

Disability is not an impediment

Harness the potential of persons with disability

ONE thing that came out clearly in roundtables organised by The Daily Star and several NGOs dealing with the disabled in Bangladesh, over the last fortnight, is the huge potential that the so-called handicapped people have in contributing towards national development. The caveat is that the government, and indeed the society, has not completely internalised the situation to allow the physically challenged to exploit that potential. We are still waiting for the proposed disability act to see the light of the day.

There is also need for awareness on several counts as regards disabled. There are almost 15 percent of our population that suffer some form of affliction which neither the state nor the society can afford to overlook. And the need to look afresh at their needs requires change of mindset, a change that must first occur from individual homes and families; a change we hope that would make this country more disabled friendly.

We often also overlook the fact that there is an economic cost in bypassing the physically handicapped as was made clear in a seminar on Sunday entitled, "Improving Livelihood of People with Disabilities" The country could have added 18 percent to its GDP had it been able build up the capacity of people with disabilities to contribute to the economy.

That being the case, the government must proceed in a planned way for appropriate education and training of these persons. And although the government has a strategy paper to address the issue it appears that there are far too many objectives to attain that might make achievement of goals, long and short term, rather difficult.

The first thing the government should do is to collect the accurate statistics of the actual number of disabled persons and the type of disabilities they suffer from. Only then can the education and training programmes, among other things, can be formulated. And there remains huge opportunity for their employment given the proper training.

Good news for Metro rail project

We commend Japan's commitment to it

WITH Japan's approval of a \$2.1 billion soft loan for Bangladesh's first metro rail system, the country's second largest infrastructure project after Padma Bridge appears to be on the anvil.

After the delay over change of route, which may have at one stage irked the Japan International Cooperation Agency (Jica) and led to the government's appointing a consultant, all of which has resulted in the cost of the project increasing from \$1.7 to \$2.7 billion, the project is finally getting on track. An agreement expected to be signed next month and construction to begin next June, to be completed by the year 2017.

The metro rail is to operate every three minutes and carry 60,000 passengers an hour, which is expected to significantly reduce the amount of traffic congestion in the capital. With Dhaka's population increasing by a few thousand every day, not to mention the number of vehicles plying the streets, with no new roads or space to build them, the metro rail seems just about the only way to counter the capital's horrendous traffic problem. Needless to say, while funding has seemed to be the major issue thus far, the upcoming agreement process, construction and, finally, the systematic running of the metro rail for commuters across the capital will decide the fate of the city's traffic system. So far, Dhaka's traffic has only added to the city dwellers' stress, along with air and noise pollution, and easing up the traffic system and the city dwellers' commute will, we hope, provide some respite from what has become an everyday struggle for residents of the mega city.

We are grateful for Japan's gesture topped up by patience with the rather slow spade work. We hope that the project will now develop with speed and efficiency on both sides, be completed by the projected deadline and



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ON paper, there is no lack of regulations or codes when it comes to the readymade garments (RMG) sector. One columnist highlighted the situation in a national daily recently: As per Bangladesh Gazette 29/5/2008, exit access, exit, and an exit discharge fall under the compulsory requirement for a factory unit. No factory can have less than 1.1 meter wide exit if it has less than 50 workers; 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% 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 have 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.

Those are the laws, rules and regulations. What happened at *Tazreen* has blown off the lid to a well-known open secret in the industry and beyond. The industrial unit had fire extinguishers but they couldn't be put to use. Lack of water reserves and poor road access to the unit delayed help from arriving at the nick of time. One could fill volumes on what went wrong at *Tazreen*, but does it really help matters? Soon, the hype will die down and we will all be running after some other tragedy that is even more gruesome than this one. The dust will settle and public attention diverted. People will get on with their lives. Not so for the families of more than a hundred who perished in what was,

by the industry's own admission, an avoidable disaster. Had the building code been followed; had the fire extinguishing equipment been prepped and maintained correctly; had a fourth of the workers been given proper fire drills in regular intervals; had the management shown a little more respect for human life by alerting workers of the impending doom they faced when the fire first started. Policymakers and policy watchers

cisely what is going to compel factory owners to embark on equipping their units to fight an outbreak like *Tazreen*? Installing fire extinguishing equipment costs money; it is so much cheaper to hand out morsels in the event of a fire since all capital machinery are heavily insured and human life is cheap in Bangladesh. Last we heard, the going rate for a burnt out human carcass lost to industrial "accident" was Tk.100,000.

not hold good anymore. There are too many reasons not to implement government regulations and it is impractical to think or believe that things can change overnight in enforcement. As rightly pointed out by economist Forrest Cookson in a recent article published in *The Independent*: "Current compensation levels of one lakh taka are so low that the factory may be prepared to take the risk of not paying the costs of fire protection against the low risk of having a large payout from a fire. The factory involved in this tragedy exported \$35 million per year. If the company made a 3% margin on these exports it amounts to a million dollars per year. The cost of the compensation for the dead workers for this fire is about \$125,000. The chance of a fire of this size is small, so why pay the costs of a real fire protection program? But at Tk.10 lakh per person the total compensation would be \$1.25 million. That is enough to encourage the company to improve their fire protection to avoid such a cost."

In other words, were the government to make it mandatory for RMG companies to ensure workers' compensation programmes due to death or injury, it could very well usher in a new line of thinking for industry owners. As the RMG sector is a fairly labour-intensive sector, the prospect of paying potentially hefty insurance premiums depending on the level of fire safety conditions existing in factories is not something to look forward to from an owner's perspective. It would be in companies' own interest to upgrade and maintain the highest possible fire fighting capabilities to reduce those premiums. This is a workable solution -- one that addresses workers' need for proper compensation, the government's need for adherence to rules and the foreign buyers' demands for compliance.

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are undoubtedly debating and mulling over what to do next. A *Prothom Alo* report published on December 3 puts the Fire Service's estimate that fire fighting preparedness in 23.28% of the factories in bad shape. Hence another *Tazreen*-type incident could be brewing somewhere as we speak. With enforcement of laws being the way they are coupled with an understaffed and under-equipped fire service and building codes ignored, pre-

At the end of the day, the poor worker who worked long hours to put food on the table for the family of four or six or eight and in many cases, the *only* bread earner of the family is now missing from the equation. A fundamental rethinking is required here. In the final analysis of things it is the government's responsibility to see that industry adheres to laws and codes. Passing the buck on to unknown elements or foreign powers simply does

Egypt brokers deal between Israel and Hamas

MAHMOOD HASAN

WITHIN a week of President Obama's re-election, the Middle East has erupted in deadly violence. It began on November 14 when Israel killed Ahmed Al-Jaabari, the head of Hamas military wing, in a targeted air strike in Gaza.

Gaza has been under Israeli blockade since the Israeli ground offensive in December 2008. Eighty percent of Gaza's 1.7 million people, squeezed into 360 sq km, are dependent on international assistance for survival.

Israeli strategy was to strangle Gaza militants from getting arms and ammunitions clandestinely. The blockade did make Gazan poorer and impoverished, but did not stop the militants from developing and acquiring sophisticated rockets. These "Qassam" rockets have been fired by Hamas affiliated militant groups into Israel without causing any serious damage. Israel held Ahmed Al-Jaabari responsible for those attacks.

Hamas reacted to the killing saying it had "opened the gates of hell." Barrages of rockets, some reaching Tel Aviv, started pouring into Israel from Gaza. Israel then launched Operation Pillar of Defense and started deadly air strikes on Gaza while gearing up for ground offensive.

As the situation got worse, Israeli President Shimon Peres telephoned President Obama, requesting him to pressurise President Morsi of Egypt for a truce. Although Israel threatened ground assault, it withheld the offensive fearing catastrophic repercussions of the "Arab Spring." Clearly Israel's strategic supremacy in the region has altered.

The US and the UN got into the picture, urging restraint and de-escalation of the violence. President Obama spoke to President Morsi several times from Cambodia, where he was on the final leg of his Asian tour. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, traveling with the president, was rushed to the region to talk to

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas and Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi.

After intense negotiations President Morsi brokered a deal with the representatives from Israel and Hamas in Cairo. Egyptian Foreign Minister Mohamed Kamel Amr and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton announced the ceasefire in Cairo. The ceasefire came into effect from 1900 hours (GMT) on November 21.

By then, the 8-day bombardment by Israel and rocket attacks by Hamas had left 162 Palestinians including 37 children, and 5 Israelis dead. More than 1,000 Palestinians have been left

seriously injured and Gaza infrastructure destroyed.

The terms of the ceasefire are not very clear. Netanyahu said he supported the ceasefire to calm the situation, but promised "more severe military action" if rocket attacks from Gaza resumes. Israel boasted of war gains including the assassination of Al-Jaabari, striking 1500 targets in Gaza and crippling Hamas rocket batteries.

Hamas also claimed victory. Hamas leader Khaled Meshal said: "Their aim was to deter us. The resistance showed them that this deterrence has failed. Israel has failed in all its goals." Indeed, Israel had to recognise that Hamas was a potent force with ability to strike Tel Aviv. Hamas has got the pledge from Israel that the blockade will be lifted. Despite all the destruction and deaths, Hamas seems to have come out of the conflict much stronger. The public sentiment in Libya, Tunisia, Egypt, Lebanon, and else-

where in the Arab world, is pro-Hamas, and anti-Israel.

The credit for brokering the ceasefire goes to President Morsi. Despite his Muslim Brotherhood background, anti-Israel sentiment in Egypt, which is sympathetic towards Hamas, and an uneasy relationship with Israel, he succeeded in getting a working relationship going with President Obama. Ever since Morsi came to power, Washington has been nervous on how to deal with the Muslim Brotherhood leader.

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Despite the ceasefire, distrust and hatred between the Israelis and Hamas is at its height. Clearly, the ceasefire is not the solution to this six-decade old conflict. In the past also, ceasefires were agreed and broken. The real solution to this conflict lies in granting the Palestinians their legitimate right -- their homeland.

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Israel remains the kingpin of US policy in the Middle East. The advent of Muslim Brotherhood in

Egypt, Libya, Tunisia and their growing influence in other Arab states has made Israel less secure than it was two years ago. Israel has to understand that Hamas does not pose security problems. Hamas is a political problem -- and this cannot be solved militarily or through repeated ceasefires.

The crux of the problem is Israeli occupation of Palestinian homeland. Palestinians see Israel as the aggressor, but Israel continues to expand its occupation through new settlements.

Hamas believes it is a resistance force and has the moral right to resist Israel through armed struggle. The US

State Department has listed Hamas as a terrorist organisation as it does not recognise Israel's right to exist. Thus, there is no question of inviting Hamas to the negotiating table though it is the missing piece in the puzzle for peaceful settlement.

What is amazing is the distortion in the Western media in reporting the events of the conflict. CNN, BBC and others completely ignored the history of the conflict and the number of UN resolutions Israel has flouted since 1947. The continuous repetition that "Israel has the right to defend itself" from Palestinian violence is a travesty. The constant portrayal that Israeli citizens are "humans" and Palestinians are "terrorists" (thus not human) is the unfortunate refrain of the Western media.

Cunning Netanyahu has tested Obama's resolve to protect Israel by launching this sudden attack and killing Ahmed Al-Jaabari, knowing fully well it will create a crisis in the Middle East. Israel goes to election in January 2013. Clearly, Netanyahu gambled to raise his rightwing Likud party's prospects by attacking Hamas.

The current conflict has left the moderate Fatah group led by Mahmoud Abbas marginalised. Over the past twelve years there has been no progress in the peace process. Bush's eight years on "Middle East Road Map" has met a dead end, The Middle East Quartet has died a natural death. Four years have gone by since Obama promised the "two state solution." It remains a distant dream.

President Obama needs to acknowledge the strategic shift in the balance of power in the Middle East and concentrate his energies to resolve this issue without any delay. He should bring President Morsi, leaders of Hamas and Fatah, and Prime Minister Netanyahu to the negotiating table as quickly as possible to establish the Palestinian state. It will be a serious test of his diplomatic skills and vision.

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THIS DAY IN HISTORY

December 4

- 1110**
First Crusade: The Crusaders sack Sidon.
- 1829**
In the face of fierce local opposition, British governor Lord William Bentinck issues a regulation declaring that all who abet suttee in India are guilty of culpable homicide.
- 1881**
The first edition of the Los Angeles Times is published.
- 1967**
Vietnam War: US and South Vietnamese forces engage Viet Cong troops in the Mekong Delta.
- 1971**
The United Nations Security Council calls an emergency session to consider the deteriorating situation between India and Pakistan.
- 1971**
The Indian Navy attacks the Pakistan Navy and Karachi.
- 1977**
Jean-Bédél Bokassa, president of the Central African Republic, crowns himself Emperor Bokassa I of the Central African Empire.
- 1982**
The People's Republic of China adopts its current constitution.
- 1993**
A truce is concluded between the government of Angola and UNITA rebels.