

Battling the crisis

The government can make it easier for the smaller factories to undertake a program of modernisation that can increase productivity of the industry as a whole manifold by making it easier to obtain land, licences/permits and import modern machinery.

A.H.M. KHAIRUL ALAM

AS the world sees a glimmer of hope in the midst of the worst global economic meltdown in decades, will it be justifiable to expect the Bangladeshi economy to accelerate with the rest? Perhaps, but it is not as certain as one might think.

"History repeats itself." That old adage looms large over the skyline of Bangladesh. Only a few decades ago, the Bangladeshi (East Pakistani) economy had experienced a sudden surge of growth, driven mainly by the jute industry, which accounted for massive foreign exchange earnings and employment at both primary and secondary industrial levels, employing millions across all sectors of the economy.

In short, it benefited us to rely heavily on growing, processing and exporting jute and jute products. But, alas, the world demand for jute fell as commodity prices spiralled downhill and synthetic fibre became more fashionable.

With demand reduced to a trickle of its former flow, the jute industry was effectively destroyed and so was the livelihood of millions, who, all of a sudden, became

unemployed as one mill after the other closed down. Gone was the hope that the "golden fibre" would light aglow the future of the Bangladeshi economy and instead, followed years of sluggish economic growth and increasing misery for the masses and for the elite of society.

Until recently, the driving force of the Bangladeshi economy had been the RMG sector, accounting for 76% of foreign exchange earnings and 66% of total exports for the fiscal year 2007-2008 while directly employing 25 lac people in 4,740 factories, a far cry from the 40,000 people employed by only 134 factories when the industry was still in its infancy 25 years ago!

As the RMG sector is heavily export oriented, its success, and hence the well being of our people, lies mainly on the economic prosperity of countries such as the US and Germany. With such countries being rocked by the financial crisis, which has had profound economic implications across the globe, the RMG sector has been dealt with a near fatal blow, much like the jute industry so many years ago.

Shall the RMG sector suffer, and with it the source of income of 25 lac factory workers, not to mention those involved

with the RMG sector in ancillary (washing, printing, packaging etc.) and related sectors such as, banking, transport, import/export and shipping? One can draw parallels between the crisis facing us today and the one that faced us all those years ago, and we must be mindful of the consequences that will befall every citizen if the RMG industry were to be destroyed.

There is, however, one fundamental difference. The jute industry perished due to a permanent fall in world demand while the RMG sector is suffering from a lack of demand brought about by a crisis that, we must hope for all the world's sake, is temporary.

So the question that may arise is, "If the problem is temporary, is there no reason to worry?" I wish it was so, but it's not because in all likelihood, it may take 12-24 months for major world economies to fully weather the storm and for reflationary measures to have a telling effect, i.e., 4,740 factories must operate at cut throat prices that are insufficient in providing the profits needed to modernise, expand and raise wages of workers for the next 12 months or more.

Consequently, the entire sector has seen its liquidity dry up month by month, and even as the camel cannot ride the dunes of the deserts indefinitely without water, the RMG sector cannot continue to survive in such adverse conditions.

Admittedly, the largest enterprises may have the resources to battle through the next year but the vast majority, that undertake the greater portion of production, will find it much more difficult to



PHOTO REZA DRIKA NEWS
Their labour brings in foreign currency.

raise the capital needed to keep afloat.

At this point, you as reader would be expected to be deeply concerned not only about RMG workers, but also the rest of the economy, which translates to the general public and ultimately yourself. It's our own well-being that is at stake and we must stand together to ensure that the next generation of this country does not inherit a shattered economy.

What measures may be taken to prevent such a catastrophe?

Firstly, it is imperative that the RMG sector has sufficient liquidity, which should not be a problem as Bangladesh Bank has recently estimated the amount of surplus loan capital held by private banks to be in excess of Tk.28,000 crore! Additionally, encouragement, incentives

and increased co-operation from all concerned may save our leading industry from total collapse, and act as a springboard to increase our international competitiveness. They might include subsidised rations for RMG workers, lower taxes, reduction of administration costs, low interest and collateral free loans, as championed by President Obama in US, and export benefits.

In the long term, productivity can be greatly increased by adopting a culture that values and rewards the development of skilled labour. Development requires motivation and motivation requires satisfaction of basic needs such as housing, health care and education for workers and their children.

Also, the government can make it easier for the smaller factories to undertake a program of modernisation that

can increase productivity of the industry as a whole manifold by making it easier to obtain land, licences/permits and import modern machinery. Subsidies in key areas will speed this process up. The government and BGMEA can play a joint role in ensuring that these needs are met. Furthermore, the sector may benefit from decentralisation, provided there is ample support in terms of energy and infrastructure and increased utilisation of the country's second port at Mongla.

Also, the government and union leaders must understand that raising minimum wage to Tk.5000 is not a "bad" idea, it is simply unrealistic as the RMG sector in Bangladesh faces immense international competition, and it has been able to remain competitive due to extremely low labour costs, hence the labour intensiveness of the sector.

A more than doubling of the minimum wage, coupled with rising energy prices would erase this competitiveness and most factories would be unable to compete in world markets and would have to close down. In essence, the union leaders must realise that by pushing for higher wages, they are unwittingly pushing towards the destruction of the industry and wide-scale unemployment.

We cannot spare any more time for discussions and negotiations. WE MUST ACT NOW! For the greater good of the country, all concerned must overlook personal interests, and together we can make real changes.

A.H.M. Khairul Alam is Managing Director, Finestitch Apparels Ltd.

Migrants at sea are not toxic cargo

From time immemorial, human instinct was to save lives endangered at sea. Instead, today, on the assumption that boats in distress carry migrants and refugees, other ships pass them by, ignoring their pleas for help.

NAVI PILLAY

HUMAN beings adrift at sea are not toxic cargo. From time immemorial, human instinct was to save lives endangered at sea. Instead, today, on the assumption that boats in distress carry migrants and refugees, other ships pass them by, ignoring their pleas for help. Port authorities force them back to sea to certain hardship and peril, if not death, as though they were turning away ships laden with dangerous waste.

In the latest shameful incident last month, scores of migrants died of hunger and thirst while attempting to cross the Mediterranean from Libya to Italy. Reportedly, Maltese authorities had spotted their boat in distress. They provided food, water and fuel, as well as life vests, and alerted their Italian counterparts. The emaciated passengers were left to go on with their trip. Only five of them overcame

this ordeal and were finally rescued by the Italian Coast Guard. The Maltese government maintains that its officials had complied with international agreements. But their acts fall woefully short of international human rights obligations and standards of conduct at sea.

In that very busy and heavily patrolled stretch of water between northern Africa and Italy, only one vessel stopped to provide sustenance to the shipwrecked. Other seafarers did not seem to take notice of the 12-metre boat and its cargo of desperate human beings adrift for 20 days.

Human rights advocates have once again raised their voice in horror and protest, reminding governments and private concerns that the rescue of persons in distress at sea is not only an obligation under the international law of the sea, but also a humanitarian necessity, irrespective of the status of voyagers and the reasons for their voyage.

Human rights law is of paramount

importance. First and foremost the right to life and security of persons must be upheld, for example, by providing food, water, and all the necessary care and protection to those who desperately need such sustenance to survive. Specifically, the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea and recent amendments to the Safety of Life at Sea, as well as the Search and Rescue Conventions and the implementing guidelines issued by the International Maritime Organisation, anchor the rules of conduct expected and required at sea.

Government disregard of international duties represents only part of the problem. There is no doubt that ruthless people smugglers bear much of the blame for the thousands of deaths that occur each year in the Mediterranean, the Gulf of Aden, the Caribbean, the Indian Ocean and elsewhere.

It is literally vital that flag states exercise effective jurisdiction and control over their vessels by ensuring strict compliance with safety standards set out in relevant international instruments so that un-seaworthy ships and boats remain ashore.

They must also prevent and prohibit smuggling and trafficking of migrants. Further, states inspecting vessels sus-

pected of involvement in smuggling or trafficking must treat all persons on board humanely and in a dignified manner, regardless of their status. Instead, overcrowded vessels and their passengers are sometimes endangered by the methods employed by governments and regional organisations to intercept and turn back boatloads of migrants and refugees.

There must be an unequivocal recognition that no persons, including asylum seekers and migrants, inhabit a human rights limbo while travelling, or upon reaching a destination other than their country of origin.

Failure to protect migrants' human rights encourages boat captains and shipping companies to put calculations of the financial cost of salvaging poor and unwanted seafarers in distress above both their duty to rescue and human compassion. Every time a government refuses to allow those who have been rescued to disembark at the nearest port or the final port of destination, they increase the pressure on captains and shipping companies to avert their gaze when they see a migrant boat in trouble.

It can cost companies millions of dollars if states refuse to let their vessels enter ports or off-load cargoes because there are migrants on board. The disincentives



PHOTOBUCKET.COM
Why are they treated like outcasts?

for responsible behaviour became paradoxically clear when fishermen who helped seafarers in distress were made to face criminal charges, rather than praise for saving lives and fulfilling a duty clearly spelled out in international law and common humanity.

The millions of people who risk their lives and safety in order to cross international borders in search of a better life

present one of the most serious human rights problems in our world today. States need to move faster and with more determination to give full effect to those international rules and standards of conduct that may save lives at sea. Above all, those who refuse help to seafarers in distress must be held accountable.

Navil Pillay is the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights.

Breaking new ground

In the project, named the Bangladesh Youth Employment Pilot (BYEP), 73 girls participated initially and the 60 who graduated have been inducted into the male dominated world of prawn hatching.



MOSTAFA SHIBLEE

A new project in Barisal provides young girls with a sustainable livelihood by educating them as prawn hatching technicians. For the first time ever in Bangladesh girls will be trained in the field of prawn hatching and farming as well as horticulture. In the project, named the Bangladesh Youth Employment Pilot (BYEP), 73 girls participated initially and the 60 who graduated have been inducted into the male dominated world of prawn hatching. The ultimate goal of the project is to achieve 50% female participation.

The girls in the program are between 18-30 years old. They all come from back-

grounds with acute poverty and family crises. The project will, in total, educate 360 youths in two sessions, the first of 45 days and the second of 25 days. The BYEP hopes that the project will provide the girls with skills and confidence to secure their economical situation and thereby give them a sustainable livelihood.

Aman's world

Even though the field of prawn hatching is male dominated and requires hard physical work the girls enter the project with the ambition of learning the trade and working on equal terms with the men. The girls hope to be able to get jobs once they finish the project, some hope to find a job near their home and others are willing to move.

However, in common for all the girls is that they wish to become self-reliant and thereby independent of others' mercy and will.

The project pushes social boundaries by educating women to work within the field of prawn hatching. BYEP realises that Bangladesh has an unsafe environment for the women in terms of working outside the home, especially since many of the girls may get jobs located far from their homes. Because of this, BYEP has initiated a series of sessions where the girls are made aware of factors that arise when working outside of the home and about being manipulated, cheated or trapped by unknown men.

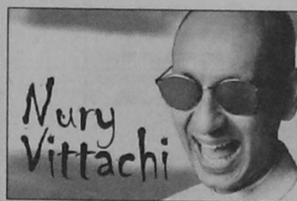
Working towards independence

The project focuses on youths that have discontinued school and may, therefore, have literacy and numeracy problems, but the project has shown positive results. "The female participants are not only enthusiastic but have proven that they are also fully capable of learning and taking part in the physical labour of the hatchery and farm work that is part of the training," says the local BYEP coordinator.

The results of the semi-final exams support the success as girls achieved 3 of the 5 best results. The project coordinators have been encouraged by these results and believe that the girls will be capable of doing well within their new field. The coordinators feel that the way to promote equality and help those less fortunate is through long term sustainable livelihood, and by educating the girls within a field that will most likely grow in the future the girls are given tools to serve themselves and those around them.

Mostafa Shiblee is Managing Director, Shiblee Hatchery and Farms Ltd., Kuakata.

Mr. Jam gets locked out



MORE and more adults are choosing not to have children. This will "reshape human society," according to social demographers in the UK. I guess they mean "reshape" as in "wipe out."

But before that happens, something scarier will happen. There will be a pandemic of meltdowns.

You see, having totally helpless dependents (children, grandparents, pets and some husbands) causes an adult's capacity to tolerate problems to expand until it is roughly the size of Australia or Donald Trump's ego, whichever is larger.

Here's proof. A childless, only-child, unmarried friend of mine received the wrong lunch order. Apoplectic with fury, he was unable to work for the rest of the day (and possibly the rest of his life).

The same afternoon, the father-of-three next to him was informed by telephone that one child had smashed the TV and another had poured Ribena into the Blu-Ray disk player. This news had no affect on him.

Parents become immune to disaster. Children alternate between ruining our lives and giving them meaning, and sometimes do both simultaneously.

The other night, I kissed my two most helpless dependents (granny and my youngest child) goodnight and took another one (the dog) out for a walk.

I returned to find that they had gone to sleep after accidentally locking the door that connects the living room to the bedrooms, the toilets, the shower, and so on.

My wife, a teacher, was working late. When she got home, she saw why I was worried. Granny and our youngest child are world-class sleepers: I'm talking Olympic gold level. The child can sleep 16 hours straight and Granny 20. Both remain comatose through alarms, thunderstorms, earthquakes and teenage parties.

Bereft of beds, toilets and showers, we spent hours trying to break in.

We tried every key in the house, and then hairpins, screwdrivers, pliers, wrenches and our teeth.

We tried kicking the door down like in Hollywood movies.

We used a battering ram like in Viking cartoons.

Nothing worked.

We spent the night on the sofa in our working clothes dreaming of toilets.

At dawn we awoke to the ghastly pros-

pect of going to work in our dishevelled, cross-kneed, unwashed state.

Then my wife had an idea. Educators have a secret weapon called the Teacher Voice. It's not exactly a shout, nor a shriek, but a sort of controlled, powerful missile of low-frequency sound. Could it penetrate several layers of doors, the roar of air-conditioners and the cocoon of Olympic-level sleep? I was skeptical.

She took a deep breath and yelled out the child's name in Teacher Voice.

In return, silence.

She did it a second time.

Pause. Then...was that a slight sound we heard?

She did it a third time.

Pause.

Click.

The door opened and the cute face of a sleepy child looked out. The previous night's trials were immediately forgotten.

Tonight, one of the kids will probably microwave my phone.

Tomorrow the dog will eat my wallet.

The next day Granny will burn the house down.

Am I bothered? No, it's all part of the rich tapestry of events, which make up that joyful thing called family life.

I can survive anything. Even getting the wrong lunch order. I am invincible. I am unruddleable. I am a parent.

To know more about how to survive family crisis, visit our columnist at <http://mjram.typepad.com>.