

GSP withdrawal issue

Let it be settled squarely

FINANCE Minister AMA Muhith terms the West's threat to withdraw Generalised System of Preferences (GSP) facility from Bangladesh as 'unjust.' The reality on the ground is admittedly stacked against Bangladesh. At the same time, sympathies and goodwill for us abound. We must focus on the crisis to transform it into an opportunity.

The finance minister and foreign minister Dipu Moni have been indicating that Bangladesh's GSP access to US is meagre. This is how they underplayed the risks. But when the spectre of a possible bowing effect pressed panic buttons, our government and the RMG sector are waking up.

The government consistently lacked a proactive approach to Bangladeshi workers being exploited, often dying in droves due to non-compliance with minimum safety standards. At one time it was easier to address the issues like labour rights, trade union rights, workers' safety, if only we had acted out of our own volition. Now the task appears complicated as the West presses its levers. Their taxpaying buyers refusing to wear RMG products from a country where workers are mindlessly exploited, the whole issue has acquired an international character but with a human face.

Our feeling is that when the government acted in the past it did so perfunctorily not taking the eventuality we now face into consideration.

Thus whilst we are in sync with the finance minister's sentiments that the threat is unjust, if we are blamed for having brought it upon ourselves would that be wide off the mark?

All said and done, we appeal to our trading partners not to withdraw GSP facility from Bangladesh.

Saudi gesture welcomed

Workers should put shoulders to the wheel

A general amnesty declared on May 10th in Saudi Arabia will allow around 4 lakh Bangladeshi workers, who are living and working there, to become legalized foreign workers. Currently there are 12 lakh reported Bangladeshi working in Saudi Arabia and many of them lack legal status. This decision of Saudi Arabia will greatly benefit our Bangladeshi brothers and sisters who so far have lead insecure and uncertain lives away from home.

So we commend the Saudi government for this action to regularise a bulk of illegal immigrants.

Additional staff are joining Bangladesh missions in Saudi Arabia to support this process, local volunteers are also working with the embassy to help the mission in this front. The mission should deal with this positive change in prospect with competence and active concern for the workers' welfare.

The trend of Bangladeshis moving to Saudi Arabia for work started in the 1980s and this community has contributed to the gross national product of Bangladesh adding to the country's macro economy. Saudi economy too benefitted.

However sadly there are also stories of hardships which accompanied the lives of the Bangladeshi foreign workers - from lack of proper workplace setting, pay, legal status, health insurance to many more issues.

This amnesty in Saudi Arabia is certainly a positive one for Bangladesh and we hope to see four lakh smiling faces of our brothers and sisters who will finally find proper ground under their feet. From this point on we should only look forward.

Repatriation ceiling raised

MD. ATAUR RAHMAN

BANGLADESH Bank in a circular distributed to the media on 15th April said that foreign nationals may repatriate up to 75 percent their net income to home countries in contrast to the 50 percent since 2009. Analysts were surprised as to why Bangladesh Bank is suddenly allowing such huge repatriation at the cost of the national economy.

The circular instructed commercial banks to follow the directives of the new rule stating that the Central Bank has brought change to the foreign exchange transaction policy of 2009.

Analysts apprehend the decision will accelerate capital flight and national economy will also suffer. They were surprised as to what factors led the Central Bank to raise the ceiling. Economists have also expressed skepticism at the decision which will cover officials at various levels in the public and private sectors.

Till now, foreign nationals were allowed to transfer 50 % of their net income and spend the remaining locally for food, housing and other expenditures. But now since the foreign nationals can transfer 75 percent of their net income, the national economy will be deprived of a bulk of the expenditure. This may bring pressure on the foreign exchange reserves if they start repatriating their income to the maximum admissible level.

Former adviser to the caretaker government and a renowned Economist Dr. Mirza Azizul Islam said that the Central Bank may be under pressure from exporters who are getting less in terms of local currency against dollar. The new policy may be aimed at increasing the exchange rates to the benefits of exporters, he said. However, he believed and feared that the rise in the ceiling may accelerate outward transfer of foreign currencies. He also apprehended that the new policy may prove counter-productive.

On the other hand, Dr. Salehuddin Ahmed, former governor of Bangladesh Bank said that such sensitive policy decisions should be taken very cautiously taking into consideration the overall impacts on the currency market and the national economy adding that whatever be the reason, a jump of 25 percent at a go can hardly be justified.

The writer is a former Senior Banker

S.M. RASHED AHMED

OUR noble laureate Professor Yunus has spoken his mind unequivocally on the Savar tragedy; this is what one would expect from a noble mind to do during one of the greatest industrial tragedies of our times; hundreds of our garment workers mostly, young female workers, lay crushed under the debris of Rana Plaza.

The contribution of these poor workers should not be measured in terms of dollars or euros alone which they bring to Bangladesh; what is generally overlooked is the sight of streams of mostly young garment girls going to work in the early hours and coming back late in the evening or night; it is the spectacle of a moving and thriving new Bangladesh pulsating with life and vigor.

The degree of freedom and confidence they exude fill us with pride; we believe we are on our way to achieving the empowerment of women along with micro-credit in a manner which no amount of intolerance can stop; we are firmly set to fulfilling one of the most cherished visions which inspired our Liberation war: the creation of a modern, tolerant and liberal society in Bangladesh.

The projection of this positive image of Bangladesh to the world at large made these young garment girls our best ambassador abroad and the backbone of our economy at home. No wonder Professor Yunus has so passionately and powerfully articulated the degrading status of these workers as 'slave labourers' echoing the sentiment of Pope Francis.

This is fundamentally, one of the most important reasons, as to why the buyers, retailers, the governments and the people, particularly of the US and the EC, need to realise that walking away from Bangladesh is no solution at all; this would tantamount to penalising the poor workers, compounding their sufferings, causing wide spread unemployment and perhaps pushing Bangladesh from its forward march on the path of moderation and modernisation.

More difficult and challenging task for Prof Yunus and the proposed citizen's initiative would seem to be to move beyond the symptom and to try to cure the disease. As Prof Yunus observed, "Savar tragedy is a symbol

Prof Yunus, RMG and Bangladesh

Prof Yunus's initiative at this point of time is, therefore, of crucial importance to the nation. His proposals on international minimum wage, trust fund and the initiative with the founder of Transparency International are indeed commendable; I feel that undue focus need not be placed on 50 extra cents of his proposal; its significance lies in getting the buyers to accept the responsibility of ensuring minimum wages for the garment workers internationally so that they can live a decent and human life.

Once the buyer's ownership of the burden of the extra wages is accepted by them, public opinion would eventually impact positively for enhanced wages in the future.

Prof Yunus has already initiated the

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process of engaging a cross section of public opinion and intelligentsia abroad through a series of interviews to the BBC, CNN and Aljazeera; he persuasively elaborated the sound rationale underlying his proposal on minimum international wage for the garment workers.

Prof Yunus's argument states: "Everybody has to have the same minimum wage. Bangladesh will have the International Minimum Wage. Burma and Cambodia will have international minimum wage... [...]" These countries are part of the global economy; you cannot judge them with the yardstick of the local economy." This should have a salutary impact on the public opinion in the western democracies.

More difficult and challenging task for Prof Yunus and the proposed citizen's initiative would seem to be to move beyond the symptom and to try to cure the disease. As Prof Yunus observed, "Savar tragedy is a symbol

of failure as a nation. The crack in Rana Plaza that caused the collapse of the building has only shown us that if we don't face up to the cracks in our state system, that we as a nation will get lost in the debris of the collapse. [...] It made us aware of what Bangladesh's dysfunctional system has led us to."

The Westminster system of parliamentary democracy, which we have adopted, is under stress and strain; characterised by growing formidable challenges to political, economic and social stability. The present system has delivering neither democracy nor development; it is what Plato would call a 'mobocracy.'

Crucially, this is negatively impacting on our goal of achieving major economic progress and development and for the creation of an egalitarian society by meaningfully reducing the widening disparity between the rich and the poor. If the current rate of growth goes below five percent in the context of the domestic crisis faced by the economy, it is predicted that our graduation from LDC status to a middle income country would become difficult to achieve in the foreseeable future.

Some serious and urgent rethinking is needed to achieve functional democracy inseparable from good governance.

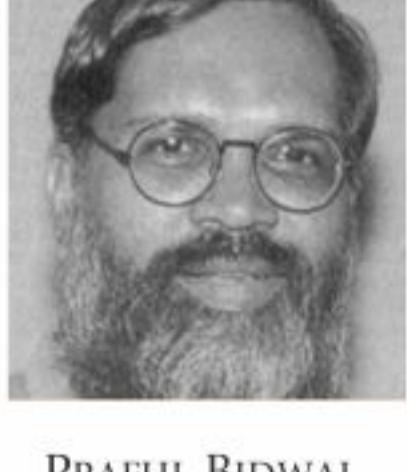
It is time to have a serious look into the models of democracy and development particularly of the Asian Tigers; combining democracy with meaningful development, good governance, clean and stable government. This would enable Bangladesh to overcome the critical challenges, among others, of global financial meltdown, climate change, water, energy and food crisis, terrorism and militancy.

This should significantly help Bangladesh leapfrog from the current status of being amongst the poorest least developed countries to a middle income and developed economy.

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Sanctifying nuclear hazards

PRAFUL BIDWAI COLUMN



PRAFUL BIDWAI

Driven by irrationality, the domestic nuclear lobby, and relentless pressure from foreign governments they pursue their fantasy of a 12-fold expansion in nuclear capacity by 2032.

Backing the US-India nuclear deal, they pursue their fantasy of a 12-fold expansion in nuclear capacity by 2032.

They are oblivious of the

Department of Atomic Energy's appalling record.

The DAE has never completed a project on time, or typically without a 300 % cost overrun. It has installed just 4,780 MW in nuclear capacity -- under 2.5 percent of India's current total, and less than five percent of the promised amount.

The nuclear fantasy now extends to two Russian-supplied reactors at Koodankulam in Tamil Nadu, against which local people have waged a resolute, two decades-long, peaceful struggle, which intensified after the Fukushima meltdown began in 2011.

The government betrayed its promise not to implement the project until people's safety concerns are allayed. Instead, it has maligned and savagely repressed the movement with arbitrary arrests, FIRs against more than 200,000 people, and charging thousands with sedition and attempt to murder.

Meanwhile, Koodankulam's operator, Nuclear Power Corporation of India Ltd (NPCIL), violated numerous safety regulations and missed some 20 commencement deadlines because of serious engineering problems, including supply of sub-standard equipment by Russia's ZIO-Podolsk, whose CEO has been jailed.

Environmentalists filed a writ petition asking the Supreme Court to strengthen safety norms and enforce accountability. The petition showed that NPCIL has breached norms stipulated by the Atomic Energy Regulatory Board (AERB), and has no plans for hazardous spent-fuel storage.

The Court pronounced judgment, clearing the plant's commissioning. The verdict trivialises safety concerns, declares nuclear energy indispensable for India's progress, calls the malfunctioning nuclear establishment infallible, and proposes a notion of the public interest which violates the right to life.

The verdict is a black mark in jurisprudence. It dogmatically denies that nuclear power poses certain unique hazards. Even a conservative, thoughtful, judgment would have acknowledged this and recommended ways of reducing hazards while boosting transparency and accountability. This verdict doesn't.

It declares nuclear power -- and the Koodankulam reactors -- unproblematically safe, based on the

say-so of the AERB, DAE and NPCIL -- all interested parties! It doesn't recognise that the AERB is not independent, but a subordinate of the DAE, to whose secretary it reports. NPCIL is a wholly owned DAE subsidiary.

The AERB has no independent personnel, equipment or budget. It stands gravely indicted by the Comptroller and Auditor General for failing to fulfil its mandate to evolve and enforce safety standards. But the verdict uncritically accepts the AERB's safety-certification of the Koodankulam reactors, ignoring a gross conflict-of-interest.

The judgment bypasses numerous site-specific issues, including vulnerability to tsunamis, volcanic activity and geological instability, and absence of an independent freshwater source, which is absolutely critical to all reactors.

The verdict ignores NPCIL's brazen violations of the AERB's reactor-siting norms -- "zero population" within a 1.5-kilometre radius of a reactor, and a maximum of 20,000 people within a further 5-km radius.

At least 5,000 people live within a 1.5-km distance, including over 2,000 in a rehabilitation colony less than 800 metres away. NPCIL itself admits that 24,000 people live within a 5-km radius, according to the 2001 Census. Their number must be much greater in 2013. This too is ignored.

According to another AERB norm, no fuel should be loaded in a reactor until a full emergency evacuation drill has been conducted in a 16-km radius. This never happened. The judgment ignores this, and also the fact that the plant has no proper Coastal Zone Regulation and Environmental clearances.

Equally overlooked is NPCIL's non-compliance with the 17 recommendations made by a special safety committee post-Fukushima.

The verdict dismisses people's safety apprehensions, heightened after Fukushima, as a mere "emotional reaction". It declares radiation exposure as a "minor inconvenience" which must be subordinated to the "larger public interest" of promoting nuclear power, which is indispensable to growth and "the right to life in a larger sense".

The judgment's worst part is the vile assertion dismissing "apprehensions" about hazards, "however legitimate": "Nobody on this earth can predict what would happen in future and to a larger extent we have to leave it to the destiny (sic)." That is, the public must live with unacceptable hazards.

The verdict's sole positive feature is its order to lift all false cases against the protesters. It otherwise lacks reason or logic, and is suffused with fatalism, irrationality and moral misjudgment.

LETTERS

TO THE EDITOR

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Judicial, not police inquiry

With great interest I read your news item, captioned "Police lied about day of arrest", published on May 26, 2013. In this news as well as earlier news on the death of Shamim Reza in custody, it has been repeatedly mentioned that police have set up an investigation into the cause of death by a committee comprising police officials. I had conducted 2 criminal revision cases before the High Court division bench of the Supreme Court of Bangladesh, both of which were heard analogously and disposed of through one judgment. Their Lordships held that where police are responsible or accused of causing the offence, an investigation must be held by members of the judiciary and NOT police. Therefore, I would urge, through your esteemed daily, the government and, more particularly, the ministry of home affairs, that this investigation be scrapped as being of no value and liable to be biased, and instead a judicial investigation be lodged under the able leadership of an individual not below the rank of additional chief judicial magistrate or additional metropolitan sessions judge and the committee comprise of one judicial magistrate and one additional public prosecutor. Only then can a credible report be truly accepted.

Sigma Huda

Secretary General

Bangladesh Society for the Enforcement of Human Rights

A sad expression

Shapla is our national flower, blooming in the water. The pink and white flowers look very beautiful... it soothes the eyes and gladdens the heart. Now whenever I think of Shapla, another word comes to my mind... that is 'Chattar'. By a quirk of fate, these two words have become entwined. I do not know if I will be able to overcome the shock by the incident at Shapla Chattar or it will continue to haunt me all my life.

Nur Jahan

Chittagong

Impact assessment of HEQEP

As part of the World Bank interim assessment study on the Higher Education Quality Enhancement Project (HEQEP), now under implementation by the UGC of Bangladesh, a focus group discussion was recently organised by the WB Dhaka office. The aim of the study was to assess the effects of the ongoing activities of the Academic Innovation Fund (AIF) sub-projects on faculties, students and institutions. The participants pointed out some areas where HEQEP needs improvement, which include more transparent review/selection process of the project proposals, simplifying the procurement procedure, and reducing paperwork in report preparation through a digitisation of the system. The participants suggested that they introduce a provision for providing financial support to meritorious students to pursue research degrees as attachments to different projects.

Professor M Zahidul Haque
Dean, Faculty of Agriculture
SAU, Dhaka

Comments on news report, "Editors' Council formed," published on May 26, 2013

M.R.R. Khan

I am happy to see this excellent start. I would urge all the editors to make unified efforts, so that political injustice unleashed by AL stops.

sl_jay1946

Hearliest congrats to the Editors' Council, but it should have been formed much earlier.

Mahboob Hossain

Dear editors, please try to unite the nation. There are good people in every party and you must accept this fact. Bring the leaders of all parties around the same table. This is what the nation expects from you most.

Rezaul Karim Chowdhury

A ray of hope to protect media freedom while the country is facing growing fanaticism and fascism.

Saleh Tanveer

Hope the Editors' Council can present a united face with the motto: denial of freedom to some, even those they disagree with, is denial of freedom to all.

Sujon Islam

Congratulations! Hope to see positive changes in journalism.

"Teesta braces for further blow" (May 25, 2013)