



Ctg RMG leaders take the lead

ARUN BIKASH DEY

THE leaders of the garment sector in Chittagong have set an example of care and commitment for workers. They have recently set up a hospital, designated for the workers of the sector only. The leaders, in a span of 30 years, have helped build their own building for the association of the sector in the port city. On the occasions of these two landmark achievements, the incumbent and former leaders of Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) in Chittagong shared their stories of a long journey with The Daily Star.

The readymade garment industry saw its nascence in 1979 in the port city. Late Nurul Kader Khan was the pioneer. Desh Garments owned by Khan was the first RMG factory there. Then Azim-Mannan group and KDS group joined the march in 1981. BGMEA began its not-so-smooth journey in Chittagong in 1986.

According to Nasir Uddin Chowdhury, the first vice-president of BGMEA, some 30 to 35 factories employing about 7,000 workers were the members of the BGMEA in Chittagong then.

The city now boasts of 750 factories with over 4.50 lakh workers.

Chowdhury said the pioneers faced a lot of problems, as the owners were new, workers were not trained, and the accessories were to be imported on cash payments.

There were no back-to-back L/C and bonded warehouse facilities. But the leaders overcame all the problems gradually, he said.

Khalilur Rahman, a former first vice-president of BGMEA

and chairman of KDS Group, said, when the association began its activities in 1986, no government agency would listen to them.

But now the industry is the highest foreign currency earner in the country and the government is much concerned about the industry people.

These all were possible due to the efficient and concerted efforts of the BGMEA leaderships.

Lutfie M Ayub, a former director of BGMEA and managing director of Sunman Group, said the government facilities the industry now enjoys came due to the huge contributions of some former leaders such as late Nurul Kader Khan, Major Abdul Mannan (ret), chairman of Sunman Group, Engineer Fazlul Azim, chairman of Azim Group.

Bonded warehouse and back-to-back L / C are two of the facilities which the BGMEA leaders had fought for and won, he said.

Ershad Ullah, another former first vice-president of the association, said an institute on fashion and technology was established in Chittagong during his tenure from 2000-2002. Chittagong Apparel Fabrics and Accessories Exposition is now an annual event.

The association started its activities in the port city in a rented building at Agrabad in 1986. Outside the capital city, it was the first regional office of the apex trade body of the textile sector.

The office was later shifted to the Jiban Bima Bhaban at 56 Agrabad in 1991. After long 25 years, it shifted to its own building in Khulshi area on February 10 this year. The construction works on the ninth floor of the 13 storied building have already been



ANURUP KANTI DAS

The newly constructed office building of BGMEA in Chittagong. The association moved into the new office on February 10.

complete and the leaders of the association expect the rest of the floors will be ready within the next six months.

The new building houses a convention hall with the sitting arrangements for 200 guests, offices of different buying houses and garment industries, and a section of Bangladesh Institute of Fashion and Technology run by the BGMEA. The ground floor will be rented to a bank.

The association did not limit itself to managing business only; rather it undertook many humanitarian initiatives for the

welfare of the garment workers.

It provides health care facilities to the workers through its 14 health care centres of which two are situated in Chittagong. It runs three schools to provide education up to primary level to the children of the workers.

The association offers scholarships to 100 talented students who are the children of the garment workers. It also organises awareness programmes to sensitise the garment workers about various emergent issues.

The association also con-

structed a 100-bed hospital in the port city for the workers. The hospital activities kicked off on February 12 with a 25-bed capacity. It is the first hospital of its kind in the country which is earmarked for the treatment of the garment workers in exchange of nominal fees.

The Tk 10 crore hospital in the Salt Gola area under Bandar police station was built on 8.31 kathas of land. The construction works up to the fifth floor have already been complete.

The BGMEA leaders said the garment workers are now get-

ting both indoor and outdoor treatment facilities as well as services of a pathological laboratory at the hospital.

Gynaecological consultations, a burn unit and the rest 75 beds will be made available in the second phase. The garment workers will get registered paying Tk 20 to Tk 30 for treatment at the hospital.

Chowdhury, the first vice-president of the association, said four doctors are providing outdoor treatment facilities, including dispensation of medicine and consultations for eye care.

The booming sector

Asian Group Managing Director MA Salam shares his views on the garment industry with The Daily Star

ARUN BIKASH DEY

What is the garment industry's compliance status now?

Maintaining compliance is a must for a garment factory to receive orders from foreign buyers. Nearly 80 percent factories in the country maintain compliance at present. And those who lag behind are trying to catch up.

What's your suggestion for the factories that failed to maintain compliance?

They have to work in sub-contracts with the companies who maintain standards in all fields. Many of such factories are now taking steps to fulfil the compliance criteria on their own. It is a good sign.

Do the BGMEA members pay workers' overtime properly?

Yes. Each garment owner has to keep 20 machines inactive out of every 100 due to a nearly 15 percent shortage of expert workers that makes the owner bound to pay overtime bills in time. Otherwise, he will not find anyone working for him.

What are the facilities for the workers in the factories?



MA Salam

The workers are the heart of a factory. They are the focal point. If they are discouraged the industry will not run. So the owners always try to provide due facilities to them. Now workers get maternity leave, insurance facility for the whole family, medical treatment, education for their children and much more. BGMEA also

strictly monitors whether the factories provide the facilities properly.

Is the industry still running on child-labour?

The garment industry is now completely free from child-labour. It is one of the preconditions for compliance. Moreover, BGMEA has prohibited

this kind of labour in the sector by imposing a fine of \$1,000 to \$1,500 on the owners if it finds any violation of the rule. Besides, the association also appointed doctors to examine the real age of workers, most of who do not know their birth dates.

The workers in export process-

ing zones are better paid than those who work outside. Why this discrimination?

It is true that the workers of the factories in the export processing zones get more salaries and other benefits than the workers outside the EPZ. The factories running in the EPZs get more facilities from the government. They get one-stop service for their problems related to gas, electricity, water supply, customs, labour and others. They get five years more tax-exemption than the factories running outside the EPZ. They get an uninterrupted electric supply from 8am to 6pm. Moreover they are working for branded companies. So it is quite possible for them to provide high salaries and benefits to workers. The factories outside the EPZ will also be able to provide the same facilities to their workers if they are treated like the EPZ factories.

What is your view on trade union?

To form trade union is a legal right of the workers. We always show respect to the right. But the experience with trade union in the previous years

was quite bitter. The women working in the factories do not want trade union as they think it will hamper their rights. For this reason we formed a concept of "Welfare Committee" in the EPZ. It has already started working in the EPZ and other big factories running outside the EPZ. We are trying to form the committee in every factory running outside the EPZ.

Are the foreign buyers satisfied with the factories running in the port city?

Yes, of course, they are satisfied. Otherwise why do they pass the export-orders? They are a bit annoyed with the insufficient electricity, gas and water supply that are also restricting the factories grow their capacity.

What is the role of garment factories in Chittagong in the national economy?

The garment industries in Chittagong are some of the major contributors to the national economy. The companies added around \$5.07 billion to the economy last year, almost 35 percent of the sector's total earnings of \$14.6 billion.

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