

Recurring unrest in RMG belt

Solution must be found urgently to stem further loss

THE labour unrest the country has been witnessing over the last week in Ashulia area has now taken a turn for the worse as key demands remain unresolved and readymade garments (RMG) owners threaten to go for indefinite shutdown unless the government ensures 'security'. This new twist puts the government between a hard place and a rock.

There are unpalatable truths behind the latest round of violence that threatens to stop industrial activity in the Savar-Ashulia belt. Both house rent in the area and transportation fare to and from the industrial belt follow no normal patterns of increase. The average factory worker is paid minimum wage of Tk.3,000 per month, which in today's context of double-digit inflation does not carry much weight. This is more so since the rise in house rent knows no bounds, not even in the industrial belt. According to what have been published in newspapers, tenants of a medium-sized room with two single beds that costs each person Tk.600 now have been told that their rent will go up 25% to Tk.750 should workers receive the much talked about pay raise that is supposed to come into effect in July. The regular price hike scenario in the kitchen markets merely adds more fuel to fire in an already untenable situation.

It is obvious that such a situation cannot be allowed to continue indefinitely. This is not merely a law and order situation. The fact that there is no organised trade union in most factories translates into a situation where workers' grievances remain unknown to management and this in turn helps create a gap in communication between the owners and the workers. Time has come for all the stakeholders including the government, factory owners and workers to sit down and work out these issues because a large portion of the annual \$26billion generated through exports comes from RMG. Only the government has the authority to bring the contending factions to talks for every day's production loss translates into millions of dollars in lost revenue, a loss that the country can do without.

Anti-pollution drive Industries take issue with environment minister

SOME industries, largely responsible for environmental degradation, have demanded the government stop the ongoing anti-pollution drives. Such group of industries include steel mills, re-rolling mills, plastic factories and brickfields.

The reasons they are citing for a halt to enforcement of environmental rules are 'hefty' fines imposed by Department of Environment (DoE) followed by, in some instances, shutting down of industries. The DoE authority argues that they are compelled to penalise the industries because the level of pollution created by them has crossed the limit set for them.

Actually, while setting up the factories owners were supposed to have effluent treatment units attached to them. The industry ministry which licentiates establishment of any manufacturing unit is responsible for ensuring that such an industry has an ETP. It is, however, for the environment ministry now to enforce rules against polluting industries.

It is good to see that a consultative process has been set in motion between the polluting industries and the authorities concerned at the initiative of the Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industries. The FBCCI organised a programme titled "Environment-related Problems and Solutions bringing about an interface between the industries and the anti-pollution authorities.

The industries complained of absence of timely warnings and guidelines which clearly need to be looked into. The minister for environment and forests Hassan Mahmud rightly stuck to his policy of enforcement but assured industry owners of considering not shutting down industries following drives.

Solution to the problem on a permanent footing lies in having separate industrial estates with central effluent treatment plants (CETPs) installed in them. This envisages clustering of industries. Furthermore, we share the minister's emphasis on saving the Buriganga river by shifting industries operating on its banks away to a separate industrial zone. Action on the ground, however, is

The Rohingya question



ASHFAQUR RAHMAN

AN old wound in the body politic of Myanmar was reopened last week. In western Myanmar, in the state of Rakhine next to Bangladesh, a

group of Muslims riding a bus were killed by a mob of Buddhists. According to news reports the killers displayed a degree of cruelty that is the usual hallmark of Myanmar's security forces. The incident was allegedly in response to the rape and murder of a Buddhist girl by three Muslim men, a few days before. The ten Muslims killed that day were beaten to death before the bus was set on fire. It did not matter to the killers that the men accused of the rape had already been arrested and were in jail.

Reactions inside Myanmar of the killing was even more startling. Comments circulated in the internet said that 'killing of the kalas is good'. The term 'kala' refers pejoratively to the dark skinned Muslims of South Asian descent known in Myanmar as the Rohingyas. It reflected their general resentment towards these Muslims.

But who exactly are these Rohingyas? Why are they the target of xenophobic elements in Myanmar society?

Myanmar's frontier areas are inhabited by many ethnic groups. Most of such groups are recognised as citizens of that country. But there are exceptions. One of the notable one is the Rohingyas. They live along the Myanmar border with Bangladesh. These people have deep historical roots in north Rakhine (also called Arakan). Their name comes from the word 'Rohans' which was the earlier name of the Arakan. They are an ethnic mix of Bengalis, Persians, Moghuls, Turks and Pathans. Their language is part Bengali (as spoken in Chittagong in Bangladesh) with sprinklings of Urdu, Hindi and Arabic words. The tall Arakan Yoma mountains cuts off their area from the rest of Myanmar. So for centuries they have been living isolated from the mainland. It has been so since the 7th century when they first settled there.

Indeed upto 1784, Arakan was an independent Muslim kingdom. In that year it was colonised by a Buddhist Burmese king called Bodawphaya.

From that time two distinct communities started living in this 22,000 square mile territory. They were the Muslim Rohingyas and the Buddhist Maghs. When the British came in 1824 and started ruling all of Burma, they recorded that Arakan had one lakh population of which 30% were Muslims. This percentage of Muslims however increased over the years. However the British at one stage of their stay profiled the various races living in Burma. They identified a total of 135 distinct races in that country. But they had left out the Rohingyas as a separate ethnic group. This mistake made by the British is being paid ever since by the hapless Rohingyas.

After Burma got its independence from Britain in 1948, a number of

Rohingyas in the face of persecution left their land and escaped by boats to Bangladesh. In 1978 and then again in 1991 major exodus took place.

In 1992, the United Nations General Assembly passed resolution No. 47/144 recognising the suffering of the Rohingyas in the hand of the Burmese army. About 200,000 Rohingyas had by then fled to Bangladesh. But the military government there did not take steps to bring them back to their homeland. About 28,000 of them who are registered with UNCHR are still housed in two big camps in the Cox's Bazar district of Bangladesh, after the rest left for various destinations within Bangladesh or in other countries of the region. The Myanmar (then Burmese) government has not responded to the

this than that.

In more than 21 years we have been requesting the Myanmar government to solve the Rohingya question so that these hapless people feel secure and can go back. But they have been dragging their feet. They obviously think that Bangladesh cannot but give refuge to Muslims. But the political scenario within Myanmar has changed dramatically in the past couple of years. Today under the leadership of President Thein Sein, Myanmar is moving towards a democratic system of governance. Nobel Prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi has been released from house arrest and she and her party has returned to parliament there. In this new dispensation the Rohingyas may see some positive changes.

But the timing of the riots against the Rohingyas is quite worrying. Many see this as a ploy by the entrenched military to keep Suu Kyi under political pressure. She cannot overtly support the Rohingyas for then she may lose support of Buddhists there. But she cannot at the same time afford to ignore the human rights violations of the Rohingyas. This will bring condemnation from the international community. She has therefore to find a solution to this question with the authorities there soon.

A possible way out for the Myanmar government is to repeal or amend the 1982 Burmese Citizenship Law. Translated it means that the Rohingyas should have their citizenship rights restored. Once they are recognised as citizens then they will have their basic rights.

Next month the president of Myanmar is expected to visit Dhaka. If the visit take place we must do our homework now and build international pressure on Myanmar to resolve the Rohingya question. We must insist that it would be to the mutual benefit of our two countries to have a peaceful border. But if Myanmar wants to keep this wound in their body politic festering, then we may caution them that it may take some time before a democratic Myanmar can join the comity of other democratic nations in the region if not in the world. They must resolve this sectarian issue first which has potential to spill over their borders, before they can display any democratic credentials.

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Rohingyas were elected to Burma's post colonial parliament. Under their 1948 Citizenship Law, they were also made bonafide citizens of the country. It was well known that from 1961 to 1965, the Burmese Broadcasting Service also had a Rohingya language programme.

But all this began to change under the rule of General Ne Win who overturned the democratic government in a military coup in 1962. Ne Win's argument was that the ruling political party before his takeover, recognised Rohingyas as an ethnic group merely to get their votes. He therefore took away their Burmese citizenship and made them stateless. They were considered as immigrants from neighboring Bangladesh (then East Pakistan).

The army then subjected them to forced labour, expropriated their property and did extra judicial killing. They denied Rohingyas employment, access to education and trade, and also restricted their movement. Even their right to marry and to form families was subject to permission which had to be bought with high bribes from the authorities. In effect the world began to see a 'slow genocide' taking place against these people. Many of the

pleas of the Bangladesh Government or the international community to take them back.

Now that there are fresh attacks on the Rohingyas across the border a new exodus is likely. Already we have seen some of these people taking small boats and crossing the Bay to reach safe haven in Bangladesh. This time our Government is discouraging their entry into Bangladesh. Our Border Guards and the Coast Guards have been alerted and under their supervision these small groups are being temporarily fed, given emergency medical treatment and sent back.

For our Government a serious moral and ethical issue is involved here. In 1971 when we were subjected to torture by the then military Government of Pakistan, we left for safe havens in neighbouring India. We were received and housed there for nine months. But in these months many of us fought a war of liberation and returned as soon we got our independence. Many people seem uncomfortable with our government dissuading the persecuted Rohingyas to go back to their homes. Even some of our international friends have been putting pressure to accept Rohingya refugees. But there is more to

The spring of our hope and the winter of our discontent

MIZANUR RAHMAN SHELLEY

THE glorious struggle of repressed people for freedom and democracy did not begin with the Arab spring, nor is it likely to end with the advent of the scorching Arab summer. As in other lands so also in Arab countries such as Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen and Libya the masses rose in unprecedented revolt against long lasting autocratic rulers. These "iron men" riding roughshod over hitherto effete people for long decades melted like tin pot dictators as the fury of enraged masses spread like wildfire. The inception was in January 2011 in Tunisia where self-immolation by an unemployed young man protesting state injustice ignited the blaze of a revolution that swept away the 29 year old dictatorial regime of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. Similar fate followed swiftly for Egypt's Hosni Mubarak, Libya's Muammar Gaddafi and Yemen's Hisan Saleh. Before the year ended Bahrain shook with the yet inconclusive upsurge of angry citizens demanding their democratic rights. At the moment Syria's autocratic ruler president Bashar Al Assad finds his regime confronted with popular armed resistance and a potential sectarian civil strife.

Western media and analysts were evidently enthused with what they initially thought to be the beginning of an epoch making transition of auto-

cratic Arab societies to liberal democracies marked by freedom and human rights. More than a year has elapsed after the inception of the Arab Spring.

The autocrats have been exiled punished or killed. Nevertheless the countries concerned are still captives of the uncertainties of transition. The democracy of their dream is yet to be realised. In Egypt election to the presidency is in

socialist dictators Saddam Hosain in Iraq or autocrat such as Hosni Mubarak in Egypt practiced was skin deep. Gaddafi in Libya also toed an avowedly pro-socialist line with underlying Islamic overtones. The dictators succeeded for long in keeping the widespread and deep seated religious inclinations of the Muslim masses. Their mal-governance corruption and

ern powers by and large supported dictators who long ruled Muslim majority countries in the name of secularism and orderly society. Despite the West's real and chastening experience many western leaders and thinkers seemed to have forgotten that democracy is not a romantic dream alone.

Building democracy is a messy and unglamorous exercise that needs farsighted and competent leadership and adequate material resources. Unfortunately, both are in short supply in countries marked by the Arab Spring and also in many other less developed and developing countries. In the former, the democratic transition is still far from achievement. In the latter group of countries what goes on in the name of democracy is visibly and in substance uncertain and illiberal elective systems. If and when these countries have a majority of strongly religious population the failure of leaders, intolerance of so-called democratic parties mal-governance, mismanagement of economy and pervasive corruption marginalise democratic dissent and open wide the avenues for the rise of militant extremists. Circumstances such as these inevitably tend to distort the spring of people's hope into the winter of their discontent.

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progress as an arrangement presided by the armed forces still features the country. The pro-Islamist party Muslim Brotherhood commands a major portion of popular support in Egypt. In Libya the post-Gaddafi order is marked by incertitude the interim government pledging loyalty to moderate Islamic principles confronts challenges from armed tribal and local forces. In Tunisia and Yemen too the rising forces are avowedly loyal to tenets of Islam. There is nothing wrong in this trend in Muslim majority lands.

repression created scope for Islamic religious extremist to make silent headway among the people in poor rural areas and urban slums. It was precisely a scenario such as this that led to the unexpected and tumultuous Islamic revolution in 1979 in Iran ruled by Western favourite monarch Reza Shah Pahlavi. Evidently, that lesson administered not so long ago has been forgotten by the West as well as their non-western allies and supporters who cry hoarse in favour of secular, liberal democracy. It is worth nothing that dominant west-

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THIS DAY IN HISTORY

June 16

- 1487**
Battle of Stoke Field, the final engagement of the Wars of the Roses.
- 1755**
French and Indian War: the French surrender Fort Beauséjour to the British, leading to the expulsion of the Acadians.
- 1779**
Spain declares war on the Kingdom of Great Britain, and the Great Siege of Gibraltar begins.
- 1858**
The Battle of Morar takes place during the Indian Mutiny.
- 1992**
Controversial Diana book published. An explosive new book about the Princess of Wales, including claims she attempted suicide, is published by author Andrew Morton.
- 2000**
Israel complies with UN Security Council Resolution 425 after 22 years of its issuance, which calls on Israel to completely withdraw from Lebanon. Israel withdraws from all of Lebanon, except the disputed Shebaa Farms.