

How cheap is cheap?

Safety discarded while cutting corners

THAT many of the RMG producers have been cutting corners to manufacture 'cheap' and 'competitive' goods have been exposed from time to time in the last several years. It has shown through the several RMG factory disasters costing many lives. The latest man made disaster and death of nearly four hundred people in Savar, exposes the callous disregard for human lives on the part of some petty entrepreneurs struttred by party and political patronisation and motivated by unmitigated greed to make a quick buck.

We note, and we hope the government as well as the RMG owners and their association the BGMEA do too, the fact that the consumers are at last starting to acknowledge that in buying so called cheap stuff they are in fact becoming a party to deaths in garment factory disasters that are taking place in Bangladesh.

We too feel that the retailers of our RMG products in the USA and Europe cannot shirk their part of responsibility in the deaths due primarily to lack of appropriate working conditions and lax safety arrangements. For example, a year and a half before the Tazreen factory fire, the Wal-Mart shareholders had rejected by 50-1 vote a proposal that required the suppliers to report annually on the safety measures of their factories on the grounds that it would ultimately lead to consumers paying higher cost for the product. And some of the buyers have held their retailers squarely responsible for the deaths in Savar.

It is unfortunate that the Bangladeshi RMG manufacturers have convoluted the idea of 'competitive' and 'cheap'. And while the producers have been trying to be so, it is the workers that have been bearing the brunt of this in terms of poor wages and through their lives. The retailers have taken the manufacturers for a ride while the manufactures have done the same to the workers.

We would hope that the RMG factory owners would understand that producing competitive goods does not mean sacrificing the interest and the safety of the workers. It is time to stop cutting corners and to come out of the hold of a captive market and demand appropriate prices for our products.

The community in climate change adaptation plans

A key element to implementation

LAST Friday,the Daily Star reported on the importance of Community-Based Adaptation (CBA) plans related to climate change which was discussed during the “Seventh International Conference on Community-Based Adaptation to Climate Change,” organized by Bangladesh Center for Advance Studies (BCAS). As Bangladesh is in the forefront of negative climate change impacts, there is no argument about the need of these CBAs. But how much work has been done and what's the best methodology to implement these CBAs in the community level still remain a work in progress.

The Bangladesh Climate Change Trust Fund (BCCTF) has supported 140 sectoral adaptation planning projects and research and capacity building projects on climate change adaptation and mitigation with funding from the development budget. However, these projects still have not reached the communities to create more concentrated and customised adaptation plans in the village levels -- where the need for CBAs is the greatest. The efforts so far have been more top down rather than grass-roots driven. Various international and national organizations have also started working with CBAs but the work has not been well coordinated so far.

At the moment, to implement successful CBAs the main issues remain with securing and channeling o of funding, getting local government involved in the CBA planning process as well as higher participation of women of the concerned communities.

Also Ecosystems Based Adaptation (EBA) goes hand in hand with community based adaptation plans, as creating resilient ecosystems and climate-resilient communities are two strong instruments to fight climate change impacts.

While a lot remains to be done in this front, our community people might already have informal CBAs in place following tradition and the experience from life with negative impacts of climate change. We hope the government, along with donor and NGO communities, will put to good use the available resources and mitigate the vulnerability of the people of Bangladesh, where disaster unfortu-

Enforce industrial compliance

HAMEEDA HOSSAIN

THE death of 371 workers and injury to numerous others as a result of the collapse of the Rana Plaza is no accident. It is a corporate crime, caused by corporate greed and political patronage. Nor is it the first instance. Since 1993 when 17 young women workers lost their lives in a fire in Saraka Garments, there have been many instances of industrial culpability and state negligence.

Even as we mourn the dead, whose poorly paid labour contributed to profits from Bangladesh' export garments, it is time to question why the state has repeatedly ignored violation of laws, why regulatory mechanisms fail to monitor systemic failures, why political patronage confers impunity for corporate crimes.

We must ask why an industry that has made millions for its owners and built Bangladesh's foreign exchange reserves has done so little for workers' safety, why it will not allow collective bargaining even when workers' lives are at risk; we must not forget that a price squeeze by global buyers results in exploitation and denial of workers' safety.

How can we make the industry comply with legal standards? The High Court following its *suo motu* rule issued on April 25 will no doubt establish the reasons for criminal liability and systemic faults. It has asked the police to produce the building owner, as well as the owners and managers of the factories that were located in the Rana Plaza on April 30 to explain their failure to comply with the law. Several other cases have been

filed, for compensation for workers' deaths and injuries, and for settlement of due wages.

This time the Court's orders and directions must be followed, even if previously neither the industry nor government agencies have shown much respect for the Court's rulings. In 2006 the collapse of Spectrum Sweater Industry in Polashbari, resulted in 64 deaths. The High Court orders to the Fire Services, Labour Directorate and BGMEA to report within two weeks on the legality of the construction, on ownership of land and safety conditions were

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complied with by BGMEA alone.

While it took on the task of monitoring safety provisions, the field supervision did not progress beyond a few weeks and many factories were not surveyed. When Phoenix Garments collapsed in Tejgaon the High Court ordered compensation of Tk.300,000 for severe injuries and Tk.50,000 for minor injuries. Death of workers in major fires in KTS factory in Chittagong in 2006 and more recently of 214 workers in Tazreen Garments in 2012, have again pointed to the criminal culpability of the owners in not providing safe conditions and to institutional failure in monitoring major lapses. There have been smaller inci-

dents as well, but in all cases the owners and managers have escaped accountability. The Labour Directorate admitted a lack of capacity for monitoring 5,000 units and the Fire Services Department a lack of equipment.

For the last 20 years since the Saraka Garments fire there has been no systemic effort to improve standards of industrial safety, even though it is a requirement of the Bangladesh Labour Code 2006. The Building Code too has been largely ignored. The procedure for giving permission for construction and the use of buildings

needs to be re-examined, and qualified personnel put in charge. Custom built factories need stronger foundations than residential buildings. Licensing of garment factories need to be more stringent so that garment factories are not loaded onto buildings that are meant for residential use. Obviously Rajuk lacks engineering professionalism. As Prof. Jamilur Reza Chowdhury has suggested, a highly qualified Building Monitoring Authority should be set up to monitor and survey compliance with the Building Code. BGMEA's membership should also be conditional to compliance with safety standards. If the regulatory agencies are not compe-

tent or able to handle such difficult tasks, a tripartite monitoring system should be established for each factory to involve business, worker and regulatory representatives.

The disaster management procedures at Rana Plaza also proved the fragility of our official system. Rescue at the Spectrum site became almost impossible because of lack of proper equipments and effective coordination. A Task Force set up after the Spectrum collapse had recommended the import of equipment for precisely such rescue operations, but it is amazing that a shortage of mechanical equipments at the Rana site led volunteers to manually dig walls and open gridlocks. Numerous volunteers using their bare hands, small scissors etc to cut wires, have set a courageous standard in rescuing lives. But many more could have been saved if disaster management procedures had been more orderly, and proper equipments made available in time. We have provisions for an industrial police to control workers but no industrial disaster management system!

Rana Plaza tragedy is the most powerful wake up call. The cost in human life has been intolerably heavy. This is no time for escape clauses. The state and the industry along with global brands have to make sure that workers' lives are not expendable and that labour is not cheap. As citizens we cannot stop after salvaging lives, we must enforce compliance by all parties responsible for the disaster.

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Death plazas

tragedies for which humanity has no clear managerial measure or means, like the tsunami in Japan or the earthquake in China. But there are some tragedies that, as the *New York Times* editorial (April 25, 2013) writing about the worst industrial disaster of Bangladesh, aptly declared "preventable." A key word. Not partially, not sporadically, but fully preventable.

As of now, more than 350 beautiful lives have been lost, and the count continues. The alive and the injured, and the maimed and the traumatised, are still trying to shake off the dust of the disaster. And, if preventable, is it not reckless endangerment? "It's a murder," the information minister has declared.

Where lies the responsibility? This is the dark side of development, the bewitching side of magical economic growth and consumer capitalism. Shuttling somewhere between 5% and 6% growth rate, Bangladesh and the rest of South Asia are facing the conundrum of global "knit-work." Allured by it and reaping its Faustian benefits, the Bangladesh garments manufacturing industry dances to the tune of being the biggest manufacturer after China. The *New York Times* writes (April 23, 2012) that Bangladesh will soon join the "7 percent club," the elite group of nations enjoying a 7% growth. Honey will flow.

Where once the production of muslim created a global repute for Dhaka, now the manufacture of monitored fabrics promises to take the delta to new heights of glory and growth. In the meantime, blood springs from the pillars of a building, burnt sandals are all that remain of a young man who toiled in a stitching section, a delicate foot of a young woman protrudes between slammed

slabs, the sad anklet a sign of a thwarted hope. Such too is the landscape of industrial globalisation.

All are complicit. Dhaka is replete with such plazas of death and destruction, a shabby show of growth in tottering structures flouting codes and regulations. While an insensitive minister proffers a hilarious reason for the destruction, who is going to consider that death in the plaza is also a consequence of Dhaka's irresponsible planning, part of an abysmal failure by city fathers to establish what should be built where and how. Rajuk, the ridiculous organisation entrusted with the planning and management of the toughest city in the world, is always caught with its

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garments down trying to say something sensible at moments like this.

The garment manufacturers -- BGMEA and BKMEA leaders -- have proposed overseeing of structural design and load management of every garment factory (who is going to check the quality of cement, amount of rods, and construction process?). After Tazreen (117 dead) and Rana Plaza (350 and rising), this is very little and not enough.

For once, the garment organisations should reorganise themselves not primarily for their own economic profit-making, for which they have always been vigilant and attentive, but for the social, physical and emotional well-being of the thousands of workers who make the owners' profit possible; workers who have little rights, little pay, and lackadaisical assurance of well-being in their work place.

Meanwhile, the big buyers and retailers in some distant shores act with a degree of impunity because the culprits are all elsewhere. And the state here, other than offering comedic explanations, performs various

kinds of pirouettes and somersaults.

Shall we not invoke the double EE word that we pretended was banished to the museum: economic exploitation?

Garment factories throng the city like cottage industry. There are really no planned areas for garment manufacturing with solidly built buildings with proper facilities and safe environments. Present-day Savar is the site of a once agricultural landscape that has been turned to "plazas" and "centres" overnight. Along the way to Gazipur, on the riverbanks towards Naryanganj, and on the road past Savar, concrete and steel rods replace the vernacular of bamboo and thatch. Multi-storied buildings -- six, seven or nine-story high -- hum with the music of a far-off Gap or Walmart. How many plazas are out there waiting to topple at the slightest shake?

The transformation of Dhaka and its regions, along with its physical and social landscape, has been relentless and brutal. At the fringe of the city, when an agricultural milieu rapidly transforms into a global "knit-work," strange things will happen when nobody is taking notice. Nalas, dobas and pukurs will get filled to shore up tottering towers, without any basic recourse to safety and buildability, and petit goons with the blessings of political leaders will become crorepatris, and enter the mystical chain of globalisation. JC Penney, meet Sohel Rana.

Bangladesh is also a land of impunity: impunity from genocidal killings in 1971, political assassination (it was metaphorically called "indemnity ordinance"), killing of national leaders in jail ... the list is long. If the present government under Sheikh Hasina has shown boldness to correct such injustices, and clear the sins of an earlier generation, she should show equal audacity for taking care of the brazen impunity enjoyed by those from being complicit in industrial killings. For it is, as her information minister has described, "a murder." Plain and simple.

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THIS DAY IN HISTORY

April 29

711 Islamic conquest of Hispania: Moorish troops led by Tariq ibn-Ziyad land at Gibraltar to begin their invasion of the Iberian Peninsula (Al-Andalus).

1945 World War II: The German army in Italy unconditionally surrenders to the Allies.

1991 A cyclone strikes the Chittagong district of southeastern Bangladesh with winds of around 155 miles per hour (249 km/h), killing at least 138,000 people and leaving as many as 10 million homeless.

2005 Syria completes withdrawal from Lebanon, ending 29 years of occupation.