The uneasy peace is broken in rowdy protest before festivals or when the doomsday strikes like at Savar and the apathy is shaken off when murderous action occurs at Greece.

The expatriate wage earners are scattered all over the world and unlike the garments workers have no scope of becoming an organised force. When doomsday of Greece Mafioso action takes place only then does it become headlines. But our national economy depends on wage earners' remittance.

Comparatively those who go abroad as wage earners have to be better endowed for contractual agreement requires a moderately large cash payment for ordinary Bangladeshi village folk. Saving is not a strong possibility. The money is generally raised from fixed assets like land or as personal loan at high interest rate.



Expatriate workers contribute significantly to the economy. PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

The process of raising the fund is loaded with risk. Judging by social perception the recruitment agency is often not operated by trustworthy men. However with bucks going down, the recruitment business is brushing up its image. There is a government ministry to look after expatriate welfare, but the extent of welfare is still murky. The foreign employers also take advantage of them lowering the wages knowing that Bangladeshis will still work for such puny remuneration.

The resentment in the garments sector has burgeoned into a volatile bomb and hence requires immediate attention.

Most garments workers are from families where the earner is a marginal farmer or who is burdened with a large number of dependents, or when the farmer himself is sick. When the necessity demands every able member becomes an earner. When they join a garments factory the whole family is relocated to a place nearer to the factory.

One may want to know as a matter of general interest about the sizeable presence of female workers and teenage girls in garments factories, which the Hefajat clerics oppose on the ground of men and women working together. May be it is a meeting of necessity and convenience. They are naturally suitable for tailoring jobs of domestic nature, like, spinning yarn, stitching, sewing etc. A more facile way would be to say they are easier to manipulate as far as wages are concerned. If there was a time like that it no longer exists. The other generalized view is that they are normally not given to idle away working time and to fill the ranks of trade unions.

Public conscience in Bangladesh admits that the wages the garments factory workers receive is poor and it grows at a rate that does not raise hope. When the facts come out the garments factory owners do not appear that ghoulishly evil. The 'world gets on by trickery' and the western buyers are not as white as they seem.

In international business operational profitability is the key to good returns and the world wants prices that fit the budget. It is understandable that the Bangladeshi garments owners are in a highly competitive field when it comes to accommodating the foreign buyers. It has done well in successfully facing the challenging situation of withdrawal of quota system by continuously growing.

But as the world knows, so does its people, the rules that work in Bangladesh are rarely fair; so social justice is an orphan. Cutting the corners in garments business can overlook safety standards, structural soundness of the establishment, human working conditions, working schedule mindful of workers safety etc.

However, even after cutting corners for operational profitability, Bangladeshi garments workers can get better wages and benefits from what they are getting. Justice denied can be the mother of another doomsday in making. The uneasy peace may not last for an indefinite period. The sooner the garments sector and government realises this the better it is for Bangladesh. ■