

Arrests made in Savar building collapse

Guaranteeing justice calls for exemplary punishment

FLOWN in on a helicopter, rushed in an official vehicle to Rab headquarters, displayed in front of the media -- all covered live -- was how the search for Sohel Rana came to a dramatic end. The arrest of one of the prime accused in the collapse of the ill-fated Rana Plaza in Savar which has killed close to 400 garment factory workers so far and injured thousands may have completed the cycle of arrests, lifting the shadow cast on the government prior to it and assuaging, somewhat, the frayed nerves of the people. We hope, however, that it does not end there.

From the Spectrum garments building collapse eight years ago to the Tazreen garments fire five months ago, over 1,000 workers have been killed in factory fires and building collapses due to lack of compliance by factory owners. The numbers of dead and injured have increased with every incident. To date, no one has been held accountable.

In this particular case, the owner of the building illegally constructed on forcibly occupied land, allegedly a ruling party cadre, is not the sole person responsible. Neither is it any occasion for law enforcers to pass judgement on who is or is not culpable. The law must take its own fair, transparent and speedy course to yield justice for the victims of the human-made tragedy. The officials who approved illegal construction of the building, the engineers who supervised it and last but certainly not the least, the factory owners who forced their employees to go back to work in a building which on the previous day had showed signs of impending collapse, must also be held liable. Though the latter have been arrested, we have seen in previous cases that brief periods of detention are no guarantee of justice. This case cannot be allowed to fritter away as have others in the past. Exemplary punishment of each person responsible in this and all other such cases must be ensured in order to avoid any more such tragedies.

For the thousands of victims, survivors and their families, their plight is inconsolable. But let us act now to ensure the safety of the hundreds of thousands of others on whose labour our nation's economy stands, who, ironically, risk their lives day every day in their battle for survival.

“Manpower-less” department of inspection

Invigorate it

WITH every calamity that occurs in a factory it exposes the woeful state of the government agencies entrusted to exercise oversight on it in terms of its operational fitness, particularly its safety standards.

We are not surprised at a recent report in this newspaper which says that the government department which has been assigned the responsibility of ensuring that the safety standards of all the nearly two hundred thousand factories in the country were up to scratch, exists in name only. It can't be anything else, given that the Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishment is pathetically understaffed. 51 inspectors for so many factories spread all over the country is nothing but a farce; and even with the 52 approved posts that remain to be filled up the department would not be able to do its job.

But in this context, particularly after the manmade Rana Plaza disaster, we are compelled to pose several questions to the concerned authorities. Have they ever pondered why almost all the major industrial accidents have involved RMG factories? And why almost all the recent RMG factory disasters have occurred in Dhaka and Ashulia areas only? Why is it that there has not been a single major accident in any garment factory in Chittagong? What is it that the people concerned in Chittagong are doing right that the people in Dhaka are not? Answering these questions does not need manpower but brain power.

We are given to understand that the BGMEA had arrogated to itself the responsibility of conducting a thorough inspection of all the 5000 or so factories registered under it. And this is repeated every time a RMG factory is afflicted. Unfortunately, the situation remains unchanged.

We are constrained to suggest that the BGMEA has failed in its task of ensuring safety of the garment workers, department of inspection or not. Any organisation, particularly as large as the BGMEA, with a modicum of integrity, would not have allowed five garment factories to

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

April 30

1789

On the balcony of Federal Hall on Wall Street in New York City, George Washington takes the oath of office to become the first elected President of the United States.

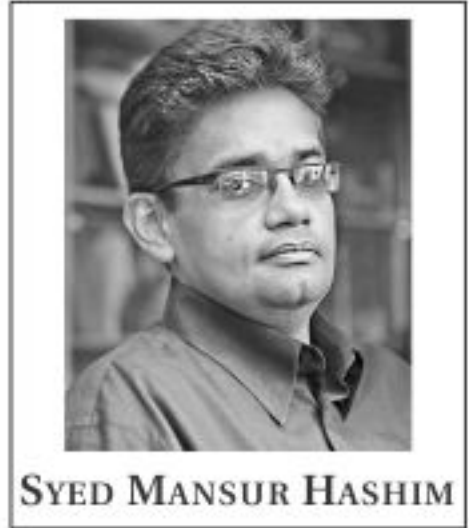
1973

Nixon takes rap for Watergate scandal. President Richard Nixon takes responsibility for the Watergate scandal but denies any personal involvement.

1975

Saigon surrenders. The war in Vietnam ends as the government in Saigon announces its unconditional surrender to the Vietcong.

Readymade garments sector walks a tightrope



SYED MANSUR HASHIM

THE repercussions of the Rana Plaza fiasco simply cannot be understated. With hundreds dead and thousands injured, the 9-storey building collapse at Savar has propelled the \$20billion export-driven industry under an international microscope. Nearly 8million people's livelihoods are directly or indirectly dependent on the sector's continued existence. Yet, as a State we have failed to mete out punishment for such major crimes.

Things are seldom as simple as they look. Could the ground realities be bettered with an improvement of the business environment? Could we reduce the cost of production so that more money is made available for workers' safety and welfare? The question less asked is why the average RMG owner (around 70% of who deal with buyers for whom compliance is nonissue) is being pushed to the limits to cut costs. The RMG sector is operating in niche or tight markets. The global market for apparels is about \$400billion. China occupies 33%, whereas, Bangladesh represents only 6%. The bulk of RMG owners are operating in that 70% margin of the market where foreign buyers are pushing for "bargain-basement" pricing. With minimum wages at \$38, it is not possible for the average factory owner to go below that. Cost minimisation will have to come from other variables,

i.e. overhead which include infrastructure, power and freight.

Here too costs cannot, in reality, be minimised either in power or freight. Uncertainties like *hartal* take their toll. Shipment dates cannot be postponed. While factories are kept outside the purview of *hartals*, transportation to the port city is not. Produced goods require transportation and have switched to airfreight that carries a heavy escalation of cost, around *eight times*.

Consider the following scenario. Shipping cost for a 20-foot container packed with 28 cubic metres (1 cubic metre = 176kg) of goods for the United States (US) averages at \$2,500. The same cargo when air shipped cost nearly \$18,000 (176kgs x \$28 / kilo). Then there is the issue of power. According to company representatives located in BSCIC industrial area, power outages on average cost factories 6 hours a day. Plants switch to power generated by diesel. REB costs Tk.5.5 per unit of electricity. Exact figures on diesel-generated power vary according to size of generator, plant efficiency and a host of other factors. Even if we were to take a very conservative *doubling* of cost of pricing per unit of electricity produced; that in itself represents a cost *hike* not a *reduction*.

So, in reality, the only way to cut costs is to switch to shoddy physical infrastructure. With little in way of

inspection, that is one area where costs can seriously be minimised at the detriment of workers' safety. It is the duty of the state to find ways to reduce the cost of business if we wish to see our garments sector continue to grow without compromising the safety and welfare of the workers.

Does the above scenario absolve proprietors like Rana Plaza of their gross negligence? Does it absolve the government of its failure to regulate? Answer to both is in the negative. At the end of the day, unscrupulous business entities will take advantage of poor regulatory frameworks and weak implementing agencies. Then why has nothing changed, either in terms of holding errant owners to account or bolstering regulatory weak-

nesses? According to an edited excerpt of a *Financial Times* report titled 'Bangladesh factory disasters highlight regulatory failures' published by *The Financial Express* on April 27 states, "Garment manufacturers, who supply companies such as Marks and Spencer and H&M, wield tremendous clout in the corridors of power in Dhaka. Analysts say at least 10 per cent of Bangladesh's parliament members are direct owners of the country's garment factories, which number almost 5,000." Were we to take that statement at face value, it would go a long way to explain why there have

been no convictions on any of the major disasters that have killed hundreds and injured thousands in the last decade of industrial "accidents" in the RMG sector.

According to Wal-Mart, one of the largest retailers in the world issued a "zero tolerance" policy for any violation of its global sourcing standards. Unofficial comments coming from the fashion industry point that the company may be winding down its sourcing from Bangladesh by early 2014. Roughly translated, it means Bangladesh could be poised to lose more than \$500million of inner-ware exported to the US in 2012 and part of the country's \$11.05billion inner-ware sector. Losing Wal-Mart or H&M or Disney would precipitate a sector-wide dampening effect. A negative move by global brand leaders from the US would certainly have ripple effects across the Atlantic and who knows how the Europeans would react.

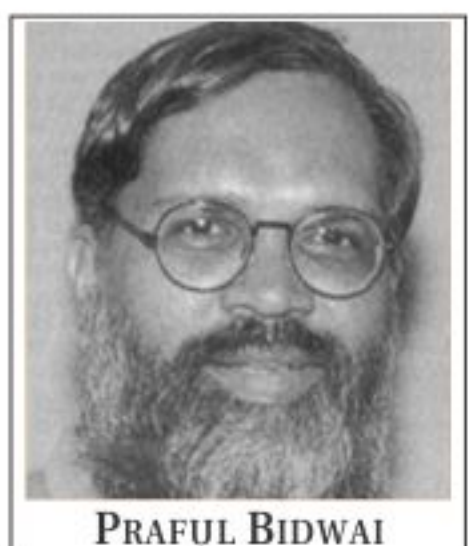
The government has its work cut out. It must move from being reactive to being proactive. Proper fire standards, infrastructure constructed adhering to building codes, workers' health and safety are all prerequisites to reputed brands which play in a market worth \$400billion annually. That is the bottom line. The question is whether the government and industry are going to take steps to protect the \$19billion a year industry because the news coming out of the US fashion industry is that 2014 is literally round the corner.

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PRAFUL BIDWAI COLUMN

The public transport imperative



PRAFUL BIDWAI

IT is no small irony that car sales have doubled in India over five years as employment, and the share of national income going to the poor, have decreased. Automobile manufacturing is one of India's fastest-growing industries, thanks to the upper-middle class's consumerism and its elitist notions of personal mobility and the glamour of cars.

This automobile addiction will ensure that the current 6% drop in car sales, the first in a decade, will be transient and brief. The dizzying 52% rise in the sales of utility vehicles, mostly sport-utility vehicles (SUVs), more than compensates for it.

SUVs are gas-guzzling, road-hogging monsters with truck-level emissions. Since they typically run on diesel, their emissions are even more harmful than those from petrol, including respirable suspended particulate matter (RSPM). India is the world's second fastest-growing SUV market.

India prices diesel much lower than petrol. Today, 55% of all cars sold burn diesel, up from under 10% in 2002.

Thanks to this, and the proliferation of private vehicles -- which account for 60%-plus of urban pollution -- concentrations of RSPM and oxides of nitrogen and sulphur have risen sharply in most cities. Pollution exceeds the prescribed norm in 188 of 190 Indian cities surveyed.

Not only bigger cities like Mumbai, Delhi and Kolkata, but even smaller ones like Surat (Gujarat), Faridabad (Haryana), Alwar (Rajasthan), Meerut (Uttar Pradesh), and Nagaon (Assam) have higher RSPM levels than the norm of 60 microgrammes per cubic metre. Smaller cities also lead in sulphur and nitrogen oxide pollution.

Delhi switched from diesel/petrol to compressed natural gas in public buses, taxis and auto-rickshaws in 2002. But rampant vehicle growth has

reversed the gains from this. Delhi's current RSPM level (261 microgrammes) is worse than in the pre-CNG days.

Urban India is literally choking on air pollution. The World Health Organisation's latest Global Burden of Diseases report describes the situation as "grave" and says air pollution is the fifth biggest cause of death in India.

Air pollution causes or aggravates many diseases/disorders, including cancer, diabetes, heart disease, hypertension and respiratory allergies among children.

Add to this disability-related loss of work, increased stress, aesthetic disfigurement from flyovers and car parks, road-accident deaths, and insecurity for pedestrians and bicyclists -- and you see the terrible impact of motorisation.

The most cost-efficient solution is using existing city roads through Bus Rapid Transit, electric trolley-buses (and trams, where feasible), and promoting cycling and walking. This entails reorganising city life, minimising commuting, and creating exchange hubs and pedestrian plazas.

Cars parasitically occupy enormous road-space even when stationary. Typically, they carry two persons, but hog one-third as much space as a bus ferrying 40 to 60 people.

Cars account for under 10% of all commuter trips in Indian cities, but use three-fourths of road-space. In many cities, bicycles contribute a similar proportion but get no road-space and face grave risks.

Free parking for cars in public spaces is one of India's biggest scandals. If car-owners were to pay market-based rent for prime space in central business districts -- where land costs lakhs of rupees per square foot -- many would stop driving.

Yet, most cities charge laughably low parking fees. In residential areas, car-owners brazenly privatise roads, even pavements. This is downright criminal.

Cars are socially parasitical in other ways. A huge share of urban-infrastructure public spending goes into widening roads or building bridges and flyovers -- for automobile use. Cars slow down traffic, especially public buses, by 30 to 50%, thus causing a loss of precious social time.

Cars have become an elite cult, and a symbol of speed and power with which to inspire public awe and fear. The Indian middle-class is no longer satisfied with small sub-compact vehicles like the Maruti-800, whose sales have tanked. It wants bigger, more luxurious cars. Mid-sized sedans are now India's highest-growth sub-sector.

Cars are used to display ostentatious wealth and macho aggression. The typical Indian car-owner has contempt for the pedestrian, whom he terrorises. Cars thus promote cal-

lousness and misanthropy.

Many industrially developed societies are now regretting motorisation and banning cars from city centres, taxing them more heavily, and levying high parking fees and congestion charges (e.g. 8 pounds per entry into central London).

They are also promoting public transport and reserving lanes for buses and bicycles. Many European cities have seen movements to reclaim roads equitably for people.

Even Shanghai, Beijing and Guangzhou limit and auction car licence plates issued each year. Singapore won't let you buy a car unless you pay through your nose and own your parking space. You can only drive your car on alternate days of the week.

We South Asians desperately need similar measures -- and a blanket ban

on SUVs and diesel-fuelled cars. We must aggressively enforce pollution checks. This means ending the permissive culture under which Delhi, with 7 million vehicles, has only 120 pollution inspectors.

Above all, we need affordable, safe, efficient public transport. The solution doesn't lie in Metro rail, constructing which is too expensive (Rs.200-500 crores a kilometre) especially in already built-up areas.

To be viable, the Metro needs 20,000-40,000 passenger-trips per hour per direction, which very few of our big cities can generate. Thus the Delhi Metro, despite huge and continuing subsidies from Japan, Asian Development Bank, and the Indian and Delhi governments, remains unaffordable for the poor, unlike buses.

With its sleek looks and air-conditioning, it's a middle class darling, but has failed to reduce the number of cars. Indian policymakers are foolishly extending Metros to small cities where they'll be white elephants.

The most cost-efficient solution is using existing city roads through Bus Rapid Transit, electric trolley-buses (and trams, where feasible), and promoting cycling and walking. This entails reorganising city life, minimising commuting, and creating exchange hubs and pedestrian plazas.

The BRT concept reserves for buses road-space that's roughly proportionate to their commuter-trip contribution (60%), and rationalises other traffic.

BRT corridors were planned in numerous cities, including 26 in Delhi. But few have been implemented. Delhi's sole BRT has faced the car lobby's vicious attack. Deprived of traffic marshals, it's becoming dysfunctional.

This won't do. Motorists must be made to respect public priorities.

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