

Gazipur factory tragedy

Another rude reminder of worker interest coming last

THE blaze at Garib & Garib sweater factory near Gazipur on Thursday night, supposedly caused by electric short-circuit, that didn't spread beyond the confines of the first floor proved lethal nonetheless in its consequences. That is where the tragedy becomes all the more poignant. As though that was not enough, topped off as it was by a supreme irony that it was so very avoidable. As panicked workers in their desperate bid to escape flames rushed to the upper floors thickly circulating smoke choked up 21 of them to death. Such a large number dying from smoke inhalation, and not from burn injuries brings into sharp focus the dismal state of preparedness against fire-related accidents in a factory stacked with inflammable materials.

The very first question that arises is why the workers rushed upstairs rather than instinctively making a move to escape through the main gate or any other exit route? This raises suspicion that the main gate remained shut despite the obvious signs of a fire in the building. Why was this done? Apparently, there was no fire alarm system. Right through the heightening incidence of fire in the garments sector falling in a pattern, the owners have been repeatedly warned against lack of three major safety precautions: first, having sufficient number of emergency exits, fire alarm systems in working order and maintenance of stipulated number of fire extinguishers. We hear that the sweater factory lacked all three of them. Perhaps there are others similarly ill prepared for any emergency. Besides, the garments factories are obliged to carry out fire drills to sensitise the workers about do's and don'ts which they seldom do.

When such negligence is shown to safety of workers who are the building blocks of the garments sector's success, the culpability of neglect must be too much of a guilt for the owners to bear. As more and more factories, despite their professed commitments to improving working conditions on the floor flounder on the basics of security would we be wrong in thinking that their self-interest and cost-cutting proclivities get the better of their best judgement when it comes to upgrading working conditions of people under their employ most of whom happen to be women?

Streamline ship breaking industry

The persistent call for legal framework must be heeded

THE ship breaking sector is running in a free-for-all style with no legal framework in place to make the parties concerned accountable to any authority. Allegations are often heard of anomaly and corruption right from procurement of vessels from foreign buyers to getting hazardous ships cleared for entry into our territorial waters. One wonders how toxic vessels could get past the port into the yards when there is a ban on import of such vessels posing risks to environment and human and animal health. Questions keep surfacing as to why no pro-environment measures are in place at the ship breaking yards and why the condition of obtaining pre-shipment inspection certificate from a qualified foreign inspection company has been waived. Although environment officials are said to be examining ships, would it not have been more effective a safeguard against hazardous vessels if pre-shipment obligations were complied with by the exporters?

The ship breaking yards themselves have been under the scrutiny of the human and child rights organisations and the media for a long time for the appalling conditions in them. Because of absence of safety measures and of rudimentary handling equipment, there have been many incidents of explosion leading to death and maiming of workers. Many of the yards are not even registered with the proper authorities. This must be looked into.

It is beyond our comprehension that the ship breaking operators of the country continue to remain non-compliant of the Court directive that says that no ship should enter Bangladesh waters for scrapping without being pre-cleaned outside the territory of the country.

The urgency expressed by the Bangladesh Environment Lawyers Association (BELA) for the prime minister to enact laws to bring the ship breaking industry under a legal framework is not only timely, it is extremely vital for marine life, human health and overall environment. We hope the PM will take timely action to help survival of the industry within legal bindings since the yards feed the rerolling mills of the country and employ nearly 30,000 workers directly with many more dependent on them.

Pro-poor agenda and enforcement deviation

The need here is, amongst others, a strong sensitisation of enforcement personnel and the prime requirement is in rural areas where the complaint redressal mechanism is weak. The poor are a helpless lot here.

MUMMHAD NURUL HUDA

PROFESSED and published declarations to improve the lot of the poor people, particularly in developing societies, are an integral part of the political-economic programme. Some international organizations have pronounced pro-poor agenda that aim at socio-economic empowerment of the downtrodden, particularly the women and children of distressed localities. A significant factor in such scheme of things is the behaviour and performance of police, now considered an important institutional link in development process.

In the above scenario, it is rather unfortunate that the linkage between desirable law enforcement and socio-economic development has not drawn the appropriate attention. There is a common complaint that law enforcement administration has not been accorded the deserved priority and that resources commensurate with its importance are very difficult to come by.

It is an admittedly discouraging phenomenon that in distressed and deprived areas of poorer countries, the police's deviant behaviour determines allocation of property rights, however temporary that may be. Police delinquency in such environment carries the danger of increasing the uncertainty of the property rights of the very poor. The compounding tragedy in such circumstances is that the aforementioned rights are quite often threatened by intimidating actions of the well-off and the local criminals.

In circumstances as above, there is perhaps a need to look into the relations between police malfeasance and development-shaping process. One needs to know if eruptions of violence and development are interlinked. It should engage the attention of the political class for obvious reasons of survival. In neighbouring India the role of the police was the subject of extensive modernization analysis in 1969.

A disconcerting ground reality of developing societies is that while police is sensitive towards signals sent by high-ups in respect of defending the elite, it would not be desirably prompt in responding to the distress calls of the numerically large poor. Such behaviour will undoubtedly adversely affect the pro-poor socio-economic agenda. Herein lies the crucial impact of selective law enforcement caused by deviant sub-culture. The situation demands remedial action.

Coming to specifics, it has been seen from experience in neighbouring India that the police function of acquiring crime related information created scope for police corruption. Extorting the poor living in large slum clusters did not register serious protest until very late in the sordid transaction. The need here is, amongst others, a strong sensitization of enforcement personnel and the prime requirement is in rural areas where the complaint redressal mechanism is weak. The poor are a helpless lot here.

We have to remember that the slum dwellers are not, as a class, criminals or terrorists. They are mostly ordinary, law



Lacking sensitisation.

abiding and simple folks, eking out an existence. All neighbourhood have their share of anti-social elements and crooks. It has to be borne in mind that only under difficult circumstances a person leaves the protective social network of his home environment. The question is one of survival.

It needs to be remembered that police corruption often adversely impacts the growth and sustenance of rural poor through the alleged extortion practices in the transport sector. In addition, it has a

negative impact on foreign direct investment. The corruption hits lower income groups harder.

Regulatory and corrective institution like police has to control and take care of their malfeasances. The tax paying citizens will suffer if pro-poor agendas are stifled by enforcement indiscretions. We must not let a situation develop where the only alternative will be to entertain pious wishes for a change in political leadership.

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Confusion of ambitions over Afghanistan

As in any other South Asian country, it will be tough eradicating or even reducing the level of corruption in Afghanistan. Nevertheless, the necessary political will has to be found. This will, in turn, strengthen both the Afghan government as well as the structured tribal networks.

MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

THERE have been different interpretations about the recently concluded London Conference on Afghanistan. Some have described it as having been hastily conceived with the principal intention of being a political face-saver for two unpopular leaders, Britain's Prime Minister Gordon Brown and Afghanistan's President Hamid Karzai. Others have claimed that it united an important section of the international community pertaining to their further commitment to Afghanistan's future. A litmus test in this regard has been the strategic approach to the initiation of the latest ISAF armed 'Mashtraq' engagement in the Helmand province in the south of Afghanistan.

Analysts might have disagreed on the modalities in London but have welcomed the broad consensus on the need to talk to the Taliban and to avoid civilian casualties as being the only way for brining a peaceful conclusion to the conflict in that country. The evolving scenario within Afghanistan has also assumed greater complexity with the Saudis now demanding that Taliban leader Mullah Mohammed Omar has given a clear commitment in writing that he is breaking with al-Qaeda -- something the Taliban have only hinted at in several of their previous communiques.

The BBC has summed it up in one phrase -- 'Talk and fight is the new mantra.'

It was interesting to observe the emerging realization among the US, NATO and Afghanistan's neighbours that efforts should now be undertaken to provide sufficient security for the people so that development can take place -- bottom up. For the first time such an approach is being preferred over past persistent statements that focused on the need to militarily defeat the Taliban and to rebuild the country from top downwards by promoting democracy. Such a new development, as has taken place in London, was unacceptable even six months ago, for Allied strategists as well as Russia, India and Iran.

The Taliban are still seen as a threat to US security but this turnaround appears to have resulted out of the awareness that the NATO forces might not be "winning" the war against the Taliban and could possibly be sinking into a stalemate that was indirectly promoting a collapse of will not only in Europe and the US but also in Kabul.

Such a view appears to have surfaced because of reports coming out of Afghanistan that the insurgents had not

only refined their tactics to evade capture but were also disrupting American and Afghan operations, all the while containing risks to their ranks. It has also been alleged that they were mixing modern weapons with ancient signaling techniques (use of pigeons, dense puffs of smoke and kites) and that this was hampering progress in the Allied war efforts. There have also been suggestions that the Taliban are transforming from a primary provincial power to a canny but mostly unseen tech-savvy force, enjoying free movement and supremacy particularly within the significant Helmand province and other areas that provide rich revenues from poppy cultivation.

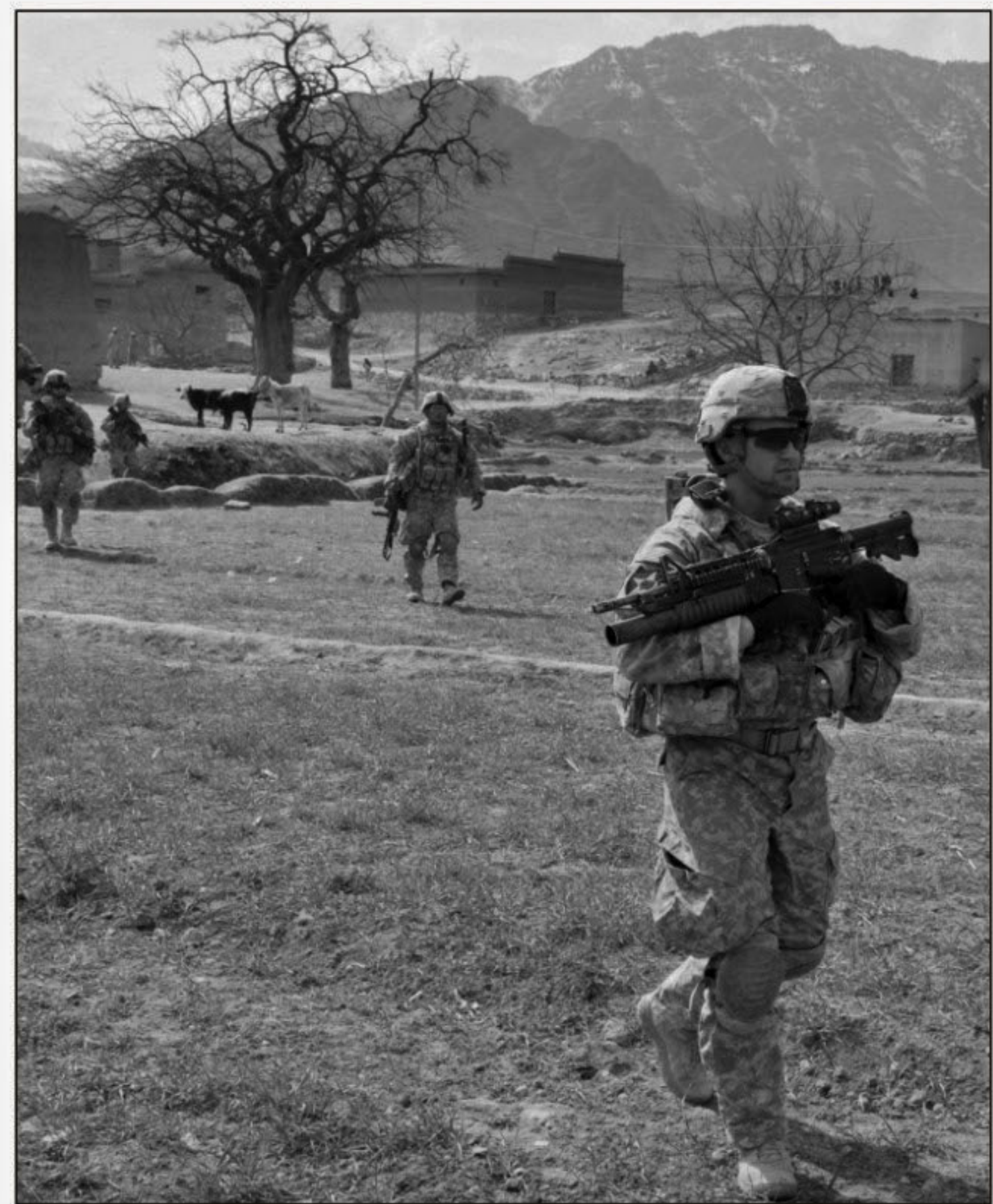
In this context, it has therefore not been surprising to read reports that diplomats or intelligence agents from Britain, Norway and Germany as well as several humanitarian agencies such as the United Nations and the International Committee of the Red Cross have already met with Taliban officials either in Pakistan or Afghanistan in the past twelve months. Humanitarian agencies are apparently trying to make sure that their staff is not attacked and that they are allowed to carry on with their medical and food distribution and also immunization campaigns in the areas controlled by the Taliban.

It is understood that for European states contacts with the Taliban have been limited to trying to discover where their nationals are -- nationals who may have trained or fought with al-Qaeda or the Taliban and might be planning to launch suicide attacks in their home countries. That might be described more as a pre-emptive engagement.

Phillip Stephens writing in London's 'Financial Times' appears to have encapsulated the existing situation rather well by pointing out that the West is wavering between the enemy and the exit.

After nearly a decade it is now growing quite clear that the West's intensive commitment to Afghanistan is understandably coming to an end. In 18 months US troops will start handing over responsibility to the Afghan army, province by province, and start withdrawing. Some European contingents might make a quicker dash for the exit.

Yes, there are also promises of substantial long term Western funding for building Afghan security forces and economic development. However, the Afghans will be expected, quite logically, to come out of their dependency on the West. Their leaders will now be asked to take on real respon-



Necessary political will has to be found.

sibility and create a working Afghan state with basic governance institutions such as a functioning bureaucracy, judiciary and police.

It will be a tough call because the 30-year-long war has bred a kind of dependency among the Afghans -- whether as refugees or as free citizens -- that prevents their leaders taking real responsibility.

One can only hope that the Afghan Administration and their Allies will be able to lure local fighters and commanders away from the Taliban by offering them meaningful jobs in development projects that Afghan tribal leaders help select.

Such an approach, in the long run will also be consistent with the US programme CERP which has been approved by the US Congress. US lawmakers have set aside \$1.3 billion under this programme. It is a discretionary fund for American officers. CERP money can be used for development projects, but the language in the bill says officers can use the money to support the "reintegration into Afghan society" of those who have given up fighting. This can be the suitable key and driver towards an interactive engagement.

However, there has to be bi-partisanship and accountability within this process. As in any other South Asian country, it will be tough eradicating or even reducing the

level of corruption in Afghanistan. Nevertheless, the necessary political will has to be found. This will, in turn, strengthen both the Afghan government as well as the structured tribal networks.

General McChrystal has a vision. So does President Obama. Both want to create a situation that will nurture sufficient political capacity that would permit Afghans to move towards stability, better governance, expanded economic opportunity and effective security. Use of mere force in the Pashtun heartland might bring in some advantages, but it is unlikely to promote reconciliation. This factor will be especially important if Afghanistan is to exploit its reserves of mineral resources. Without inclusive peace nothing will work.

Today, the international coalition in Afghanistan has lowered their sights. There is new realism but that should not just convey the impression that there is palpable eagerness of western governments to depart. The affirmation of resolve must not be lost in the signal that everyone is looking for a quick way out. Such a perception could then do more harm than good.

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