

Apparel factory disasters

FROM PAGE 16

Such agencies as the Department of Labor and the Office of the US Trade Representative, meanwhile, are stepping up their efforts. Labour officials have agreed to fund a programme to improve the Bangladeshi government's currently weak — and some say corruption-ridden — factory inspection system. USTR, meanwhile, is moving forward with plans to exclude Bangladesh from import tax breaks given to goods from developing countries.

US officials said the decision was made last fall to begin pressuring Bangladesh for improvement in its labour conditions, and the process intensified after the recent incidents.

Requests by labour groups to exclude Bangladesh from tariff breaks have been pending for several years, but USTR said in documents published in the federal register that "the lack of progress by the government of Bangladesh in addressing worker rights issues... warrants consideration of possible withdrawal" of benefits.

That has gotten the government's attention. A delegation of top Bangladeshi officials is in Washington this week lobbying to retain the tariff breaks and to convince US leaders in USTR, Labor and the State Department that they are serious about overhauling local labour laws, prosecuting crimes against labour leaders and making other long-sought changes.

"We reached the conclusion that things were not moving forward, and we needed to do something dramatic," said a US trade official, who was not authorised to speak for the record.

The November fire and last month's collapse of the Rana Plaza textile centre brought into sharp relief one of the core moral questions of globalisation: What

obligation do the nations that benefit from low-cost goods made in places like Bangladesh have to ensure a safe environment and basic rights for workers? The incidents also highlight the challenge of policing a global economy in which developing nations now absorb massive outside investment each year and corporations rely on ever-more diffuse and distant supply chains to source their goods.

The textile industry, historically, has been prone to problems. It is a sector that thrives on cheap labour and can easily decamp from one country to the next as buyers at such major firms as Target or Spain's Zara chain seek the lowest-cost suppliers.

The expiration in 2005 of a worldwide quota system, in which developed nations like the United States limited how much in textiles they would import, touched off a global explosion of investment in such places as Bangladesh, a densely populated nation with a per capita income of around \$2,000 annually. The country now relies on garment exports for about a fifth of its annual economic output. Complexes with hundreds of warehouse textile shops have sprung up under lax oversight, and a consortium of textile factory owners has developed into a potent political force.

In documents submitted to the USTR, the Bangladeshi government acknowledged its inability to cope, saying the expansion of the textile industry "has outstripped the pace of our progress" in strengthening regulation.

The tariff breaks in question allow Bangladesh to export a wide variety of goods to the United States tax-free; last year that amounted to about \$35 million. The breaks do not apply directly to Bangladesh's textile industry, which sells in excess of \$4.5 billion of goods to the

United States each year. But analysts say excluding Bangladesh from the Generalised System of Preferences, a nearly 40-year-old programme meant to encourage manufacturing in poor countries, would send one of the sharpest signals available — short of cutting off trade altogether or increasing tariffs directly on textiles.

Advocacy groups generally argue against those stark measures, on the grounds that the brunt of the pain falls on workers left jobless by the disruption in trade.

"Bangladesh doesn't want to lose this for symbolic reasons," said Kimberly Elliott, a senior fellow at the Center for Global Development. "Cutting off trade doesn't help anything. They lose 3 to 4 million jobs mostly held by young women who would otherwise be working on farms or having kids as teenagers."

Among changes the Bangladeshi government has promised to avoid sanctions: It has pledged to join an international programme credited with improving working conditions in such places as Cambodia — a step that labour advocates have urged for years as textile employment in Bangladesh surged. The Better Work programme, jointly administered by the International Labor Organization and the World Bank, generally trades import or other concessions for monitored improvements in labour conditions.

The plight of workers in Bangladesh has long been a concern. But for all the problems, the textile industry has also drawn millions of young women into the labour force, allowed them to send money home to village families and has probably delayed childbearing and marriage from the early teens — a dramatic cultural shift in the predominantly Muslim nation.

Crores left to pay, chit fund boss commits suicide

TNN, Chinsurah

The body count in the state's chit fund scandal rose further with an owner of a microfinance company committing suicide on Thursday at Mogra in Hooghly.

Asim Bera (56), the chairman-cum-managing director of microfinance firm Amco Company Limited was found lying unconscious and frothing from the mouth early on Thursday near the garage of his house at Mogra.

After neighbours informed police, a team led by OC of Mogra Sukhomoy Chakraborty reached the spot. Asim was declared brought dead at Chinsurah Imambar hospital. Doctors said that Asim died after consuming poison.

Asim was a bachelor who lived with his brother and his family at their house in Mogra's Adhikarypara locality. However, neighbours said that Asim, who had a good reputation in the area, rarely stayed at home.

Sources said his company had an office in Chinsurah which mostly remained closed. It also had no business in the district. He collected crores from depositors in Bankura and Purulia. For the last 3-4 days, the depositors kept knocking on his doors demanding their money.

Hooghly additional SP (headquarters) Tathagatha Basu said an investigation has been started into Asim's death. "We are also trying to find out which other microfinance companies in Hooghly did business elsewhere, particularly in Jangalmahal," Basu

France boycotts UN vote on Polynesia

AFP, United Nations

The UN General Assembly put French Polynesia on the global body's decolonization list at a meeting boycotted by France yesterday.

The resolution, passed by consensus in the 193 member assembly, was called for by the Solomon Islands and other Pacific island states who back the territory's pro-independence parties.

The vote places French Polynesia on the UN decolonization list along with 16 other territories around the world, including the British-ruled Falkland Islands and the US Virgin Islands.

The resolution "affirms the right of the people of French Polynesia to self-determination and independence."

The resolution is largely symbolic but Britain, the United States, Germany and the Netherlands all disassociated themselves from the consensus vote.

France sent a letter to other UN members on Thursday announcing it would not be taking part in the debate.

"The right to self-determination cannot be exercised against the will of the concerned populations," said the note.

Boston suspect wrote note before capture

AFP, New York

Boston bombing suspect Dzhokhar Tsarnaev wrote a note before his capture in which he called the victims "collateral damage" for US action in Afghanistan and Iraq, local media reported Thursday.

"When you attack one Muslim, you attack all Muslims," Tsarnaev also scribbled on the inside wall of the boat where he hid from police during a massive manhunt in the days after the April 15 blasts, according to CBS News.

The twin explosions near the finish line of the Boston Marathon killed three people and wounded more than 260.

Syria refugee tally tops 1.5m: UN

AFP, Geneva

More than 1.5 million Syrians have fled their conflict-ravaged homeland, the UN's refugee agency said yesterday, warning that the real figure could be even higher as the tally only reflected those who register with aid groups.

Dan McNorton, spokesman for the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, told reporters that close to 250,000 Syrians were being registered each month.

"Refugees tell us the increased fighting and changing of control of towns and villages, in particular in conflict areas, results in more and more civilians deciding to leave," McNorton said.

"Over the past four

months we have seen a rapid deterioration when compared to the previous 20 months of this conflict," he added.

McNorton underlined that the actual number of refugees was likely to be even higher than 1.5 million.

"This is due to concerns that some Syrians have regarding registration," he said, explaining that rumours circulating among exiles about the supposed security risks of signing up for refugee status put some people off.

He said aid agencies were working to encourage waverers to register in order to be able to receive official help, even as UNHCR struggles to keep up with the

rising numbers and needs.

"The increasingly widening gap between the needs and resources available is a growing challenge," he said.

"UNHCR continues to respond to the emergency needs of those in desperate need inside Syria and neighbouring countries," he added.

Syrians have surged out of their country since March 2011, when a crackdown on protests against the regime of President Bashar al-Assad heralded the start of an armed rebellion.

Numbers ballooned as the conflict morphed into an increasingly sectarian civil war, and the total topped a million in March this year.

Regime change won't affect ties, China to Pakistan

TNN, Beijing

China on Thursday assured Islamabad that a change of regime in Pakistan and Beijing's recent overtures towards India will not come in the way of their "all weather friendship".

A Chinese minister said Pakistan continues to serve Beijing's strategic interests without actually mentioning its role as a bulwark in India-China relations.

"China-Pakistan relations have stood the test of time," said Song at a briefing to discuss premier Li Keqiang's visit to India, Pakistan, Switzerland and Germany starting with New Delhi on May 19. The two countries have had "mutually beneficial relationship" for decades, and political changes inside Pakistan and

in the international landscape will not affect their "traditional friendship".

Song also made it clear, for the first time by any Chinese authority, that premier Li will meet Pakistan Muslim League(N) chief Nawaz Sharif, expected to form government in June, besides meeting president Asif Ali Zardari.

Speaking about India, Song said China will work hard with India to resolve the border dispute at "an early date". The insistence on early resolution is a new development after the Xi Jinping government took office and differs from the previous approach of "work in progress" towards border negotiations.

"China and India have

historical border issues, but these are outweighed by our mutual interests and cooperation," said Song. The second ranked Chinese leader will also meet Indian businessmen in Mumbai.

"We have the wisdom and resourcefulness to properly manage differences, and we have the ability to prevent differences from affecting the overall growth of China-India relations," he said.

Apparently encouraged by the success of the China Development Bank to sign a \$1.9 billion loan deal with Reliance Communications, the minister said his country plans to invest \$500 billion in foreign destinations over the next five years, and India was welcome to make the most of the opportunity.

'Golan peacekeeping force suffers third abduction'

AFP, United Nations

Syrian rebels seized three UN peacekeepers in the Golan Heights in the third abduction in two months in the ceasefire zone between Syria and Israel, the UN said Thursday.

The abduction of the three observers came as the United Nations struggles to persuade the Philippines to keep its troops in the Golan force, which has been hit by growing fallout from the Syrian civil war.

One of the three officers from the UN Truce Supervision Organization (UNTSO) seized from an observation point in the early hours of Wednesday was from New Zealand, the New Zealand Defence Force said.

It said the army officer was held for about five hours before being released unharmed, declining to provide further details, including the nationalities of the other two peacekeepers who were taken.

The UN Security Council "strongly condemned" the abduction, which it blamed on "anti-government armed elements" that looted the observation post where the peacekeepers were overrun.

The 15-member council "noted with grave concern" the growing number of seizures in the zone and expressed strong support for the peacekeepers.

"A group of unknown armed men broke into UN Observation Post 52, in the area of separation," UN peacekeeping chief Herve Ladsous told reporters.

Three unarmed UNTSO observers "were taken and held for approximately five hours and were released unharmed," he added, without giving the nationalities. The officers were released after the head of the UN force intervened.

No test for admission

FROM PAGE 16

their results, according to a new policy for college admission.

The government on Thursday took up the policy that had fixed Tk 120 as fee for each admission form and other admission related costs. The amount could be taken in cash or through mobile SMS payment.

The policy said the college authorities could take Tk 120 as registration fee, Tk 30 as sports fee, Tk 15 as rover/ranger fee, Tk 20 as Red Crescent fee, Tk 7 as science and technology fee and Tk 200 as annual sport grants fee from each student.

No additional money

apart from the approved fees can be taken from the students.

The policy warned that necessary action would be taken against the institution concerned as per laws in case of non-compliance.

As many as 11,54,778 students under 10 education boards passed this year's SSC and equivalent exams, while a total of 91,226 students received the highest score of GPA-5.

The policy also said the colleges under seven divisional headquarters will keep 90 percent of their seats available for all students.

Of the rest 10 percent of college seats, three percent will be reserved for students

outside the divisional headquarters, five percent for children and grandchildren of freedom fighters and two percent for children of teachers or managing committee members or staff of the education ministry and its offices concerned, it added.

Colleges that offer co-education in the remote areas will reserve a 10 percent quota for girl students, if necessary. The college authorities will have to publish admission related information in their websites.

The last date of admission without late fee is June 30 and classes would begin on July 1, according to the policy.



QUALITY ENGLISH COURSES

Courses
19 May - 6 July
Registration
17 - 23 May (9.30 - 5.00)

Placement test fee Tk 500

- General English
- IELTS Preparation
- Business English

Calling all HSC Examinees!

- Highly qualified teachers
- Open 7 days a week
- Convenient class times

Year-long courses for children of all ages!
JYL (7-9), SYL (10-12), Young Adults (13-17)

For more information please contact us at these numbers:

British Council Dhanmondi
7540 Satmasjid Road, Dhanmondi
T 9116171, 9116545, 9145557-8
M 01755534523, 0171168 8526, 01755534521

British Council Fuller Road
5 Fuller Road, Dhaka University
T 861 8905-7

e-mail: learnenglish@bd.britishcouncil.org

www.britishcouncil.org/bangladesh



British Council Uttara
at Trust College
Plot 36, Road 5, Sector 13
Uttara Model Town
T 8922400
M 01755534522, 01755637261

