Behold a Pale Horse

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The kind of onslaught Bangladesh's readymade garment industry is facing, is perhaps best described by Shakespeare: "*Mischief, thou art afoot. Take thou what course thou wilt*". Under the veneer of recent tragedies, concocted, arbitrary and imaginary allegations are circulated, some of them even made it to the headlines. It is quite apparent a monster has been let loose, and if it is not put on a leash, it will spell disaster for the frontiers of our economy. Today our position as the second largest exporter stands on slippery ground.

Our jute mills started to shut down one after another in the eighties. One of the reasons behind this was Europe's perception of the natural fiber as a health hazard and its preference for synthetics. However, we were the main reason behind the disaster. Various charters of demands followed by unrest/arson in the mills acted as catalysts to accelerate the shut down process. No industrialist can grapple with a situation where s/he has to confront hostile situations internationally and also in the home front or a situation where unjust demands mean expenses that over-shoot earnings. Eventually we became a laughing stock as our very jute found its way to resurrect the dead jute mills of our neighbours who did not even grow 50 percent of the raw jute. We must prevent history from repeating itself.



PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

We seem to be unaware that posters were displayed-- visuals of disasters and unrest in Bangladesh as background with superimposed captions "Buyers - *come back to safer haven*"-- on the walls of many garment factories of other countries from where readymade garment industry has shifted to Bangladesh. Who wouldn't like to get back their "lost business" once their own political/ethnic violence stopped? Buyers are as sensitive as Siberian ducks and if they are disturbed or upset/embarrassed, they move out to the nearest comfort zone and seldom return. Sri Lanka is the best example as to why we have flourished in this sector and that is why you see them working in garments or occupying prime positions with buyers. We don't want to swap places with them, do we?

We in the third world hardly come across footage or photographic coverage of the unfortunate victims of disasters occurring in the West particularly the dead or severely injured or bodily impaired. It didn't happen even after the ghastly terrorist attack in New York on 9/11 or after the bombing of the London underground or after the recent fertiliser factory disaster in Texas that killed more than 100 including almost blowing away a nearby township. Was media cordoned off till everything was cleared and removed? Yet we are regularly washing our soiled linen in public and giving it international exposure. Is this behaviour prudent?

Today in our backyard reportedly stands a network of 400 purpose-built industrial infrastructures with potentials and incentive packages for garments. The need of the hour for them is to have a couple of Siberian ducks fly out of the cuckoos nest as all eyes are set to patronise this region that was once backward or under the rule of uniformed people.

For that matter, a friendly country as a gesture to off-set huge "balance of payment" deficit allowed duty free access (quota) in September 2011 – yet in their 2013-14 Budget mitigate the wrath of their affected businessmen by slapping a 12.36 percent countervailing duty and E.Tax, making our products less competitive. Today we are receiving enquires daily for purchase of non-compliant factories by their businessmen – raising questions in our mind whether netting in the quota becoming a manufacturer at this end and earning profit as a buyer in the other end is what this is all about.

If the present situation heralds the sunset for this sector, it will be something as Shakespeare