

# BNP sees govt failure

FROM PAGE 1

industrial sector.

The ruling Awami League (AL), however, blamed the garments owners' reluctance to implement necessary rules and a strong lobby against the government for cancellation of GSP.

The US on Thursday suspended trade privileges for Bangladesh after a six-year review exposed "serious shortcomings" in safety and labour standards.

BNP acting secretary general Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir yesterday said "The government and its lobbyists had totally failed to maintain a fruitful lobbying for GSP in the international arena."

He alleged that the government did not take any effective action against the accused after the Rana Plaza collapse and Tazreen fire incidents.

"Both the tragedies had created a bad impression of Bangladesh to them [the US] and so they suspended the facilities," he told a discussion at the Jatiya Press Club in the capital.

AL acting general secre-

tary Mahbubul Alam Hanif told The Daily Star yesterday the government could not solely be blamed for the suspension.

The present government took a number of initiatives to improve working conditions for the garment workers, he claimed.

It had raised the minimum monthly pay for the workers to Tk 3,000 from Tk 1,600 and was planning to further increase the wage to Tk 6,000, Hanif, also a special assistant to the premier, said.

He also said the government had repeatedly asked the garment owners to comply with the international rules to maintain GSP facilities but they paid little attention to it.

"So, I can say the government had tried its best and can't be blamed (for the cancellation of GSP)," added Hanif.

At another programme at the Jatiya Press Club, BNP standing committee member Moudud Ahmed said "It [suspension of GSP] will damage the image of the country abroad."

# Why suspension

FROM PAGE 1

There's just one little problem: The 90 percent of Bangladesh's exports that are clothing don't receive these benefits, and face an average import duty of 15 percent. The \$35 million in Bangladeshi exports that are penalised by this decision are less than 1 percent of the total.

So the move is more symbolic than substantive -- which is actually a good thing.

While conditions in the clothing sector are abysmal and definitely in need of improvement, cutting off exports would only make things worse. Roughly 4 million poor Bangladeshis, mostly young women, have jobs in the sector, and however bad those jobs are, they're better than the available alternatives.

If President Obama and new US Trade Representative Michael

Froman were serious about improving working conditions in Bangladesh -- and about "working to foster development through trade," as Ambassador Froman said at his swearing in -- they would do the opposite of what they are doing. They would offer to increase the paltry trade benefits that Bangladesh receives, contingent on serious and sustainable improvements in worker rights.

The administration could do this by signing on to an initiative to provide duty-free, quota-free market access for the world's least developed countries (LDCs), including Bangladesh, that all the other industrialised nations long ago embraced.

But that would require taking on the US textile industry -- and symbolic gestures are far more appealing than messy political fights.



Nobel Laureate Prof Muhammad Yunus, with microphone, speaks during the opening plenary "social business around the world" on the occasion of the fourth annual Social Business Day at Radisson Hotel in Dhaka yesterday.

PHOTO: SK ENAMUL HAQ

# Social business spreads wings Mandela showing

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Developed and developing nations are implementing the social business model devised by Nobel laureate Prof Muhammad Yunus to solve their pressing social problems.

Binod Chaudhary, chairman of Chaudhary Group, Nepal, and also the first billionaire of the country, said his land-locked nation faced serious problems such as unemployment.

"So, we intend to forge a partnership with Prof Yunus to solve the problem," he said.

"I truly believe that if we can give the social business a momentum, we will be able to solve some of our pressing challenges -- in my country and around the world."

Binod said the society's youth would have to be made the driver of the change.

He was speaking at the inaugural ceremony of the fourth Social Business Day

at Radisson Hotel in Dhaka yesterday.

Clementine Lalande, project manager of Yunus Social Business in Haiti, said the social business was a powerful tool for developing the country, which has suffered a serious deforestation.

The Yunus Social Business is implementing six forestation projects in the Caribbean country which has convinced others to come forward.

It was also working to increase poultry production in Haiti, she said.

Saskia Bruysten, co-founder of Yunus Social Business, Germany, said many governments in Africa were interested in the social business concept.

Nobel peace prize winning Grameen Bank founder Prof Yunus said, "We are being invited by many countries around the world to help them set up social businesses."

He said Europe was partic-

ularly interested about the new business model. "This has surprised us, as you might not expect that European countries would be interested in the idea of social business."

"Now Germany and France took the lead and other countries are joining in," he said.

The European Union has already made social business a part of its policy issue.

Prof Yunus said unemployment was really shaking up the European continent and was already a major source of trouble in Spain, Greece and Portugal.

"But nobody has heard about the problems in Sweden. However, the country has invited us to have a series of social businesses, as unemployment is a very nagging problem in Sweden."

"We have recently been invited by the city of London where a lot of people struggle for food. The city is worried as their number is

increasing," he said adding that he would sit with officials of the city next week to discuss the issue.

Prof Yunus, known as the Banker to the Poor, said Brazil had also showed interest in opening its doors to social businesses.

He said social business had reached Africa since several countries were embracing the business model.

He said a close partnership had been established between the African Development Bank and Yunus Social Business. Tunisia would be the first country where the two would work together.

He said Uganda would come next. Egypt, Senegal, Tanzania, Togo and many other African countries would join the list.

"This is a significant thing, as they have considered the social business in a serious way ... to finance it and to stand behind it."

FROM PAGE 16

Madikizela-Mandela called on the media not to "get carried away" in their reporting on her former husband's illness.

Her statement came a day after South Africa President Jacob Zuma said the anti-apartheid icon is much better after seeing him on Thursday.

Meanwhile, the US President Barack Obama was headed to South Africa yesterday to pay homage to his hero Nelson Mandela.

Mandela's failing health has thrown into doubt prospects of a meeting between two men who shattered racial boundaries on either side of the Atlantic.

"I do not need a photo op. The last thing I want to do is to be in any way obtrusive," Obama said aboard Air Force One when asked whether he would visit the anti-apartheid icon in hospital.

"I think that the mes-

sage we'll want to deliver is not directly to him but to his family, is simply profound gratitude for his leadership all these years," Obama added.

Mandela, who turns 95 next month, remained critically ill in hospital, three weeks after he was admitted with a recurrent lung disease dating from his years in apartheid-era prisons.

Supporters have been gathering outside to offer prayers for the former political prisoner who negotiated an end to decades of racist white minority rule and went on to become South Africa's first black president.

A wall of handwritten notes praying for Mandela's recovery has become the focal point for South Africans preparing to say goodbye to the father of their nation, with singing and dancing by day and candlelight vigils at night.

# Flyover work faces delay

FROM PAGE 16

Ashiqur Rahman, superintending engineer of DSCC and the project director, said construction work at nine spots had been kept on hold due to the relocation setback.

Five out of eleven ramps were yet to be built due to intricacy of underground utility lines, said Ashiqur, adding that except for some uphill obstacles almost 85 percent work of the flyover had been completed.

On relocating the Phulbaria bus stand, Abu Alam Md Shahid Khan, secretary to Local Government Division, said: "We wrote to the railway authorities several years ago asking them to spare a

nearby land for the bus stand, but they have not responded."

He said although slow, the construction of the flyover was progressing.

Records show that despite repeated directives from the Prime Minister's Office and decisions made in a series of inter-ministerial meetings, the Dhaka Water Supply and Sewerage Authority, Dhaka Power Distribution Company Ltd, Titas gas and Bangladesh Telecommunication Company Ltd did not relocate their service lines by mid-June last year.

The concessionaire, also an associate of Orion Group, began the flyover

construction saving the underground water, gas, telephone and electricity supply lines.

For the piling work, they had manually checked the underground lines to keep those unharmed and changed the design of all 315 piling foundations, said project officials.

Salman Obaidul Karim, managing director of Belhasa, said: "We have worked round the clock to meet the deadline but various physical obstacles and political unrest have kept us behind."

"The construction was kept on hold for 80 days due to hartals over the last six months and for 20 more

days, as we had to mobilise heavy equipment of the project for Rana Plaza rescue operation," he headed.

The government had first set December 16, 2012, as the flyover completion deadline; then it was pushed to January this year and later to March 26, the Independence Day, before setting the time limit for June.

The Tk 2,300-crore flyover -- the country's first-ever Public Private Partnership scheme -- is named after former Mayor of Dhaka Mohammad Hanif.

The concessionaire is to hand it over to the government after 24 years of concession period.

# Saudi Arabia

FROM PAGE 16

Ibrahim Badawood, managing director of ALJ Community Initiatives, welcomed the plan to extend the deadline, saying it would help both expatriates and businesses, reported Arab News, a leading English daily of Saudi Arabia.

The flight of experienced workers will definitely affect many service firms across the country, he said, calling for an extension of three to six months.

According to a report, about half of an estimated eight million expatriates need their status corrected and the process will take a lot of time.

The ministry has acknowledged that only 1.58 million of them have so far benefited from the amnesty.

# Priority on safety

FROM PAGE 1

emphasis on safety," he said, adding that Bangladesh had taken full preparation to handle the power plant, with the help from Russian atomic energy corporation Rosatom and had fulfilled many major legal requirements to run the plant.

At a press briefing later, he clarified that it would take about five to seven years for Bangladesh to create a set of competent people to run the plant. Rosatom would help train the human resources in different batches.

The exact cost required to build the plant could be figured out only after the three studies are completed. "But Bangladesh will bear 10 percent of the total project cost," he said.

Rosatom's affiliate company on Thursday signed a contract to undertake the last major studies -- including the environmental impact assessment, techno-economic feasibility and a site survey to determine how the plant should be designed.

The studies would be completed in 18 months. The cost for the studies would be covered from a Russian loan of \$500 million.

Upon completing the studies, Bangladesh would have to sign three more contracts for building the plant, nuclear fuel supply and waste management.

Russia wants to speed up signing of at least one more deal but the government did not want to proceed further

before the next election.

At the conference yesterday, speakers from different countries, including Japan, discussed the cause of the Fukushima disaster in 2011 that happened after an earthquake and a tsunami.

They all said while the disaster had primarily taken place due to the tsunami and the earthquake, Japan could have been more careful in designing the plant considering the severe natural disasters it was at risk.

They also observed that in Japan, employees were discouraged from asking questions. "We need a questioning culture if we must focus on ensuring safety," said Jacques Regaldo of World Association of Nuclear Operators.

# The oldest tree

FROM PAGE 16

between 1,000 and 4,800-years-old, taking root in the white, alkaline soil that's inhospitable to all plants except the ethereal bristlecone pines.

The gnarled bristlecone pines don't necessarily prefer the limestone soil, according to the United States Department of Agriculture, but have adapted to it over thousands of years.

The oldest trees are found in the mountains of eastern California, with other bristlecone pines scattered throughout the high mountain regions of Nevada and Utah.

Other families of the twisted tree can be found in Colorado, New Mexico and Arizona.

Located between 10,000 and 11,200 feet above us, the age of the ancient trees has been estimated through their

rings.

Researchers extract a small cross-section of a tree to determine the tree's age and growth pattern.

Analysis of the bark can also show climate changes over time.

Every year, the knotted trees produce a new layer of wood just under the bark. During periods of slower growth, a narrow band of dark wood grows which, when wrapped around the lighter summer bark, produces the tree ring.

The United States Department of Agriculture says the width of this layer of new wood in wet months is usually wider than in years of drought.

Bristlecone pine wood that has fallen to the ground can remain intact for thousands of years in the cold, dry climate of the White Mountains.

# Harsh, shocking

FROM PAGE 1

the decision to suspend GSP comes at a time when the government of Bangladesh has taken concrete and visible measures to improve factory safety and protect workers' rights," the foreign ministry said.

"Indeed a section of people, inside both Bangladesh and the USA, had long been campaigning to this effect."

Although the GSP does not cover garments -- the nation's main export -- the loss of preferential trade came as an embarrassment for the government, which is desperate to encourage Western fashion retailers to stay put.

Dhaka listed a series of steps it has taken: labour law reforms, ILO-led tripartite agreement to implement time-bound

decisions and formation of a ministerial panel to ensure compliance in garment factories.

These should "speak for the Bangladesh government's seriousness in the matter", according to the statement.

Bangladesh believes that its partnership with the US is founded on "certain core values such as democracy, human rights, rule of law, women's empowerment, freedom of expression and social justice".

"It enjoys an extensive partnership with the USA in multiple areas such as democratic institutions building, empowering grass roots people, protecting economically and socially vulnerable groups, countering terrorism, contribution to global peace, and most importantly, a lasting business-to-

business connectivity," the statements said.

Dhaka pledged to remain engaged with all its trading partners to share ideas and collectively address factory safety issues.

Despite the setback, the buyers would continue their business with their "long-trusted partners" and allow the US-Bangladesh trade to grow further.

In 2012, the total value of imports that entered the US duty-free under GSP was \$19.9 billion, including \$35 million from Bangladesh.

Bangladesh hopes that the US administration would soon bring back Bangladesh's GSP status, a benefit the least developed countries are supposed to receive in the developed countries as per the provisions of the

World Trade Organisation.

Gowher Rizvi, foreign affairs adviser to the prime minister, said he was deeply disappointed by the GSP loss but he hoped the US would reverse the suspension order by the year-end.

"We're very hopeful that in six months the US will review our GSP status and restore our privileges," he said.

Now the government's first step will be to pass the amended labour law in parliament soon and take steps to upgrade worker safety and rights, Rizvi said.

The policy adviser linked the GSP suspension to bad publicity created by the Rana Plaza collapse and Tazreen fire about Bangladesh.

"I would not call it a failure -- certainly not a diplomatic one. It's a

complex subject," he said in an interview with BBC Radio.

"When a law is reformed, there will be a lot of pressure and conflicting demands. All demands should be rationalised, in such a way that all parties agree to the reforms," he said.

"It took a lot of time."

Also disappointed were garment makers who said the suspension decision would hurt the apparel sector indirectly although the garment is not covered by the GSP.

"We expect that the US government will reconsider its decision for Bangladesh as the least developed country," said Atiqul Islam, president of Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association.

# Shibir

FROM PAGE 16

enforce the hartal if our demand is not met by Saturday."

The student body of Jamaat alleged that the government had been using law enforcement agencies to abduct its party leaders.

It claimed that police had "abducted" Rajshahi University (RU) unit Shibir leaders Azimul Islam and Tajammul Islam on June 24 while they had "picked up" another RU unit Shibir leader Abdus Salam and Dhaka city unit Shibir leader Nurul Amin on June 26 from different parts of the country.

Police did not produce those Shibir men before the court till yesterday, it alleged and said, "It is a violation of human rights."

Shibir also claimed that Sunday's shutdown would add a new dimension to the ongoing anti-government movement of the BNP-led 18-party opposition alliance in which Jamaat is a key partner.