

A better world starts in the workplace

SACHIKO YAMAMOTO

THESE are unsettling times all across Asia and the Pacific. The economic malaise and debt crisis plaguing Europe and the high levels of unemployment and weak consumer confidence in the United States -- our region's two main export markets -- threaten Asia's economic security. The rapid growth experienced in many countries has, in some ways, unhinged our societies. While notable progress has been made in reducing poverty, the increased prosperity reflected in GDP figures and the financial gains enjoyed by some are simply not being shared in ways that benefit the majority of small businesses, workers and their families. While productivity has improved in many countries, wages have not kept pace. We continue to see widening inequalities, persistent vulnerability, gender disparities and limited social protection.

Weak or non-existent worker representation, including restrictions on freedom of association and collective bargaining, means that the voices of the majority are often not heard, or simply ignored. This system of unbalanced growth cannot continue. It is an injustice and one that has serious consequences. The wave of political uprisings that started in North Africa earlier this year has now reached many parts of the Arab world. Demonstrations have also been seen in North America and Europe. The demands for change, led largely by frustrated and marginalised young people, demonstrates the universal need for decent jobs, basic rights and freedoms, and respect for human dignity. While there is no immediate indication that this social unrest will spread, we should heed this warning, and treat it not as a threat but as a call to action, an opportunity to create a more balanced and just future for everyone.

Policy-makers from governments, employers' and workers' organisations have an opportunity to do just that at the International Labour Organisation's (ILO) 15th Asia and the Pacific Regional Meeting which is being held in Kyoto, Japan, (December 4-7). Delegations from more than 40 member states, from Asia, the Pacific and the Arab States of West Asia, will discuss ways of creating a more balanced, just, sustainable future for the world of work.

Although the economic turbulence is not over some things are already clear; if Asia and the Pacific is to sustain its impressive growth it will need to place quality employment at the core of policy-making, rather than assuming it will follow as a by-product of economic expansion. It will also need to refocus on domestic demand -- rather than export-led growth -- and that means wages that reflect productivity improvements. Another way of supporting domestic demand, and protecting the most vulnerable -- including the many millions in Asia's informal economy -- is through a social protection floor that can even out income and demand fluctuations.

Just as important are respect for rights at work, strong and functional labour market institutions, and investment in human capital -- skills and pro-

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ductivity -- as well as machinery and technology.

In short, these are all components of what the ILO calls decent work.

Already, this region has made progress towards these decent work goals. Fairer wages are being seen in some countries along with better workplace and labour market systems, and steps to improve dialogue between workers and employers. Progress has also been made in eliminating some of the worst forms of child labour, and there is growing recognition that labour migration is not a problem to be solved but a process to be better managed.

But if we are to protect our economic and social future there is much more to be done. In many countries women are still underrepresented in the workforce, and often underpaid when they are in it. The region's huge informal economy means that millions of people remain extremely vulnerable to

any shock or disruption.

The massive earthquake and tsunami that struck Japan and this year's severe flooding in Southeast Asia are reminders of this region's particular vulnerability to natural disasters. Ensuring that people can get back to work after such crises is a vital part of planning and response measures.

What is also clear is that the more effectively these policies can be integrated, the more countries can co-ordinate and work together, the more effective such policies will be. Cross-border issues like labour migration, human trafficking and climate change require cross-border solutions.

Asian countries also have much valuable expertise of their own to share on common issues such as building stronger social safety nets, developing skills and supporting small businesses. The ILO stands ready to assist, and is working increasingly in partnership with member states and other multilateral organisations to make this expertise available. To this end we already have formal partnerships with Australia, Japan, Republic of Korea and Singapore.

We will also be launching a campaign to increase the ratification rate of ILO Conventions in Asia and the Pacific, particularly the core standards relating to discrimination, child and forced labour and freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining. Currently, this region lags behind the rest of the world in signing up to these international standards. Some people have expressed concern that such commitments will undermine competitiveness and hinder a country's development. Let me be clear; they do not. They underpin it.

Asia has the potential and dynamism to lead the world in sustainable economic recovery. While there are challenges ahead, I am very optimistic that the region can rise to them and, with the right approaches, consolidate its position as an economic and social world leader, with policies that directly support both employment and equity -- in other words, decent work.

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SHIFTING IMAGES

And, live happily ever after?



MILIA ALI

IS happiness for real or is it a state of the mind? Thomas Hardy described happiness as an "occasional episode in a general drama of pain." Hardy has been criticised for "being overly pessimistic about humanity's place in the scheme of things." We may or may not agree with Hardy, but both optimists and pessimists are still struggling with the concept of happiness and the factors that contribute toward making

human beings happy. Of course, the core question is: what is this illusive emotion, termed happiness? Different individuals may have different views, but a generic definition of happiness is: "A mental state of well-being characterised by positive emotions" or, in layman's terms, happiness is the sense of satisfaction we have in life.

Is happiness determined by heredity or circumstances, or can we control how happy or unhappy we are? Behavioural geneticist and psychologist David Lykken compared happiness data on identical vs. fraternal twins and reached the conclusion that about 50% of one's satisfaction with life comes from "genetic programming." Genes influence personality traits like "having a sunny, easygoing disposition; dealing well with stress; and feeling low levels of anxiety and depression." Lykken also found that circumstantial factors like income, marital status, religion and education contribute only about 8% to one's overall well-being. The remaining percentage is attributed to "life's slings and arrows." These findings may cause many of us to take a fatalistic approach toward the pursuit of happiness. If it is primarily genes that determine our level of satisfaction with life, then behavioural changes may not help improve our emotional well-being! But let us not forget that we still have the 50% that is not genes to play around with, at least to a certain degree.

What is interesting is that most researchers have found that money cannot buy happiness "beyond the point at which people have enough to comfortably feed, clothe, and house themselves!" On the contrary, spending money on others makes us happier than spending it on ourselves. Also, interpersonal virtues like kindness, gratitude and capacity for love are strongly



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tied to happiness. Altruistic acts can be real mood enhancers since focusing on others diverts our minds and we worry less about ourselves. In addition, compassion helps us put our own problems in perspective because we realise that we are not the only ones suffering.

Regrettably, many of us fall into the age-old trap of seeking happiness through increased income, status and material attributes. In this context an anecdote is worth recounting. An acquaintance of mine has an unusually competitive streak and believes that the only way one can achieve happiness is by competing (and winning) with others on all material fronts. Sometimes she takes her competitiveness to a ludicrous level. When a mini-hurricane hit Maryland and Virginia causing widespread power outages in many neighbourhoods, she called friends and acquaintances to find out how many people had lost power. The purpose? Not to empathise, but to convey the message that neighbourhoods that were without power were in some way inferior. And, since she still had electricity she was standing on higher ground. She may have got an ego boost, but she succeeded in ruining quite a few relationships in the process!

I am not sure whether the lady in question is a happy person, but I do believe that deriving pleasure at the misfortune of others does not help us attain happiness. Didn't our elders tell us that we attract what we generate and bad energy sent out into the world will be reflected back to us? This age-old wisdom is now supported by a significant body of research which confirms that positive human interactions have a great impact on happiness.

Despite all the knowledge and insight on how to achieve happiness, I often wonder: "Why isn't the world one happy place?" May be because the strategies for attaining happiness require tremendous effort and years of practice before they can be perfected. And, individuals cannot change their habitual coping styles easily. The bottom line is that one needs to renew one's commitment to happiness every day, every moment, because happiness is not a destination but a constant journey.

The writer is a renowned Rabintra Sanjeet exponent and a former employee of the World Bank.

Peace in CHT: A perspective on the military role

A. F. JAGLUL AHMED

IT has been more than a decade that the Chittagong Hill Tract (CHT) peace accord was signed. And it appears from the media and a few other groups that peace by and large seems to be far despite the sincere efforts of the government. The government's efforts in terms of handing over of the remaining subjects to the Hill District Councils, forming various committees to expedite the peace process, bringing normalcy in the daily life of the people living in CHT, undertaking development activities, and, above all, the shift in the working procedures, indicate that peace is near rather than far.

The factors that militate against peace are; individual and communal clashes over multiple claims on land, parochial political activities revolving more around fomenting communal tension rather than politics, armed group activities in disguise often portraying the situation as highly volatile due to unbalanced media coverage, uncompromising attitude of both the tribal and non-tribal groups on conflicting issues bringing both face to face on insignificant matters drawing, at times, national and international focus.

One who lives/works in the CHT would see the situation as quite normal. However, one who visits the area for a short-while or is seldom in touch with CHT affairs might view the situation with suspicion. Nevertheless, the actual state can only be determined through the lens of different actors who matter for establishing peace in CHT and whose views also vary. It took a long time to realise before the peace accord was signed that the problem was not a military one. The political and economic development partners and others like the media were quite late in getting involved in the peace process. The military played the lead role for long and according to some critics, are still playing it. Undeniably for various reasons, the military is critical in maintaining a congenial environment for making of peace complete. Other actors are reactive, some proactive or too active, to play their role to contribute to making peace or making it more complicated.

The efforts to establish peace before and after the signing of the accord have not yet been seen from the time point of view. Of the total engagement of

the military in last thirty-five years, only fourteen years, after the accord, have been spent to implement peace. Perception of the method of establishing peace varies between various members of the military because "fighting" for peace is more difficult than winning a war. When there was combat situation for which the military was trained, providing direction was easier.

The military has to depend more on the wisdom and experiences of contemporary insurgency situations around the globe than a clear cut textbook solution. Experiences gained by militaries across the globe or from recorded history are different than that of ours. Our military, like in all other nations, believes in the Clausewitzian concept of victory as being the ultimate end state of all kinds of conflicts. And like Clausewitz, it is difficult for the military to view peace as the end state of all conflicts. Therefore, the tendency of the military is to first clearly determine the enemy that has to be

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defeated. Not an exception, our military on its first entry into CHT looked for the enemy and found the derailed group merged with the innocent tribal community.

The entire tribal community appeared to be the enemy but had to be engaged in general to segregate them from the real enemy. As a result, the innocent who underwent some collateral damages due to the prevalent combat situation nurture a hostile feeling towards the military. The military on its part finds it difficult to convince these people of their role and thus falters in advancing peace. The military's post-accord method of "fighting" for peace proves inadequate largely due to the antagonistic attitude of many tribal people, which is shaped by their pre-accord experiences. The misgivings exist even today and it is difficult to identify those that are fused with the entire tribal community and acting against peace. Under such a mind

frame, the method of fighting is more often than not decided equivocally.

The fighting method in the pre-accord era was easier to be passed on from one person to another as the method was textbook-oriented and the situation was fast moving, where a sense of urgency always prevailed because of many factors. But in the post-accord era, the textbook method of combat disappeared, the face of the enemy got blurred and the sense of urgency of the soldiers vanished due to reduction in the level of threat. For any newcomer in CHT, the starting point is difficult to decide, legacy from the last is perhaps out of question. Unfortunately, when the military turned its end state from victory to peace, it was not understood clearly by the ethnic people. Therefore, the military is still labeled by many as an oppressive force.

At the tactical level at times, the military has to cope with the experience of the pre-accord era to deal with the post-accord situation. Some of the military personnel, now in high ranks, have to shift their approach of work from the ground experience of the much lower ranks. Sometimes it is not easy to make a clear shift and make it clear to the people associated with it. Clashes occur at times between the strategic and tactical methods of "fighting" for peace. A benign approach is always assumed to deal with the situation at the strategic level, but aggression is the normative approach at the tactical level for any military operation. How to switch from a combative to a benign mindset is a dilemma.

The military, at the tactical level, looks for immediate success, whereas what constitutes success is also not very clear in the post-accord situation. Even when the perception of the end state equally exists in all, the good efforts for a noble purpose fail to draw focus due to hostile propaganda by various quarters. Due largely to all these, operational or tactical focus sometimes fail to connect the strategic end state. With all these limitations, more often than not, the military is labeled as the impediment to peace, leaving it no scope to justify otherwise. Not too many books have been written by the old generation of the military to guide their new generation. The military still struggles to determine if the peace in CHT is far or near, and difficult or easier to achieve.

The author is currently commanding an infantry brigade in CHT.