

SUNDAY POUCH

Safety measures for workers on the table

Strong will and constant monitoring essential for compliance

ASHULIA garments fire has been the latest in the series of embarrassments one of our largest foreign exchange earning sectors has caused to the country. The highest number of deaths so far in garment fire hogging international media attention, the overseas buyers are chagrined and worried. Are the BGMEA and its constituent manufacturers and exporters any wiser and resolute to call a halt to the accidents?

There are concerns at three levels: first, workers have been dying in droves over the years in fires that on the one hand were waiting to happen and on the other patently avoidable. Secondly, international buyers are perturbed over obligations to tax-payers and retailers for ensuring that the goods they bought bear the stamp of compliance with minimum work safety standards. Third, since the industry is a golden goose for the owners, exporters and importers, why mustn't the workers be treated in a way that they too can own it up as such.

In almost all the fires that took place, the central reason has been absence of exits in case of emergency. Then come the issues of electrical system, which once installed hardly ever checked for repair and maintenance, standard fire fighting equipment such as hydrants and fire extinguishers in working conditions, training drills, risk perception, and above all, the floor in-charge chosen as a ramming rod as though to shepherd the workers most of them women. The house administration and culture needs a complete overhaul driven by a will to change from being extractive to one of respect for their labour and skill. Let's not forget that by keeping the workers dissatisfied and insecure, owners are really making them vulnerable to external influence peddling.

The international buyers in a meeting with the BGMEA on Friday put forward recommendations such as upgrading BGMEA fire safety cell, training the owners first and then mid-level officials and workers, revising building code, reviewing fire licence, conducting fire drills, keeping collapsible gates open and assessing power supply regularly. An important piece of advice is to 'listen to workers' which necessarily calls for a forum of the workers viz. some form of trade union in place.

Customers have the last word in business, and therefore, they must be heeded.

The passing of I.K. Gujral

We have lost a man of vision

IN the death of Inder Kumar Gujral, India and indeed the entire South Asian region has lost a man of vision and courage. There was in Gujral an urbanity, both in terms of his approach to politics and in his dealings with people on an individual level, that revealed the substance his personality was made of. No one could have foreseen, back in the 1990s when India went through some rather rapid changes in power in New Delhi, that Gujral would one day be called upon to lead India as its prime minister. But, then again, as foreign minister twice, first in the VP Singh government and then in the HD Deve Gowda government, he did a rather good job of giving a new dimension to Indian diplomacy, especially where it concerned Delhi's relations with its neighbours. As prime minister, albeit rather briefly in the late 1990s, what came to be known as the Gujral doctrine would subsequently be regarded as the foundation upon which future leaders in South Asia could build an edifice of cooperation.

Like every man with a deep understanding of history and culture, Gujral possessed layers of toughness within him, aspects of his character that manifested themselves in the mid-1970s. Surprised, perhaps even shocked, by the precipitate manner in which President Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed and Prime Minister Indira Gandhi imposed a state of emergency on India in June 1975, Gujral nevertheless was not about to take things lying down. He was irked by the rude and, to him as well as to others, extra-constitutional manner in which individuals like the prime minister's son Sanjay Gandhi were beginning to exercise their new-found authority. He brushed aside the young man's attempts to run the ministry of information and broadcasting by ignoring the minister in charge, in this instance Gujral himself. That was an act of surprising courage for many. For Gujral, it was nothing out of the ordinary.

I.K.Gujral was a friend of Bangladesh. His belief in good neighbourly relations between Delhi and Dhaka earned him not only the gratitude but also the abiding respect of people across the spectrum in Bangladesh. In particular, as Foreign Minister in Deve Gowda's government, he played a pivotal role in bringing about the Ganges water sharing agreement with the Hasina government.

We mourn his passing. Such a one as Gujral does not

What happened to Chittagong-Kunming road?



ASHFAQUR RAHMAN

AFTER a gap of three years, India and China last week concluded talks on "a proposed land corridor that

would pass through Myanmar and connect Kolkata with south-western China's Kunming city in Yunnan province." Officials from the foreign ministries of India and China met in Kunming with officials from West Bengal and Yunnan to finalise the project. An action plan was approved, which also decided on the route that this road would take to establish connectivity with China. Analysts say that China has shown serious interest in building this road. So also has India as it will also connect it with South-East Asia. Curiously however, the Chinese are keen to have access to Kolkata port through this road in spite of the various bottlenecks in using the port.

The decision by India and China to have direct road links between their countries, bypassing Bangladesh, has implications for us. Our direct connectivity with China, besides geo strateg, 0, is important from the point of view of trade and mutual development. We had proposed to Myanmar to jointly construct a road from Chittagong to connect it to their main highway that goes from Mandalay to Kunming in China. This would have meant that the Chinese could have direct access to a warm water port, Chittagong, in the Bay of Bengal. The distance from Chittagong to Kunming is only 1,700 kilometers and loaded trucks could cover it in three to four days.

Thus, exports from China, loaded in Chittagong port, could sail to the Middle East and Europe bypassing the congested and often dangerous Strait of Malacca that straddles Malaysia and Indonesia. Today, all ships passing through the Strait are charged high insurance premiums. By using the Chittagong port China

could reduce the cost of freight and its goods could be sold in Europe and the Middle East at lower prices. If India is able to build connectivity before us, then Chinese ships would use that land corridor, which has similar advantage for China, and deprive us of the revenue in port dues, low cost Chinese goods, etc. Today, China ships its exports originating from west and south-west China through its ports on the east coast, the nearest of which is Guangzhou (Canton), 3,000 kilometers from Kunming.

Chittagong-Kunming connectivity would have helped us in several ways. First, it would have increased our exports and imports from China. Our trade with Myanmar would also get a huge boost. We would also have earned large revenue from servicing Chinese ships in Chittagong. Tourism to China as well as Bangladesh would have

ties to attend to. They are therefore not willing to sink money in this project now. In any case, they are not in the business of building hundreds of miles of road through the dense jungle and mountains in western Myanmar to reach the border of Bangladesh. Technical talks between experts of the two countries seem to have drifted away.

The third reason why Myanmar may be reluctant to come forward and implement the project is because India has, in the past few years, helped it to build a reasonably modern port near Sittwe (Akyab) in western Myanmar close to Chittagong port. This facility has road connections to the eight provinces in north-east India. Hence, providing road connections to Chittagong port from China would only diminish the importance of the port in Sittwe and cut into its revenue expectations. Moreover, as

need to do to attract both India and China, as well as Myanmar, to help us establish connectivity. To start with, we may consider not only road connections between Chittagong and Kunming but also rail connections. We have a geographical advantage that most of the terrain from Chittagong to Kunming is not intolerably high. This is not always the case between India and Myanmar. There, the terrain is high and treacherous and at times can be impassable for railway tracks. The railway can be a cost effective way of bringing goods from China to Chittagong.

The other thing that we may consider is giving Myanmar a revenue incentive to cooperate with us to build connectivity between Chittagong and Kunming. This could happen if we allow Myanmar to build natural gas pipelines to cross Bangladesh to supply points inside India. In that case Myanmar would be able to sell gas to India as well as to Bangladesh and rake in revenue that will be much more than what they could obtain by using the port in Sittwe.

What we need to do is to keep the interest of China in this project. This can happen if we propose to China that we can allow a crude oil pipeline from Chittagong port through Myanmar to Kunming. This could lead the Chinese to consider the matter as it would be cost effective to pump crude oil from Chittagong port straight into the underbelly of China. Both we and Myanmar could get revenue for allowing passage of this crude. The advantage for China would be great as oil imported from the Middle East would not have to pass through the Strait of Malacca and then be transported thousands of miles overland to various destinations inside China.

It is therefore time for our policy planners to go back to their drawing board and consider these new possibilities. Our diplomats should be able to sound out the respective capitals and see how many of these ideas are acceptable.

We should revisit the original proposal and see what we need to do to attract both India and China, as well as Myanmar, to help us establish connectivity. To start with, we may consider not only road connections between Chittagong and Kunming but also rail connections.

increased. Ideas and education would have flowed directly from China to Bangladesh and vice versa. Because of this connectivity we would have been able to go to South-East Asia by road and trade with them at lower costs. Bangladesh would in many ways become a communication hub between India, China and South-East Asia.

But Bangladesh had never taken up the proposal formally with the Myanmar and Chinese governments simultaneously. Nor did we ever host any tri-nation talks on this issue. The Myanmar had been reluctant to go forward on this matter on three counts. First, they refer to security issues close to the border between China and Myanmar. They are therefore not ready at this point to stake their military assets to ensure safe passage to anyone along this route. Second, Myanmar has other priori-

Myanmar opens up politically more foreign ships would be calling at Sittwe. It would facilitate access not only to the emerging markets in north-east India but also to China. So why should Myanmar be interested in supporting Chittagong-Kunming road project?

However, we have procrastinated for too long over this project. All our neighbours are developing connectivity and building spanning new infrastructure with the hope of getting some benefits for their people. We, on the other hand, did not understand what was happening around us and are still sitting along the roadside with blueprints hoping that Myanmar and China would understand our need and come round to offer us the proposal of establishing connectivity between Chittagong and Kunming. This is never going to happen.

Instead, we should revisit the original proposal and see what we

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Who will be China's next top diplomat?

KOR KIAN BENG

THE guessing game over China's next top diplomat has intensified, now that the exit of incumbent Dai Bingguo is confirmed. The 71-year-old veteran's exclusion from the Communist Party's new leadership this month signals his imminent retirement as state councillor in charge of foreign affairs in March when the new cabinet is formed.

The post is described as China's top-ranked diplomatic post, owing to the concurrent role as head of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) foreign affairs office. It is ranked higher than that of the foreign minister, whose job is more of implementing rather than shaping foreign policy.

Contenders to replace Dai, who has held the post since 2008, are current Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi, 62, and a quartet all surnamed Wang, among others. The four are Wang Yi, 59, who heads the Taiwan Affairs Office; Wang Guangya, 62, head of the Hong Kong and Macau Affairs Office; Wang Jiarui, 63, head of the Communist Party's international department; and Wang Huning, 57, the party's chief researcher.

Observers say China wants someone with a strategic vision of its position and role in the world and understanding of the challenges

facing its diplomacy.

Retired US diplomat Don Keyser believes Yang and Wang Yi are front runners to take over from Dai, who was not named to the Central Committee unveiled on November 14 at the close of the CCP's 18th Party Congress.

Keyser said Yang, as foreign minister since 2007, has had ample opportunity for "face time" to build trust with newly installed party chief Xi Jinping. Yang, who was envoy to the United States from 2000 to 2004, has built "especially close" US ties too, said the senior fellow at the University of Nottingham. "Also, Yang has proven himself a forceful public advocate of China's 'principled positions' and has thus probably made himself acceptable to the camp of China's assertive nationalists," he added.

China has also had a practice of promoting serving foreign ministers to the senior post: Qian Qichen in 1993 and Tang Jiaxuan in 2003. It was broken only when

Yang's predecessor Li Zhaoxing retired in 2007.

University of Macau analyst Wang Jianwei also named Wang Yi and Yang as favourites, who are both full members in the Central Committee. Professor Wang said Wang Yi is also well regarded and liked among the rank and file of China's diplomatic corps, besides

being viewed as having done a "good job" at the Taiwan Affairs Office. In addition, Wang Yi's wife is the daughter of late premier Zhou Enlai's secretary Qian Jiadong.

The change-over this time is also worth watching as it could mark an expansion of power for the top diplomat, said Prof. Wang. The post's influence had dipped after Qian Qichen retired as vice-premier in 2003. As a Politburo member from 1998 till his retirement, he was widely known to have had strong influence in China's diplomacy. But his successors -- Tang and Dai -- have served only as state councillors, and neither made it into the Politburo.

Keyser said the successor will oversee the flow of policy papers for the top leadership, and also enjoy a close relationship -- and therefore some influence -- with Xi, who chairs the party's leading group on foreign affairs. The person also helms bilateral summits with foreign powers.

But there is talk now that newly promoted Politburo member Wang Huning could replace Dai and be appointed vice-premier in charge of foreign affairs. "This will significantly lift the importance of foreign affairs in the central leadership as Wang Huning is a Politburo member," said Prof Wang. However, Keyser thinks Wang Huning's chances are low, as "he lacks any experience as a foreign affairs 'practitioner' and is principally an academic type." Even so, observers say foreign countries should be watching Dai's replacement keenly.

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The person also helms bilateral summits with foreign powers. For instance, Dai is US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's counterpart at the yearly Strategic and Economic Dialogue meetings. "So, for the US at least, Mr. Dai's successor will be important both in terms of the dialogue role and other talks to resolve pressing issues," said Keyser.

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THIS DAY IN HISTORY

December 2

1946

The British Government invites four Indian leaders, Nehru, Baldev Singh, Jinnah and Liaquat Ali Khan to obtain the participation of all parties in the Constituent Assembly.

1976

Fidel Castro becomes President of Cuba replacing Osvaldo Dorticos Torrado.