

In shame

RUBANA HUQ

REPORTS on private television channels were still showing the video clips of a factory building burning. The electronic media was still covering the event with one reporter being stationed there and giving a brief account of the incident every time the studio loops him or her in. At our end, as manufacturers, we crib and complain for being covered in such frequency; as human beings, we burn in shame.

Starting from the Mirpur tragedy in 1990, to 53 deaths in Choudhury Knitwear in 2000, to 24 deaths at Maico Sweaters in 2001, the nine in Nisco Supermarket building, the 23 at Shan Knitting, and of course the 64 in an incident of building collapse of Spectrum in 2005, the records wreak tragedy.

Tazreen Fashion Ltd, a unit of Tuba Group at Nischintapur in Savar, is reported to be exporting knit items worth \$35 million. A factory, which was set up only three years ago, with a sprawling 49,000 square feet equipped with twelve production lines, 1,200 workers, a machinery strength of 650 sets, produces knitted polo shirts, fancy fleece jackets and basic t-shirts.

As a manufacturer myself, it felt only natural to visit the site. It was impossible to maneuver the car through the road. There were hundreds of workers from other factories who were all over the place, with their own mobile phones, taking pictures of the charred building. The road seemed extraordinarily long and I was wondering how long it could have taken for the fire service trucks to reach the spot. The law requires a clear space of nine feet to be left around the factory building in order to allow fire service teams to access the affected site. But what happens when the roads to the factory happen to be of inadequate width for the fire service team to access? How do we comply?

There was no representation from the factory management; there was no sign of any worker. Police and fire service personnel swarmed the site along with the television crew. None could explain the source of fire and none could explain exactly what had happened. There was an internal staircase, which was burnt. Apparently scrap material, electric boards blocked the staircase. All I saw was burnt yarns, which almost looked like burnt heads. Whether the fire had started from the store or whether there was a boiler, which had



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burst, was unclear. All I heard was that the fourth-floor gate had remained locked in spite of the workers burning there.

We are supposed to listen to law in this land. As per the Bangladesh gazette

29/5/2008, exit access, exit, and an exit

discharge fall under the compulsory requirement for setting up a factory unit. No factory with more than 50 workers can have less than 1.1 metre of width; no factory can be exempted from the basic requirement of three exits if it has more than a thousand workers.

No factory can escape the rule of law, which clearly states that there has to be at least one fire extinguisher per every 5,500 square feet with 25 percent of the workers having full operational knowledge of fire fighting, rescue and coordination. The stairs have to be at least 55 inches wide and at least 78 inches in height. There has to be gas and powder-type extinguishers on the floor along with 30 refill masks, blankets, fire hoses, fire beaters, lock cutters, stretchers, ropes, etc.

Now is the moment for reality checks.

With the rule of having 6 percent of workers per factory being trained by the Fire Service and Civil Defence, there are hundreds of applications pending on BGMEA's desk. Unfortunately, in spite of charging a straight Tk 16,500 for 40 workers per application, neither BGMEA nor Fire Service has adequate manpower to train our factory workers. As far as licences go, things have just gotten worse lately. Some check and issue

licences with diligence; some skip every process and issue them without checks. Building codes are not adhered to, water reservoirs are almost non-existent, fire extinguishers are mostly blocked, ebonite sheets are non-existent, circuit boxes have cobwebs, boilers and generators are not routinely checked, extinguishers are exposed to excess pressure... The list could go on.

The parliament passed a bill on September 29, 2006 that requires the factories to have only a yearly drill. But deep down inside, most of us know that we ought to do at least a monthly one. The reason is simple: we are dealing with lives here and the community of manufacturers cannot just afford to routinely wake up with a scarred conscience for the rest of their time on this earth. We could have all the rules laid down for us; we could have all the tools and equipments in place; we could have all our compliance records straight... yet there could still be many more burnt Nischintaps awaiting our path, till we ourselves readdress our limitations and study and practise compliance beyond the bare minimum.

The writer is the managing director of Mohammadi Group, a garment manufacturer.

ANALYSIS

Why fires in South Asia kill more than blazes elsewhere

If you were to invent a death trap, you'd use: unethical owners, crowded slums, corrupt inspectors and untrained firefighters

JASON BURKE AND SAAD HAMMADI/
The Guardian

BLAZES like the one in Dhaka on Saturday, which killed more than 100 in a garment factory, are sadly all too frequent occurrences around south Asia.

In September, in one of the worst incidents of its kind, 289 died in Karachi, Pakistan. The same month, 40 were killed in a blaze at a fireworks factory in the state of Tamil Nadu in south India.

Several factors combine to make death traps of factories across south Asia. Often exits are padlocked, basements used as store rooms for highly flammable raw materials and fire escapes missing. Smoke alarms and sprinkler systems are rarely heard of.

Survivors often describe the desperate crush as hundreds rush into narrow corridors filled with clouds of toxic smoke.

Fire is a constant hazard in the grossly overcrowded poor neighbourhoods of emerging world cities.

At least 11 women and children died in a blaze in one of Dhaka's biggest slums last week, thought to have started in a rickshaw workshop.

There is little proper zoning so industry is sited in the middle of residential areas, often slums which house the factory workers. More than 120 died in June 2010 when a fire destroyed six buildings -- including a factory -- in Dhaka. A possible cause was cooking for a wedding.

Then there is the ill-preparedness. Fire services in south Asia are poorly equipped and trained, and public awareness is low. "The workers are not trained to use extinguishers. The fire drills performed at the factories are limited to attaining only the benchmark of compliance and audits," said Kalpona Akter of the Bangladesh Centre for Workers' Solidarity (BCWS).

Wafer-thin profit margins exacerbate the problem. After the Karachi fire, Pakistani manufacturers blamed overseas com-



Garment workers bring out a procession in Ashulia yesterday after at least 113 people were killed in a fire incident at a factory on Saturday night.

petition, including from Bangladesh, for unsafe cost-cutting.

Babul Akhter, president of the Bangladesh garments and industrial workers' federation, said mid-level managers were mostly concerned with how many clothes could be produced and forgot safety.

Then there is corruption, endemic in all south Asian nations, which means government inspectors are easily paid off. The ease of hiring and firing, and mobility of the workforce, means "no employee-employer relationship", according to Subhash Bhatnagar of the Delhi-based Unorganised Workers Association.

"There is no sense of safeguarding their wellbeing," he said. Construction sites present another major problem. Bhatnagar estimates that hundreds die every year in Delhi alone, and thousands across the rest of India and Bangladesh in building site accidents.

'Fiscal cliff' talks stalled but progress possible

REUTERS, Washington

US lawmakers have made little progress in the past 10 days toward a compromise to avoid the harsh tax increases and government spending cuts scheduled for January 1, a senior Democratic senator said on Sunday.

The United States is on course to slash its budget deficit nearly in half next year. Closing the gap that quickly, which in Washington is referred to as going over a "fiscal cliff," could easily trigger a recession.

"Unfortunately, for the last 10 days, with the House and Congress gone for the Thanksgiving recess ... much progress hasn't been made," Dick Durbin, the No. 2 Senate Democrat, told ABC's "This Week" program.

Serious negotiations are expected to resume this week. Democratic and Republican lawmakers have been trying to convince the public and financial markets - that they are willing to compromise and can reach a deal before the end of the year.

Durbin indicated Democrats might accept a reform of the gov-

ernment's Medicare health insurance program for the elderly that would make higher-income seniors pay more for their care.

Democrats traditionally oppose limiting Medicare benefits according to income, a practice known as "means testing." Durbin said

Medicaid, a public health insurance program for the poor, also could be overhauled.

But Durbin said Social Security, the federal government pension program, needs only small tweaks to ensure long-term solvency rather than major reforms.

A deadline looms over the talks. Without action by lawmakers and President Barack Obama, roughly \$600 billion in tax increases and spending cuts will start to hit households and companies in early January.

Republicans are averse to Democrats' plan to raise income tax rates on the wealthiest Americans, which Republicans say would hurt job creation.

Republicans also want to cut spending on social programs more than Democrats say they will accept.

House Speaker John Boehner has

called for a short-term plan to avert the fiscal cliff to pave the way for Congress and the White House to agree to work during 2013 on comprehensive tax reform and longer-term spending cuts.

But Republican Senator Bob Corker said both sides need to show "political courage" and reach a bigger \$4 trillion deficit reduction deal that includes both increases in revenues and cuts in spending by the end of the year.

"Kicking the can down the road setting up a process for token deficit reduction today with the promise of more reforms later is misguided and irresponsible and shows a total lack of courage," Corker wrote in an editorial in the Washington Post.

A growing group of Republican lawmakers are loosening their ties to Grover Norquist, the anti-tax activist famous for getting elected officials to sign a pledge that they will vote against any tax increases.

Republican Senator Lindsey Graham said Republicans will allow tax revenues to rise as long as social spending programs are reformed. "I will violate the pledge - long story short - for the good of the country, only if Democrats will do entitle-

ment reform," he told "This Week."

Graham said he supported boosting revenues by closing tax loopholes rather than by raising tax rates.

Republican Senator Saxby Chambliss said last week he "cared more about the country" than a 20-year-old pledge. On Sunday, Republican Representative Peter King, chairman of the House Homeland Security Committee, told NBC's "Meet the Press" he agreed with Chambliss.

While income tax breaks have attracted the most scrutiny, lawmakers also need to come to terms on a host of other tax incentives that are set to expire at the end of the year, including an estate tax break.

Senator Max Baucus, the chairman of the Senate Finance Committee and a key player in fiscal cliff talks, told a newspaper in his home state of Montana that he wants to preserve the estate tax break, which is important for farmers who want to pass down land worth millions of dollars to their children.

Baucus also said he hopes to preserve the production tax credit for wind energy, he told the Great Falls Tribune.

GSK unveils expansion plans in India, Nigeria

AFP, London

BRITISH drugmaker GlaxoSmithKline said it intends to increase its holdings in its Indian and Nigerian divisions, as part of a long-term strategy to expand into emerging markets, in a statement on Monday.

GSK said it had offered to buy an additional stake of up to 31.8 percent of its Indian unit, GlaxoSmithKline Consumer Healthcare Ltd, in a bid pitched at 3,900 rupees per share.

The proposed voluntary open offer, which would lift its holding from 43.2 percent to up to 75 percent, is worth about £591 million (\$941 million, 730 million euros) or 52.2 billion rupees, funded through existing cash resources.

"GSK Consumer Healthcare is a well established business in India and its leading product, Horlicks, is an iconic household brand," the group's chief strategy officer David Redfern said in a statement.

"This transaction represents a further step in GSK's strategy to invest in the world's fastest growing markets and, we believe, offers a liquidity opportunity at an

attractive premium for existing shareholders."

In a separate statement, London-listed GSK said it has also reached a deal in principle to ramp up its stake in GlaxoSmithKline Consumer Nigeria PLC from 46.4 percent to 80 percent, in a proposed transaction worth some £62 million.

Redfern added: "This proposal to increase GSK's ownership of GlaxoSmithKline Consumer Nigeria reiterates our long term support of the company's strategy and our confidence in the continuing growth prospects of the business."

In morning deals, GSK's share price dipped 0.71 percent to 1,337.50 pence on London's FTSE 100 index of top companies, which was 0.44 percent lower at 5,793.25 points.

Keith Bowman, equities analyst at brokerage Hargreaves Lansdown, said the move was part of GSK's wider strategy.

"The emerging markets continue to form an important growth driver for GSK," Bowman told AFP. "Today's moves appear to underline management's confidence in expected long term growth for both locations."