

Pressure piles on US

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best to achieve this goal.

Some officials, particularly in the State Department, say that if trade status is revoked, Washington will lose its leverage to pressure Bangladesh to improve building codes and labour rights. Labour advocates and officials from the Labour Department counter, however, that this leverage is lost anyway if the administration is never willing to use it.

"By failing to take serious action before now even in the face of phenomenal, unprecedented death of workers, US trade officials have already sent the wrong message to Bangladesh," said Brian Campbell, policy and legal programmes director of the International Labor Rights Forum, a workers advocacy group. "It's time to send a strong signal."

Bangladesh is among more than 125 countries that receive breaks on United States tariffs under a World Trade Organization program, the Generalized System of Preferences, intended to promote economic growth around the globe. The United States trade representative is to decide the fate of the country's trade status in June.

In meetings this month to discuss the disasters, officials from the State and Labor Departments agreed that Bangladesh had failed to improve labour rights sufficiently but they disagreed over what to do about it.

Some State Department officials argued that taking away Bangladesh's preferential trade status would damage diplomatic relations with a country that has faced repeated Islamist threats and hurt its economy, which has lately averaged trade-fueled growth of about 6 percent a year.

Bangladesh's garment

industry does not enjoy American duty-free status, though other sectors in the country do. But State Department officials said that a decision by the Obama administration to scale back benefits might prompt foreign brands to reduce orders from the country. It might also lead the European Union, which does exempt the garment industry from tariffs, to revoke this status.

But Labor Department officials argued that more pressure was urgently needed. In December, American officials gave the Bangladeshi government a list of areas requiring improvement in order for the country to avoid losing its status. But there has been minimal progress, officials said. The list called for an end to government harassment of labour organisers and greater rights for workers in the country's special export processing zones.

During these meetings, American trade officials also pointed out that under the trade agreement they are required to certify that countries receiving trade privileges meet certain eligibility standards, including the protection of internationally recognised worker rights, which are widely ignored in Bangladesh.

Federal labour officials also said the administration should publicly apply pressure on retailers like the Gap and Walmart to sign an international accord providing for a binding inspection programme and mandatory improvements in workplace safety, according to officials who participated in the meetings but are not authorised to speak to reporters.

Many major European retailers have signed the international accord but most American retailers

have cited liability concerns, opting to do their own audits of factory conditions. Eight Democratic senators wrote on May 16 to retailers including Wal-Mart Stores, Target and Kohl's, arguing that this type of self-monitoring has proved to be ineffective and urging the companies to reconsider signing the accord.

On Thursday, the Bipartisan Policy Center, a group based in Washington, said it was working with retailers including Wal-Mart Stores, Gap and Target to put into effect a programme to improve fire and safety regulations in Bangladeshi garment factories.

The State Department declined to answer specific questions about the trade status. But in a written statement, Patrick Ventrell, the acting deputy spokesman, said that his office continued to convey its hope directly to the Bangladeshi government that it would "take additional steps to improve worker rights, including the right to freely associate and engage in collective bargaining."

In a letter to members of Congress this month, Dan Mozena, the ambassador to Bangladesh, argued that good relations with Bangladesh were vital to regional security and United States strategic interests and that labour conditions were improving.

Earlier this year, the Bangladeshi government emphasised the same point in meetings with American trade officials.

"Compliance with rights, including labour rights, will necessarily be gradual" in poor countries, the top civil servant in Bangladesh's Commerce Ministry said at a March hearing held by the trade representative's office.

Bangladesh's garment sector represents roughly

\$19 billion in annual revenue and employs nearly four million workers, most of them women. It sells more than \$4.5 billion worth of goods to the United States each year.

American trade officials say their frustration was growing even before the recent disasters.

"This has been a long process of one step forward, two steps backwards," said an official from the United States trade representative's office, who was not authorised to speak on the record. The official added that Bangladesh had its trade status reviewed previously in 1990 and 1999 for many of the same labour violations that remain problems now. The trade status was not revoked because the Bangladeshi government made commitments to improve, the official said.

In 2007, the AFL-CIO petitioned the United States trade representative to take a tougher posture toward the Bangladeshi government by revoking the country's trade benefits.

"If the country improves and enforces its own laws, real change can happen for these workers," Cathy Feingold, international director of the AFL-CIO, said on Thursday.

One of the biggest concerns among American officials has been the treatment of Bangladeshi labour activists.

Last April, Aminul Islam, a prominent worker advocate, was found dead, his body bearing signs of torture. Reporters in Bangladesh said there was evidence that the government's security forces might have been tied to the death. No one has yet been arrested.

According to American diplomats and labour officials, there has been little progress in the investigation.



PHOTO: STAR

The vandalised Krishna Sarkar's Aangeena Temple in Annada Prasad village of Lalmohan in Bhola yesterday. Hard to believe the temple got vandalised over a trivial matter.

Battle of two alliances

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The election results, view some analysts, may influence the political atmosphere in the coming days. And it may leave some message for the parties ahead of the upcoming parliamentary polls.

If irregularities happen in the polls, it would add fuel to the opposition's street agitation demanding the restoration of a non-partisan election-time government.

If everything goes smooth, the Awami League-led government is sure to claim credit and say that it always ensures free and fair polls.

Meanwhile, winning the battle of ballots would help a camp claim that its popularity has increased.

Rafiqul Islam Miah, a member of BNP national standing committee, told The Daily Star yesterday, "If the polls are held in a free and fair manner and if the BNP-backed candidates win the four mayoral polls, it will send a clear message to the government that people do not like the government."

His colleague Goyeshwar Chandra Roy yesterday said, "It is a hypothetical notion that the elections will be free and fair under this government. If there is any irregu-

larity, it will further justify our demand for a non-partisan election-time government."

Talking to The Daily Star Mahbubul Alam Hanif, joint general secretary of Awami League, said it was not possible to judge the popularity of the government or any political party through local government polls. Many local issues matter in the polls, he added.

Hanif, a special assistant to Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, said all the polls held in the last four and a half years were free and fair and the upcoming polls would also be free and fair.

More tax on car owners

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It now plans to impose a tax of Tk 10,000 to Tk 12,000 at source on each private vehicle with the engine capacity ranging between 1,300 cc and 1,500 cc.

Listed mobile operators might also see their corporate tax go up by 5 percentage points when Finance Minister AMA Muhith announces the budget for 2013-14 fiscal year in parliament on June 6.

Presently, listed mobile operators pay a corporate tax at 35 percent, while the non-listed ones pay at 45 percent.

Grameenphone is the lone listed company among the country's six mobile operators.

"These moves are still at planning stages, which will be finalised after a meeting with the prime minister in the run up to the unveiling of the budget," the NBR official said.

The tenure of the tax holiday facility to 36 sectors might also be extended in the next fiscal year, but this time it could take a new shape.

The finance minister has already said the tenure of the facility could be extended for another two

years.

Sectors entitled to this facility now pay no tax in the first five years of operation, 50 percent in the next three years and 25 percent in the following two years.

But as per the new plan, the sectors will enjoy 100 percent tax holiday in the first two years of operation. From then on, the facility will gradually be lowered every year.

Companies setting up network and providing connections through optical fibre for expanding data connectivity in the country might be entitled to the tax holiday facility.

Businesses worried

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Frequent shutdowns and vandalism had made businesses run into losses, he said, adding, "This is alarming."

Anis Ud Dowla, also a former president of Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce and Industry, said a political resolution was necessary for a peaceful election and to help the business environment improve.

"The country poses a tremendous potential for attracting more foreign investment. The export growth will continue if we have political stability," he said.

According to him, political instability, infrastructure deficits and poor law and order were the major impediments to the country's development.

The confrontation between the ruling and the opposition parties

over the next parliamentary election has been the root of uncertainty in politics that led to repeated shutdowns, vandalism and arson.

Since January, the main opposition BNP and its allies have enforced 32 countrywide hartals.

Besides, the government's slow pace in providing new industries with gas connection and increased interest on bank loans have kept the investment flow subdued.

Mustafizur Rahman, executive director of Centre for Policy Dialogue, said investment and business environment would continue to remain depressed, affecting the over all GDP growth.

Citing declining trend in credit flow to private sector and falling investments, he said future of business and investment climate depends largely on the way the poli-

tics goes.

"An acceptable solution to all will encourage investment for both domestic and exports markets," he said, adding, "A shift from confrontational politics to politics of compromise, and the mindset of give and take are necessary to have a peaceful solution."

AS M Mainuddin Monem, deputy managing director of Abdul Monem Ltd, said political turmoil in the last year of a government's tenure was nothing new. "However, the political uncertainty is hurting investment," he said.

He also observed that the high interest rate on bank loans was one of the biggest hurdles for business. "It has to be brought down to a reasonable level to encourage new investors," he said.

Russians find mammoth

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bellow the belly and when we broke these cavities with a poll pick, the blood came running out," he said in a statement released by the North-Eastern Federal University in Yakutsk, which sent the team.

Woolly mammoths are thought to have died out around 10,000 years ago, although scientists think small groups of them lived longer in Alaska and on islands off Siberia.

Scientists have deciphered much of the woolly mammoth's genetic code from their hair, and some

believe it's possible to clone them if living cells are found.

Grigoryev said the find could provide the necessary material. The blood of mammoths appeared not to freeze in extreme temperatures, likely keeping mammoths warm, he said.

The temperature at the time of excavation was -7 to -10 degrees Celsius (14 to 19 degrees Fahrenheit.)

The researchers collected the samples of the animal's blood in tubes with a special preservative agent. They were sent to

Yakutsk for bacterial examination in order to spot potentially dangerous infections.

The carcass' muscle tissue was also in perfect condition.

"The fragments of muscle tissues, which we've found out of the body, have a natural red color of fresh meat," Grigoryev said.

Up to 4 meters (13 feet) in height and 10 tons in weight, mammoths roamed across huge areas between Great Britain and North America and were driven to extinction by humans and the changing climate.

Hindu temple vandalised

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Bhola

Criminals vandalised eight idols of Hindu gods and goddesses at a temple in Annada Prasad village at Lalmohan upazila of Bhola yesterday.

Police arrested Jasim, Mobarak and Riaz of the village for their alleged involvement in the incident, said Khondokar Mijanur Rahman, officer-in-charge of Lalmohan Police Station.

Locals said the incident of vandalism at Krishna Sarkar's Aangeena Temple happened following a row over a cow's ruining vegetables.

In the morning, Oli Bepari's cow entered the garden of Niranjan Das, brother of Kiran Chandra Das, and started flattening the okra plants.

Niranjan's wife Jharna Rani Das, 30, rushed to the field and drove away the cow, which angered Oli. A furious Oli then beat up his neighbour Jharna.

When Kiran, priest of the temple, protested the incident of beating, Oli led a gang of miscreants, including his sons Riaz, Siraj, Mosarraf and Mobarak, for vandalising the idols at 2:00pm, witnesses said.

The criminals also attacked Kiran and his family members with sticks, leaving Birangini Baishnab, 75, and Babita Rani, 30, injured.

US may need

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even before a garment factory collapsed in the Asian nation on April 24, killing more than 1,000 people.

US officials "should now use their leverage to get those changes and get those changes right away," Representative George Miller, who recently returned from a trip to Bangladesh, said yesterday on a call with reporters. Miller, of California, is the top Democrat on the House Committee on Education & the Workforce, which oversees labour issues.

In a Jan 8 notice in the Federal Register, the Office of the US Trade Representative said that "the lack of progress by the government of Bangladesh in addressing worker rights issues in the country warrants consideration of possible withdrawal, suspension or limitation Bangladesh's trade benefits."

Bangladesh participates in a US programme known as the generalized system of preferences, which allows zero or reduced tariffs on some products imported from developing countries.

The USTR in June is scheduled to consider the next steps in its review. Miller said Bangladesh should be given a few months to comply with benchmarks to improve labour conditions.

If Bangladesh doesn't improve worker conditions "we have no choice" but to revoke the country's preferred trade status, he said. Miller said he will wait for the results of the Obama administration's review before considering legislation.

The Senate Foreign Relations Committee is scheduled to hold a hearing on labour conditions in Bangladesh on June 6.

Tarique

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party at a press briefing at BNP chairperson's Gulshan office.

Fakhrul claimed that Home Minister Mohiuddin Khan Alamgir on Thursday in Chittagong and also yesterday in the capital had said Tarique had breached the bond conditions and that the government would bring him back to the country on this ground.

Fakhrul wanted to know where, when and before whom Tarique, senior vice president of BNP, had signed the bond. He said, "There is no provision for submitting any bond in politics."

He urged the government not to spread "this kind of false information".

He said Tarique had been living in London for treatment, as he had received serious injuries during the last caretaker government rule. When doctors declare him fit and when the BNP feels the need of Tarique, he would be brought home, said Fakhrul.

US lauds

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prevent terrorism.

"Bangladesh is party to various counterterrorism protocols under the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation and is bringing the country's counterterrorism efforts in line with the four pillars of the UN Global Counter Terrorism Strategy," according to the report.

It said Bangladesh continued to participate in the Department of State's Antiterrorism Assistance programme and cooperated with the Department of Justice's efforts to provide prosecutorial skills training to its assistant public prosecutors, encourage greater cooperation between police and prosecutors, and institute community policing in targeted areas of the country.

"With financial support from the United States and other partners, Bangladesh established a National Academy for Security Training in 2012 and began to provide counter-terrorism training courses," the report said, adding that Bangladesh uses strategic communication to counter violent extremism, especially among youth.

Turning to madrasa education in Bangladesh, the report said the ministry of education was developing a standard national curriculum that included language, math, and science curricula; and minimum standards of secular subjects to be taught in all primary schools, up to the eighth grade.

The US said the ministry of religious affairs and the National Committee on Militancy Resistance and Prevention worked with imams and religious scholars to build public awareness against terrorism.

"The government of Bangladesh is also actively expanding economic opportunities for women as it views economic empowerment of women as a buffer against violent extremist messages of male religious leaders," it added.

The report also said despite the absence of major terrorist incidents on their territory, the governments of five Central Asian states were concerned about the possibility of a growing threat connected to changes in the international force presence in Afghanistan in 2014.

US retailers devise

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Target, Wal-Mart and other retailers, will seek to "develop and implement a new programme to improve fire and safety regulations in the garment factories of Bangladesh," according to the Bipartisan Policy Center.

This effort will be led by two prominent members of that group, former Senators George J Mitchell, a Democrat, and Olympia J Snowe, a Republican, both from Maine.

But some labour advocates called the effort divisive and a sham.

After a factory building collapsed in Bangladesh on April 24, killing at least 1,127 workers, Western retailers faced more pressure than ever to take action to ensure factory safety in that country, the world's second-largest apparel exporter after China. In response, H&M, Carrefour, Marks & Spencer and more than two dozen other European companies backed a binding plan in which they agreed to rigorous independent inspections of the factories they use in Bangladesh and to help finance improvements for fire and building safety.

Only a few American retailers signed on, however. On Thursday, Sean John, the fashion company run by Sean Combs, announced that it would become the third United States company to join, following PVH, the parent company of Calvin Klein and Tommy Hilfiger, and Abercrombie & Fitch. Loblaw, a Canadian retailer that produces the Joe Fresh clothing line, has also joined that plan.

With about 40 companies signed on to that plan, Gap, the Children's Place and several other American retailers have faced protests and a flood of Facebook posts, urging them to join.

Bill Chandler, a Gap spokesman, welcomed the new effort. "We see the American alliance as a powerful path forward," he said. Jessica Deede, a Target spokeswoman, said, "We have been engaged with the Bipartisan Policy Center's initiative as a potential solution."

The center said Mr Mitchell, Ms Snowe and the North American retailers would seek to release their

plan by early July. The effort also includes the Retail Industry Leaders Association and the Retail Council of Canada.

In assessing the new plan by American retailers, Richard M Locke, an expert on overseas manufacturing at the Sloan School of Management at MIT, said, "I think they must be feeling the heat because people are asking them, 'Why don't you join this other initiative?'"

Professor Locke added: "The idea that you would bring all these people together in this new effort is a good first step. But I don't think it's good to have competing initiatives."

Philip J Jennings, general secretary of Uni Global Union, a worldwide federation of 20 million retail and service workers that helped develop the initial Bangladesh factory safety plan, criticized the new effort.

"It's a sham," he said. "There is no valid reason why they can't join the initiative we have launched. It has been well received," he said, adding, "Now they seem to want to paddle their own canoe on their own terms."

Officials from several American retailers have voiced concern that their companies would face large legal liability if they were to join the European-dominated plan. But several backers of that accord say the Americans are shying away because they dislike the binding obligations and potential costs of the plan.

On Wednesday, officials from Wal-Mart, Gap and several other retailers met in New York to begin moving ahead with the plan. Kevin Gardner, a Wal-Mart spokesman, lauded the effort, saying, "There is a need to partner with other stakeholders to improve the standards for workers across the industry."

Scott Nova, executive director of the Worker Rights Consortium, a factory monitoring group, said the new effort would "contain no real obligation on the part of brands and retailers to pay for the building renovations necessary to convert deathtraps in Bangladesh into safe factories."

Place proposal

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government comprised of unelected people, while the government has been saying that only elected representatives will be in the poll-time government.

"Come to parliament and place whatever proposal you have over the poll-time government. Do not walk out of the House on any grounds. There will be resolution of the matter through talks," AL president member Mohammad Nasim told reporters after an alliance meeting yesterday.

Nasim, a former home minister, also observed that the BNP leaders against whom there were no serious accusations should be freed.

Yesterday's 14-party meeting was held at AL President Sheikh Hasina's political office in Dhamondli. It discussed the country's latest political situation, elections to four city corporations, among other issues.

Chaired by Workers' Party President Rashed Khan Menon, the meeting observed that intentional misuse of religion by a section had been spreading confusion over the upcoming city corporation polls and that there were a number of instances of such act.

It alleged that BNP and its key ally Jamaat-e-Islami along with Hefajat-e-Islam had been misusing religion ahead of the city corporation elections in Khulna, Barisal, Rajshahi and Sylhet.

Agriculture Minister Matia Chowdhury, 14-party leaders Nooh-ul-Alam Lenin, Sharif Nurul Ambia, and Mrinal Kanti Das, among others, were present in the alliance meeting.

Six killed

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The accident, which happened around 7:45pm, left four dead on the spot and 12 others injured, said Golam Sarwar, officer-in-charge of Kotwali Police Station.

Of the injured, two succumbed to their injuries after being admitted to Mymensingh Medical College Hospital, police said.

Police seized the truck but its driver managed to flee the scene.

The bodies were sent to Mymensingh Medical College morgue for autopsies.