

SUNDAY POUCH

Opposition's 48-hour ultimatum

Prospect of talks in a bind

PRIME Minister Sheikh Hasina's offer of talks to the opposition for reaching an understanding on ways to hold national election with participation of all political parties has met with rejection from the opposition. The nation is left disappointed. Khaleda Zia in her massive public rally at Shapla Chattar yesterday gave a 48-hour ultimatum to the government to announce its decision to restore caretaker government system or else she would accentuate movement for the ouster of the incumbent government. Expressing solidarity with Hefajat-e Islam's siege programme scheduled today, she virtually seemed to have leaned on the radical side as counter-poise to Shahbagh Projonmo Chottor.

With the pronouncement of an ultimatum, the barometer of political temperature has shot up. We have to see how Hefajat-e Islam's blockade programme goes today to be able to gauge the level of tension.

However sympathetic we have been with the opposition's sentiments over a lack of space and oppression they have been subjected to, we have to say that ultimatum is not the language of democratic politics.

The spirit in which the prime minister had offered talks to the opposition should have been met with some reciprocity in view of the fact that without discussion between major political parties no pathway can be laid for peaceable and negotiated settlement of the interim caretaker issue.

This brings the stance of the opposition BNP into a sharper focus. Its insistence that the government concede the demand for a restoration of the caretaker system has in recent days been tempered by a call for a credible election-time government prior to the actual voting. That seems like having the potential for a good beginning, a process the opposition will have been well advised to carry forward through engaging the ruling party in negotiations across the table.

But we must make it abundantly clear that the government needs to release all the detained opposition leaders and withdraw cases against them by way of proving its bona fides in regard to creating an atmosphere conducive to holding a dialogue between the two sides. This is absolutely crucial for the flickering prospect for talks to materialise in some shape or form. We should emphasise here that laying any precondition to the talks cannot be helpful just as an open-ended unfocused discourse would be of little meaning.

Too few labour courts

Justice eludes most workers

THERE are 3.6 million people working in the garments industry in Bangladesh, and many more labourers working in other industries across the country. At the moment there are 13,000 pending cases with seven labour courts in Bangladesh out of which 9,000 are in Dhaka. The seven courts do not sufficiently serve those who come to them for justice. And there are numerous cases which do not get filed because not every district has a labour court and if a worker from Sylhet has to travel to Chittagong to file a case which will most likely be pending for years, why would he or she want to lose his/her daily wage, let alone take the hassle.

Ministry of Labour and Employment's website says their vision is "To reduce unemployment and poverty through productive employment and human resources development by maintaining good industrial relation and relation development between workers and employers." Does productive employment for workers mean just keeping a job and working on the relations and relational development between workers and employers mean neglecting the workers rights and pleas and delaying the process of justice?

Though a majority of our country lives below the poverty line our laws in so-called organised working sectors do not serve the poor. The set up and functionality of the labour courts are a prime example of the kind of negligence shown to the individuals who have not much to give us but the strength of their arms and legs. That strength might equal up to 14.4 bn Euros of export for the garments industry but to us they are nothing more than replaceable arms and legs. Needless to say, it is high time to reconstruct the labour ministry's ways of dealing with our labour law issues, if we do not fix the base of our law system when dealing with our laborers, we would have

Time for industry audit -- PM must intervene



ASHFAQUR RAHMAN

READY-MADE garment industries is one sector in Bangladesh that has flourished because of low labour costs, relatively less investment

costs and poor compliance to international standards. When the pioneer 'Desh Garments' started, by a retired civil servant Nurul Quader in the early seventies, little did he visualise the forces he was about to unleash in this sector. From a quaint start that employed only several thousand female workers, the industry has now bloated to gargantuan proportions that employs about 4 million workers and exports \$19 billion worth of garments annually.

It is therefore time to look in depth at the state of this industry. The garment owners have been raking in sizeable profits; with little reciprocal gain accruing to the RMG workers. By investing little and using cheap labour many of them have brought disrepute to the country. Incidents of fire, building collapse, Dickensian exploitation are one too many.

The government must look closely at certain things, first being the physical infrastructure that houses these industries. It must ascertain whether these are safe and environment friendly. How do the captain of these industries recruit, train and put to work the available human resources? Do they provide a fair wage to their labour? Do the labourers receive the benefits promised by management? When there are industrial accidents leading to death or disability, does management see to it that the victim's family is adequately compensated? So if there is breach on implementing any of the terms agreed to by the employer, where does a worker go to redeem the loss?

But just as workers have rights, they also have responsibilities. Do they conform to high standards of discipline, loyalty towards their employer, and do they strive to improve produc-

tivity? Do they support the management to achieve industry compliance? Does a laborer help the employer increase his returns?

It is regrettable that much of our RMG industry is in a mess. To begin with, garments are produced in four different kinds of premises. There are those RMG units which operate from rented apartments in big cities. Because of paucity of space, even bathrooms in such premises are converted to accommodate sewing machines. Then there are RMG units located in commercial buildings (like the ones in Rana Plaza in Savar) where other assorted offices are located. Here achieving industry compliance is almost impossible. The garment employer is subject to the dictat of the owners of the building.

The third category of premises from where RMG units work is within com-

mercial buildings which are rented for producing garments only. Here achieving compliance is relatively easy and doable.

Finally, there are fully internationally compliant garment factories. It is the first two categories of premises that rise as matters of concern. Here corrupt employers obtain a 'no objection certificate' from equally corrupt building regulatory authorities. Such premises could at times be death traps for workers. Rana Plaza is a case to point where till yesterday more than five hundred bodies have been recovered from the collapsed building where five RMG factories were located.

The next issue is how our garment factory-owners treat their workers. When the monthly salary of the unskilled labour hovers between TK.3,000 to Tk.3,500 (average \$40) per month, and that also not always paid on time, it tantamount to exploitation of these voiceless people.

are used by such employers to get labourers to obey their orders.

What does BGMEA, the organisation that looks after the interest of the employers, do? They quietly point out that it would be imprudent to publicise the deed of the recalcitrant employers as this could give a bad name to the Bangladesh RMG industry. Some foreign buyers overlook such violations because they are keen to continue to purchase garments at extremely low prices.

Yet Article 14 of Bangladesh constitution states that "It is of fundamental responsibility of the state to emancipate the toiling masses, the peasant and workers and the backward section of the people from all forms of exploitation." It is therefore the task of our government to look at these problems straight in the eye and take cor-

rective action. Passing good labour laws are the first step. But a correct and humane implementation of these laws is critical.

The recent Rana Plaza tragedy has given a body blow to the image of our RMG industry. Even Pope Francis in a meeting with brand CEOs recently described RMG workers in Bangladesh as "slave workers." How far this appellation is correct time will decide, but for the moment as a moral authority he has spoken out. The ILO and UN Human Rights organisations have also expressed their deep concern about the state of affairs.

It is in this backdrop that we urge our government to start a serious appraisal of our RMG industries. Industrial auditors should be brought in to scan the industry from top to bottom. The rights of the workers, the expectation of the employer, the negotiating capability of the marketer, the role of industrial police, our inspection system must come under the microscope.

A credible audit and swift implementation of their recommendations will allow us to avert losing our GSP facility in Europe and perhaps obtain duty-free status for entry of garments in the US. Let us not forget that we are the world's second largest RMG supplier. We can through quick and easy steps become the No.1 supplier with export earnings of US\$ 50 billion if we can get our house in order.

There are powerful and influential persons in the RMG industry. To what use is the 30 odd member of parliament who are also garment owners? Why they have not voiced their concern in more emphatic terms and taken initiatives to contain this loss of image? Mr. Fazlul Azim MP and a garment owner has only implored the brands not to abandon buying garments from Bangladesh.

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Developing and negotiating resolutions in these three bodies will not be easy or quick, and each day of deliberation means a day of continued tragedy in Syria. It will take political courage on the part of the international community and our own legislators to vote on intervention -- courage from many who would clearly rather avoid accountability by burying their heads in the sand.

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| The New York Times EXCLUSIVE

Obama can't go it alone in Syria

DANIEL C. KURTZER

THE Obama administration is awash in advice about what to do in Syria. With the administration's having declared chemical weapons use by the government of Bashar Assad a "game changer," many are advising the president to intervene militarily. The stakes are high: every day that Assad remains in power brings death and destruction to more Syrians; but after more than a decade of war in Iraq and Afghanistan, the prospect of American military intervention is daunting.

Before making a momentous decision on intervention -- especially if the president is considering unilateral intervention -- we ought to first do serious diplomacy to see whether an international consensus can be reached on the question of intervention, and then ask the Arab League, the United Nations Security Council and Congress to vote on whether and what kind of intervention is acceptable. Public votes will mean shared responsibility and accountability for whatever action -- or inaction -- results. Indeed, the Syria crisis presents an opportunity to turn away from unilateralism and to adopt instead a more strategic, multilateral approach to resolving international crises.

To make this process credible, the United States should take the lead in trying to shape consensus positions in the three bodies. The diplomatic strategy would need to start with Russia which, together with China, has been blocking Security Council action on Syria. The Russians are motivated by large strategic and narrow economic interests. They are most concerned about the possibility of a jihadist victory in Syria that could spill over into their own backyard -- the

Muslim-majority Caucasus region of southern Russia. Russia is also keen to maintain its longest-standing ally in the Middle East. For the Russians, the starting point for any discussion of possible intervention will be how to manage the transition if Assad falls. This would probably involve transferring power to military officers strong enough to maintain stability (Russia's interest) but also willing enough to oversee a gradual opening up of the political system (America's interest). Concerns about chemical weapons -- of as much concern to Moscow as

engage urgently with three Arab states -- Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Egypt -- all of whom are playing their own games on the ground in Syria, supporting various opposition groups as counterweights to Iranian influence. The Qataris have supported Islamist opposition forces, including reportedly funneling arms clandestinely, much to the consternation of the Saudis, who are distrustful of the Muslim Brotherhood's intentions in the region. Egypt is caught in the middle: the Egyptian military knows Syria's army well and is inclined to support former Syrian Army officers who have

defected to the opposition but promise stability; Egypt's Islamist leaders, on the other hand, are more sympathetic to their Muslim Brotherhood colleagues in Syria. These three Arab states hold the key to Arab League action or inaction. While a broad consensus exists that the Assad regime must go, there is no consensus on whether or how outside intervention should play a role at this stage. For the Arab states, the stakes ought to be laid out clearly: they need to bring the Arab League to a yes-or-no vote on military intervention with a clearly defined mission; and in the unlikely event that the vote is yes, they will be expected to provide tangible support to whatever mode of

intervention is decided.

At home, while our diplomats are negotiating with Russia and the Arab League, we need to see partisan politics replaced with a reasoned and serious debate about American interests in Syria and possible courses of action. Sunday morning talk show chatter should give way to a full discussion in both houses of Congress, focusing on at least three policy options: continuing on the present course of providing "nonlethal" training and assistance; establishing no-fly zones to neutralize the aerial advantage currently enjoyed by the Assad regime; or engaging in full-scale military intervention with the goal of regime change. Americans deserve to know where their president and elected representatives stand on these important issues.

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Constructing an international coalition of willing states -- especially Russia, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Qatar -- is the only strategically wise option for the United States. Without such a coalition, intervention won't work. And without such a coalition, America must reject unilateral military intervention in Syria.

engage urgently with three Arab states -- Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Egypt -- all of whom are playing their own games on the ground in Syria, supporting various opposition groups as counterweights to Iranian influence. The Qataris have supported Islamist opposition forces, including reportedly funneling arms clandestinely, much to the consternation of the Saudis, who are distrustful of the Muslim Brotherhood's intentions in the region. Egypt is caught in the middle: the Egyptian military knows Syria's army well and is inclined to support former Syrian Army officers who have

defected to the opposition but promise stability; Egypt's Islamist leaders, on the other hand, are more sympathetic to their Muslim Brotherhood colleagues in Syria. These three Arab states hold the key to Arab League action or inaction. While a broad consensus exists that