, who is empowered to do anything he likes in his domain. A diplomat in foreign mission should be thoroughly knowledgeable about what is happening in the political, economic, social, and cultural sector of the country he is posted in.

Since 2001, I have had the privilege of visiting the Bangladesh Embassy in Washington DC many times. The embassy remains busy holding national day functions, and receptions in connection with the visits of VIP from Bangladesh. Recently, I find that there has been a change in the attitude of the newly appointed ambassador, Muhammad Humayun Kabir, who is relatively new in the

diplomatic arena.

Generally, the senior-most foreign service officer, or a political appointee, is picked as ambassador to the United States. But the present ambassador appears to be dynamic and prefers to play public diplomacy along with traditional diplomacy. I observed that there has been a significant shift in the approach of the embassy.

The Bangladesh Embassy in Washington DC arranged for the first time -- in cooperation with a non-government organisation, Dristpat -- an open air multi-cultural soiree at the Dupont Circle Park on February 21 to commemorate International Mother Language and Martyr's Day. It was a chilly day, but the diverse audience enjoyed the music of Bluegrass from the United States, Bahasa from Indonesia, Flamenco from Spain, traditional Andean songs of Peru, patriotic Bangladeshi songs, and dances from Nepal, Indonesia, and Egypt.

Ambassador Kabir gave a brief background of the language movement, which turned out to be symbolic. Mrs. Judith Terra, Washington DC's Commissioner for Arts and Culture paid tribute to the embassy for spreading the message and spirit of the day to diverse communities in the District of Columbia, while Virginia Williams, mother of the ex-mayor of DC, expressed gratitude for attending such a function.

The function was aimed at disseminating the historical fact of the language movement to a wider audience. The US Post Office brought out commemorative stamp to mark this occasion as a result of the persuasions of Bangladeshi-Americans. Similar efforts by expatriate Bangladeshis bore fruit when Arlington County in Virginia adopted February 21 as Mother Language Day.

There was good news, which

relates to a declaration by Governor Martin O'Malley of the State of Maryland to proclaim March 26th as Bangladesh National Day in Maryland. These are positive developments for Bangladesh as a result of public diplomacy.

The Embassy also participated in a pitha utshob (home-made cakes festival) sponsored by Bangladesh Center for Community Development Incorporated (BCCDI). BCCDI is running a Bangla school in Virginia, and promotes Bangladeshi culture. As many 18 people made the pithas for the utshob.

Ambassador Kabir inaugurated this one-day event. On another occasion, Bangladesh Embassy Women's Association, in cooperation with the hospitality and information service -- a Washington based non-profit volunteer organisation -- presented Bangladeshi cultural heritage with particular focus on saris. This American organisation intends to promote friendship and foster stronger ties with nations around the world.

Pahela Baishak brings a message of goodwill and hope for the future, which, in fact, heralds the arrival of Bangla New Year in a mood of festivity. It was observed by the Bangladesh embassy with a colourful cultural function and tasty food and pithas. The hall was jammed. The presence of a huge number of expatriate Bangladeshi-Americans reflects the public relation efforts of the embassy. These efforts by the embassy have earned a good name in the community and among the Americans as well.

It was very interesting to note that the embassy also has an open invitation for Bangladeshi children to get to know their heritage and culture. It is noteworthy that the embassy has published an online newsletter entitled Vibrant Bangladesh. It cov-

ers the activities of the embassy and important developments in the country for the benefit of Bangladeshi communities as well the policy makers of the host country.

The ambassador is compiling a database of expatriate Bangladeshi-Americans for the first time. To cultivate expatriate Bangladeshis, who are informal ambassadors to the country they now live in, is an important work of the embassy. Compilation of a comprehensive list of policy makers, think-tank organisations, journalists, business communities and lobbyists of the host government has also been undertaken. The efforts of the embassy to engage in public diplomacy are laudable indeed.

Other Bangladesh embassies may replicate the good work of the Washington embassy to promote greater interests and goodwill of the Bangladeshi people. Bangladesh diplomats have to make an extra effort to communicate with, listen to, and engage with not only traditional audiences but also with audiences to whom they previously had not given as much effort and time. Bangladesh diplomats must move beyond the walls of embassies and offices, and into communities of the host countries to promote public diplomacy.

In the absence of people's representatives, traditional diplomacy makes no sense. When the country has been passing through critical political and economic conditions, and is being governed in a vacuum, public diplomacy matters in projecting the image of the country in the cultural arena in particular. Investments in public diplomacy will certainly benefit the national interests of the Bangladeshi people and the government.

Mohammad Amjad Hossain, former Bangladesh diplomat writes from Virginia.

Open economy, not corridors and transit

Liberal economic borders with India would be beneficial but have to be negotiated by the government. Transit or corridors would be difficult to manage and will not remove hatred and suspicions, but may increase them to newer heights. Borderless economies do not mean that Bangladeshi people would have no businesses.

NIZAM AHMAD

THROUGHOUT economic history, particularly recently, nations and people have found more benefits from free and open economies than from closed and isolated ones. Nevertheless, such economic knowledge seems to have been rejected in Bangladesh.

A significant number of people are unbending against the opening, or liberalisation, of our economic borders and ports, fearing that such an opportunity will benefit India's political economy. It will cripple, as they say, our infant industries and threaten our national security. They refuse to consider the benefits the people of Bangladesh will miss, or sacrifice, if their dreadful campaign succeeds in blocking economic progress.

After the 1965 war, General Ayub Khan, Pakistan's dictator, had closed our water, air, and rail connections with India. Before that war, the people of Bangladesh, then East Pakistan, had enjoyed easy travel and trade with India. Many believe that the closing of socio-economic links with India indirectly heightened people's support for Bangabandhu's economic agenda that he made in 1966.

The shutting down of links between India and East Pakistan

may have obliquely affected our socio-economic interest that quietly turned into a rising resentment against Ayub's rule and, eventually, sealed the fate of one Pakistan in 1971.

Napoleon Bonaparte met his Waterloo when he, to wreck England's economy, imposed his Continental System, barring English ships from docking at continental European ports. That imperial decision had an opposite reaction. It impoverished the people of the continent by depriving them of their trading opportunities. Napoleon soon became unpopular throughout Europe, the Europe that had once greeted him as a liberator. Such is the consequence of policies that dares to disrupt natural socio-economic interests and linkages of the people.

Erecting economic borders not only exacerbates poverty but also creates suspicion and hatred between countries. Neighbours like France and Germany had fought each other for more than 1,100 years. Mutual fear and acrimony triggered their wars, and no war was the last, or solved anything.

Friendship and trust between France and Germany only developed through economic interdependence when the "Monnet" concept, after Jean Monnet of France, dismantled the economic

borders of France and Germany after World War II. France and Germany had fought more than 200 battles in the past, but wars between them became impossible with open economies that initially began with two of their most important commodities steel and coal.

The European Union (EU) is built on the "Monnet" concept and, today, has more than twenty European countries constituting a borderless economy in all products and services.

The late Chinese legend Zhou Enlai had said that China and Japan had "a 2000 year friendship and 50 year antagonism." Japan and China re-established their economic ties in 1972, and Japan now replaces USA as the number two trading and economic partner of China. Vested economic interests brought peace and understanding between those who had once despised and fought each other. Similarly, economic interdependence between China and Taiwan strengthened their relationship despite unfinished political issues between them.

Many people in Bangladesh abhor neighbouring India, or distant Pakistan. Monnet's borderless economies can turn hatred and suspicion into friendship, and deliver far-reaching economic benefits for the people of Saarc. How

to End Wars Forever, a book by libertarian Aslam Effendi of Pakistan, asserts that the existing condition of suspicion between India and Pakistan would only disappear if their economic boundaries were abolished. As a defence policy, it is not guerrilla warfare, militarisation, or a continuous campaign of hatred; but a policy of economic interdependence that is unfailing and supreme.

Bangladesh's bilateral relation with India is without the big military factor, as with Pakistan and India, but there is a deep suspicion and hatred. Bangladesh's failed rendezvous with socialism and the unworkable government economic control that continues until today, never promoted sound domestic economies or natural economic interdependence beyond our borders. We were, and are, a closed and controlled economy; therefore, suspicion, distrust, and conspiracy theories are widespread.

People are fearful, or had fear instilled in them, of having open economies, believing that Indian goods would flood our markets or, as a bigger military power, would swamp and plunder our country for economic gain. Such apprehension will only go when borderless economies between the two are unfurled. Bangladesh can become as prosperous as any nation in EU, but only if politicians and think-tanks cast off their fears that they invent, or exploit.

Liberal economic borders with India would be beneficial but have to be negotiated by the government. Transit or corridors would be diffi-

cult to manage and will not remove hatred and suspicions, but may increase them to newer heights. Borderless economies do not mean that Bangladeshi people would have no businesses. Firstly, only those goods for which there is a demand or a preference would enter.

In order to buy Indian goods, the people of Bangladesh must produce something the Indians require, or else we will not have the purchasing power to buy any goods of our choice. Maybe, we will buy Indian goods with the income of what we sell to Pakistan, or to the US.

Furthermore, a deficit in trade does not necessarily mean it is a bad state of affairs. As a household, we are in perpetual deficit with our grocery stores and with our utility service providers. We are happy to spend our money in the shops and to pay for the services provided. But, what do the shops or the supplier of electricity buy from us? They buy nothing, yet that is sound economy for every household. The same is true for a country. No country, household, or person is independent but, by nature, interdependent. Economic interdependencies will not jeopardise, but promote and safeguard, our national interest. An open economy will largely satisfy our demands.

Bangladesh's seaports are its great economic strength. A busy, modern port would generate numerous economic activities, hence, national wealth. The use of our roads, rivers, air, and rail by India, Bhutan, or Nepal is in our

national interest, as that would give us the income to consume goods that would be cheaper or better, or simply to assert our right to buy something foreign.

Economic freedom, property rights, rule of law, environmental laws, least taxes, sound money, and limited government regulation are the underlying conditions for national prosperity, investments, enterprise, employment, production, and the competition with imported products or services in Bangladesh, or in markets abroad. In such an arrangement, the people of Bangladesh will not lose, but thrive and stand to gain enormously.

During the War of Independence in 1971, Bangladesh's border with India was completely open for almost a year. Anyone could cross over and migrate to India. However, despite the war in progress, only 10 percent of the population crossed over to India, and that, too, temporarily.

People simply do not cross a border because it is open, unless they have something to exchange, or offer, on a voluntary basis. Only militaries cross and plunder, and they do, when borders remain shut. Think of EU, and how people there live in peace and prosperity without borders and without fears. It is time Bangladesh realises this truth, and opens its economic precincts to the world for our prosperity. Let us be the first to do so in Saarc, for others to follow.

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Freedom of expression, access, and empowerment

As a commitment to remove all obstacles to press freedom, improve the conditions for independent and professional journalism, and to empower citizens to engage in public debate, no one should restrict or attack the freedom of the press or compromise the right of the news media to gather, produce, and disseminate information in secure and safe conditions.

RIPAN KUMAR BISWAS

WHILE celebrating the 60th anniversary of the World Press Freedom Day, like many other individuals, organisations, government agencies, and media groups, Unesco paid tribute to the courage and professionalism of the many journalists and media professionals killed and wounded while carrying out their professional activities by dedicating this day to the themes of "empowerment and access to information."

"Press freedom and access to information feed into the wider development objective of empowering people by giving people the information that can help them gain control over their own lives. This empowerment supports

participatory democracy by giving citizens the capacity to engage in public debate and to hold governments and others accountable," said Koichiro Matsuura, Director-General of Unesco, on the eve of the World Press Freedom Day 2008.

Quoting from Article 19 of the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, which asserts "freedom of expression is a fundamental human right," he further added that press freedom and freedom of information were the basic principles for good governance, development, and peace.

There is some debate over which publication was the first newspaper because the definition of a newspaper has been flexible. In the English-speaking world, Nathaniel Butter is often credited with the creation of the

first news periodical in 1622.

The first newspaper in the American colonies, titled *Publick Occurrences*, was published in Boston, Massachusetts on September 25, 1690. (It was only published once, so it is doubtful if it can be called a newspaper.) But its contents greatly offended those in power and caused such a public uproar that it was immediately discontinued after the one issue. *Publick Occurrences* was the forerunner of a new time, and, in the 1700s, newspapers began to spring up in the American colonies.

Today's media, with the help of technological advances, reaches more people in more places, allows people to share their opinions more readily, and allows information to flow across borders.

Throughout the world, May 3

serves as an occasion to inform the public of violations of the right to freedom of expression and as a reminder that many journalists brave death or jail to bring people their daily news.

But the bitter truth is, according to the end-of-year analysis of the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), 64 journalists were killed in 2007 in direct connection with their work up from 56 last year while the other 22 deaths are under investigation as to whether they were work-related. This makes 2007 the deadliest year for the press in more than a decade. CPJ has recorded only one year with a higher death toll -- 1994 -- when 66 journalists were killed, many in conflicts in Algeria, Bosnia, and Rwanda. For the fifth straight year, Iraq was the deadliest country in the world for the press. Its 31 victims account for nearly half of the 2007 toll.

Knowledge of empowerment is not a luxury, it's a necessity. It is not self-sustaining; it needs to be learned and passed down from generation to generation. Everyone has to know the country's

founding principles, how the institutions came into being, how they work, and what the rights and responsibilities are.

Empowerment is a multi-dimensional social and political process that helps people gain control over their own lives. This can only be achieved through access to accurate, fair and unbiased information representing a plurality of opinions, and the means to actively communicate vertically and horizontally, thereby participating in the active life of the community. Here's why the media is so valuable.

The media is an essential component of a democratic society as access to a free, independent and pluralistic media is essential for gaining awareness of the issues that matter, both nationally and internationally. Empowerment of community members relies on access to diverse media outlets; however, several factors affect the extent to which the media can empower its citizens media variety, the existence of professional standards, and access to new technology.

Since the closure of Public

Occurrences, and the framing of a constitution for the National Press Club in America, on March 29, 1908 -- by 32 newspaper men to uphold freedom of expression, the media has often faced threats, intimidation, and actual violence as a direct result of their work throughout the world. These unconscionable acts impede the free flow of accurate and reliable information that underpins good governance and democracy.

A democracy is only as good as the knowledge of the people who are part of it. The more the people remember the past, the better off they are the stronger they are. The term "freedom of expression" in any constitution in the world asserts that without the free flow of information and "truth" disseminated by different media, the future of democracy would be threatened. But tests, surveys, and facts are showing the lack of freedom of expression worldwide.

The decline in freedom, as reported in "Freedom in the World 2008," an annual survey of political rights and civil liberties

worldwide, was reflected in reversals in one-fifth of the world's countries. Most pronounced in South Asia, it also reached significant levels in the former Soviet Union, the Middle East, North Africa, and sub-Saharan Africa.

A substantial number of politically important countries whose declines have broad regional and global implications including Russia, Pakistan, Kenya, Egypt, Nigeria, and Venezuela were affected.

A number of Asia's most important countries, many on the Indian subcontinent, suffered setbacks in freedom during 2007. Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka all experienced downturns due to increased restrictions on civil society and, in three of the four cases, increased military activity. Declines were also noted in the Philippines, Burma, and Malaysia. Freedom of expression was being attacked in those countries.

No journalist was killed for his work in 2007 in Bangladesh and there was a sharp decrease in the

number of journalists physically attacked or receiving death threats or warnings from political militants or criminals, though arrests increased markedly, with almost 40 cases in 2007.

While some assert that the media is now the parliament in the absence of a government formed by elections, it is very clearly guided by the existence of censorship, according to the Bangladesh Centre for Development, Journalism and Communication (BCDJC), a Reporters Without Borders partner organisation.

As a commitment to remove all obstacles to press freedom, improve the conditions for independent and professional journalism, and to empower citizens to engage in public debate, no one should restrict or attack the freedom of the press or compromise the right of the news media to gather, produce, and disseminate information in secure and safe conditions.

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