

Tackling RMG unrest effectively

Well-thought-out moves are needed to stabilise the sector

THE spate of violent incidents which has lately marred the efficient functioning of some ready-made garment units in the country brings to light once more a crisis that calls for deft handling. Just how grave conditions are in the sector, which has over the years made significant contributions to the national economy, was made known by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina at a May Day discussion in the city on Saturday. She has hinted at the possibility of a hidden hand or third force being behind the recent turmoil in the RMG sector, the nefarious objective here being a subverting of it and thereby harming the economy. Before we go into other aspects of this discussion of the RMG crisis, we feel that this suspicion of a conspiracy against the sector must be dealt with first.

It is not for the first time that a head of government has raised the question of a well-laid conspiracy at work against the RMG sector. Previously, the BNP-Jamaat government too spoke of such a possibility and so did the Fakhruddin caretaker government. The question now is simple: in all these years, despite all the pronouncements about identifying the possible saboteurs involved in undermining the RMG units, why have the relevant agencies of the government been unable to ferret out these criminals? The plain and simple truth is that if the authorities believe that dark hands are involved, they should have been able to unearth the truth long ago. We feel that rhetoric must give way to results, if the authorities are indeed convinced that sabotage is involved in undermining the RMG. Unless and until that is done, all such vocal expressions of apprehension about the sector will sound rhetorical and therefore pointless.

That said, there can be no denying the fact that workers in the RMG units are overworked and underpaid. In these days of rising prices, for workers to demand a minimum working wage is hardly a radical move. It is for the owners of these units to consider how best they can respond to such demands sympathetically, considering the economic difficulties the workers face and the profits that are yielded by the sector. In recent times, a good number of RMG units have complied with the tripartite deal reached on industrial conditions not long ago. But that positive move can only be considered to have been implemented once the remaining, non-compliant units are brought on board. In other words, every effort should be expended to ensure that workers are happy and at the same time the RMG units remain in a stable condition. One way of making sure that a win-win situation prevails for everyone is for serious thought now to be given to the provision of trade unionism in the sector. Responsible, apolitical trade unions geared to protecting the rights of workers are also a guarantee against the very articulation of grievances through aggressive means that has of late undermined some RMG units in the country.

Revocation of stay order on illegal billboards

Removal work must go full steam ahead

WE are happy that the stay order on demolition of illegal and hazardous billboards in the capital has been revoked by the High Court last Thursday putting the safety of the public and their property above all other considerations. And RAJUK and the DCC must act on the HC directive without delay.

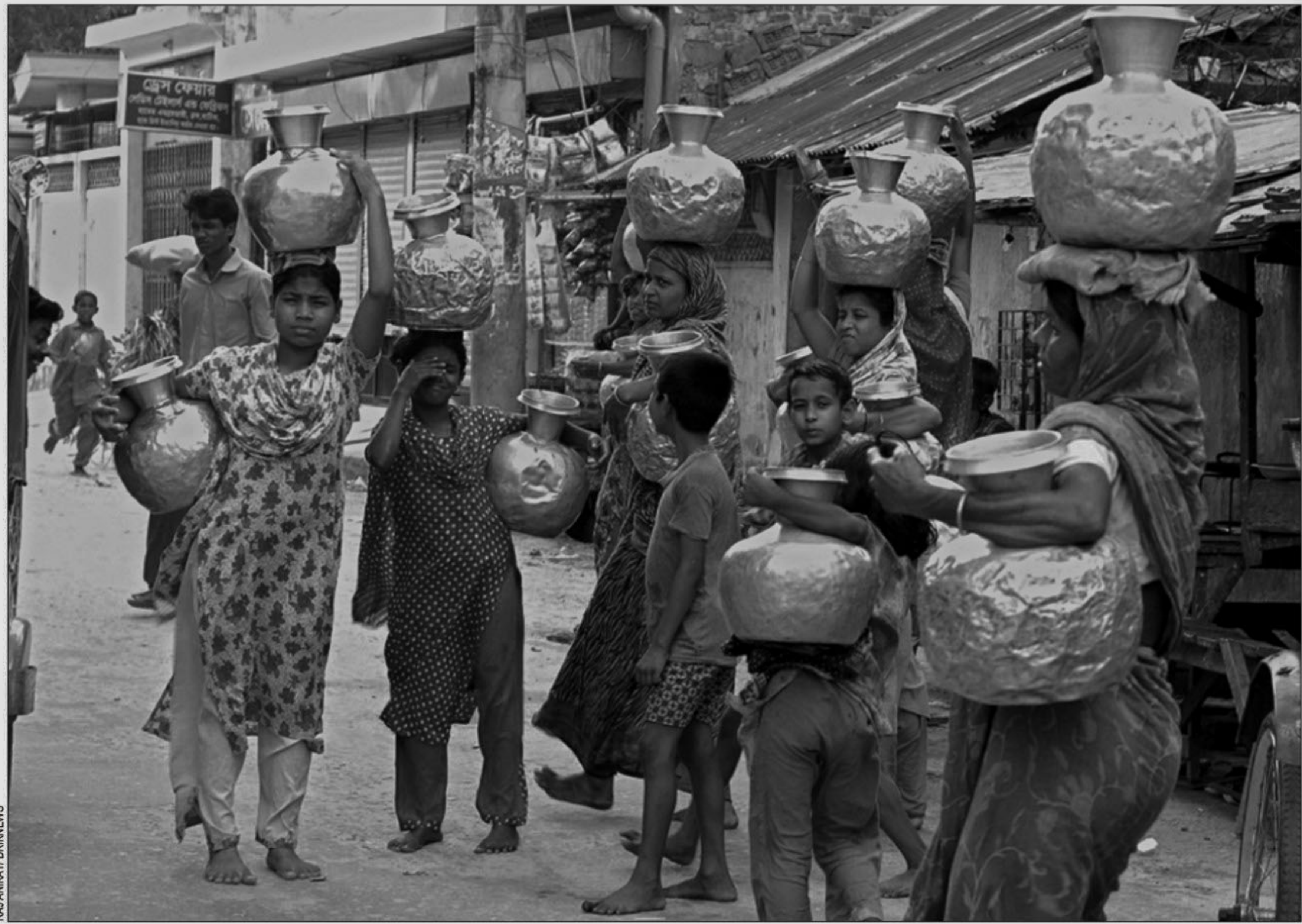
The business of putting up billboards in Dhaka city was for long a syndicated affair, particularly during the erstwhile 4-party alliance regime, when the job was monopolized by a small coterie with strong political connections. Along with billboards and hoardings approved by the city corporation, a large number of advertisements were erected illegally disregarding all requirements of safety as evident from instances of collapse of several billboards, some of which resulted in damage to life and property.

In most cases the construction did not conform to the minimum engineering requirements that would ensure safety of the structure. And the relevant authorities were either helpless to do anything or had willingly turned the other way, thereby becoming complicit in the illegal business. It was indeed painful to see innocent passersby losing their life from falling billboards.

It is regrettable that the authorities should have to wait for a court order to ensure something that is within their terms of reference anyway. But now that the High Court has removed the impediment to acting against illegal and hazardous advertisement structures, no excuse shall be countenanced and the authorities must move full speed ahead to remove these objects that pose threats to public safety.

All too often we see the DCC and RAJUK proffering excuses of shortage of manpower in exercising oversight of the safety standards during the construction and after. It doesn't need large manpower but appropriate rules to ensure that requirements of safety, aesthetics and traffic flow are followed. Why in the first place were such billboards allowed to be set up? This question must be seriously gone into and procedures clearly laid out for renting out of spaces to accord with certain standards of safety, aesthetics and spacing.

Not only must the work of demolition be commenced and finished with speed, the relevant authorities must also formulate rules that would bring the private building owners under the ambit of the rules also. Authorities concerned must not fail to ensure that public safety is not compromised for commercial considerations.



RAJANIKATI DRINKNEWS

The water crisis

Bangladesh should take immediate steps to overcome the existing situation that threatens her existence. National awareness, and national and international cooperation are essential to help the country and its people build the necessary capacity and resilience.

M. FAISAL AKBAR

A CUTE water crisis, compounded by pollution, is causing indisputable harm in most poor countries of Asia and Africa. Worldwide, two billion people still have no access to clean water, and water contaminated by sewage is estimated to kill 3.4 million, including two million children, every year.

Now it is a great irony that our planet, which has 70 percent of its surface covered with water, is facing an acute water crisis. It is alleged that the next world conflict could be for water. 97.5 percent of the water on the earth is ocean water, which is salty. 1.725 percent is in the form of glaciers, snow and permafrost, 0.075 percent is ground water, and 0.025 percent is in the lakes, swamps and rivers.

Though it is claimed that 16 percent of the world's safe water is in Bangladesh, we are also suffering from serious crisis of pure drinking water. In summer, most of the major cities suffer from water crisis. Rivers around major cities have become polluted, and the water is unsuitable for drinking

even after treatment in traditional plants.

During a heat wave, there is an outbreak of diarrhea. These regular outbreaks mainly affect children and are caused by eating rotten food and drinking polluted water; they escalate in summer when drinking water is in short supply, forcing people to use contaminated sources.

In the case of ground-water resource, the presence of arsenic in ground-water is affecting the people of rural areas who are largely dependent on this source of water for drinking, agriculture and livestock. Again the contaminated water and the increased salinity is affecting human health and living massively.

According to the World Health Organization, arsenic-contaminated water directly affects the health of 35 million people in Bangladesh. Similarly, water crisis in Dhaka has worsened due to frequent load shedding and fall in groundwater level. The city of Dhaka experiences acute shortage of water all the year round. The city dwellers have taken it as part of their life.

As the demand for water increases, the

share of water per person will decrease, and gradually result in greater demand for water. The internal dimension of water scarcity addresses contaminated ground and surface water. The huge populations makes the water crisis more complex.

Similarly, burning, deforestation, over-grazing, agricultural practices, chemical disturbance, air pollution, over-pumping of groundwater, urbanisation and industrialisation are responsible for the shortage of pure drinking water. Surface water is also polluted by the waste from industry, agriculture and human activities. About 2 million tons of wastes are dumped everyday into rivers, lakes and streams. Water is the key element of life, and when it is polluted with slow poison then it becomes dangerous.

About two-thirds of the cultivable land in Bangladesh is prone to flood damage every year. Climate change has an impact on the natural, social, and economic systems of the country. A Unesco report indicates that by the middle of this century (2050), almost 2 million children will die each year for want of a glass of clean water and adequate sanitation.

Contamination of surface water bodies and groundwater aquifers by agricultural pollutants, industrial discharge and domestic pollution endangers both the natural ecosystem integrity and public health. The number of people at risk of arsenic pollution is estimated to be 90 million in a population of 150 million people.

Today, one person in five across the world has no access to safe drinking water, and one in two to safe sanitation, more than 30,000 children die before reaching their fifth birthday, either through hunger or due to easily preventable diseases. 1.8 million people die every year from diarrhea.

3,900 children die every day from water borne diseases. 90 percent of all deaths caused by diarrhea are of children under 5 years of age. Each year, more than five million people die from water-related disease in the world. Due to acute water crisis diarrhea becomes unpreventable in Bangladesh in summer.

So Bangladesh should take immediate steps to overcome the existing situation that threatens her existence. National awareness, and national and international cooperation are essential to help the country and its people build the necessary capacity and resilience.

Conserving ground water, preserving the environment to retain the natural cycle, maintaining ground water level, preventing arsenic poisoning, dredging rivers, creating embankments are necessary. Proper urbanisation and sewerage dumping also have to be ensured. So we have to tackle these issues through political will and understanding based on flexibility and harmonious water sharing, and active efforts to keep the eco-balance.

M. Faisal Akbar is a graduate student at the University of Dhaka.

A cut in Delhi, a run in Ranchi

We will see a gradual but inevitable effort to expand by the Congress and BJP, and in doing so they will disturb the patterns of the last ten years. There will be patches in the new quilts as well, but far less patchwork.

M.J. AKBAR

A cut motion is moved in the Lok Sabha to wound the Congress alliance in Delhi and a BJP alliance a thousand miles away, in Ranchi, begins to bleed to death. Is there a rational connection between cause and consequence apart from the compulsions of an ageing politician suspected of more crimes than we can count without being a professional mathematician?

If the story were only about the addictive duplicity of a drama-centric Shibu Soren, it might be worth a fleeting sneer but not much comment. If the BJP has made its bed with Soren, then it can hardly afford to get hysterical at infidelity. Some politicians do not offer their souls at wholesale rates; they bargain for small pieces, a bit at a time, at rates negotiated by market value. If the price is occasionally set by police officers of the CBI, that is par for the course in an age of turbulent corruption.

The great merit of the Congress is that its expertise in the use of power for the benefit of the party, whether through public policy or private pressure, is unmatched. When the BJP tried similar

tactics, it fell on its face. Its nose is still in disrepair.

Cause and consequence may both be obscured by facts. The turmoil in Delhi, with the ruling alliance being hammered for corruption on a scale unprecedented in the history of the UPA, is not accidental. Very little happens by accident; and information is certainly never leaked inadvertently.

There are political reasons why a spat between the look-alikes Shashi Tharoor and Lalit Modi blew up like an Iceland volcano, and spread a cloud of ash over the ruling alliance that has left the biggest of big boys wheezing and a number of small boys in self-pitying tears. The telephone tapping brouhaha that followed did not fall into the lap of journalists like nature's gentle rain from heaven.

The transcripts which exposed DMK's A. Raja did not multiply by themselves, like excessively enthusiastic amoeba. Someone leaked that evidence, and it was not the hand of God. The fingerprints belonged to someone in government.

The massive Raja scam, with heavily-lubricated PR agencies, semi-lubricated journalists, and triple-dealing corporations, could have been news more than a

year ago. It was not. The general elections had not taken place, and the allies would have been foolish to injure each other before an election. On the face of it, the UPA victory of 2009 reinforced the status quo. In reality, it energised the momentum for equations of the second decade of the 21st century.

The first decade began with the NDA victory under Atal Behari Vajpayee. Those ten years were stable precisely because of multi-party partnerships. Every member of the group was allotted a relevant share of the cake, inducing comfort. The NDA was so comfortable that it became complacent, and was punished.

Both the Congress and the BJP are aware, even if they do not find it expedient to say so, that the next stage in the evolution of Indian democracy will be the gradual elimination of the smaller parties, many of whom are making themselves irrelevant, either because of their inflexible attitude to leadership or because the issues that brought them into power have outlived its utility.

The paradox can be cruel; the DMK movement, for instance, has lost its dynamic hold on Tamil affections precisely because it has succeeded in its caste-empowerment agenda. It has ruled, in one form or the other, since 1967. A new generation awaits a new agenda, and there is no sign of it. DMK leaders have no idea what to do next, except repeat squalid and vicious wars of succession that went out of fashion in the 18th century. If that is the story of the apex, then the leaders on the rung just below are busy looting with a

voracious and inexhaustible appetite.

Who can blame the Congress for hoping that it can replace the DMK? The squeeze has begun through an exposure of sleaze. Such exposure played a crucial part in the decimation of Laloo Yadav in Bihar. Laloo did not believe he was being sliced in a pincer; neither does the DMK. It will find out when it is too late.

It is equally obvious that the Congress is not entirely unhappy over the tribulations of Sharad Pawar; Maharashtra is another large state where it can bid for sole supremacy. Once again, the spillage of sleaze on a partner's reputation does not hurt the Congress, but creates space that it can capture when time creates the opportunity.

This is not a drama of continual thunder and lightning; it is a play dominated by long periods of silence, interspersed by occasional bouts of decisive intervention. So stories will rattle through media only to disappear, and then reappear when the optimal moment arrives.

The BJP has begun to realise the futility of allies that take more than they offer. If it wants to return to the spotlight, it must reconstruct; and the architecture of reconstruction cannot be left to the fringe. We will see a gradual but inevitable effort to expand by the Congress and BJP, and in doing so they will disturb the patterns of the last ten years. There will be patches in the new quilts as well, but far less patchwork.

M.J. Akbar is editor of *The Sunday Guardian*, published from Delhi, and *India on Sunday*, published from London.