

CROSS TALK

RMG factory inspection underway

This time it should have teeth

THE decision to put in place a fire inspection team to check on whether workers are being paid proper wages, structural integrity of buildings and fire safety issues of a hundred factories in the next week sounds like a step in the right direction. The problem is that there are some 5,000 plus factories in the country, and while the latest "drive" led by a full member of the cabinet grabs all the attention, solving the systemic problems the RMG sector suffers from will take serious political will and commitment over the long run.

As pointed out correctly by a leading labour rights activist, the RMG sector has been given the last opportunity to prove capable of reforming itself and adhering to nationally and internationally acceptable compliance standards. What it boils down to essentially is that the different stakeholders -- workers, factory owners and the government under the counsel of the International Labour Organisation (ILO) must thrash out and ink a comprehensive and workable agreement on May 9. Eyewash inspections simply can't do anymore. Too many lives have been lost and scenes of the carnage of the latest two incidents, i.e. Tazreen Fashions and Rana Plaza have been viewed by millions across the globe.

Inspections have taken place in the past too. After the Tazreen fire, Department of Factory Inspection inspected 2,381 factories. It was found that some 300 factories were operating without any license. Unless sufficient inspectors are recruited and empowered to levy heavy penalties on violators of the building code, it is feared that recurrence of disasters like the Rana Plaza will simply continue. One may only hope that the government will act this time decisively to help protect the lives of workers and preserve the largest foreign exchange earning sector of the economy.

Cyber disinformation campaign

Doctored news confuses general public

THE scale and sophistication involved in spreading propaganda around the number of casualties at Shapla Chattar during the crackdown by security forces on May 05 has reached new heights. From news reports it appears that some bloggers managed to spread the news that about 2,500 people lost their lives during cleanup operations. This was made possible taking advantage of lax posting controls at the CNN blog website. This "loophole" has been blocked after several such "reports" made it on to the site.

What this particular incidence highlights is the ever-increasing need for authorities to equip themselves to fight an increasingly complex cyber war, a war that has been raging ever since the mainstream bloggers started their agitation at Shahbagh. The opposition camp has not been idle. The usage of false information, particularly fake pictures of mass killings is being spread abundantly. Facebook has become the media of choice for bloggers on both sides of the divide. While internet penetration is low in Bangladesh, the use of social media has a global audience. Hence, it is only natural that bloggers take full advantage of it, especially in the absence of any effective government anti-cyber crime outfit.

Governments across the world are taking steps to fight this growing menace. Yet, we are sorry to see that beyond making public statements, no concrete steps have been taken thus far. While the international crimes tribunal law stipulates punishment up to 10 years imprisonment for cyber offences, authorities in Bangladesh remain ill-equipped to for this new threat. Bangladesh Telecommunications Regulatory Authority (BTRA) last year formed Bangladesh Computer Security Incident Response Team to identify websites engaged in spreading anti-religious and anti-state propaganda. Merely the formation of a team is not enough. People need to be made aware of cyber crime and hacking and on these

Political brinkmanship and the Overconfidence Trap



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

HERE'S a name for it when confidence verges on stupidity. The owner of the building in Savar that came crashing down on April

24 knew his building was risky. There were cracks in the pillars and the fear of imminent collapse was hanging heavy in the stifling air. Yet he gave false hope to thousands of people that everything was under control, and forced them to enter a building that was getting ready to crumble. He proved wrong, when it was too late. More than eight hundred people have died so far and we are still counting. That state of hard-headed mind is called the Overconfidence Trap. It may have now gone viral from Sohail Rana to infect our politics.

The proof is in the political brinkmanship that has been wrecking this country. The events of the last few months, particularly the mindless violence on May 5 and 6, could be the cracks in the pillars, but our politicians, having the gut feeling of Sohail Rana, don't seem to be worried. What we saw could be the sneak preview of the full-length crisis looming ahead of us. Just imagine the madness of May 5 had lingered on for a few more days and Dhaka were still burning!

There are politicians in this country who will laugh away that possibility. So did Sohail Rana when he was told that his building was shaky. Nothing is wrong for someone who doesn't have to take responsibility. Sohail Rana was on his way to India, before he got picked up by the police. Many of our politicians won't be available for their comments if their confidence proved stupid. Many of them will put up their feet in the comfort of one of their strings of second homes far from this country.

Our politicians don't believe in Aesop's fables anymore. If they did, they should know that after the boy had cried wolf for many times the

hands. They think they are calculating, prescient and have got a tight grip over everything around them. That things are going from bad to worse, from ultimatum to ultimatum, from dead end to dead end, isn't occurring to them. They aren't paying any attention to apparent cracks.

This is the Overconfidence Trap, which is now a political reality. We have got politicians who believe national politics is as good as schoolyard taunts. Many of them even don't make sense when they speak. Their honesty and integrity are as questionable as the smirk on a guilty face. Yet they expect us to have confidence in their confidence every

to consider the possibility of failure seriously and take precautions to avoid it.

That makes the point. If only Sohail Rana had taken the cracks seriously and heeded the advice to shut down the building, the lives lost could be saved. Those men and women would still be smiling and working. Their families would have been spared the burden of grief and the nation its embarrassment before rest of the world.

For once I would urge the politicians to consider this possibility. Once they should consider failure as an option, that what they have been doing may not eventually work and backfire on the country. May be, that will give them the reason to seek compromise. The fear of failure might bring them closer when the courage to succeed is pulling them apart.

The country has never before looked so shaky. Everyday dozens of people are getting killed and we are losing our capacity to mourn their deaths. Our politics has reached a new level. We are now looking like our own subjugators, and we are also looking like our own victims.

History repeats itself, but not until we have repeated our mistakes. Disasters strike when we're confident enough to make mistakes and stupid enough not to admit.

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real wolf showed up one day. We have been having this brush with real danger time and again. We are having the chastening glimpse of it from time to time. But every time we escape it, we don't get ourselves warned. Instead we gloat about our confidence. We tend to think it's great politics.

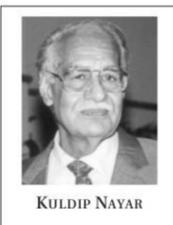
So the politicians push us to the brink and then pull back. They think they are good at the game and know this country like the back of their

time they play dice with this country.

Harvard Business Review, in its review of the book by William D. Eggers and John O'Leary, writes that no matter what one may hear from the politicians, failure is always an option. It describes those who fall prey to the Overconfidence Trap. They dismiss others who advise caution, go by the best-case scenario, and plan with unrealistic budgets and impossible time lines. The authors suggest that the best way to avoid this trap is

BETWEEN THE LINES

An opportunity lost



KULDEEP NAYAR

BELIEVE it or not, the Supreme Court gave the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) an opportunity to be independent

in one of the matters before it, asking the agency why it was not independent. Yet the CBI failed to grab the chance with both hands. It had a foolproof case against Law Minister Ashwani Kumar when he amended the report on the coal blocks allotment scandal. The government's blatant interference resulted in a "corrected draft," exactly the way the Law Minister wanted the report to be.

The Supreme Court said that the CBI had "shaken the system" and it expected the agency to give its independent verdict on the probe. But it did not because the agency realised that it would have meant opposing the government. Apparently, it was the failure of both the CBI and the government. They could have seen to it that the agency would have its own say. Now that it has lost the chance to be viable, the way out for the government is to make the CBI independent.

The present bill pending before Parliament falls short of giving the CBI independent character. It looks that both major political parties, the Congress and the BJP, do not want the agency to have teeth. I do not know how far other parties want the agency to be independent. In any case, the CBI has lost the opportunity to become viable.

Corruption still gets most attention in Indian politics. The present government at the centre beats all records in scandals. Never before did the CBI have so many eyes riveted on

it and what comes out again and again is the inadequacy of its powers. The reason, simply put, is that the CBI realises the extent of independence it can exercise in the present set up. The law minister's argument that he has not committed any wrong by vetting the report as his ministry has been the authorised legal adviser of the agency sounds hollow.

However, every time a scam tumbles out of the government's cupboard, there is a familiar exercise that follows. The CBI is asked to conduct a probe. But when the agency remains a department of the government and part of the system, doubts

one been punished till today and why has nothing concrete emerged after practically every investigation?

This doesn't surprise me at all. The party has been confronted with several such situations before and had weathered them all without much ado or damage to its existence. Yet what the Ashwani Kumar and, of late, Railway Minister Pawan Kumar Bansal, episodes have brought to the fore is that even before one controversy dies down, there is another one waiting to catch the administration on the wrong foot. No government since independence has been as badly battered and shattered as

that "the investigation agency does not exist in isolation" is no revelation.

However, Sinha's admission has let the cat out of the bag. We knew that institutions like the CBI have been devalued over a period of time. And it is the government which has its last word on a charge-sheet because of political power. Even with the Supreme Court breathing down its neck, there have been several instances where the CBI's investigations have remained questionable. In fact, political parties have their own views and positions on ways and means to improve the efficiency and accountability of the CBI. But no government has been ever willing to give up its administrative controversy over the agency.

Take the case of the BJP, the main opposition party. It did create a ruckus in parliament over the issue, demanding the resignation of Ashwani Kumar. So did the other parties with their leaders baying for his blood. But we have not seen anybody making concrete proposals to insulate the CBI from government interference. In a way, it is good that the apex court is seized of the entire matter and is determined to liberate the agency from the clutches of the government. But it remains to be seen what structure it would recommend to give the CBI full freedom.

Unfortunately, the government does not seem to be even sorry for what has happened to revive faith in governance. Some ministers try to explain things "in proper perspective." Yet what the Manmohan Singh government does not realise is the yawning trust deficit: none of its claims is accepted, none of its explanation is considered credible and none of its action is taken seriously. It is thus the loss of faith which has put a question mark against every segment of the administration.

The writer is an eminent Indian journalist

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about its functioning cannot be brushed aside. Several former directors of the CBI have written articles and books to show how they were given instructions from above to decide a case in a particular way.

In the entire scenario, it is difficult to say whether or not Prime Minister Manmohan Singh had been briefed. Because of his clean record in public life, we come to infer that he did not know. It is probable, if not possible, that such a situation did obtain and that Manmohan Singh knew what was happening under his nose. But then you expect some heads to roll when the scams come to light and particularly when you can spot out the officials in the loop. Why has no

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's has been.

But there is a certain pattern to the CBI-law minister controversy. As was to be expected, the Congress first dismissed the accusation and then issued a perfunctory explanation before finally admitting that the law minister did go through the report and suggest some changes to it. But for the three-judge bench, which ordered CBI director Ranjit Sinha to file an affidavit, the actual behind-the-scene activities would not have come to light, although we know the agency always functioned under the influence of the government of the day. Hence, the confession by the CBI director before the Supreme Court

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

May 10

1773
The Parliament of Great Britain passes the Tea Act, designed to save the British East India Company by granting it a monopoly on the North American tea trade.

1796
First Coalition: Napoleon I of France wins a decisive victory against Austrian forces at Lodi bridge over the Adda River in Italy. The Austrians lose some 2,000 men.

1857
Indian Mutiny: In India, the first war of Independence begins. Sepoys revolt against their commanding officers at Meerut.

1877
Romania declares itself independent from the Ottoman Empire following the Senate adoption of Mihail Kogălniceanu's Declaration of Independence. Recognized on March 26, 1881 after the end of the Romanian War of Independence.

1994
Nelson Mandela is inaugurated as South Africa's first black president.