

## STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING

## Violence in RMG sector

*Get to the bottom of the problem*

MONDAY'S unrest originating from a knitwear factory at Ashulia spread to other garment units ending up in a widespread violence and damage to machinery in five factories, vehicles on the road and clashes with the police. The labour-violence of that day reportedly had to do with alleged excesses committed by administrative officials of the knitwear unit concerned. Spontaneously, the unrest spread among workers from other factories engulfing the entire area into a veritable battlefield.

Whenever such labour-unrest with attendant violence takes place, the factory owners, trade bodies and the government invariably point fingers at some unseen quarters for the situation. The workers, on the other hand, blame the factory management for such violence. Their complaints include refusal on the part of the management to listen to their demands for pay raise, non-payment of bonuses and other benefits before religious festivals, highhandedness of factory officials and use of hired goons to suppress them. But neither side has the patience to listen to the other side's point of view, and the problems in this vital sector continue to fester.

Foreign buyers at a recent meeting in Dhaka, as well as a hearing of the US Congress, expressed serious concerns about the unrests and violence in the RMG industry. The State Department officials made special mention of the absence of labourers' right, especially their right of association. The government's failure to tack down and try the killers of labour leader Aminul Islam, who disappeared on April 4 this year and other incidents of rights violation featured prominently in the Congress hearing with cautionary notes about what implications these developments might have on Bangladesh's exports.

The government can ill-afford to ignore these warnings from its potential export destinations. It should mount credible investigations to find the real cause of the labour unrest in this sector and address the problems at their source rather than look for enemies elsewhere.

The government should also impress upon the garment owners to allow labour unions to grow in the industry as the universally accepted medium for negotiations between the owners and labour to resolve the crises in the garment sector.

## Foreign secretary-level talks in Delhi

*Resolving bilateral issues must acquire urgency*

THE talks between the foreign secretaries of Bangladesh and India in Delhi hold out the hope for some good results to emerge soon on outstanding issues between the two countries.

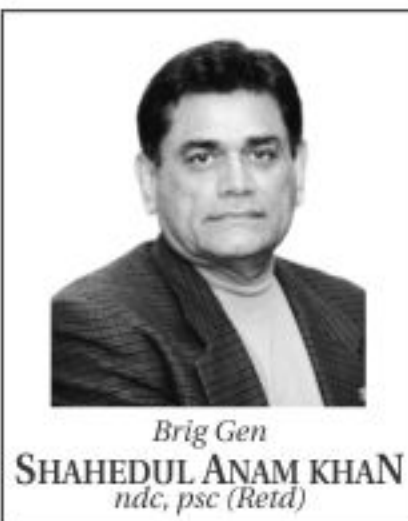
It may be mentioned that the talks were held as a follow up to the Joint Consultative Commission meeting held in New Delhi in May this year and the two summit meetings in 2009 and 2011 in New Delhi and Dhaka respectively. In Bangladesh we look upon such meetings as stocktaking of what have been implemented as far as the two joint declarations are concerned.

Bangladesh is still waiting for progress in the two important issues, the land boundary agreement and the Teesta water sharing. Implementation of the USD one billion loan has stared very recently. To a very large extent, indeed almost totally, the onus is now upon the Indian government to move, and move quickly, towards an implementation of the agreements that have been reached.

As the Bangladesh foreign secretary has correctly pointed out, it is not in anyone's interest to make a commitment and not deliver on it. Obviously, the Indian government is hamstrung by the reluctance of the West Bengal chief minister to countenance any deal with Bangladesh on the ground that such a deal might harm the interests of her state. All we can say is that such internal Indian dynamics must be speedily worked on by India quickly.

Bangladesh ought not to be kept in a limbo over the Teesta issue and the land boundary agreement. If it is, mutual confidence will wither. With such other issues as the killings on the border of Bangladeshis by India's BSF on the table, it is our expectation that the foreign secretary-level talks in Delhi will have stressed the urgency with which all outstanding issues must be approached

# And now the US Senate



Brig Gen  
SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN  
Editor, *psc (Retd)*

WE have not yet had any response from the government on the recent hearing of the US Senate regarding the

state of human rights and the scenario in the labour front, the RMG in particular, in Bangladesh.

The hearing dwelt on the state of human rights in general, singling out the Rapid Action Battalion for its criticism, blaming the elite force for the extrajudicial killings in the country. It cannot be a pleasing testimony for any government that considers itself the flag bearer of democracy, rule of law and human rights, particularly coming in the wake of HRW report that had delivered a scathing commentary on, again, the elite force, among other HR issues in the country. And now the US Senate hearing on Bangladesh labour and HR scenario, does likewise.

We can question the credentials of the US government to conduct hearings on human rights on any country, or for that matter, the moral authority to publish a yearly report card on the state of human rights all over the world when its own record of human rights in its own country or for that matter in those that it is in occupation, sometimes under the umbrella of coerced UN sanctions, makes a sorry and ignominious reading. One could also question many aspects of the testimony of the Director of the HRW, those being mere subjective opinion rather than

factual, but can we question the main point at issue of the deliberation where senior US government functionaries delivered their views on the state of human rights in this country.

It is a good sign that the government did not dismiss the proceedings of the hearing out of hand as it has been wont to do, where some of such reports have been summarily rubbished as figments of some fertile mind's imagination. We hope that the government would seriously address

Aminul's body was found in a ditch on April 5, 2012, after being picked up, allegedly, by a law enforcing agency a day before from Ashulia. Reportedly, the labour rights advocate was detained previously by the NSI on June 16, 2010. According to Aminul, he was threatened with death and subjected to severe and repeated beatings to give false testimony against his colleagues at BCWS.

These are issue that have serious ramification for our RMG industry. The

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the issues brought up at the Senate hearing, both the scenario in the RMG sector and the alleged violation of human rights by RAB.

The RMG sector merited the attention of the US Congress particularly for two reasons, firstly, because of the "failing of the government to enforce its own labor laws and its commitments as a member of the International Labor Organization," and secondly, because of the unresolved mystery of the death of Aminul Islam, head of the US based Bangladesh Center for Workers' Solidarity (BCWS) linked to the US body advancing labour rights in Bangladesh.

industry has grown in size despite the less-than-stable political situation in the country, and in spite of the many hurdles that it has had to face, particularly shortage of power. And it has the potential to double the export in the next several years has been forecast by international market research groups. The country can hardly bear any reduction in the demand for our apparel particularly in the US and Europe, something that might just happen as hinted to by the US Ambassador in Bangladesh, if the situation was not addressed.

The mystery of Aminul's death must also be resolved quickly. Regrettably, what one found rather disturbing is the

attempt to paint him as an NGO activist rather than a labour leader, as we saw being done recently, as if to suggest that an NGO activist is a fair game for a killer? It does not diminish the importance of the issue whether the murdered person was a labour leader or an NGO activist, nor detract from it the gravity of the fact that a human life has been cut short.

Why should the HR situation come to such a pass that the international bodies are compelled to suggest that Bangladesh be put under watch of the UN? And can any government tolerate its elite force being called a "Death Squad?" The HRW has done so several times in its official documents. As for the RAB and the alleged extra-judicial killings, we did not find any protest from the BNP to the HRW statement in the hearing that, "BNP officials told Human Rights Watch that extrajudicial killings were part of its mandate from the outset because, they argued, corruption in the police and courts meant that powerful criminals could avoid arrest or buy their way out of prison." The BNP has a lot to answer for if that is true.

Instead of going in a denial mode the government should investigate all the allegations of rights violation by government agencies, and wherever necessary take the errant persons to task. And, if it believes really in what it has publicly preached, that it is committed to "zero tolerance" for human rights violations, it must act sincerely to stop it.

The writer is Editor, Op-Ed and Defence & Strategic Affairs, *The Daily Star*.

# India-Pak relations: Time for cricket

SALMAN HAIDAR

ALL of a sudden, something is stirring on the India-Pakistan diplomatic front. It has been only a few weeks since the two foreign secretaries met and ended up with little to show for their pains, their meeting being overshadowed by the "Abu Jundal" affair which saw the repatriation from Saudi Arabia of an Indian national deeply implicated in the 26/11 attacks on Mumbai, someone that India has been trying to capture for many years.

As more information pertaining to the attack kept tumbling out, hapless Pak officials were forced to repeat yet again that their agencies had no part in the murderous attacks, a denial that carries less and less conviction as evidence continues to pile up to the contrary, and not from Indian sources alone.

It would have been no great surprise if the tempo of bilateral exchanges had been deliberately slowed down in the light of the revelations provided by the repatriated prisoner. But that is not what happened.

In a new twist to the unpredictable path of India-Pakistan relations, cricket diplomacy has been once more invoked to give a fresh complexion to events. Rather than put up new barriers after the previous, unsatisfactory meeting, the two sides have agreed to ease and ameliorate relations. There is to be a series of cricket matches between the two teams.

Moreover, the matches will be held on Indian soil. A considerable flood of Pakistani spectators are to be permitted to come and view the matches. With this announcement, much excitement has been generated, both countries being in the grip of a cricket rivalry that excites and animates countless numbers of their citizens: indeed, a gesture involving cricket has become a time honoured means of conveying mellower sentiments from

one side to the other.

The rather halting progress of the official dialogue has been abruptly upstaged by the impending sporting contest and by speculation about what it implies for the overall relationship.

While these cricket-related events have been taking place, there has been renewed speculation about the possibility of a visit to Pakistan by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh. Such conjectures arise regularly but this time there seems to be a real expectation that the long expected visit might indeed materialise. Rumours to this effect are not espe-

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cially strong but have been fairly persistent, so maybe the time is coming. It has also become evident that if real progress is desired, there is no escape from engagement at the top.

The official dialogue is a useful and desirable mechanism, and it is necessary that the two sides should remain engaged with each other.

But it is evident that, of itself, this form of dialogue cannot be expected to lead to a breakthrough that reorders the relationship along more constructive lines. For that, higher level engagement is needed.

The foreign ministers are to be in contact to discuss some of the outstanding issues but major steps forward can hardly be envisaged without the topmost leaders showing readiness to engage with each other and take the initiative.

Simultaneously, it would not be very meaningful to pitch for a prime

ministerial visit that did not lead to real movement in the relationship. The leadership has to consider what decisive steps are possible during such a visit. The confidence-building process has been in progress for quite some time and it has yielded some good results, like the bus service across the line of control (LOC) which has had an impact: complaints about its limited reach and benefit are a paradoxical indication of increasing demand for the service.

Similarly, the trade across the LOC has brought a measure of prosperity in the border areas. In fact, cross-LOC trade is poised for very substantial

enlargement but is being held back by its limited remit: it is not clear whether it should cater only to intra-J&K trade or have a wider compass. A comparable case relates to regular trade across the international border which has been eased significantly but continues to be impeded by slow-moving regulators on the spot with ideas of their own.

This has become a bane of the bilateral relationship. There is too much history, too many precedents, bearing on virtually every issue, and it is very difficult for those responsible for implementing innovative new rules to fight free of the thickets of precedence. Thus new facilities at Wagah remain under-utilised while matters of procedure preoccupy the officials.

In these circumstances those who seek easier mutual access, having seen how officials get bogged down,

pin their hopes on intervention by ministers and more authoritative state functionaries. Of course, a summit-level visit is not to be sought or justified for such purposes, but it could have the beneficial side effect of easing the procedural blockage that deflects good intentions.

A full-scale prime ministerial visit would inevitably be judged by what it achieves in the central areas of concern -- matters of war and peace, of cross-border terror, of mistrust and suspicion. The public seems ready for a change of direction but it is not certain how the governing classes would react. Hence leaders must be cautious and not be swept into premature gestures, to the detriment of neighbourly relations, and of the standing of the government itself. Yet to avoid initiative and sit tight at this juncture could mean another tantalising loss of opportunity. It is a fine balance and a difficult judgement.

If current indications of a thaw are correct and a brisker tempo in bilateral relations is indeed on the cards, then there is no shortage of useful initiatives for governments to consider. In J&K, progress is desired on the dictum that while lines on the map cannot be removed, they can be made irrelevant.

More generally, the trading communities on both sides are now eager to expand trade exchanges, having realised how much benefit they can bring. Most important is to build peace and cooperation, something that requires the personalised conviction and commitment of the leaders.

Thus much can be done to give real substance to a meeting at the highest level should it take place. But it remains a difficult challenge for the leadership.

The writer is India's former Foreign Secretary

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## THIS DAY IN HISTORY

July 26

**920**  
Rout of an alliance of Christian troops from Navarre and Léon against the Muslims at Pamplona.

**1822**  
First day of the three-day Battle of Dervenakia, between the Ottoman Empire force led by Mahmud Dramali Pasha and the Greek Revolutionary force led by Theodoros Kolokotronis.

**1944**  
The first German V-2 rocket hits Great Britain.

**1952**  
King Farouk of Egypt abdicates in favor of his son Fuad.

**1956**  
Following the World Bank's refusal to fund building the Aswan High Dam, Egyptian leader Gamal Abdel Nasser nationalises the Suez Canal sparking international condemnation.