

# Another wasted week

## Time for people to resist hartal

IT would be a waste of a good part of the week if BNP decides to call hartal during this week, as some fear they might. As it is, two days will have been wasted already with today's hartal called by Jamaat to protest arrest of its Nayeib-e-Ameer on allegations of crimes against humanity.

Calling hartal has become a fad it seems. Even socio-cultural organisations are doing so. Regrettably, the political parties have not bothered to pay heed to our repeated entreaties to avoid hartals and instead seek alternative ways to ventilate their grievances. We do not contest the validity of their position but the manner of airing their points which, by coercing people to close down, has had tremendous impact on the economy. The parties have shown no compunction for the people by calling hartals.

People have been pushed right back to the wall. They cannot take it anymore, particularly the poor. It will just not do for the political parties to call hartal and sit smugly in their air-conditioned rooms while some of their activists go about damaging public and private property, and those that have to work everyday to make ends meet are left to wonder why it is they that must fall victim to the degenerative politics.

In this situation, where no one is listening, the only alternative for the public is to resist hartal. And that's possible by coming out in open defiance of hartals, by refusing to be cowed down by the political goons.

## Salary increase for garment workers

### Break out of the \$40 per month ceiling


THE government's move to set up a new minimum wage board for garment workers to increase their salaries is welcome, but it has to be finalized after consulting with the owners and an objective assessment of the industries financial condition. That the new wage will have retrospective effect from May 1, 2013 will certainly benefit the workers.

The test of the pudding would be in eating. If their salaries are nominally increased as had happened before then it would be another disappointment, a cruel joke played on them again.

Please keep in mind that the wage increase is actuated out of a universal sympathy for the poor working conditions including wage structure our workers have been toiling in.

For the government let the move not become an exercise in populism -- come election season -- rather it should result in a remunerative wage pegged to the rate of inflation and offered upfront to workers. When their minimum wage was raised from Tk 1662 in 2006 to Tk 3000 per month as from November, 2010, it was evidently an insufficient raise. The same mindset is no longer tenable; this time the salary should be increased to meet the workers basic needs. Even Cambodia pays a higher rate.

While we are sympathetic to the workers' need for better salary the concerns of the garment manufacturers will also have to be addressed, the principal among which is that the buyers are demanding lower prices, thereby negatively impacting the prospect of owners' paying more to the workers.



### Mother's Day turns bloody

SHAYERA MOULA

AROUND 300 people were joyfully marching in the streets of North Villere Street in New Orleans this Mother's Day when three boys decided to go all-out hunting season on them. "The gunmen fired into the crowd as if they were playing a duck-hunting video game [...] trying to shoot as many as possible," said one woman whose sister had four bullets shot at her arm. (*The Times-Picayune newspaper*)

Bloody photos of some of the survivors -- 19 were killed -- are miserable reminders of the unexpected violence that have been erupting across America recently. Such events have resulted in greater intensity regarding gun-control issues, and with the ban in background check, Americans worry more than ever over the future of their national security strategies.

Regarding random mass murders, Peter Michaelson in his 'The Psychology Behind Mass Shootings' writes, "our suffering is produced through inner conflict, we have nowhere to turn for relief but inward." Along with other psychologists, he too explains that negative emotions when suppressed aggravate stronger impulses and violent outcomes -- which often result in gun bangs and "pop pop pop" as asserted by another woman from the New Orleans merry-making march.

Yet a great deal of experts agree that there is never one particular reason for aimless shootings -- it could be psychological, and an overflow of negative emotions, or it could be to indulge in hegemonic masculinity that mimics action movie heroes and blood-infested video games. Whether movie theatres, schools or annual marathons, the reasons behind mass killings aimed at helpless targets remain a trend still with a reason of mystery. Is it the economic recession? A national cry for ignorant forms of discrimination? Or is it simply sadistic pleasure?

The answers linger at point blank and many remain disappointed as the gun-control amendment introduced by Senators Pat Toomey and Joe Manchin, which would have extended federal background checks to cover both gun shows and internet arms sales, had a majority vote out last month.

Facebook this Mother's Day had flooded itself with photos of everyone's mums. Cards, gifts, etc. were and are the main objectives of this special day and social networks really highlight the joys that encompass such occasions. If the days when communities get together for a fiesta are met with speeding bullets, much of the freedom and citizens' happiness will also slowly die away.

THE WRITER IS SUB-EDITOR, EDITORIAL AND OP-ED, THE DAILY STAR.

# The value of a garment worker's life

THE building collapse in Savar has led to more than 1,000 deaths and left many more injured, adding to the increasing number of casualties from accidents at ready-made garment (RMG) factories over the last decade. The proposed across-the-board compensation of Tk.20 lakhs (\$\$25,628) for injured workers and Tk.1 crore (\$128,090) for deceased workers is undoubtedly generous, but it appears arbitrary, and the methodology used behind such estimates remains largely unclear. While it is nearly impossible to estimate the monetary worth of a human life or the long-term suffering of families of the affected, it is still necessary to determine a reasonable compensation amount for the affected workers and their families, based on a systematic analysis in the current domestic and global economic context.

We have performed the following analysis using data retrieved from government reports, garment industry releases and various online sources. The analytical framework has been created based on the wage structure of RMG workers, the age of the worker at the time of accident and the average age of retirement for workers in Bangladesh.

We have calculated an approximate compensation amount by considering the income that the worker would have brought in if alive till the age of retirement (assumed 50 years), further adjusted to the current market wage, inflation, interest rates and possible wage increments through job promotions. Due to limitations in data, we have had to make conservative assumptions, such as considering only gross wage, which does not include festival bonuses and overtime, for calculating compensatory amounts.

However, bonuses and overtime, which constitute a large portion of workers' income, are partially accounted for in our analysis with the assumption that the wage increases annually according to the inflation rate averaged over the last 25 years (6.28%, source: WB). Since we believe the compensation should be paid on a one-time basis, we have calculated the present discounted value of the future annual wage applying the real discount rate averaged over the last 25 years (2.72%, source: WB).

The Bangladesh Garments Owners and Manufacturers Association (BGMEA) categorises the industry staff in two broad groups -- workers, personnel who are directly involved with processing apparel products, and employees, who are not. The wage structure for employees is divided into grades -- 1 to 4 -- with grade 1 being the highest and grade 4 the lowest, whereas workers' wage rate is divided into grades -- 1-7. For example, the monthly wage for grade 7 workers, such as assistant sewing machine operators and assistant knitting machine operators, is Tk.3,000 (\$38). On the other hand, the monthly wage for grade 1 workers, such as pattern masters and chief cutting masters, is Tk.9,300 (\$119). Unskilled new workers, taken in as apprentices, usually get promoted to grade 7 within 3-4 months of employment. Promotions for workers and employees in job grade leading to increments in salary and benefits was assumed to take place every 5 years.

Details of our calculations based on the facts and assumptions mentioned above are available online ([savartagedy.wordpress.com](http://savartagedy.wordpress.com)). According to our estimates:

- Workers of age 20 years and below, should receive a minimum compensatory amount of Tk.29,35,000 (\$37,594) (grade 7 at the time of the accident) and a maximum of Tk.54,74,000 (\$70,116) (grade 3 during the accident), for 30 years equivalent of wages lost;
- 21-25 years age group (25 years wage loss): minimum (grade 7) Tk.18,13,000 (\$23,222) and maximum (grade 3) Tk.45,88,000 (\$58,767);
- 26-30 years age group (20 years wage loss): minimum (grade 7) Tk.12,58,000 (\$16,114) and maximum (grade 1) Tk.33,65,000 (\$43,102);
- 31-35 years age group (15 years wage loss): minimum (grade 5) Tk.9,78,000 (\$12,527) and maximum (grade 1) Tk.23,34,000 (\$29,896);
- 35 years and above (10 years wage loss): minimum (grade 3) Tk.8,99,000 (\$11,515) and maximum (grade 1) Tk.14,64,000 (\$18,752).

Compensations for employees have been calculated similarly based on age groups and working grades. It is important to note that these estimates are only applicable to deceased workers and employees. Workers who have lost their full productivity due to severe physical injury should receive a higher compensation compared to that of a deceased worker to account for recurring costs of medical treatment and rehabilitation. Injured workers with a short recovery period should receive at least 3-4 months' worth of wage and be given other employment opportunities as seen fit. For simplicity's sake, we have excluded the medical treatment and rehabilitation costs of injured workers, but that can be fitted into the indemnity through some methodological adjustments based on various degrees of limb amputations and physical injury.

Such disasters also inflict various degrees of mental trauma and social harm on workers and their families. Theoretically, these impacts should be considered while assessing indemnity, but in reality, it is almost impossible to do so given the nature of these afflictions.

Thus, the compensation awarded becomes quite insignificant in the long run, especially for the families who have lost their only earning member, when compared to the long-term effects such a disaster would have on them.

The aim of our current work is to build a preliminary structure required for calculating the indemnity and we would like to reinforce that our estimates are primarily meant to point the government and policy-makers in the right direction. We earnestly hope that the government will establish a proper compensation procedure based on fair assessments, and will compel the RMG owners to be more conscious about ensuring safety for their employees to prevent further loss of human and social capital.

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# LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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## Rescue of Reshma

The rescue of Reshma Begum from under the Rana Plaza rubble united the nation in rejoicing. All those involved ceaselessly in rescuing the living and retrieving the dead, deserve to be lauded. The focus now should be on Reshma and how she can be helped to overcome the trauma of the ordeal. It would be appropriate for the government to find some alternative employment for her, as she may have difficulty in returning to a similar work environment. Perhaps she could be sent to visit some garment-buying nations, as a symbol of the indomitable spirit and courage of the Bangladeshi garment workers, to persuade them to do their part in improving the conditions of our garment industry. Considering the enormous profit margins enjoyed by the buyers, surely it is not too much to expect of them to make some contribution to the welfare of those whose labour enables them to reap the profits?

Syed Hamde Ali, *The Nawab Palace, Bogra*

## Why save Sohel Rana?

Sohel Rana has killed over a thousand innocent garment workers and made thousand others maimed for the rest of their life. The European Union is considering trade action against Bangladesh in order to force Dhaka to improve the safety standards in RMG factories. We have come to know from the media that the cases filed against Sohel Rana are weak, and so we assume that he will not get the highest punishment. Our prime minister said in the parliament that Sohel Rana didn't belong to Awami League. According to the media, the local MP was trying to save him since the very beginning when the building collapsed. The question is, who or what is to be saved: the brutal killer of thousands of people or the garment industry?

Khandaker Zia Hasan  
Communication Trainer, Dhaka

## RUET students' invention

An interesting report was published in a local English daily on 17th April about a wireless remote control device, developed by students of RUET, for operating doors and windows. They deserve our appreciation. However, to enable them to cash in on their invention, this device should be patented immediately. The RUET authorities should help the students to do so. Without patent protection, anyone can commercialise the device and reap financial benefits.

Engr. S. A. Mansoor, Dhaka

## We want justice

I couldn't hold my tears when I came to know that garment worker Shaheena was no more. What a tragic death she had to embrace! There is no hope left for the victims who have lost either their legs or hands. Sohel Rana, the owner of the building, has been arrested. Now we want justice.

Jannatul Ferdous Usha, Nalitabari, Sherpur

## News analysis or govt. press release?

While reading the news analysis titled "Shapla Chatter & act of Houdini" (May 8, 2013), I was having difficulty to understand if I was reading a news analysis of the daily or a press release of the government!

The indifference the 'news analysis' showed to the death (be it 3 or 13 or 2500) in May 5 incident, and the way it tried to justify the number of dead, is disturbing to put in the mildest term.

The bias in news presentation for the last couple of months shows that TDS is leaving its old ways. I feel terribly sad to see that my once favourite daily is not living up to its reputation.

Saif, Dhaka

## Comments on news report, "Let's talk; say 'yes' first," published on May 12, 2013

## Anwar Hossain

Government should hold a referendum to find out whether people support the caretaker system of government. We don't want to see any violence.

## Khan Kalam

These political parties are hijacking the basic rights of citizens. I have been looking forward to see real leaders who will think about the welfare of the people.

## Ash C.

A poll was held by Prothom Alo through a professional surveyor agency Org-Quest Research Limited and the result of the poll was published in the daily's May 11, 2013 issue, which shows that over 90% of the nation's adult population want the next general election to be held under a caretaker / neutral government with only 8% opposing the system!

## Vikram Khan

Bangladesh became independent in 1971 and still we need foreigners to come and ask us to kindly stop the fighting and corruption and start good governance. We are not a poor nation in terms of resources, but we are poor in mentality.

## Palisade

The UN Secretary General's rep must understand that there is no credible administration in the country. A neutral caretaker government is a must.

# Who will pay for the innocents' blood?

SYED WASIF

I am sorry to observe that recent articles/news items in The DS about Hefajat-e-Islam make me think that you are biased prejudiced and are sounding more and more like bigot yourselves.

All my respect for DS as a righteous, helper of the oppressed and downtrodden, vanguard of the truth newspaper has been washed down the drain. Your insistence on calling them bigots, fanatics, marauding gang etc, bespeaks of your holding these people in low esteem.

I am not a Hefajati, but I respect our Ulemas, as there is Hadiths that says: "Those who do not respect their elders and do not show affection to their young ones, nor honour the learned and scholars of Islam, are not from amongst my Ummah."

Hefajat-e-Islam people are basically scholars and students of Islam. They carry no political agenda. Their main concern was Bangladesh, being a Muslim majority country, is slowly slipping towards Godlessness and irreligiousness. Amongst other demands they wanted capital punishment law against people who blaspheme Islam and its holy Prophet (SM), and a sound and basic education policy ensuring Islamic values and principles.

Their mega meeting of 5th April 2013 was unprecedented and unexpected by both friends and foes alike. The opposition, mainly BNP and Jamaat, saw in it their opportunity to bolster their waning popularity as well as to achieve their designs using the Hefajat platform.

The last meeting was a great success for Islam lovers especially for its non-violent character and peaceful gathering. But it was unique in its spontaneity, a matter of the moment. Hefajat will err if they think they can always pull such a crowd.

Within the one month period, 6th April to 5th May, it appears the Jamaat and BNP as well as other Islamic political parties made sufficient inroads into Hefajat to carry a potential clout regarding policy matters.

The fiasco at Purana Paltan and Bangabandhu Avenue on the 5th does not fit in with the character of Hefajat. Also, it was away from the venue of

their gathering. However I do not rule out some fringe elements of Hefajat being involved. Some eye witnesses allege they saw Awami activists and Jamaat/Shibir activists involved in the rampage and arson. The Home Minister also mentioned about Jamaat's instigation. I myself saw a very large procession of Hefajat at Sheraton crossing (only a few hundred yards from Gonojagoron Moncho), carrying on in a very disciplined manner veering off towards Kakrail and beyond. If committing "mayhem" was their objective, they could very easily have breached the lightly guarded police barricade and attacked the Mancho. They did not. If "marauding" was their intention, this was the best opportunity, they could have easily left a trail of devastation on the way to Shapla Chatter, from their various 'oborodh' points. That did not happen.

Mr. Shahriar Khan of DS claims that Quran shops were burnt by Hefajat is unacceptable. Did he see it himself? No, a shopkeeper said so. Did the shopkeeper verify whether it was really Hefajat men or Shibir? No. Or was it Awami activists carrying out a false flag operation?

Next is the dark deed carried out in the early hours of 6th May. First, I see no reason why the Hefajat leadership decided to stay the night jeopardizing the lives of its adherents. Their decision making appears to have been blurred by outside elements joining them.

How could the security forces carry out such a cowardly, pre-dawn crackdown on unarmed defenseless mostly madrasa young boys? How could they fire live bullets into a crowd of civilians while they were asleep or in prayer vigil? Mr. Shahriar Khan states they used sound grenades, tear gas etc. Was he hiding the live bullets in the "etc"?

How do you account for the bullet wounds found on the dead and on the wounded, spread out in many of the hospitals and clinics in and around Dhaka? What about those who have been crippled for life or maimed or disfigured?

I will not debate the question of how many were killed. My question is why even one protester will be killed. ? That's one too many. Or is human life so cheap in the eyes of our law enforcers? Remember, the Holy

Quran states, "If you kill one person (without just cause) it is as if you have killed all of humanity."

Do we not follow any international norm or laws in dealing with such mass gathering? We need an independent inquiry into this affair immediately. And the government should offer all support to carry out such an enquiry to help vindicate itself. I am told that the PM is a kind hearted lady. She also prays regularly. How could she allow this barbaric attack? Awami activists continue to provoke, insult, and assault madrasa students, teachers and even common people dressed in Islamic garb. This must stop.

It is here that I feel The Daily Star has failed to live up to its reputation as being outspoken and candid. Is it that when it comes to Hefajat they are ready to condone police brutality? Why? You show pictures captioned Hefajat and Jamaat beating up a policeman. But you don't show pictures of young madrasa boys shot to death by security forces. Why? So who will pay for the blood of the innocent?

Again, isn't Awami league slowly getting alienated from the people? First the Rana plaza tragedy. Will any of the garments workers and their close kin vote for Awami League? That's 5 million multiplied by 5, that's 25000000. Again the madrasa boys who were killed, wounded, or jailed. 15,000 Qawmi Madrasa multiplied by say 500 students multiplied by 5 close kin. That's 75000000. They are lost too as far as their votes are concerned.

I think PM should be advised to put in place a policy of "winning hearts and minds." Instead of taking harsh repressive measures, which breeds backlash and ultimately, insurgencies and rebellion?

It's heartening to note Hefajat-e-Islam's decision to call off their proposed hartal as well as their disassociation from politics. I hope the government will reciprocate by releasing all ulamas and madrasa students from confinement. And call off their activist from the witch hunting now in progress.

THE WRITER IS AN ISLAMIC SCHOLAR AND AN OCCASIONAL CONTRIBUTOR.