

Tongi garment worker violence

Could it not have been prevented?

SUCH a recurring spectacle, of workers attacking factories and laying siege to roads and halting traffic on the highway is clearly reflective of an ailment in the garments sector that refuses to be cured. In most of these instances it is the grievances of the workers stemming from arrear pay that have led to needless violence.

The latest occurrence was in Tongi where the workers of a garment factory turned violent in protest against the closing down of the factory without previous notice. The situation was further compounded by the fact that the owners resorted to shutting down without paying arrear salary to the workers. As of now there are reports of two deaths and a large number of injured as a result of the violence and the ensuing police firing.

While the workers may have genuine complaints it is inconceivable that they would set upon something that fetches them their livelihood. It is also true that the effect of global recession has had its effect on our garment industry. But that is something that the owners can explain to their workers before taking decision regarding running of the factory. But nothing can justify the closure depriving the workers of their dues.

We are also confused about the role of the BGMEA in this regard. It sounds strange that the BGMEA should be crying foul when there is every reason to believe that among the owners are perhaps the ones that did not play by the rules, and along with the Association are trying to hide behind the allegation of sabotage. While we do not discount the possibility of foul play, we wonder whether the Association has played its part in ensuring that the factory owners did not default on workers payment.

We fully share the police view that the law enforcing agencies should have been apprised of the impending lay off in which case it might have been possible to avert the incident, particularly in view of the fact that the relevant agencies had warned a week back that there might be efforts by some quarters to foment trouble in the garment factories. However, there is certain confusion regarding facts which we call upon the police to clarify. Reportedly, there was a contingent of police at the factory the previous night. And unlike in previous cases, damage to the factory was averted because of their timely presence at the factory site.

How did the police happen to be there the previous night? Were they alerted by the owners or they acted on their intelligence report. In such an event the statement by the police authority that they were not aware of the lay off and the impending trouble sounds a tad incredible.

We demand a thorough government enquiry into the incident. There are questions that need answers and there are people at fault that need to be taken to task.

Given the unabated unrest in the garments sector and the proven inefficacy of incident by incident handling, there is a felt need to constitute a permanent body whose job it would be to identify vulnerable industries, monitor their situations from time to time and intervene whenever necessary to prevent outbursts.

The threat to Atir khal

The canal must not fall into predatory hands

THE commandeering of lakes and rivers by unscrupulous individuals and organizations over the last many years is today a major public concern. The fact that much has been written about such nefarious activities does not seem to have resulted in any change of attitude among some quarters. The latest that we have on the issue is the bid to fill in an old, well-known water body in Waaspur on the outskirts of the capital, known as Atir khal. As reports have it, a housing society has been piling sand into the lake on the basis of what it claims documents allowing it to operate in the area. The amazing part of the story here is that, as an official of the Waaspur Garden City Cooperative Society has said, there is no mention of the canal in the documents the company has seen. It raises a mind-boggling question: since the canal has been there for ages and only five years ago a bridge was built over it, how is it that there is no mention of it in the documents?

It is here that questions about who prepared the documents and in what dubious circumstances begin to come up. When a canal like Atir khal, beginning at the Buriganga, passes through a number of trade centres and villages before joining the same river at Kholamara, it is inconceivable that some people will simply pretend it is not there. That being the case, it now becomes important for the authorities to probe the matter and indeed see if some questionable dealings have been going on. On a bigger note, it is now important that a major inquiry be initiated into the easy way in which some housing societies have in recent years claimed lakes and canals as their own and have swiftly moved to build apartments and other edifices on them. We have before us the many instances of unauthorized building structures coming up in the capital despite clear rules being there to prevent such action. We have too cases relating to the corruption involving both builders and a section of dishonest officials and employees at Rajuk in such unauthorized construction. Which is why we suspect similar sinister acts in the matter of a filling in of canals and rivers.

Residents of Waaspur have alleged that the local land office has been behind the making of forged documents in return, of course, for pecuniary benefits. That is a grave charge and one surely cannot be dismissive of it. We urge the authorities, who have lately been vocal about saving rivers and canals from predatory hands, to look into the matter in the greater interest of the local population as well as in the interest of the environment.

Our "Project Democracy"

Whether it likes it or not the AL must be able to win over the BNP's cooperation, however insignificant that may look. Only unity among the political forces and socio-professional groups can open up the possibility for success, to which only the sky is the limit.

M. ABDUL HAFIZ

AS the BNP's political prospects brighten, with the Awami League getting increasingly stuck with the incumbency and its concomitant answerability for anything called into question, the mood in the BNP camp is obviously buoyant and it is stalwarts -- so long in hibernation -- are returning to the party fold in droves. Many of its star leaders, not seen for months and even years, have started to show up in party forums -- an indication that the party is still left with a good deal of promise even after its fall from grace in the wake of one-eleven. In recent times, the media have also been projecting the BNP highlights with earnestness. Also, a new assertion can be felt among the party's rank and file -- particularly in its junior echelons.

Only the party supremo, with her dream of continuing authoritarian hold over the party shattered and the idea of family

controlled fiefdom going out of vogue, did not exude the same enthusiasm -- consequently she is doing more harm to the party than good by running the party erratically. The BNP led by Madam Zia being on a different wavelength had also to understandably behave differently. But by adopting a negative stance in present milieu the madam is isolating herself and abdicating the turf she is entitled to dominate.

She first rejected the result of the last election alleging that it was rigged, although she grudgingly accepted it later. Then, on spurious excuses, her party has been boycotting the parliamentary proceedings as well as other public forums. Her deliberate absence from the national convention on poverty alleviation strategy was viewed in a poor light by observers.

As viewed by political analysts, Madam Zia critically lacks the chemistry to co-exist with others in a democratic spirit. As a matter of fact, she never came to grips

with the reversal of fate that befell her. She suffered a double whammy -- one when she failed to execute her scripted selection in 2007 and then again when she lost the ninth parliamentary election. As a result, her party has been in limbo ever since her release from incarceration. The party could not move either laterally or horizontally, and no decisive step could be taken even to match the equally indecisive AL.

It was learnt that to overcome the prevailing stupor in the party and to tackle the challenges a think-tank of sorts was brought into being. It was also learnt that the young party activists who earned some of the earlier successes for the BNP would be made use of to get over the stasis that has set in the party. Whether or not they will again be successful is yet to be seen.

When someone or some organisation faces defeat he/she, or it, is orphaned because none claims the parenthood of failure while there are many to claim the parenthood of success. That's what we have witnessed in our political history. In keeping with the same tradition, if the BNP admirers and well-wishers are looking for foster-parents for a yet to be achieved success it will be a novel experiment, but the success of the experiment itself will remain uncertain unless the heroes of yesteryears shun the beaten track of the past.

There has been a tectonic shift in the

country's political terrain in the last two years, drastically changing the public outlook, perspectives and political views. An account will have to be taken of those changes to be able to reconstruct an outfit that has been subjected to so much ignominy -- rightly or wrongly. But even here there seems to be no silver lining for BNP when we see a frenzied move among the younger lot of BNP to install Tariq Zia to the key position of the party, thus according him an iconic status. True, no one learns from the past! But how can one close his or her eyes to the sleaze of Hawa Haban, the brainchild of Tariq Zia.

The AL, by virtue of its electoral mandate can rule, and has been doing so. The BNP also did the same when it was in power. Okay. But that's not the democracy that we are committed to. There are many invisible threats to democracy, against which we have no safeguards. Militancy, poverty and corruption are ever-present enemies in our midst. It would be in AL's interest to fight them. But how? The experience hasn't been quite savoury so far. Whether it likes it or not the AL must be able to win over the BNP's cooperation, however insignificant that may look. Only unity among the political forces and socio-professional groups can open up the possibility for success, to which only the sky is the limit.

Brig (retd) Hafiz is former DG of BIS.

The nightmare city

The ever-worsening traffic tangle, pollution of air and severe scarcity of electricity, gas and drinking water have turned the capital into a nightmare city. The government needs to urgently take some real steps to make Dhaka livable before undertaking ambitious plans.

A.N.M. NURUL HAQUE

PRIME Minister Sheikh Hasina announced her government's plan to construct elevated and underground railways, flyovers, circular waterways and roads to ease the city's traffic woes. The announcement came while she was replying to queries in the Parliament on October 28. The prime minister also said that her government had begun a project to upgrade Zia International Airport, construct a bridge linking Arong at Tejgaon and the Gulshan shooting club, and coordinate a development project in Hatirjheel to solve the traffic tangles in the capital.

The local government (LGRD) minister recently expressed his grave concern about Dhaka city in the Parliament, apprehending that an unimaginable environmental disaster was awaiting the city dwellers. According to him, severe waterlogging and scarcity of drinking water would make the city uninhabitable soon. Dhaka city dwellers have become quite accustomed to hearing for many years

such promises of turning Dhaka into a city fit for the 21st century, but have hardly seen any initiative that would suggest that there is hope for the future.

The painful reality is that Dhaka, as the capital of Bangladesh, remains a problem-ridden city with terrible traffic congestion, scarcity of electricity, gas, and drinking water and lack of life security, despite the spree of promises made by all governments.

A recent survey revealed that Singapore edged out Tokyo and Hong Kong as the best city in Asia for expatriates to live in while Dhaka was the worst, just ahead of Karachi.

Barrister Nazmul Huda, the communication minister of the BNP-led alliance government, made lots of hollow promises to change Dhaka into an international standard capital like Paris, Tokyo or Vienna. Syed Abul Hossain, the communication minister of the AL-led grand alliance government, who recently visited the Kanchpur bridge area in the capital, found no traffic congestion there and rebuked the media for stories about traffic jams.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has announced that she will establish elevated and underground railways to solve the capital's ever-worsening traffic congestion. In fact, the elevated expressway was conceived at the summit level talks between Bangladesh and Thailand in 2002 when the then Thai Prime Minister, Dr. Thaksin Sinawatra, paid an official visit to Dhaka.

The Thai Exim Bank had also agreed to finance the project on favourable terms, but it was foiled because of a mysterious tug-of-war between the communications ministry and the Dhaka City Corporation over the right to supervise the project. An amount of Tk 107 crore from the public fund went down the drain when the mega project of circular waterways around Dhaka city was shelved. The project was taken up in 2004 ostensibly to reduce traffic holdups in the capital.

The Mughals established the city of Dhaka on the bank of the mighty Buriganga in the early 17th century, considering the immense beauty and potentiality of this river, with its vigorous flow, for growth of trade and commerce. With huge encroachment of its banks by land grabbers and severe contamination of its water, the Buriganga has now turned into a septic reservoir, with about 22,000 cubic metres of toxic tannery waste dumped directly into it everyday.

The total population of Dhaka grew from 0.1 million in 1906 to 12 million in 2008, but city authorities could not prepare and implement any effective plan to

cope with the growing population. Although two master plans for the city were formulated as long ago as 1959 and 1995, they were never implemented. What is now imperative to make the capital livable is to curb further unplanned sprawl of the city.

Land grabbing and river pollution are no doubt major causes of the environmental disaster in the city. Land grabbers have now extended their greedy hands into the canals and rivers around the capital city. The Buriganga, Shitalakhy, Turag and Balu rivers, which flow around the city, are also being sacrificed to the greed of powerful people who have grabbed their banks and beds.

The rivers that once flowed in abundance around the capital city are now dwindling. The grabbing of riverbeds has gone to such extent that it has become quite difficult to recognise the existence of these rivers at many points. The waste emitted by industries set up along these rivers has heavily polluted the almost stagnant waters.

The capital city, which is the face of the whole country, has already been made too ugly to behold. The ever-worsening traffic tangle, pollution of air and severe scarcity of electricity, gas and drinking water have turned the capital into a nightmare city. The government needs to urgently take some real steps to make Dhaka livable before undertaking ambitious plans.

A. N. M. Nurul Haque is a columnist of The Daily Star. E-mail: annmhaque@hotmail.com

An Indira Gandhi moment

But the special place she still retains in the hearts of India's poor is evidence of her powerful political achievement. The state would not have succeeded as effectively without the parallel political mobilisation by Indira Gandhi.

M.J. AKBAR

I F so many male members of the Delhi establishment were not irredeemably bald, the loudest sound in the capital would be that of hair being torn in frustration. Those who have rescued their pates with American wigs (probably made with recycled hair from Tirupati) or artificial implants are not going to risk their camouflage by an injudicious display of temperament. So the prevailing noise in Delhi is the sound of gnashing teeth. The despair is over the upsurge of Naxalite violence.

While it is understandable that successful India should get antsy over subaltern anger, perhaps we should pause to consider what the Naxalites have not done; this would shade the focus, which is at the moment concentrated on what they have done. They did not kill the police officer they picked up in Bengal. They released him in exchange for tribal women in government custody. They did not bargain for the release of their leaders, sending a message to a vast constituency that tribal women were equal, on their scale of values, to the top brass.

You can appreciate the electrifying

impact on their support base. And while relief will be the overwhelming sentiment among the passengers of Rajdhani, who were unharmed after five hours as captives, they will, on reaching home, search in the debris of memory for some answers.

The governments of Bengal and India were helpless when the train was brought to a halt, and impotent during the hours in captivity. The authorities did not rescue the passengers. The abductors freed them. These Naxalites have decided that their war is against authority and its structures and symbols, and not against the people of India.

This is a significant shift from Naxalite thinking in its first phase, the decade between 1965 and 1975, when the leadership was with Charu Mazumdar, Kanu Sanyal (a tribal leader) and their intelligent, if apolitical, student comrades like Ashim Chatterjee, hero and scourge of Kolkata's Presidency College campus. Then they targeted civilians, whether clerks or kulaks, and semi-civilians like constables.

For the first time, traffic policemen in

horrendous traffic and the other to guard his partner. This should have led, at least in my view, to learned internal dialectic debate on "Is the constable a class enemy?" I do not know if it did.

What I do know is that when dread of Naxalites seeped down from those at the top of the power-pyramid to those in the middle and the base, it fomented a government-people-political parties partnership that destroyed the Naxalites. The state provided ruthless determination; the people gave information; the Congress and the CPI(M) used their cadres in the counter-offensive.

The Naxalites made a second serious ideological mistake, which they have consciously avoided this time around. The walls of Bengal were daubed with the slogan "Chairman Mao is our Chairman." The Chairman of Beijing may not have been consulted on this honour, but he was not one to kick away a garland strewn in his path.

Those were turbulent times in China as well; the Mao-inspired Cultural Revolution was an exercise in havoc, and mesmerised young Chinese waved Mao's "Little Red Book" as the magical panacea for their myriad problems. No one wanted any little red book in India.

Ms. Indira Gandhi, who was martyred a quarter century ago, was prime minister for most of that long decade of insurrection. She did not waste any sentiment while dealing with the Naxalite threat. She gave carte blanche to Bengal's political leadership (first, the United Front and then Congress Chief Minister Siddhartha

Shankar Ray), police chiefs like Ranjit Gupta and finally the armed forces who, under the leadership of Lt. Gen. Jacob, played a decisive role in the state response to urban insurgency.

But Ms. Indira Gandhi addressed the fundamental cause of the revolt through a brilliant, almost instinctive manoeuvre. She realised that you could kill Naxalites, but you could not meet the challenge of Naxalism, unless the government brought the corroding problem of poverty to the top of its concerns.

The theme of her re-election and government became "Garibi hatao (Remove poverty)." She held out the hope that poverty could be eliminated through the democratic process, and was thereby able to convince the base that violence was not an answer.

In the event, Ms. Gandhi was unable to do very much to eliminate poverty -- she was partly misled by the "Congress Left," which was neither Congress nor the Left. But the special place she still retains in the hearts of India's poor is evidence of her powerful political achievement. The state would not have succeeded as effectively without the parallel political mobilisation by Indira Gandhi.

In 2009, we are not short of Hurray-Henrys who would be happy to mow down Naxalites with blazing submachine guns in order to make India safe for themselves and their self-serving economic policies. They do not realise it yet, but they are going to Ms. Indira Gandhi.

M.J. Akbar is Director, Covert Publications.