

Violence amongst RMG workers

Get to the bottom of it to resolve the issue

THE smouldering discontent among the garment workers manifested itself once more on Tuesday, as the workers clashed with the police in Gazipur, and ransacked 10 factories, leaving 50 people injured.

The trouble was triggered by a rumour that three workers of a factory, who had fallen sick, died in a hospital. The workers were driven to frenzied action by the rumour and did not even bother to check whether it had any basis. And the violence that they resorted to proves that they are ready to pounce on anything going against their perceived self interest, not guided by logic in this instance.

Obviously, the owners and the workers in the country's premier foreign exchange earning sector have failed to converge on a point where mistrust and misgivings would make way for a sound and professional owner-worker relationship. Labour unrest threatens to destroy discipline and order in the sector, which in the long run will cost the nation dearly.

While there is absolutely no doubt that the workers rights have to be established, it is equally important that they refrain from subversive activities which have already caused great damage to the industry. What is particularly worrying is that even the factories which comply with the provisions of the tripartite agreement are being targeted. This obviously smacks of foul play, if not a conspiracy.

The owners have to get to the bottom of the labour unrest in order to find a durable solution. Some pertinent questions need to be answered to have a better understating of the situation prevailing in the sector. Why do the workers turn so violent? Are the demonstrations spontaneous or prompted by the subversive elements having ulterior motives? The workers agitate to press home their demands. That is normal in any industrial setting. But when they are aroused to violent action by rumours, some of which sound ridiculous, there is reason to be worried.

The BGMEA has to play a greater role in defusing tension in the factories. The latest outbreak of violence does suggest that there might be issues, apart from the workers' wages and other benefits, which have to be dealt with efficiently. The BGMEA should work on developing a strategy to ensure better understanding between the owners and the workers.

The government's directive to the law enforcers to handle the matter with an iron hand is understandable. But the principles of fairness and justice have to be upheld under all circumstances. The workers must get their due, while the owners must not fall victim to vandalism.

Ramadan price rise

There is much the government can still do

IN a market economy, where it cannot simply mandate a maximum retail price for products, there are limits to what the government can do to address the issue of price rise of essentials. Nevertheless, through regulation, incentives, and ensuring that the law is followed, there is still plenty that a government can do to rein in runaway prices.

In the context of Bangladesh, the principal problem stems from the fact that some 70-80 per cent of essentials are still imported and this import dependence, not only makes the country vulnerable to price rises in the global market, but also creates opportunity for collusive and monopolistic practices among unscrupulous syndicates of importers.

The solution here is to create an environment conducive for new players, a new generation of importers to enter the market and correct the inefficiency. If the import barriers to entry are eased and not the sole possession of a relative handful of powerful actors, we should see more price competition for imported goods.

Similarly, when it comes to the differential between wholesale and retail price of domestically produced goods, the solutions are to break the monopoly of the existing syndicates and interfering rings of middlemen through dispersal of marketing centres whereby the growers and consumers will be brought into a more direct relationship. The government can do a lot to diversify the supply chain, ease the entry of new retailers and to ensure that they are not shut out.

Finally, with Ramadan upon us, the government needs to expand programs such as TCB operation and OMS, which though they will have no impact on the aggregate price of goods, are nevertheless necessary as they provide relief for those at the bottom of the economic scale.

Even in a market economy there is much that a government can do to ensure that the market mechanism works to deliver essentials to people at an affordable price. Where there is inefficiency in the market, there is opportunity for correction.

Keeping Kuwait clean with Bangladeshi money

STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING

We seem to have got our priorities wrong, for to me these poor workers that break their backs, and suffer the worst form of indignity to provide for my comfort at home and the foreign exchange to travel abroad, from whom we turn our face away in the most supercilious manner when approached at the airport by one of them to fill in their disembarkation card for them, are the ones who merit being at the top of the list of CIPs.



Brig Gen
SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN
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NOT only in Kuwait do our workers have to pay their employers -- instead of getting paid -- for their labour. This is a stark reality, and it is so in many of the countries of the Middle East which employ Bangladeshi workers. This has been known to everybody, except the unsuspecting migrant workers seeking greener pastures in distant lands -- only to find themselves cheated -- by the combined contrivance of the manpower agents in Bangladesh and the employers in the receiving countries.

Only recently has the plight of our workers in this country got extensive media coverage. But one wonders whether there has been enough commotion for people at the right places to get motivated enough to address their problems in earnest. It is a comforting fact that the Foreign Affairs adviser is in Kuwait, welcomed to that country almost two months after the first batch of Bangladeshi workers returned home, battered and bruised at the hands of Kuwait

policemen, for demanding their rightful due. They were not even accorded the minimum human dignity to collect their personal belongings before being repatriated.

It could be said that the travails of our workers in Kuwait are fairly representative of the troubles that our workers face in some of the other Middle East countries.

The day they land in the receiving country they sign, what has come to be known as, the "slavery bond." They are taken to an accommodation whose condition is little better than a pigsty, kept in the most inhuman conditions, barricaded like animals, and, after having had all their papers taken away by the employer, made to sign on the dotted lines of documents whose substance none of them understands. They become no better than a bonded labourer.

Most of the domestic workers and cleaners in Kuwait are Bangladeshi and that is why there is good deal of truth in the comment that in one sense Kuwait is being kept clean with Bangladeshi

money.

It is unimaginable that for all these years we have been exporting manpower to a country where there was no fixed rate of pay for the category of workers that we were sending. There was no minimum wage law except for domestic workers, which was KD 48, and even in those cases it was not possible for anyone to ensure or verify whether the domestic workers were being paid as required by law. For all the other categories of workers so many different charges, which the employers are supposed to pay to the state from their pocket, were deducted from whatever was due to them as "pay" that very little was left for the workers to send home. The employers are supposed to deposit pay of the workers in the bank. While that is being done, most of the employers take away the bank card forcefully from the Bangladeshi workers.

One wonders whether the concerned officials are aware of the situation. And one wonders whether the government of Kuwait has done enough to prevent our

workers being victimised? While one agrees that our workers should always respect the law of the countries they are working in, is it not for the receiving countries to ensure that the foreign workers are not cheated?

There are about 12,000 female workers in Kuwait, of whom about 4,500 work in the private sector (mostly in schools), and the less said about their plight the better. Employment of female workers as domestic help has been stopped for now. In fact it should never be allowed, for in many of these countries these women are treated worse than in the days of Jahiliyat.

And as for those women that are employed in schools, all the schools in Kuwait remain closed for three months of the year, and during this period they are not paid anything. What are the avenues open to a woman left to fend for herself for three months of the year? And we accepted these conditions of service without comprehending the consequences of such an occupation. Was there nobody to see the hell that these unfortu-

nate women were being pushed into for the sake of a few dollars?

It is also a fact that some of our workers in these countries have resorted to illegal ways of income. Trading in false passports is one such activity, and there are several such occupation that they take up to supplement their income particularly after having become "illegal," and making foreign workers illegal is another "trade" of some of the employers.

It's time to lodge a coordinated thrust against exploitation of our workers abroad. There are several parties to this. It starts with the manpower agents at home (perhaps human traffickers is a more appropriate adjective), who indulge in the most unethical competition of sending workers abroad at the cheapest rate, and the employers at the receiving end that cheat these workers by exploiting their ignorance, the existing rule or the absence of one, and the utter inability of the concerned ministries in Bangladesh to address the plight of the expatriate workers. There is perhaps nexus between recruiting agents and some government agencies too, since in one case almost three and half times more workers were sent to one Middle East country than the number of visas attested by our embassy there.

Considering that our workers abroad contribute more money to our foreign exchange coffers than any one single sector of the economy it pains to see the raw deal that they are getting. About the time when our workers were getting

bashed up in Kuwait and not a word of protest from our side except for a muted whimper, it was quite a contrast to see the government honouring some expatriate Bangladeshis as CIPs for having invested over one million dollars each in the US Dollar Premium Bond and US Dollar Investment Bond introduced by the government.

While the contribution of these gentlemen cannot be slighted and they certainly deserve the status of a CIP, the ostentation that accompanied the conferring ceremony at the Osmany Auditorium appeared extremely incongruous given that many of those on whose contribution of more than eight billion dollars to our foreign exchange keep us going, were facing the most horrendous experience in a foreign country at that time.

We seem to have got our priorities wrong, for to me these poor workers that break their backs, and suffer the worst form of indignity to provide for my comfort at home and the foreign exchange to travel abroad, from whom we turn our face away in the most supercilious manner when approached at the airport by one of them to fill in their disembarkation card for them, are the ones who merit being at the top of the list of CIPs. And it is to their wellbeing that the government must attend with the greatest of sincerity and utmost urgency.

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Economics and ecology of dirty energy

The question is, what happens after 2030? Nuclear energy is, by far, the most promising alternative, given that the development of other renewable energy sources faces the challenge of providing sufficient amounts of electricity to be a meaningful contributor toward decreasing the world's growing power shortages.

ABDULLAH DEWAN and ALBEE HAQUE

THE power that lights our houses and streets, runs factories equipment is clean. What is dirty or controversial is what produces it.

The shortage of electricity has made people's day-to-day living unbearable. Worse still is the looming threat of further shortages, unless new gas fields are discovered soon (estimated gas supply is short by 10% of the estimated 2 trillion cubic feet).

The current installed capacity of electricity generation in the national grid is just over 5,200 MW, in addition to about 1,800 MW being harnessed by various industrial plants for their internal use.

These factory need-based private power generating plants -- of 100 KW to 10/15 MW capacity -- are installed to circumvent supply disruption from the national grid. The actual power available at peak hours (6pm to 11pm) is around 3,500 MW, which falls short of the peak demand of nearly 5,000 MW.

To offset this shortage and also keep pace with increasing demands, the energy source that is fast raising its ugly head in policy discourses and design is coal -- environmentally the most unfriendly alternative -- the dirtiest of all energy sources.

The Draft Coal Policy (August 13 article by Sharier Khan) on "Mine Bangla Proposal" -- much to our consternation -- fails to show serious concern about the havoc caused to the soil, life forms and surrounding vegetation, by open-pit coal (OPC) mining.

The most economical technique

of coal extraction depends on the depth and quality of the seams, and also on the geology and environmental factors of the area being mined. The extraction process can operate on the surface, called surface mining (also open-pit or opencast mining), or underground.

Most coal seams are too deep underground, inhibiting OPC mining. That is why underground mining accounts for about 60% of world coal production. However, we're concerned here about OPC mining in Phulbari, and its environmental fallout.

When coal seams are near the surface, it becomes relatively economical to extract coal using opencut, or strip mining. The method exposes the coal by the advancement of an open pit or strip. The earth above the coal seam(s) is called overburden.

The mining is done by drilling holes into a strip of overburden. The drilled holes are then filled with explosives and blasted. The dislodged overburden is then removed and placed into the previously mined (and now empty) strip. When all the overburden is removed, the underlying coal seam will be exposed as a strip known as a "block." This block of coal may be drilled and blasted (if hard), or otherwise transported to the coal preparation (or wash) plant. Once this strip is empty of coal, the process is repeated with a new strip next to it.

Although OPC mining is more productive than underground mining, the method is unappealing because it can cover many square kilometers -- which would invariably contaminate a vast area of arable land and the surroundings.

OPC mining is considered an extremely disruptive human intervention to natural soil conditions, which changes the topology and disrupts the ecosystems. The adverse ecological and human health impact of OPC extraction renders it both economically and environmentally dangerous.

The danger of OPC mining is from fly ash -- a by-product of the combustion of coal. Coal also contains toxic trace metals such as arsenic, chromium, nickel, lead, mercury and zinc and, when burned, many of these metals can concentrate in the fly ash, sometimes reaching levels of 100 times the concentration found in coal itself.

These metals can leach from fly ash accumulated via atmospheric deposition, or when illegally dumped in local ponds/rivers, and cause toxic metal pollution in sediments.

National leaders of the mineral resources and port protection committee had rightly opined -- on May 30, 2006 -- that food security in the district would be affected if the coal in Phulbari was extracted by OPC mining method. They warned that about 40 square miles in four upazilas in the district would be spoiled in the process (DS May 31, 2006).

Phulbari has reserves of at least 572 million tonnes of coal. If the government goes for extraction, it will last for 30 years and about 50,000 people will be relocated, according to officials of Asia Energy.

The law ministry's revision to the draft coal policy says: "Once the government acquires a piece of land, it can't be returned to the original owner." It then says: "The



Open pit coal mining.

government can, however, restore the land and allow its agricultural use." Aren't these self-contradictory and hypocritical statements, especially when it comes to doing agriculture by the government rather than returning the land to its original owners?

Restoring the land for agriculture isn't credible, based on existing experience and evidence. Restoration could never happen in a polluted piece of land or degraded wetlands; it is only mitigation that can occur in the aftermath. For example, Brownfield redevelopment project in Massachusetts, USA, which spent an enormous amount of money to clean up and reclaim the polluted industrial sites, is just one of numerous examples that could be considered for a serious case study by the proponents of "polluted land restoration."

From our research, we can safely contend that any assurance by the government to "restore the land

and allow its agricultural use" is not pragmatic -- in fact, it may prove deceptive and ruinous. Besides, where would the government get the huge amount of money for land restoration when money is needed for other pressing priorities? Our recommendations:

- Policy makers may look into the US Geological Society's unique design plan that provides information on water resources in 60 important river basins and aquifers across the country. Together, these areas account for 60% - 70% of the water served by public water supplies.
- The government mustn't dilly-dally in implementing the 6-point demand signed after the August 30, 2006 Phulbari carnage, squashing any suspicions of foreign conspiracy.

According to the Draft Coal Policy, the discovered coal fields of Barapukuria, Phulbari, Khalashpir, and Dighpara can cater to the 136 to 450 million ton (MT) need till

2030 or so to support a GDP growth rate of 5.5 to 8%.

The question is, what happens after 2030? Nuclear energy is, by far, the most promising alternative, given that the development of other renewable energy sources faces the challenge of providing sufficient amounts of electricity to be a meaningful contributor toward decreasing the world's growing power shortages.

At present, nuclear energy provides nearly a fifth of the world's electricity, without harmful by-products. Nearly 80% of France's energy source is nuclear. The clear, long-term salvation from energy shortage for Bangladesh is nuclear -- unquestionably (DS June 22, 2006, Nuclear energy -- Abdullah Dewan).

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Whither Thailand?

As riot police moved in, leaders of the People's Alliance for Democracy vowed to stay inside the Government House compound until Prime Minister Samak Sundaravej bowed to their demands to step down. "The protest has already developed into a people's revolution. I do believe that Samak is going to resign," protest leader Sondhi Limthongkul commented.

MD. MASUM BILLAH

THAILAND has been going through serious political turmoil for the last one week. On August 28, up to 35,000 demonstrators stormed a state-run television station, besieged at least three ministers, and finally invaded the grounds of Government House; stepping up a campaign to bring down Prime Minister Samak's administration.

The demonstrators remained in the Government House for six days. The Criminal Court has approved arrest warrants for nine people, as proposed by the police, including five People's Alliance Democracy

leaders.

The leaders face four charges, among which the most severe is treason. The premier, who was working from army headquarters, said that his approach would be soft and gentle and that police would simply surround the seat of government until everyone had left. "If we get arrested, please don't follow us to the detention centre. If you leave the government house that means we have been defeated," said the protest leaders to boost the morale of the protesters.

As riot police moved in, leaders of the People's Alliance for Democracy vowed to stay inside

the Government House compound until Prime Minister Samak Sundaravej bowed to their demands to step down. "The protest has already developed into a people's revolution. I do believe that Samak is going to resign," protest leader Sondhi Limthongkul commented.

Police have indicated that they will enter the compound to arrest the PAD member, but interior minister Kowit Wattana appeared to be holding out for a peaceful solution. "I ask the protestors of the PAD to please withdraw from the Government House compound immediately. You can rally somewhere else," he said. Despite gov-

ernment pleas, the threat of arrest, and even the onset of a tropical rainstorm, protest leaders refused to budge. "If you want to arrest us here, it is the government who must go," they said. Somsak Kosaisuk told the protesters, most of who were wearing yellow shirts, to show allegiance to revered King Bhumibol Adulyadej.

Correspondents saw hundreds of police, some with batons and shields, in the enclosure. The security forces appeared relaxed, watching the ongoing rally on the manicured lawns of the Government House.

Samak has won praise from Thailand's often-hostile English language press, with a poll showing that nearly 68 percent of Bangkok residents surveyed did not agree with the Government House siege.

They have broken the law and it could be a serious setback for them. The government has a lot of options. They still have time on their side. Some political analysts

pass their comments as the following: Regular and peaceful demonstration hardly allows and recognises the siege inside the country's presidential house. The protest leaders must not cross the democratic norms.

Since taking office, Samak has faced a series of setbacks. Court decisions forced three top government officials to resign. The ongoing PAD protest has sent the stock market down nearly 18 percent.

The alliance wants to force the government of Prime Minister Samak Sundaravej to step down, accusing it of corruption and of serving as a proxy for former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra who was ousted in a 2006 coup and faces several corruption cases.

After Thaksin was deposed in the bloodless coup, his party was dissolved and he was banned from public office until 2012. But Samak led Thaksin's political allies to a December 2007 election victory, and their assumption of power

triggered fears that Thaksin would make a political comeback.

Thaksin still remains popular with the country's rural majority. It is said that he brought a revolutionary change in rural Thailand through various welfare steps for the farmers.

But the corruption, particularly in telephone companies, led him to face the present exile. The protesters say that Western-style democracy has allowed corruption to flourish in Thailand. They want a new government, with a parliament in which most of the lawmakers would be appointed and only thirty percent elected. Thaksin, who fled to self-imposed exile in Britain, faces an array of corruption charges.

The Chart Thai Party, a key member of Samak's six-party ruling coalition, said it was ready to suggest that Samak step down. The Thai parliament convened an emergency meeting on August 31 at the request of the prime minis-

ter, who understood and acknowledged that the administration could not control the spiralling anti-government protest.

Samak's People's Power Party said it planned to present a compromise in parliament to appease thousands of protesters who had remained in the President House till sixth day of their siege.

Samak's six-party coalition government controls more than two-thirds of the seats in the 480-seat lower house. The coalition partners also say that the situation was deteriorating and that they were thinking of telling the prime minister to decide on the future of the government. But Samak Sundaravej is still adamant not to bow down to public will. He says that he can restore law and order in the country, despite protests spreading from Bangkok to the other regions and forcing three airports to close. At one point he angrily asked the protestors: "Who do you want as your next leader?"

Do you think that somebody will reward you or honour you?"

Bhumibol is the constitutional monarch of Thailand with no formal political role, but has repeatedly brought calm in times of turbulence during his 60 years on the throne.

Probably, this time also, he is going to play a heroic role. The country's influential army commander, General Anupong Paochinda rejected a request by Samak on August 30 to declare a state of emergency. Anupong has vowed that they army will not intervene, and has called for resolution of the crisis by political means.

It is indeed a good indication that the army does not want to embroil itself in the political turmoil of the country. It wants a people's government. That's good. It is time for Samak also to listen to what the people say.

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