

What ails the RMG sector?

The people believe that if the workers' genuine demands are properly addressed, this sector can retain its competitive edge. Merely talking about invisible enemies trying either to kill or cripple this industry without ever trying to nab them will serve no useful purpose.

MD. ASADULLAH KHAN

THE simmering discontent brewing over the reported sacking of some workers in the S. Suhi Sweater factory took a volatile turn on June 27 when the Ansars on duty fired at the agitating workers, killing two and injuring twenty-five on the first day of the violence. The clash ensued for three days and the demonstrators, many of them outsiders it is learnt, were inspired by a group of disgruntled jhoot traders who exploited this moment to establish their supremacy in the garments sector.

On the second day, agitated workers and outsiders numbering about 20,000 torched the Ha-Meem group factories. The agitators burned down several vehicles and vandalised 50 other factories on both sides of the Ashulia-Bypile road. According to reports, the maximum damage was done to Ha-Meem group factories and the loss, as the owner of the Ha-Meem group claims, will be to the tune of Tk.100 crore according to preliminary estimate.

The garments sector has been the target of attack for many people inimical to the interest of the country. People might recall the damage done to the garments sector by a series of vandalising

acts resorted to in 2006 by a sinister group. The discontent over non-fulfillment of the RMG workers' demand relating mainly to low salaries, overtime allowance, issuance of employment letter and confirmation in jobs, long overlooked by many factory owners, erupted into violence on May 23, 2006.

Strangely enough, it was a repetition of the May 2006 vandalism in the garments factories. The statement of the then state minister for home affairs that the administration at that time could not take action because of the dearth of law enforcers and lack of coordination among the forces was an attempt to hide facts and a serious lapse of governance. Reports allege that this time some Jubo League or Chatra League activists now employed in jhoot trade instigated the vandalism because of some conflict with the garments owners.

With the bitter experiences of the past incidents in the garment sector, people cannot agree with what the S.P. Dhaka district said, that they had "failed to sense that things could spiral out of control." With the improvement in the information gathering networks, people really committed to the profession should have got the message.

It was so intriguing that when all the

eyes were set on the final day of the budget approval session, violence erupted in other parts of the city. With the appeal for protection by the factory owners falling on the deaf ears of the law enforcers, arsonists, looters and rioters reportedly joined by the jhoot traders made the most of the volatile situation. This only speaks of the brazen ineptitude and amateurish handling by the law enforcement agency.

The blame game and finding a scapegoat for anything going wrong in the country have been the usual practice with the law enforcement agencies. The minister of commerce and industry said that the acts were carried out by groups or agents inimical to the interest of the country. But this excuse, especially when the home ministry seemed to know for certain that such conspiracy was being hatched, could hardly be comforting to the people.

If the grievances of the workers are not met as committed, then such eruptions might again occur with more debilitating consequences on the RMG sector and especially on the economy of the country, which is showing signs of strain at the moment because global economic recession.

There are a lot of non-compliant factories, and the workers are grumbling for higher wages and other facilities. If these industries have turned out to be sick because of the recessionary effect and workers' demands cannot be met, then the matter has to be sorted by discussions, and not by sacking the agitating workers. The workers, because of long suffering and deprivation, might falter, but the owners must demonstrate their sense of responsibility. There must be a special cell in each factory to handle

grievances.

The fire may have been doused for the time but the groundswell of discontent and deprivation makes these factories a highly inflammable area. Presumably, the violence, might have been orchestrated by seemingly militant forces from outside determined to turn people's attention from the ongoing reforms movement. No sensible person, however agitated or aggrieved he might be, will never cut off the branch of the tree on which he is standing.

True, in a country where politics and vendetta go hand in hand, authorities in most cases wash their hands off responsibility through passing the buck. People might recall the grim situation prevailing in the garments sector just five years back, which prompted the general secretary of the International Textile Garments and Leather Workers Federation (ITGLWF) to write to the then prime minister pointing to the low wages and inhuman conditions imposed on the workers. In 2005, the government introduced 72-hour work week, which was never adhered to. In hundreds of factories workers can be found working for 18 hours a day.

An ILO survey, made public years back, exposed the grim working conditions in the RMG factories. The survey indicates that when workers did overtime, some employers paid them a fixed sum, which was lower than 100 percent incremental pay for overtime work as provided for in the law. The survey further adds that although in recent time there has been some initiative to bring workers under insurance coverage, non-issuance of appointment letters by employers could actually deprive workers of the benefits



We need to get to the bottom of the unrest.

from the scheme.

Starting in the '80s, this industry has made substantial impact on the economy, identifying itself as a vital foreign exchange earner as well as providing jobs to a vast multitude of unemployed youths, especially women. This industry, now numbering about 4500 units, employs about 30 lakh workers, about 80 percent of whom are women. The absorption of large numbers of unemployed and widowed women from the rural areas has added to the importance of sustaining this industry with care and caution.

Nobody in the country can countenance the fact that an industry that employs 40 percent of our total industrial work force, and has achieved nearly 20 percent growth despite post-MFA (Multi

Fibre Arrangement) apocalyptic predictions, is allowed to be in a state of turmoil every now and then. Responding to the call of the factory owners, the government now needs to post a strong contingent of industrial police with superb intelligence network to foil any outside manipulation or attack by any vested quarters.

The people believe that if the workers' genuine demands are properly addressed, this sector can retain its competitive edge. Merely talking about invisible enemies trying either to kill or cripple this industry without ever trying to nab them will serve no useful purpose.

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A silent crisis calls for urgent action

Stagnant agricultural productivity, rising food prices and now declining incomes, especially in much of Africa and parts of South Asia, have brought the world dangerously close to humanitarian distress and resulting social and political instability. Averting such a calamity must be high on the global agenda.

MARSHALL BOUTON

AS the world still struggles to deal with the first truly global recession, little attention has been given to the growing number of hungry people and the possibility of mounting food crises in the years ahead. According to the World Bank, over a billion people around the world are now chronically hungry.

Stagnant agricultural productivity, rising food prices and now declining incomes, especially in much of Africa and parts of South Asia, have brought the world dangerously close to humanitarian distress and resulting social and political instability. Averting such a calamity must be high on the global agenda. The G8 meeting in L'Aquila, Italy, on July 8-10 is the time to start.

Surprisingly, while our world may be increasingly urban, the world of the poor and hungry remains overwhelmingly rural. Of the 1.2 billion people in the world living on less than a dollar a day, the majority, almost 700 million, are small farmers, farm labourers and their families in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia who are unable to sustain themselves, not to mention rapidly growing urban populations, due to decades of lagging farm productivity.

Most of the world's hungry people are women and children. Women comprise

80% of Africa's farmers, but they have access to only 5% of the continent's agricultural land, credit and extension services, a key reason for the region's average grain yield being one-fifth that of the US and Europe. Sub-Saharan Africa accounts for 55% of the global nutritional gap, with devastating impacts on children's physical and mental development. Almost half of all children in South Asia, most of them on farms, are underweight for their age.

Why do we face such a crisis when it seemed so recently that the Green Revolution of the 1960s and 1970s had ushered in an era of food plenty? Beginning in the 1980s the world turned its back on agricultural development. The Green Revolution technologies of new seeds, fertiliser and farm practices resulted in dramatic yield increases for irrigated crops, especially wheat and rice, in settings with adequate infrastructure such as market roads, largely in Asia. These breakthroughs created the false impression that the world's food and farming problems had mostly been solved, when in fact the Green Revolution had bypassed much of Africa and the drylands of South Asia.

As a result, international support and developing country investments in agriculture declined sharply in the 1980s and the 1990s. Between 1980 and 2005, for instance, foreign aid to low income coun-

tries for agricultural development dropped from 17% of overall aid to 3%. By the 1990s, growth rates of global public expenditure on agricultural research had been halved.

The rising global demand for food due to population growth and changing diets (producing one pound of beef takes three pounds of grain) has outstripped the growth in the production of staple food crops. Per capita production of maize in

world market prices. In the first half of 2008 grain prices doubled or tripled in some countries. Since then prices have fallen by 50-60% in many countries but remain well above their ten-year average, swelling the ranks of the extremely poor, who spend 50-70 percent of their incomes on food, by at least 100 million people.

These are dangerous portents for the future. Improving agricultural productiv-

shifts will once again put demand pressure on the world's food supply.

But there is good news. We know how to increase agricultural productivity and farm incomes -- through a combination of adaptive agricultural research, improved education and extension, and market development, all aimed at small farmers, especially women farmers. A new generation of seeds and farm practices and infrastructure improvements will make possible higher yields and increasing farm incomes.

A new Green Revolution can help. Though Green Revolution technologies have been increasingly criticised as benefiting only larger farms and harming the environment, later studies showed that small farmers benefited as much. In fact, without yield-increasing technologies, the expansion of agriculture into marginal lands would have wreaked greater environmental damage.

What is required first and foremost is to put agriculture back at the top of the global development agenda. We seem to have forgotten that no economy has achieved sustained growth and graduated to middle income status without first developing its agriculture.

There are promising signs of change. The World Bank has announced a new focus on agricultural development in Africa. The G20 Summit in April 2009 addressed the need, and the G8 are expected to issue a major statement on global food security at their meeting this week. Under NEPAD -- the New African Partnership for Agricultural Development -- African nations have committed to devoting more resources to improving agriculture.

The United States is moving to renew American leadership for global agricultural development. President Obama has announced his support for doubling US foreign assistance for agriculture.



There can be no progress without food.

Africa, for instance, has actually fallen 14% since 1980. The projected increase of Africa's population by 2050 means that African agricultural production would need to double just to keep the number of hungry people at today's level.

To some extent the gap between food supply and demand has been met by imports. Commercial grain imports by developing countries almost tripled between 1990 and 2008. But the increasing dependence on food imports exposed these economies, and especially their poorest citizens, to wide swings in the

ity will become a more not a less, challenging task in the decades ahead. The supply of readily arable land is diminishing in most developing countries. Water scarcity is already a constraint in the semi-arid tropical zones of Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia where pressure on the land is high. According to the projections of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, weather extremes including severe drought are likely to become more frequent in those same regions. When the world recovers from recession, income growth and dietary

When celebrities die



SENSIBLE, cautious people are careful never to speak the truth in public about celebrities. I am not a sensible, cautious person.

When celebrities die, a bizarre phenomenon takes place in the media. Fat, unhealthy, immobile journalists spring out of their chairs, grab their principles, and do reverse somersaults.

You see, reporters normally work strictly to the eleventh commandment: Thou shalt focus on the negative as it sells more papers. But when a celeb dies, press people do shameless 180-degree back-flips.

Your columnist learned this the hard

way. As a kid working on my first articles, I noticed that the favourite targets of my elders were the easy ones: druggie celebrities.

For example, I was a huge Beatles fan, but I knew that my hero John Lennon had spent 12 years abusing his body, his wife, and his fans, creating the worst albums not just on earth, but in this sector of the universe.

It was said that no human being could listen to John and Yoko's experimental music trilogy and live. I endured 32 seconds of disk one before running out of the room, crying, "Shoot me, please."

When the news broke that someone had instead shot Lennon, I tearfully descended to the cuttings library to find the reviews of his solo albums (almost all scathing) as background material for commentary articles that would fill the next day's papers.

But senior reporters sent the cuttings back untouched. The albums were reviewed from scratch. Drug-addled

philanderer Lennon was hailed as not only the greatest musical genius who ever lived, but the best husband in history, an ideal father, and a possible incarnation of God. Lennon's latest album was now discovered to be "quintessential genius" and given a Grammy.

When I pointed out to a reviewer that he had only two days earlier described it as "not worth melting down to make into an ashtray," he replied: "He wasn't dead then. Journalists never speak ill of the dead."

I thought about pointing out that Hitler was dead, but decided against it.

Exactly the same thing happened in 1997 when Princess Diana died. Until August 31 that year, journalists knew her as a serial adulterer who had ignored the tearful entreaties of her own children to have a dirty weekend with another woman's fiancé. Then she died.

From that moment, we wrote about her as a sinless angel who had temporarily descended from heaven to teach



mere mortals about the truly essential things of life, such as love, goodness, landmine clearance, and the importance of wearing a different designer frock

everyday.

And so it has proved with Michael Jackson, another one-time hero of mine. Until last week, media commentators

thought of him a sad pervert of questionable sanity and fast-deteriorating talent (Rolling Stone described Invincible, his last album, as "excruciatingly self-referential"). Now Jacko is hailed as the greatest musician of all time, forgetting that such a title would be better given to someone who actually plays a musical instrument.

Two weeks ago, the Mayor of Zagreb called for Freddie Mercury, the lead singer of the band Queen, to make a comeback gig in the Croatian capital. What a great idea. Now all the media has to do is find a way for a gentleman who has been dead for 18 years to play a concert on earth.

Maybe John Lennon and Elvis Presley could be back-up singers and Michael Jackson could choreograph a dance troupe of journalists doing back-flips.

To know more about dead celebrities visit our columnist at www.vittachi.com