

Employment in Middle East

Working conditions being streamlined

IN an otherwise gloomy scenario in the international labour market following the global economic downturn we can see a silver lining in the clouds as some countries in the Middle East hold out promise of lifting lid on employment and of reform in labour laws that would improve the working and living environment of our workers in these countries.

We are heartened by the news that the Malaysian government would soon start recruiting the 55,000 Bangladeshi workers it sent back and is also likely lift ban on employment of foreign workers.

Also recently, the Government of Bahrain has decided to do away with the sponsorship system for foreign laborers that had so long been used as an instrument of exploitation. An oppressive situation had often forced workers to flee their job and thus become illegal migrants. The Bahrain government, reportedly the first in the gulf region to do away with the sponsorship system, must be commended for acknowledging the human rights issue and taking timely step in this regard.

There are positive signs from Kuwait too that the country is likely to start fresh recruitment of workers from Bangladesh, which it had stopped doing in 2006. We consider the initiative to form joint committee of the two countries to deal with the recruitment process a positive step. We are confident that this body would be able to stop irregularities in the recruitment process and prevent exploitation of workers. Happily too, the Government of Kuwait has approved the facility for job transfer, offering opportunity to the workers to move to better jobs.

All these, coming in the wake of the Saudi government's decision to put an end to the misery of 2 million Bangladeshi workers by passing regulations allowing them to switch jobs, are good auguries. The government of Bangladesh should also be credited for playing a proactive role in these developments.

While these positive developments are most welcome we feel it essential to draw the attention of the government to the fact that a good part of the travails of our workers start from here at home. The government should ensure that the process of recruitment is made foolproof at our end. It must see to it that people, seeking employment abroad, do not fall victims of cheats. And with a little bit of effort the demand for our workers abroad can be multiplied by adding value to their work by appropriate training.

Falling billboards!

DCC owes an explanation to citizens

NINE policemen narrowly escaped a fatal accident on Sunday when a collapsing billboard was obstructed by a high voltage electric line and did not, mercifully, come down on them. This is the third billboard collapse in a week in the city. A young man had been crushed to death as a billboard fell on him near Zia International Airport on May 6. It was reportedly a case of the hoarding being flattened by a storm.

Such deaths and injuries caused by falling billboards are really hard to accept. The slightest concern for human life on the part of the agency in charge, the DCC to be precise, is missing here. The latest collapse was not caused by a strong wind, let alone a storm. It was a simple case of the billboard caving in, because it was not strong enough and there was nobody to check that its pillar had become very weak due to rusting.

The callousness and negligence of duty that such mishaps bring into light are indeed indescribable. The dangers associated with a huge structure falling on the roads or footpaths or live electric wires, as it happened in the latest case, need little elaboration. Yet, such accidents are taking place from time to time. And it is not clear what fault the citizens have committed that they will have to walk along the ruptured footpaths with big holes and awkwardly misplaced or protruding concrete blocks, with the danger of metallic boards coming down on them being always there.

The DCC, as usual, has its own defence, even though presence of such menacing billboards can hardly be defended. We are told that out of around 2,200 billboards in the city, the DCC's share is 485, while the rest belong to private owners. Many of the billboards on private buildings are reported to have been erected illegally. But the DCC has so far failed to do anything to put an end to the unlawful practice. What we feel is that even if it cannot force the building owners to go by the rule as far as installation of billboards is concerned, it must ensure that the safety factor is not ignored. It is a question of saving human lives, any hesitation or lack of stern action will lead to more deaths and injuries a truth that can no longer be overlooked.

Do we really need a large cabinet?

The caretaker governments in 1996 and 2001, with an eleven-member advisory council including the chief advisor, undoubtedly administered the country better than any party government.

M. ABDUL LATIF MONDAL

THE Daily Star of May 8 and a Bangla daily of May 9 carried reports, which said that Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina was planning to expand the cabinet soon. Quoting sources close to the prime minister, the reports said that the cabinet expansion might take place within a week, and if it did not happen immediately, then it might come ahead of the budget session in June.

At present there are 32 ministers including ministers of state. This excludes the six advisers to the prime minister, who hold the rank and status of ministers and been dubbed "super ministers" because of their close proximity to power.

Sources in the government and Awami League (AL) suggest that in order to bring dynamism and efficiency in government activities, the prime minister may go for expansion of the cabinet in the following way:

- Include some efficient AL and alliance leaders who have not got any cabinet post.
- Break up food and disaster management ministries into two ministries, and appoint a full minister for each.
- Appoint full ministers to the ministries of labour and employment, housing and public works, power, energy and mineral resources, women and children affairs, and cultural affairs.
- Appoint ministers of state and/or deputy ministers to the ministries of post and telecommunication, industry, commerce, communications and few others.

- Appoint two or three women lawmakers from reserved seats as ministers of state and deputy ministers.

If the above proposition is accepted, the number of ministers (according to the constitution, ministers include ministers of state and deputy ministers) will stand at forty plus. If we include the six advisers to the prime ministers, the number will be 50 or so. Will an expanded cabinet ensure dynamism and efficiency in the government activities?

A large cabinet is not a sine qua non for running the government dynamically and efficiently. In many countries including Bangladesh, a large cabinet has rather proved otherwise. We have seen how the jumbo cabinet of the four-party alliance government failed to run the government efficiently.

It may be recalled that on September 4, 2004, the then ruling and opposition lawmakers of the parliamentary committee on private members' bills and resolutions decided to table a bill brought by a Jatiya Party lawmaker, now a minister in the present cabinet, proposing amendment to the constitution for reducing the size of the cabinet.

The press was appreciative of the decision of the aforesaid parliamentary committee. The Daily Star's editorial of September 6, 2004 congratulated the committee for its decision to introduce a constitutional amendment to permanently fix the size of the cabinet, and expressed hope that the prime minister would give serious thought to the matter.

While congratulating the committee's decision to introduce the bill, the New Nation's editorial of September 6, 2004 said



Will a larger cabinet mean better performance?

that reduction of the size of the entire government, that is the cabinet and the permanent set-up of the government at all levels, had been a recommendation of the multilateral donors agencies.

Different quarters had also been extending support to the idea because a big portion of the national budget had to be spent to maintain the administrative staff to implement a development program for which not much resource was left in the budget.

The bill was not placed in the house due to the then government's unwillingness. However, if the spirit of that proposal is now taken into consideration, then the number of ministers, ministers of state and deputy ministers should not exceed thirty-five. The Rules of Business provide that where there is a minister of state/deputy minister, the prime minister or the minister-in-charge with the approval of the prime minister may specify the cases or classes of cases, which may be disposed of by the minister of state/deputy minister. But such instances

are very rare. This has been the bone of contention between the minister and the minister of state/ deputy minister since the early nineties.

A minister of state during the four-party alliance government did not attend office for months because he was not allocated any official work. A repetition of such an instance with a considerable number of ministers of state/deputy ministers in different ministries of the present government may take place.

The caretaker governments in 1996 and 2001, with an eleven-member advisory council including the chief advisor, undoubtedly administered the country better than any party government.

To conclude, a reasonably small cabinet consisting of efficient and honest persons can run the government activities more efficiently than a large cabinet composed of inefficient and corrupt persons.

M. Abdul Latif Mondal is a former Secretary to the Government.

Bangladesh way of democracy

The BNP chief went to the extent of threatening to launch a movement to dislodge the government because, to her, this government has failed to fulfill its election pledges. This indicates its lack of patience and strong desire to go back to confrontational politics.

A.B.M.S. ZAHUR

THOUGH Bangalees shed so much blood and fought an independence war for nine months, with the hope for attaining economic and political freedom, they have not been able to enjoy it. We always see hurdles after hurdles that deprive them of true democracy. After their successful struggle against the military regime of President Ershad, it was expected that democracy was going to be established. Unfortunately, that did not happen because our major political parties could not come to a mutual understanding in establishing democracy in the country.

The country remained under democratic rule from 1991 to 2006, and we saw the emergence of two major parties, AL and BNP. These parties, unfortunately, did not try to bring competition in politics. Instead,

they resorted to policies of confrontation, which proved detrimental to the development of democracy, particularly in establishing parliamentary democracy in Bangladesh.

After waiting for two years for an elected government we have regained democracy. The people of Bangladesh want to see a peaceful political scenario, and not a return of the confrontational politics that existed before 1/11.

It must be stated that our armed forces are in favour of setting up a democratic order. If the common men, armed forces, and civil society want democracy why should we again see confrontational politics which is causing so much suffering to our people and the country? We have, perhaps, no option but to point our fingers to some leading politicians who provoke political restlessness in the country.

On May 1 and 2, the AL and BNP held May Day meetings. Instead of speaking mainly on the welfare of the workers nationally and internationally, both the major parties tried to find faults in each other.

The BNP chief went to the extent of threatening to launch a movement to dislodge the government because, to her, this government has failed to fulfill its election pledges. This indicates its lack of patience and strong desire to go back to confrontational politics.

It is not correct to state that the AL-led government has not been able to fulfill its election commitments. On the contrary, the new government deserves credit for performing certain tasks, like reducing prices of food grains, edible oil, fertiliser and diesel oil, and introducing rationing system for RMG workers, processing the case relating to trial of war criminals, processing bilateral agreement with Russia for supply and installation of two 1000mw electricity generation plants, processing of case of Padma bridge, reopening of some closed government mills and factories for increasing employment, more vigorous effort to arrange employment for Bangladesh workers abroad, arranging implementation of recommendations of

education commissions to upgrade the quality of primary education and declaration of economic package to face possible shocks of the global economic melt down on Bangladesh.

By holding street demonstrations to pressurise the government, the BNP ultimately wants to push the government towards confrontation. With her long experience as PM Begum Zia must understand that the achievements of Sheikh Hasina are not mean in anyway, and further improvement in quality and speed of her work may be seen soon with the possible reshuffling and expansion of the cabinet.

For a good evaluation of the new government's performance more time is necessary.

The new government has been able to overcome some initial hurdles. Even though we are passing through the greatest economic depression in history, the government is doing its utmost to absorb any serious jolt in future with assistance from multilateral and other donors. In fact, we see some movement in almost all sectors. Speed of work will increase with passage of time. We wish success of the government.

A.B.M.S. Zahur is a former Joint Secretary.

Self-help in Bangladesh

*Love them;
Learn from them;
Plan with them;
Serve them;
Begin with what they have;
Build on what they know.
But of the best leaders
When their task is accomplished,
Their work is done,
The people all remark:*

--"We have done it Ourselves."

YUKIE YOSHIMURA

THIS is my favorite old Chinese verse and also has been my basis of development work. Every time I am touched by the overwhelming power of community people, I become more convinced with the truth and wisdom of this verse. My theory of community development has been endorsed by the people in Bangladesh ever since I came here four years ago. Through this writing, I want to share my precious experiences in the rural Bangladeshi community.

Most foreigners have a strong image of Bangladesh as a poor country and a major emergency relief recipient because of natural disasters. I admit I was one of them. When I traveled to different areas of Bangladesh, I saw the actual scenario. The remote rural areas are not much promising and the people themselves tell me: "Bangladesh is a poor country, please help us!" The people's dependency seemed so high that I felt myself depressed and powerless about making any meaningful changes in this country.

The experiences in Narsingdi district saved me from feeling desperate. I met the

members of community groups under the so-called Community Support System (CmSS). They look just like ordinary rural people, and the only difference is that they are impressively motivated and committed to the activities initiated by their own.

"Every time I saw or heard about a pregnant mother dying during delivery in our village I felt very sad, I even felt anger inside me. But, I never thought that we could do something about it." A farmer who was selected as a president of a community group enthusiastically told me his story. "But now we have learned how we can prevent the sad death of mother and child. Since we formed the group, we tried to raise funds to help poor pregnant women with complications to ensure their access to emergency care. We also hired rickshaw vans so that they could be carried to the hospital. We register all pregnant women and disseminate birth planning information to them, and accompany them if they need our assistance to go to the health facility. At present, we do not have any death cases in our village. We are confident that we can contribute to our community and be appreciated by our villagers. We are proud of ourselves!"

When I visited a backward area of Monohordi upazila, one old man approached me: "I lost my daughter a few weeks ago. It was heavy bleeding that killed my pregnant daughter. I knew that something wrong was happening to my child, and I consulted with a member of CmSS. He told me to take her to the hospital immediately, but I did not take his advice. When I finally took her, it was too late. If I knew that pregnancy could be life-threatening, I could have given better care to my daughter. Please, help the people learn about the risks



Learning to serve the community.

of pregnancy so we can avoid the death of pregnant women." It was obvious from the appearance of his house that he was quite well off, however, even though he had money he could not save his daughter's life due to ignorance about pregnancy risks.

We went to the people, and we found that they had the solutions. They know what is important for them. CmSS groups decided to establish their own Federation to empower themselves so that their voices were heard. The activities of CmSS groups have now expanded beyond health: they facilitated the construction of rural roads in their locality; they opened informal schools; they mediated domestic violence in their neighbourhoods, they stopped early marriage, and so on.

Their activities have been recognised

and supported by union and upazila authorities. The CmSS circle has been enlarged within and outside Narsingdi as well. Some leaders of the CmSS groups have become promoters of CmSS, and are getting requests from other villagers to teach them how to organise a group. There is a goal ahead of them, and I am excited to see how far CmSS can reach.

Finally, I am grateful to CmSS members personally for giving me an opportunity to learn about another face of Bangladesh and giving me the power to move on. The success of this country depends on the commitment of the people, and I hope that CmSS can grow as a social movement to stir up the potential of the community in Bangladesh.

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