

## Apparels industry in doldrums

*Calls for talks fall on deaf ears*

PLEASE rescue us from the situation. We want to do business." That was the call of despair from the Bangladesh Garments Manufacturers Association. The readymade garment (RMG) industry is one of the largest foreign exchange earning sectors and has been under tremendous pressure thanks to the ongoing political stalemate. Indeed, the week gone by saw four out of five working days in hartals. The message from the \$19billion industry is that the country risks losing its hard earned place in the global apparel industry. That the jobs of some 50million people engaged directly or indirectly in the industry are at risk should the current state of affairs continue cannot be lost on anyone.

The Bangalee New Year is one of the biggest seasons for apparel retailers and boutique shops. This year however, sales are so dismal that a significant number of businesses face closure. Calls for direct talks between government and the opposition have been uttered by different interest groups for some time now. Yet what is disturbing to witness is the apparent willingness of both groups to thrash out differences on the streets rather than the negotiating table. This simply cannot go on indefinitely. Livelihoods of such a large portion of the population cannot be trifled with.

The real danger lies in the fact that many foreign RMG buyers are turning away from Bangladesh. This is more so since foreign missions located in the country have been cautioning their citizens about travelling to the country due to the political unrest. There are other countries waiting in the wings to take the business lost here. And once Bangladesh is branded an unreliable country to do business with, where do the millions of unemployed go and what happens to our foreign exchange earnings? It is high time that national interest superseded petty party politics. The time for a negotiated settlement has arrived.

## Political dialogue

*Ministers must stop making out of turn comments*

AT a time when the only serious public concern is how to defuse the stifling environment generated by the prevailing political atmosphere, and the resultant uncertainty which demands the two major parties to come to the discussion table, it is irksome to see some in authority making out of turn comments and putting conditions for talks while no genuine effort for a dialogue is in sight. This only adds to public frustration.

We are sorry to see the absence of a genuine and sincere effort by the government to address the current mess which, if not attended immediately and with extreme seriousness, might mutate into a crisis situation. Under these circumstances, the country should be spared statements that aggravate the situation, such as the sate minister for law's offer to the opposition for talks, on condition that these are held without the Jamaat. We find this very cynical and counterproductive.

When the top ranking leaders of the BNP are in jail on apparently spurious charges, who is there left in the BNP to represent it in any inter-party dialogue?

We reiterate our oft-stated position that the government cannot make a short shrift of the prevailing volatile situation. There is no other alternative to dialogue, and it is for the government to create conditions for the talks. To start with, no one but the spokesman of the government and the party should make statements but should not go beyond the remit specified by the government. Apart from that, we want an end to exchanges of invectives and disrespectful and demeaning comments about one another.

There is too much at stake that needs the collaborative effort of the two major parties to protect, and neither rigidity nor coercion will help create the ground for initi-

### CROSS TALK



America's social problems stem from affluence, not poverty. He was referring to obesity that rivals smoking as the largest cause of premature deaths amongst the Americans. That tells us that someday we might be looking at pictures of extremely obese people from affluent nations with the same astonishment as we did roughly a decade ago at grossly emaciated children from famine-stricken Africa. While poverty still rages through more than half the population in many countries of the world, affluence itself is turning into a menace.

Just to know what that means, 400,000 people die annually in the United States from obesity, while tobacco kills 435,000, alcohol 85,000, car accidents 43,000 and guns 29,000. That should tell us about the irony of the whole thing. If starvation is a sad thing, gluttony isn't good news either.

Two other news items should puzzle us more. One is that the Washington-based International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ) has found that as much as \$20 trillion may have been stolen by the rich and powerful people from all over the world and stashed away in offshore accounts

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A call for peace announced by the jailed Kurdish leader Abdullah Ocalan on March 21 reverberated throughout the Middle East. The promised rapprochement between Kurdish rebels and the Turkish government may have set into motion what could be a game-changer in the Middle East. Syria, Iraq and Iran have significant Kurdish minorities concentrated in regions contiguous to one another. The nations have been targets of Kurdish irredentism and, at times, used the Kurdish card to Turkey's detriment when mutual relations, as is the case today with Syria and Iran, have been tense.

An accord with the leading rebel group Kurdistan Workers' Party, PKK, when combined with Ankara's cozy relationship with the Kurdish autonomous region in Iraq will provide Ankara greater leverage with its neighbours to the south and east as well as remove a major blot on Turkey's democratic record.

PKK supreme leader Ocalan's statement on the Kurdish New Year, calling for an immediate end to PKK hostilities against the Turkish state and withdrawal of PKK fighters from Turkey to the Kandil Mountains by August was the result of painstaking negotiation underway at least since October.

By and large the Kurdish population has welcomed Ocalan's announcement of a ceasefire, visible in the celebratory atmosphere in Diyarbakir, the unofficial Kurdish capital of Turkey, on New Year's.

Ocalan's statement appealed to several camps in Turkey: By explicitly abandoning the idea of a separate Kurdish state, Ocalan sought to set at rest the misgivings of Turkey's ultranationalist and Kemalist segments. By harking back to the ideal of Turkish-Kurdish unity during their "1000-year-long coexistence in Anatolia under the flag of Islam based on brotherhood and solidarity," Ocalan appealed to the Ottomanist sentiments of the ruling Justice and Development Party's (AKP) observant Muslim base.

The ball is now in Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's court. Erdogan is arguably the most popular leader in Turkey since the legendary Ataturk. If any Turkish leader can sell a deal, which realistically must be based on a

with reputed banks. The list of plunderers includes French politicians, and wealthy Chinese, Mongolians, Indians, Pakistanis, Russians, Americans, Canadians and Britons. Whether or not their names are on that list, some Bangladeshis certainly have got millions stashed away in foreign banks.

Perhaps one of the many contradictions of this civilisation is that it's utterly debauched behind its genteel façade. But before we delve into that subject, here is yet another news,

**The source of one man's fortune is always another man's misfortune; one man's gain is another man's loss. Obesity is but a terminal manifestation of that disturbing process.**

which, read with the news of obesity, should give us some kind of a shock mixed with pleasant surprise. World Bank President Jim Yong Kim has announced that extreme poverty will be wiped out by 2030. It means more people will be able to afford more and the ultimate contradiction is knocking on the door. Overweight will gradually surface as a phenomenon even in the lands of previously malnourished people.

In our part of the world, the subject of poverty hits close to home. Many of us can still recall how starving people once lay on the streets of Dhaka and their lives evaporated like camphor in the sun. We have got vivid memories of hungry children foraging through heaps of rubbish, looking for an

quasi-federal structure of the Turkish state while delinking Turkish identity from its current narrow ethnic definition, he can do it. Ending the Kurdish insurgency and putting an end to terrorism would assure Erdogan's place as a great statesman in Turkish history.

By committing himself to implementing the deal with Ocalan, he will ensure support of the Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party, BDP, for a new constitution that would guarantee minority rights and redefine Turkish national identity, but at the same time establish a presidential style of government that he favours. AKP and BDP

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together have enough votes to pass a draft, even if the other two major parties in Parliament -- Republican People's Party, CHP, and Nationalist Action Party, MHP -- oppose it. Such a draft when put to vote in a referendum will almost certainly pass, given the popular base of AKP in the country and the support of Turkey's Kurds who form about one-fifth of the population.

More is at stake for Turkey on successful implementation of this agreement than a prime minister's reputation. First, by incorporating the Kurdish minority into the body polity, Turkey would end discriminatory treatment of the Kurds by denial of their ethnic distinctiveness -- all the more essential when Turkey is undergoing democratic consolidation.

Second, Turkey has faced increasing tensions with neighbours to the east and south -- Syria, Iraq and Iran -- especially since the outbreak of the Arab uprisings in early 2011.

While the Kurds in Syria and Iran continue to be restive and chafe under oppressive control of authoritarian governments, those in Iraq have carved out an autonomous region for themselves in the Kurdish north, thanks to the US 2003 invasion. Even so relations between Erbil, capital of the autonomous region, and Baghdad remain tense because of the acrimony over disputed regions, especially oil-rich Kirkuk, and distribution of oil

orange rind or a banana peel or meat clinging to discarded bones to satisfy their pangs of hunger. Newspapers should be able to recover from their archives the picture of a starving man licking the vomit of another person on the platform of Kamalapur rail station.

Hunger was once a bitter force not only in Bangladesh, but also in many other countries of the world. Poverty alleviation has largely conquered it and people are no longer dying of starvation in this country. Even

though pricey, food is sufficiently available and that availability is now going to become a problem.

Whether it is better to starve or eat to death will soon dominate intellectual discourses. But ICIJ findings give us the alarming news. People across the world are plundering their countries while suited-booted bankers are helping them in their scurrilous mischief. This is where this civilisation fails to correspond with its image. It conveniently defends what it should consciously denounce.

In the ultimate sense, the human body is like a river that shrinks and swells between excessive eating and starvation. At the same time, the mind also goes through its contraction and expansion. This is where, besides

accumulation of wealth and bank balance, affluence is different from poverty in equal but opposite measure. In poverty, a weak body leads to moral failure. People steal, beg, cheat and sell their bodies when their income or its absence proves inadequate to sustain physical wellbeing.

Affluence operates on an opposite spectrum when the crisis starts with moral turpitude before it gets to physical failure. French philosopher Pierre-Joseph Proudhon observed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century that property is theft. Thus, the source of one man's fortune is always another man's misfortune; one man's gain is another man's loss. Obesity is but a terminal manifestation of that disturbing process.

In Goethe's *Faust*, the protagonist wagers his soul with a devil named Mephistopheles. The myth has it that anything King Midas touched turned into gold, including his food and drink. Between these two stories lies the whole gamut of human follies leading to limitless pursuit of wealth.

Mahatma Gandhi believed fasting was an important method of exerting mental control over base desires. He writes in his autobiography that abstinence diminishes sensual faculties, bringing the body increasingly under the mind's absolute control. There is an incessant power struggle happening inside each of us. While mind and body fight for control, corpulence is connected with corruption.

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# Peace deal for Turkey

income.

Turkey has acted not only as economic lifeline of the landlocked Iraqi Kurdish region, but also as its primary political supporter in disputes with the Shia-dominated government of Baghdad. Statistically, Turkey has become Iraq's largest trading partner for the simple reason that 90% of northern Iraq's trade is conducted with Turkey. Turkish companies in construction and other sectors have become ubiquitous in Iraqi Kurdistan. The close relationship between Turkey and the Kurdish Regional Government has helped immensely in convincing

Tehran, though plagued by Kurdish separatism, has extended assistance and refuge to PKK fighters when its relations with Turkey have been tense. This was the case from 1979 to 2002, when the AKP came to power in Ankara and began improving relations with Iran for both economic and strategic reasons.

Turkey's good relations with Iran were aided by the improvement in Ankara's relations with Damascus, Iran's principal Arab ally, during the past few years thanks to Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu's policy of "zero problems with neighbours." However, in 2011, Iran and Turkey split over Syria: Turkey supported the opposition to the Assad regime while Iran continued to be the regime's principal supporter.

The Turkish decision to allow Nato to position an anti-missile defense system in southeastern Turkey aimed, despite Turkish denials, at Iranian missiles bound for Israel and other western targets, also hurt Iranian-Turkish relations. Consequently, it was reported that Iran was once again reviving support for PKK. A deal with Ocalan therefore indirectly strengthens Turkey's hands against Iran as well as Syria -- all the more essential as tensions between Iran and Turkey have increased in recent months over competing aims in Iraq. Iran supports Nouri al-Maliki's Shia-dominated government, and Turkey supports Sunni Arab opponents of the Maliki government as well as acting as the patron-saint of the KRG in Erbil.

The Ocalan-Erdogan deal, therefore, brings advantages to Turkey that go well beyond its borders. The devil is, of course, in the details about which not much is known so far. One hopes that the Turkish government acts with sagacity, indeed with magnanimity, when implementing the agreement even if some parts may not be palatable to ultranationalist hardliners. Acting otherwise will be short-sighted for nothing less than Turkey's strategic future rides on successful implementation of this agreement.

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## THIS DAY IN HISTORY

April 12

**1606**  
The Union Flag is adopted as the flag of Great Britain.

**1927**  
April 12 Incident: Chiang Kai-shek orders the Communist Party of China members executed in Shanghai, ending the First United Front.

**1945**  
U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt dies while in office; vice-president Harry Truman is sworn in as the 33rd President.

**1961**  
The Russian (Soviet) cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin becomes the first human to travel into outer space and perform the first manned orbital flight, in Vostok 3KA-2 (Vostok 1).

**1980**  
Samuel Doe takes control of Liberia in a coup d'état, ending over 130 years of minority Americo-Liberian rule over the country.

**2002**  
A female suicide bomber detonated at the entrance to Jerusalem's Mahane Yehuda open-air market, killing 7 and wounding 104.

**2007**  
A suicide bomber penetrates the Green Zone and detonates in a cafeteria within a parliament building, killing Iraqi MP Mohammed Awad and wounding more than twenty other people.