

Relocation of risky chemical depots

Govt should stand firm on its decision

THE Industry Minister Dilip Barua has asked in no uncertain terms the businesspeople of Old Dhaka to relocate their warehouses for dangerous chemicals by the 17th of this month. We appreciate this position of zero-tolerance on the part of the government about depots of risky chemical at crowded places like Old Dhaka where residential quarters, shops, workshops of different kinds and markets coexist in close proximity to one another.

It is precisely two months after the worst fire in recent memory from a warehouse of highly flammable chemicals at Nimtoli in older part of the city that took some 118 lives and destroyed properties worth tens of millions of taka that the industry minister has issued this directive.

It may be recalled here that the Nimtoli inferno was triggered by the explosion of combustible substances kept in a depot placed at the basement of a residential building. And the immediate cause of the explosion was most likely the heat produced by big ovens being used by chefs preparing food for the guests at a wedding party taking place in that residential building. The flames from the ovens first heated up the building's walls, which in turn ignited the combustible chemicals through radiation thus setting off the big fire.

Though the horror of that fire still haunts the Dhaka residents, the warehouses containing the dangerous chemicals are still there. Immediately after the fire, the residents of the affected area as well as others including the authorities concerned did press for removing the chemical depots at a safer place.

So, the minister's call to remove the depots of risky chemicals should be heeded by the chemical traders as well as the plastic factory owners, who are the main users of the chemicals. And their request for more time hardly makes sense, since even so many days after that heartbreaking experience, we have not seen any serious initiative from the dealers in such deadly cargo to shift their activities to a location away from crowded localities. In any case, the relocation has to be a time-bound affair.

However, it is noteworthy that the government as stated by the state minister for law, who spoke at the same occasion that the industry minister was addressing, will be providing a guideline for the business houses concerned on the type of chemical warehouses that need to be relocated to a safer site. Now it is upon the government to basically spell out the guidelines as early as possible.

It is hoped that the government will stand firm on its decision. At the same time, it would do well to help warehouse owners select safe spots for relocation and also provide businesses in question with other support as necessary.

Luggage handling hiccups at the airport

Modernising is the answer

HAZRAT Shajalal International Airport, which has by no means an enviable record of passenger service, is now an even bigger source of anxiety to the incoming passengers. By one count, at least 30 of them have to leave the airport every day without their luggage after filing complaints with the airport authorities. Loss of luggage, which unlucky passengers used to face occasionally in the past, has become a regular feature of the apparently inept and manifestly corrupt luggage handling system at the country's biggest airport.

The problem seems to be even more acute when it comes to our own national carrier -- Biman. It is disgusting to note that two to five Biman passengers lose their luggage every day! Have the Biman or civil aviation authorities ever bothered to work out what it means in terms of harassment to the passengers landing after long flights? A passenger waiting for a long time near the conveyor belt finally discovers that his suitcase or bag is missing, or in some cases, found to have been opened or emptied! They lodge a complaint and come out of the airport totally dejected.

The airport authorities have tried to defend themselves through pointing out a number of constraints and limitations besetting the system. For instance, they point out that transit airports in the Middle East have started opening luggage to ensure better security which leaves it a little disheveled and exposed. This is an issue which should be settled within the framework of international air transport rules.

However, one can hardly overlook the fact that our own aviation experts believe that the airport is still using outdated equipment and methods for luggage handling. There is, they feel, the need for introducing the computerized baggage handling system to eliminate human errors and corrupt practices. The decision makers have to attach due importance to the matter if they are really embarrassed by the vanishing or tried open luggages.

Whatever might be the loopholes, it is hard to ignore the plain truth that a section of the airport staff is not honest or efficient enough to deliver the accompanying luggage to the passengers without any hassle. So, the emphasis should be on deploying well-trained and positively motivated personnel to serve the passengers at the conveyor belt. The civil aviation authorities have to act, instead of glibly repeating what they are planning to do for the passengers. The fact cannot be lost on all concerned that the quality of service delivered at the country's premier international airport adversely reflects on its reputation, something we can ill-afford.

Garment's troubles



Is "competitive pricing" more important than their survival?

We repeat what we have said in these columns before, the word "cheap" is a denigrating term when related to human beings; it dehumanises a person and reduces him or her to the state of a commodity. We can no longer tolerate to see the blood and sweat of our workers made "cheap."

SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN

THAT is perhaps an understatement considering the havoc that we witnessed last week. The wanton act of destruction by some section of garment workers must be condemned, but at the same time merely putting the blame on "outsiders" alone as being the ones behind the upsurge will look like an attempt to evade the real problems in the RMG sector.

We are always quick to jump at the conspiracy theory. If the trouble mongers have exploited the situation that is because there were enough causative factors to be exploited; the workers' resentment for one thing is a handy pretext to exploit.

One wonders whether the stakeholders are at all aware of the threat that the RMG

sector is facing because of the multifaceted attack being perpetrated on it over the last few years. The global meltdown and loss of market to other countries in the region far and near have been exacerbated by the continual unrest in this sector, which holds out very pessimistic prospects for the growth of the second-largest foreign exchange income source of the country. Some would say, it is the golden goose that is about to be killed.

The post MFA doomsday scenario was belied and the impact of global economic meltdown was not so acutely visible on our RMG sector, and the credit for that must go to the owners and the workers, although many small factories had to close down because of it. One must also credit the entrepreneurs for keeping their heads

above the water despite the many difficulties in terms of inputs.

And in all these the worst sufferers have been the workers. Their pay has been the major cause of unrest in the industry. And there is no doubt that the garment workers in Bangladesh have been shortchanged on every account. And even the PM was constrained to speak aloud about the workers' pay, which, even by our poor standards, is beggarly. It defies imagination that the basic pay for the lowest grade was a meagre Tk. 1,125 up until now.

The wage board process was handled in ham-handed manner and the workers have every right to resent it. But what is reprehensible is that their resentment has been exploited by some mischief makers. The police was taken off guard in spite of the clear indication by the LGRD minister that mischief may be afoot following the announcement of the new pay scale. But should the situation have been allowed to come to this?

As for the new pay scale one cannot but wonder at the attitude displayed by the owners during the process. The pay scale that was finally announced did not meet the expectation of either side. We are given

to understand that it was with great reluctance that the owners agreed to the amount only because of the PM, according to them. One finds it difficult to accept that attitude.

We take it that the owners are still not convinced that their workers deserve a raise. When the employers feel that it is not the need of their workers but for some other considerations that they have agreed to the new pay scale then there is serious flaw in the system. Only those bereft of sensibility can entertain such ideas.

More surprising was the stipulations laid down by the owners as preconditions for implementing the new scale, which are that the raise would be dependent on the government ensuring uninterrupted supply of gas and electricity to the factories and that the payment would be made from November.

There was no indication that even if the payment were to be made from November, the award would take effect from the date of announcement at the least. Can one blame the workers for thinking that the government has given in to the pressure of the owners?

There are some inherent difficulties in the RMG sector. The workers have not been made a stakeholder in the industry, and they have not been made to feel that they belong to it. The genuine problems of the factories are not shared with them. More so, the workers feel that they are the only ones being made to bear the rap of the economic meltdown, and their so-called reps in the wage board have nothing to do with the garment sector; they have every reason to think that they have been given a raw deal.

The owners are demanding a special force too for the factories. Security cannot be imposed by force but engendered through a harmonious worker-management rapport. Unfortunately, that is what is lacking.

Surely things have been difficult for the RMG sector. But unfortunately, the greatest brunt of the production cost is shifted on the workers. Why can't we get the buyers to pay more for our products? We repeat what we have said in these columns before, the word "cheap" is a denigrating term when related to human beings; it dehumanises a person and reduces him or her to the state of a commodity. We can no longer tolerate to see the blood and sweat of our workers made "cheap."

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The ultimate Games of also-rans



The Games were never about sports. They were a fortuitous opportunity for Delhi's ruling class to divert a vast fortune from the national exchequer, in the name of national prestige, and spend it on just those few parts of India's capital where the elite lives.

M. J. AKBAR

WE might all have missed the point about the Commonwealth Games (CWG); the problem is not in the games but in the Commonwealth. Britain took the event seriously when it began life as the Empire Games, for it was a good opportunity to find out how the natives were getting along in approved pursuits. Even the queen is no longer interested in a collection of countries that don't take orders from her, have little in common and less by way of wealth.

Why then should Usain Bolt be interested? There is neither the financial reward of professional engagement, nor the prestige of an Olympics medal. The CWG is the

ultimate competition of also-rans. The most versatile athlete at the Games is probably going to be the acrobatic Katrina Kaif, who may not be much good at the 100-metre dash, but is the undoubted star of the 100-metre-wide wriggle and writhe, which will surely be the most interesting event of the two-week tamasha.

The Games were never about sports. They were a fortuitous opportunity for Delhi's ruling class to divert a vast fortune from the national exchequer, in the name of national prestige, and spend it on just those few parts of India's capital where the elite lives. As patriotism, despite its many virtues, is also the last refuge of the scoundrel, a healthy part of the money was siphoned off, evidence of which has begun to move towards the front page.

Trenchant critics like Mani Shankar Aiyar could be falling into a trap when they pray for calamity. (By the way, which would you prefer; a good monsoon or a good CWG?) The oldest PR ploy is to deliberately lower expectations so much that even if the event is halfway average it can be billed as a triumph and all memory of corruption can be washed away in the ensuing gloating and self-congratulation. You have to be seriously stupid if you cannot get a few stadiums in shape after spending Rs.35,000 crore, and we should never underestimate the intelligence of the corrupt.

So expect Delhi to have the Games without a hitch; the weather will have improved; the streets will be light on traffic because locals will be on holiday and tourists absent; athletes will get their feed thanks to last-minute contracts at inflated rates; and a Rs.40 crore balloon, bloated with controversy, will provide adequate laser lighting to Katrina's sultry gyrations. Sports will merely be a boring hyphen between excellent opening and closing ceremonies.

Would David Cameron, prime minister of the premier Commonwealth nation, be caught, dead or alive, at the opening ceremony in Delhi? As his extremely successful

visit to India last week proved, he is, sensibly, far more interested in a bilateral relationship with India than a disjointed, multilateral extravaganza, even though Britain is the mother of the Commonwealth. The only flaw was our disconcerting tendency to call Cameron "Cameron," but this was the hangover from a far more successful sporting event, the football World Cup. We will have mended our ways by the time he drops by again.

The relationship between India and Britain must be one of the more astonishing success stories of history. There is a moving anecdote about an argument between Kasturba and Mahatma Gandhi during their last detention, in Pune, after Gandhi launched the "Quit India" movement in 1942.

Age, and life with a difficult, indomitable husband, had begun to wear "Ba" down. Once, seriously ill, she chided her husband for pitting impoverished Indians against the might of the British Raj. Why, she asked, did Gandhi want the British to quit? India was a vast country, and they should stay, but as brothers, not as rulers. This, replied the Mahatma, was precisely what he had been telling the British.

Kasturba, who did not live to see freedom, would have been pleased this week: Indians and the British have become, almost imperceptibly, brothers. Britain and America are mere partners. Cameron admitted, during his Washington visit, that Britain was the junior partner. There is no seniority in the equal British-India relationship. Scottish jute mills were once the largest employers in India; Tata is now the largest employer in Britain.

There is far more genuine, if latent, sentiment than both countries are loath to admit. While political bonds might be stronger across the Atlantic, India and Britain are united by unnoticed details of cultural contiguity. Cameron would scoff down a curry without a thought, for curry is as British now as Indian.

But look carefully at the photograph of Cameron eating a hot dog, in Mayor Bloomberg's company, in New York; his lower fingers twirl away in implicit disdain of the unfamiliar. Hot dog on Main Street is not Cameron's favourite fast food.

And now that the ranking dove in the Indian cabinet has decided to purchase 57 British Hawks, things can only get better.

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