

## PM's remarks

*Worsening of rhetoric is extremely unhelpful for the future of our politics*

IT has been reported in some newspapers that Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has advised Leader of the Opposition Begum Khaleda Zia to repent publicly through a self-debasing pledge (the Bangla term 'Nake Khat' was allegedly used) not to indulge in corruption again, and admit her failure to contain it during the last BNP rule.

We do not want to believe that the prime minister said what has been reported, something that is practically never prescribed in a democratic society. We think that a clarification from her office is in order. However, if no attempt is made to make things clear, one will have reason to believe that there is some truth in what has been reported by a section of the press.

Apparently, the prime minister wants her rival to pay a heavy price for the corruption and poor governance during her second term. But suggesting anything coming close to Begum Zia being pilloried is neither tenable nor democratic. It is as much demeaning to the person saying it as it is to the person targeted.

The prime minister has one clear and result oriented option to deal with the alleged corruption of the last BNP-Jamaat government. She should go to the court of law and seek legal recourse to settle these matters and in the process reveal their wrongdoings to the public. But by publicly repeating the charges and asking Begum Zia to offer her apologies in a demeaning manner, Sheikh Hasina is neither serving any purpose of good governance nor of fighting corruption. She is only making more acrimonious her already antagonistic relations with Khaleda Zia. This is demeaning for her and will bruise her image as the leader of the nation. Above all, such ultra aggressive attitude is totally uncalled for and can only widen the political divide which is unhelpfully wide as it is.

What is not particularly pleasant for us to think is that the two leaders have failed to give up their habit of undermining each other in ways not particularly good for the growth of a healthy political culture in the country. The leaders have to show the way, instead of bringing outlandish charges, and suggesting even more bizarre punishments for the wrongs done.

Finally, we would repeat that we still do not want to believe the reports published in some of the dailies. Such demagoguery, if true, does not help anybody, least of all the person resorting to it. The leaders have to realise the truth that decent language should be an integral part of their strategy of dealing with rivals. However, if no clarification comes, then we will have to believe the worst.

## The Nimali victims

*Help them rise from the ashes*

A report in The Daily Star has drawn our attention to the difficult days that the survivors of the Nimali fire are passing almost two months after the incident. Given that the inferno has devastated a large number of houses and rendered a large number of the residents homeless as a consequence has added to the grief of loss of their very near ones in the fire.

We feel that the devastation the blaze has left in its wake is no less than any other natural disaster that occurs in our country because of the scale of the destruction as well as of the grave impact it has had on the lives of the survivors. The inferno has also taken away all their earthly possessions, and for them it would not be possible to reestablish themselves without substantive government support. Many of the victims have been well-to-do people who have become paupers because of the fire. Some are people with modest means that the fire has wrecked.

A few of the residents have to eke out their existence from support being rendered by their family members but that is neither substantive nor permanent and most do not have even that support. Many are spending the daytime hours inside the burnt-out house and have to fall back inside the corridors of a relative's residence for the night.

Very soon after the devastation we had heard assurances of support from the administration for rehabilitation of the victims. Unfortunately, money does not flow out as readily or as quickly as verbal commitments. And only those families that suffered casualties in terms of injury or death have been given monetary help.

The PM's spontaneous support for some of the victims by providing them all the help to solemnise their marriage, whose prospect had all but turned to ashes in the inferno, is worthy of repeat. Similar large scale support must come forthwith. Many of the victims have not received any monetary help since they did not suffer any death in the fire.

As many as six multistoried buildings and twenty shops of various sizes have been destroyed and nearly 80 families affected by the fire. We strongly appeal to the government to address the woes of the Nimali victims on an urgent basis.

The government must provide adequate support to rebuild the destroyed houses as well as help the survivors to start up on whatever business they were pursuing heretofore. The Nimali survivors will have to literally pick up the pieces and rise up from the ashes, and it is the government that can help them do so first and foremost.



WAHID AZMAN/DRK NEWS



NOOR ALAM DRK NEWS

## Sewing up in garments sector

The stakeholders should now get down to implementing the new wage structure immediately in a spirit of cooperation, leaving an open door to further negotiations. The government must go on playing its role as the honest broker in any follow-up engagements between the workers and the owners.

A.N.M. NURUL HAQUE

IT is quite unfortunate that several thousand garment workers raged through different parts of the capital and Gazipur on July 30, rejecting the new wage structure and demanding Tk.5,000 as minimum wage from August. The angry workers vandalised vehicles and around 200 business establishments, including several garment factories, resulting in injury of at least 25 people including five police.

The government formally announced a revised wage structure on July 29, unanimously recommended by the tripartite minimum wage board, for the workers of the readymade garment (RMG) sector -- aiming to put an end to the longstanding labour unrest over wages. Under the new wage structure, an entry point worker placed at grade-7 would get Tk.3,000 a month from November, up from Tk.1,662 set in 2006.

Garment Sarmik Sangram Parishad, a combine of the workers' rights bodies, at an emergency meeting, rejected the minimum wage and demanded review of the proposal. The leaders of the combine demanded that the minimum wage for garment workers should be fixed at Tk.5,000 and warned that they would announce tougher movement programs, including strikes, if the demand was not met.

In all, 14 rounds of negotiations took place between the employers and the workers, brokered by government representatives at the tripartite wage board in the last six months, many of which

were stormy -- with the employers remaining reluctant to increase the wages fixed nearly five years back. The RMG factory owners said that the new wages would reduce their profit margin and make it difficult to compete in the global market.

It appeared from the way the minimum wage negotiations advanced that a bridging of the positions was impossible. The demand from the workers was Tk.5,000 as the minimum wage while the employers pleaded that they could absolutely go no further than Tk.2,500 given the present deplorable condition of the sector and the need to maintain viability and competitiveness.

The fixation of the minimum wage at Tk.3,000 was a compromise, but with some favour for the workers. The employers had refused to pay more than Tk.2,500 but in the end they agreed to add another Tk.500 under some conditions. Though the workers did not get what they demanded, they still have a raise which is higher than what was originally offered.

While any action leading to destruction of public and private properties, endangerment of people's life and disruption of law and order is condemnable, the reason for violence and vandalism by the garment workers is understandable. The increase in their minimum wage is almost double of what the workers now get.

Admittedly, this amount is not enough to make both ends meet because the spiraling cost of living and inflation are likely to eat up the

increase. At the same time, the position of the employers, who are heavily burdened with producing their own electricity and a plethora of other production costs, must be taken into account.

Maybe, the workers' frustration and anger were compounded by the hopes that were raised by the prime minister's observation a few days back that the wages of the garment workers were "insufficient and inhuman."

But, by agreeing with the factory owners' demand for deferred implementation of the new wage structure, which is scheduled to take effect in November, the government has shown its sympathy for the employers, not for the workers. That may also be a reason for the workers to feel deceived and become violent.

Bangladesh ranks fourth in terms of value in the global apparel exports, with a 3% market share, according to a recent World Trade Organisation (WTO) report. According to the report, which was prepared on the basis of export data of 2007 of the respective countries, China exported apparel items worth \$115 billion, EU-27 countries \$103.40 billion, Turkey \$14 billion and Bangladesh more than \$10 billion.

Bangladesh was the largest exporter of cotton T-shirts and was second in cotton pullover and jeans exports to European countries in 2009. In terms of volume, the country was the second-largest exporter of cotton trousers to the US last year. The latest data from the Export Promotion Bureau said that Bangladesh fetched \$12.59 billion from garment exports last fiscal year, and contributed around 80% to national exports. Last year, Bangladesh also explored some new export destinations such as Japan, New Zealand, Canada, Australia, and some countries of South America.

Certainly, these are very encouraging developments for our RMG sector. Unfortunately, the RMG units of the

country have been facing frequent agitation and violence, mainly by the workers. The far-reaching consequences of the labour unrest in garment units may be devastating for foreign investment as these incidents have been widely covered by the foreign media.

The RMG sector has been playing a very vital role in the economy of Bangladesh. Presently, more than 4,500 garment units are involved in exporting both woven and knit items. Almost three million workers, most of whom are women, are employed in these factories. The RMG sector provides jobs for over five million people, including indirect employment.

The doors for rethinking the wage structure have not been closed. The stakeholders should now get down to implementing the new wage structure immediately in a spirit of cooperation, leaving an open door to further negotiations. The government must go on playing its role as the honest broker in any follow-up engagements between the workers and the owners.

More importantly, the government should extend some tangible support to the owners of RMG units, such as supplies of diesel and furnace oil at a subsidised rate, so that the industries can run their generators. The extension of such support will enable the owners to meet the demand for higher wages by the workers.

The garment workers must realise that violence and vandalism as a means to articulate their demands are not only condemnable but also criminal. Such actions will surely leave them isolated from the mainstream of society. If they want to mobilise public support for their cause they must desist from violence and vandalism.

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## From rage to outrage

The poor do not protest too often, for the daily task of earning enough to eat is a demanding physical and psychological responsibility that consumes their time. But their patience is not infinite. They voted in large numbers for the Congress in 2009 because they believed in the sincerity of the party. They are beginning to feel betrayed.

M.J. AKBAR

IS there a tipping point to corruption, that last straw, or rupee note, on the corrupt camel's back that ignites the dormant fuse of public response, and transforms apathy into rage? Will there come a subsequent moment when rage escalates to outrage?

Corruption has found a figleaf cover: everyone is corrupt, so why bother? This is the convenient argument that persuades some watchdogs, including within the media, to join the gang, even if their reward is marginal. Cynicism is a lucrative camouflage. If everyone is a thief, then theft becomes the law. There are no outlaws in a country teeming with in-laws.

The robber barons are too sophisticated to steal from one another. They don't need to. That would also introduce unnecessary conflict into a cozy system. They all steal from the public, and there is so much public money available in the exchequer that even if all of them grabbed enough to satiate their hunger, there would still be something left over.

Robbery has graduated to daylight robbery. The thief of the night is apprehensive about guards, and hence seeks the protection of darkness. The daylight robber has no qualms, because the purchased sheriff is snoring at noon, and the bystanders are impotent.

Here are some facts printed on the front page of the *Times of India* on Saturday. This, remember, is just one day's news; this is not the whole story. The Central Vigilance Commission has scrutinised only 16 Commonwealth Games projects so far, ranging from upgrades of stadiums, road construction, pavements, street lighting, etc., worth Rs.2,477.22 cr. Every quality certificate it examined was either forged or suspect.

Each one. There is little point wasting space over details; they will be repetitive. Suffice to say that there has not been undiluted stink of this order for some time.

The odour is multinational, but naturally: this is the Commonwealth Games, after all. There is something called the Queen's baton relay, which means that the baton honoured with Queen

Elizabeth's blessing has to reach Delhi by relay. If there is an event there must be a function, and if there is a function there must be corruption.

The British authorities have provided a small glimpse into what is going on. The CWG Organising Committee sent about Rs.1.68 cr. in British pounds, to a company called AM Films UK Ltd (and is still sending 25,000 pounds every month) for video equipment in a deal where there was no tendering, no procedure and no paperwork.

The office address of this company shows only the presence of an AM Vehicles Hire Ltd., and on its books it says that it hired cars, makeshift toilets and barriers, not video equipment. Its director resigned, very conveniently, on 14 July. The Organising Committee issued a brazen denial that takes about a minute to tear to shreds.

Sports Minister M.S. Gill has admitted in Parliament that the cost of the Games increased 17.5 times since the *tamasha* began in 2003. Repeat that sentence 17 times for better effect.

Doesn't Prime Minister Manmohan Singh know what goes on in Parliament? Does he not read newspapers? Is he going to preside over the opening ceremony of the Games in the midst of those who should be on trial for loot? How long can he distance himself from the muck at his feet by silence? There will come a time, if it has not come already, when this silence will be heard at a volume that speech could never match.

Are we heading towards a 1973 situation? In early 1971 Ms. Indira Gandhi

was re-elected by margins that surprised her Congress. She reached the pinnacle of her tenure with the military triumph in Bangladesh in December 1971.

Within a year, inflation had soured the public mood. By the end of 1973 corruption had deepened the mire in which government was stuck. In 1974 Jayaprakash Narayan, whose own integrity was beyond question, challenged the moral right of Ms. Indira Gandhi to continue in office.

The one great difference is too obvious: there is no Jayaprakash Narayan in 2010. The corrupt are comforted by the fact that the credibility of all politicians is so low that the public does not have an effective vehicle through which it can mobilise its anger.

This vacuum should be of little comfort to the government. The wrath, real or simulated, of Opposition parties is not the spectre ahead, but the rising discontent of the people. The whiplash of food inflation is harshest on the poor, those who earn around a hundred rupees a day.

The poor do not protest too often, for the daily task of earning enough to eat is a demanding physical and psychological responsibility that consumes their time. But their patience is not infinite. They voted in large numbers for the Congress in 2009 because they believed in the sincerity of the party. They are beginning to feel betrayed.

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