

Malaysia reopens market for Bangladeshi workers

Cost rationalisation to benefit them

It is welcome news that Malaysia is going to officially withdraw its ban on recruiting Bangladeshi workers after a lull that lasted four years. But more welcome than that is the fact that workers hoping to work in the Malaysian labour market may not be fleeced as before. As per newspaper reports, the government-to-government agreement allows for job seekers to pay maximum 40,000 to avail work opportunity in Malaysia.

Thus, the State-to-State agreement envisages significant cost savings for expatriate workers. Although the date for resumption of recruitment by Malaysia is yet to be announced, the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) has officially been signed by the two governments. The next step of course will test the mettle of the government. According to the MoU signed in Malaysia, the Bureau of Manpower Employment and Training (BMET) will act as regulatory authority for overseas labour affairs. It will fall upon BMET to manage the entire recruitment process with the sole aim of preventing malpractice that had cost us the lucrative Malaysian labour market in the first place. To what extent this body will be able to check corrupt practices will in the long run decide the important issue of whether government-to-government labour recruitment arrangement is a workable model for replication.

The BMET now has its job cut out. The ministry of overseas labour affairs must undertake serious efforts to increase manpower and efficiency of BMET so that it may discharge its duties as 'regulator' in an exemplary fashion. It cannot be emphasised enough how important it is for this arrangement to work. Not only will it address the irregularities associated with recruitment that has earned Bangladesh a bad name in some overseas labour markets, but it will, in the long run, help reform the manpower export sector which makes significant contribution in terms foreign exchange earnings for the country.

Chittagong flyover tragedy

Inexcusable lapses

THE Chittagong flyover girder collapse almost coincided with the Savar garment fire shocked the entire nation. It was again another instance of collective irresponsibility on the part of Chittagong Development Authority (CDA), firms in charge of construction and consultancy, ministry of works and district administration. This led to the avoidable deaths of 12 people so far.

We recall that another accident of similar type in this flyover took place on June 29, but there was no casualty, if only because the area was free from pedestrians at that time. But the probe body that the CDA had formed to look into that incident is yet to come up with its findings.

This reinforces the impression that an early warning has been ignored. Not only that, the lessons that could be learnt from a properly instituted probe have been unavailable.

The government must hold those responsible to account and amply penalise them for their laxity and failure to maintain needed safety standards in the construction work for the flyover.

CDA has formed another investigation committee following the mishap. So have the Ministry of works and the Chittagong district administration constituted their respective probe teams. Given our previous experiences about such probe committees, we have reasons to be circumspect about them. However, we would like to be proved wrong this time around.

What, however, is of overarching importance is to adopt adequate precautionary and preventive measures so that such mishaps may not occur in the first place.

In the present case, first, the area where girders fell was not closed to public movement by building a fence around the place. Second, the construction company did not issue any warning to the public while carrying out the shifting work of the girders. Third, the CDA whose project it is had apparently no supervisory role when the work was going on. They should have ensured enough precautionary measures in the entire project area for the flyover. Fourth, the district administration was allowing pedestrians, peddlers and others to move about freely and use the place.

Such lapses are inexcusable. The authorities concerned must take necessary steps to avert recurrence of



SYED BADRUL AHSAN

WE may be living through insipid times here in Bangladesh, but you do have to agree that politics is the one area where we come across some of the thrills we need to carry on in life. Dr. Kamal Hossain and A.B.M. Musa have just enlightened us on what it is precisely that we need to do about the stale and yet riveting nature of our politics. The veteran politician and the veteran journalist have called for politics to be made formalin-free. Which is rather intriguing, considering that of late citizens have been wracked by thoughts of the damage being done to their health by fish and meat and vegetables treated with formalin. Something has indeed emerged from all this concern over how formalin may be pushing all of us to an early grave. In these past few weeks, with quite some degree of fanfare, ministers and other government functionaries have been going around distributing formalin detecting machines to be used in urban markets. Many among us have cheered.

Those are the depths to which we have been made to sink. You might argue that it is all because of bad politics. Bad politics has come to your dining table where healthy food should have been. You could be right, but pause a while and reflect on whether everything that has been going wrong or bad with us has been a consequence of the free market society we pretend to have created in this miserably poor country. We were supposed, in the early days of freedom, to have gone for a socialistic order of things, with the state caring for all of us. But then came, through

a series of bad turns, this concept of capitalism. Just how you build capitalism or make it offer a better life to citizens in our pecuniary conditions is something we have not yet been able to understand. Besides, there is the bigger question to answer: in a land where a majority of citizens live on the frontier between poverty and death, where life below the poverty line is the stark reality, how do you expect the wealth coming into the hands of the few to bring about positive change in the lives of the innumerable many?

That is the question which comes up as you reflect on this formalin-related thought. Kamal Hossain and his friends are right, certainly. Politics does need to change, for the

one, politicians -- those who have dug deep roots among their people -- have been ignored. Retired secretaries and former generals have sewn up nominations and gone to parliament, along with the businessmen. Conversely, there has been a decline in intellectual debate on the floor of the house. Politics is devoid of politicians.

You thus have this dilemma before you: how do you have real politicians get to have politics back in their control? Even here you are quite likely to be up against some huge hurdles. You have a former autocrat playing a not insignificant role in national politics and no one has remembered the sheer cavalier manner in which he overthrew an elected

with a party nomination for the general election. Freedom fighters and ageing Pakistani collaborators have found themselves sharing space in the same political party. Diplomats with little to command them where performance is concerned have come into politics, with some of them even ending up as ministers.

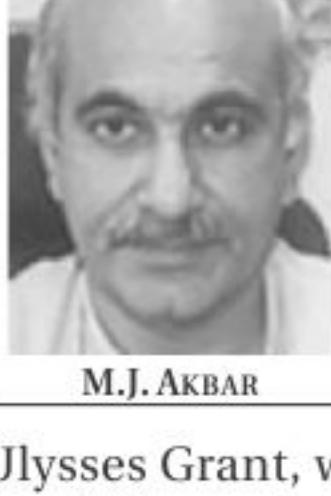
Politics is hard business. It is for men like Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy, Sher-e-Bangla A.K. Fazlul Huq, Moulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani and Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. These illustrious men walked along dusty village paths through rain and shine, to reach out to the masses and enlighten them with the message of change.

Politics is always an enlightening affair, for it aims at a promotion of the common weal. Syed Nazrul Islam, Tajuddin Ahmed and their colleagues demonstrated the beauty that politics is through waging a war for freedom and leading the nation on to the valley of light. No one spoke of formalin-free politics in the old days because in the old days it was politics -- pure, purposeful and principled -- that happened.

Comrade Moni Singh and Professor Muzaffar Ahmed may not have risen to the heights they ought to have, but they did leave behind the undying idea that belief is all, that politicians cannot be weather vanes.

Formalin-free politics can happen, to be sure. But that will call for a purge, a decisive removal of deadwood and moss from around us. And that can happen with a strong, compassionate, visionary leader ready and willing to lead this nation into the future.

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M.J. AKBAR

WHEN Abraham Lincoln was told at the height of the devastating civil war that his most successful general, Ulysses Grant, was drinking too much he wanted to know the brand of Grant's favourite whisky so that he could send his general a few cases. Eight decades later, during the Second World War, rumour was rife that Dwight Eisenhower, commander of the European theatre of operations, was having an affair with the lady who drove his car. Censorship ensured that this never escaped the confines of coterie gossip. The American system, sensibly, might not care too much about peacetime generals but it protected its wartime commanders. Grant and Eisenhower went on to become elected presidents.

Class-conscious Britain went a step further: it protected its losers as well, apart from offering huge financial bonuses to successful generals, not to mention the occasional elevation to prime minister to heroes like Wellington. Lord Cornwallis was not punished for losing the American colonies to George Washington; he was sent off to India to fight the French. Lord Wavell messed up the African front in the Second World War, turning Churchill apoplectic. Wavell was given a soft landing in India as Viceroy.

If America has a modern war hero then it is surely David Petraeus, who was not only good at his job but also fulfilled Napoleon's criterion: he was lucky as well. He pulled America out

of the Iraq quagmire just enough to save face, and was acclaimed for leaving Afghanistan better than he found it. Perhaps his predecessors deserved much of the credit, but Petraeus was in the right place at the right time, and who can argue with that? Although he was a George Bush general, Barack Obama co-opted him into his team. Republicans promoted him as a future party nominee for the White House, and cynics have noted that this might have been one of the reasons why Obama made him CIA chief after his Afghan tour. Such was the paucity of talent in Republican

government thirty years ago. Military rulers, in Africa and Asia and Latin America, have faded away or paid a price for their extra-constitutional acts. In our case, that has not happened. That said, there are all the tales of the turncoats who have ceaselessly moved from one party to another, with no embarrassment and with absolutely no scruples. There are men who have been in the Awami League before moving to the BNP and then to the Jatiyo Party and back to the BNP. Bureaucrats who were denied entry into the Awami League simply walked down to the offices of the BNP and cheerfully walked away

almost all its senior politicians, except perhaps Angela Merkel of Germany; and even the saintly Merkel put posters in her last campaign that emphasised her handsome cleavage. No American woman politician could afford to do that, although America is consumed by a parallel prurient appetite for sexual junk at a mass-consumption level.

But Petraeus was not running for public office. His affair ended four months ago. Nor was it much of a secret when it was happening, since young Paula was seen more often in his company than his wife of 37

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ranks in 2012 that Petraeus just might have won the nomination this year, and then who knows who might have been sitting in the White House today.

Instead, Petraeus has been forced to resign after a delayed revelation of an affair with his biographer, Paula Broadwell, a scalp-hunter who clearly wrote this adulterous book for reasons quite different than a love of writing.

There is a strong Puritan streak in America which demands standards of sexual probity among its politicians that would rid Europe of

years. There is much mystery about the "jealousy" emails from another woman with ties to American agencies that led to this "exposure." It exploded in public just after Obama was re-elected, or when he had become invulnerable to this mess. The official story is that Obama had no clue about the FBI investigation that undid Petraeus. It is hard to believe that the president was not informed that his CIA chief had become a potential security risk -- at the start of the investigation, not at its end.

There remains the Agatha

Christie in any mystery: who gains from the death of a reputation? Barack Obama. Petraeus was too iconic a figure to be sacked. He had to be outmanoeuvred, at the right moment. His mistake could have been covered up, or even pardoned, since he had left the army, and CIA chiefs have more leeway than army chiefs. But Petraeus' departure deflects an immediate problem in addition to wounding any long-term political ambitions he might entertain.

The murder of American ambassador Christopher Stevens in a CIA safehouse in Benghazi, Libya, on the anniversary of 9/11 is shrouded in intense controversy. Someone has something to hide, perhaps for good reason. As CIA chief at the time, Petraeus must defend the Obama administration, even as his departure prevents him from shifting the narrative. There is also talk that Obama wanted Petraeus out as he begins a play for a deal with Iran.

And who is laughing today, possibly all the way to Kabul tomorrow? The Taliban, at whose expense Petraeus won so much glory. A Taliban spokesman could not contain his glee as he told an AFP correspondent in Pakistan on November 15: from a Pashtun point of view, America's hero should be shot by relatives of mistress' family, and from a Sharia standpoint stoned to death.

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Politics, anti-politics and formalin

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Washington's revenge

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

November 28

1912

Albania declares its independence from the Ottoman Empire.

1971

Wasfi al-Tal, Prime Minister of Jordan, is assassinated by the Black September unit of the Palestine Liberation Organization.

1989

Cold War: Velvet Revolution In the face of protests, the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia announces it will give up its monopoly on political power.

1991

South Ossetia declares independence from Georgia.

2002

Suicide bombers blow up an Israeli-owned hotel in Mombasa, Kenya; their colleagues fail in their attempt to bring down Arkia Israel Airlines Flight 582 with surface-to-air missiles.