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FOUNDER EDITOR
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Whitening black money

Immorally and economically indefensible

THE finance bill, passed in the parliament on Saturday, has provided for legalisation of undisclosed monies as in the years before. The difference in the present case is the caveat that tainted money can be invested only in productive sectors, and not in purchasing land. In view of the sky-rocketing land prices, the fetter appears to be justified. But this is watered down when you find that a person would be allowed to whiten money by purchasing a flat or a plot of land on condition that he paid a certain amount of tax.

In the outgoing fiscal, people could legalise black money by paying an additional 10 percent tax along with the normal tax but the National Board of Revenue (NBR) could question the source of the undisclosed money. In the present fiscal, the provision for questioning the source of money has been dropped if the money is invested in industries and other productive sectors.

Whilst the possessors of black money have responded to the offer extremely inadequately, honest tax-paying entrepreneurs and traders have felt hard done by. Not only were the latter hurt by the unfair practice, they also looked at it as an incentive for non-payment of taxes.

Had there been statistics to quantify how much the step has fueled increases in unearned incomes, evasion of taxes and sweeping of ill-gotten money under the carpet, it would be quite an eye-opener to an amazingly lenient culture.

Water logging unnerving

Ad hoc approach won't do

IN the last few days, the city experienced heavy rainfall. As a result, many parts of Dhaka city were water logged. It is one thing to have water logging in areas which are situated relatively lower in the city, like Shantinagar or Maghbazar, but with time water logging is becoming pronounced in nearly all areas. We cannot help but look the lack of proper infrastructure for excess water to drain out of the city.

The debris from the construction spree around the city and the at the sites clogs up the drainage system. The street garbage bins have also added the element of germs to the logged water and pedestrians have no choice but to be in that murky liquid to get from one place to another. Water logging is not only an issue that affects our daily life and chores but is also a threat to public health.

We have been talking about the same issue year after year, and again as monsoon arrives in full swing, we urge the government to look at our streets, our drainage system and clear the way for the rain that is to come. Our city has faced enough workless days this year due to political unrest and now we cannot let water logging get in the way of our lives.

High cadmium levels in rice

S.A. MANSUR

A detailed front page report about the prohibitive levels of cadmium in our rice was published in a local English daily on June 23. It was an eye opener, and a bolt from the blue.

As reported, the acceptable level of cadmium as a mineral additive in rice should be maximum 0.22 ppm, as set by WHO. However, cadmium levels in our rice vary from 0.01 to 0.33 ppm! Fortunately, the higher levels are present in only a few rice growing regions, and not all over the country! A simple solution was also provided, and that was to grow a crop of soya bean plants where higher levels of cadmium in the soil are present. All the cadmium is drawn out by the soya plants, which are then burned totally to ashes. This ensures that none of the soya bean seeds or plants are introduced as human food!

Both BRRI and BARC, and the Agricultural Department, should take closely supervised field level measures to identify the areas where unacceptable level of cadmium is present and employ this simple method for removing it from the soil. Further, steps may be taken to plant crops that do not absorb cadmium from the soil. However, eradication is better than this option, as farmers may be tempted to plant rice instead of vegetables -- based on supply and demand situation at the time.

The government must take all necessary steps to start and implement the programme for reducing the soil cadmium levels by closely supervised burning, which is quite easy! However, the farmers will lose a crop during the period of growing and burning of soya bean; and they should be fairly compensated for their financial loss! I am confident that our capable agricultural scientists and their team of field workers are capable of implementing the solution for reducing cadmium in the soil for safe rice planting.

The writer is an engineer.

It should not have happened

KALEIDOSCOPE



SYED FATTAHUL ALAM

THE suspension of Bangladesh from US's Generalised System of Preference (GSP) scheme has given rise to the all-too-familiar blame game in our national politics. The government in its initial reaction to the US decision did not miss the opportunity to point the finger at what it said "campaigning" by "a section of people, inside both Bangladesh and the USA," for this situation.

Whoever may happen to be in the so-called 'section,' one cannot but simply wonder at their power to influence the US government's decision! And if the US policymakers were really so impressionable, one would perhaps then lose all one's respect for the world's lone superpower.

If truth be told, the US government's decision to delist Bangladesh from the GSP programme has a history; it did not come out of the blue. In fact, Bangladesh's eligibility as the beneficiary of the GSP scheme had long been under the review of US policymakers.

The American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO), the largest federation of trade unions in the US, filed a petition in 2007 to remove Bangladesh from the list of GSP beneficiaries and it proved instrumental in the US government's decision. But it was also not for the first time that AFL-CIO had been putting such pressure on their government.

It filed its first petition to the United States Trade Representative (USTR) in 1990 for, what it alleged, Bangladesh government's refusal to apply its labour laws to the Export Processing Zones (EPZs). And again in 1999, it filed a second petition for what it called Bangladesh's failure to meet deadlines for adopting and enforcing labour rights in the EPZs. But Bangladesh Export Processing Zone Authority's (BEPZA) decision to review performance of the Workers Rights and Welfare Committees before allowing them the full exercise of free association and collective bargaining prompted AFL-CIO to file a third petition in December 2004. And it again filed yet another petition in 2005, alleging continued violation of internationally recognised workers' right in the EPZs.

Finally, in 2007's petition, the AFL-CIO suggested

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that Bangladesh be removed from the list of beneficiaries under the GSP programme because its labour laws were only on paper and that it was not implementing those.

More specifically, it said Bangladesh had not been taking steps to afford internationally recognised worker rights that include "(i) the right of association, (ii) the right to organise and bargain collectively, (iii) freedom from compulsory labour, (iv) a minimum age for the employment of children and (v) acceptable conditions of work with respect to minimum wages, hours of work and occupational safety and health.

So, questions against Bangladesh's enjoying GSP status were being raised by powerful quarters within the US itself since long. And the course of history also shows that those quarters were engaged with successive Bangladesh governments on the labour rights issue.

Therefore, the government cannot now say it was caught unawares by the US decision. On the contrary, as things had been brewing for more than two decades during the rules of successive democratically elected governments, they should be seized with the problem in good time. As both Awami League and BNP held power by turn during that period, neither party can now wash its hands of the issue. From that point of

view, the responsibility for Bangladesh's failure to retain its preferential status in trade under GSP falls equally on the shoulders of both the major political parties. However, the recent tragedies like the devastating fire at Tazreen Fashions and the collapse of the Rana Plaza, killing hundreds of workers, did leave their telling impacts on the international community. The bad press that those incidents drew, locally as well as internationally, was also to a large measure behind precipitating the US decision.

In the given circumstances, it will be pointless now to cry over the spilt milk. The government, if it is really keen on retaining its GSP status with US, should face facts and not hold some imaginary quarters responsible for the unfortunate US action.

But there is yet another dimension to the whole issue. We should have put our own house in order so far as it involved ensuring safety of workers at their workplaces, providing them with a decent pay package, and granting them the internationally recognised labour rights long before a third country could point those out to us as our failures. We must be on our toes to avoid similar embarrassments in the future.

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GSP suspension: What to do now

MUNIR QUDDUS

THE suspension of Bangladesh's facilities for the Generalized System of Preferences (GSP) should not have been a surprise since US officials had been warning the government of the risk of suspension unless it took steps to improve industrial workers' safety and working conditions. However, the decision still came as a shock.

Who is really to blame? The sad fact is that there is plenty of blame to go around. The government had many opportunities to work with the industry agency, BGMEA, to fix many of the problems. The rules of the game (determined by US laws) were pretty clear, and yet the government failed to make sufficient changes in time.

Why did the government fail to regulate the construction and maintenance of factory buildings, and the fire code? Perhaps it was a failure in management and administration. Worse, the devilish virus of corruption that eats away the vitals of the society and good administration was allowed to flourish unchecked.

The opposition cannot be absolved of blame. They had many opportunities in the past to fundamentally improve labour laws to allow for collective bargaining and other reforms. After the Tazreen fire incident, did the opposition speak up in the parliament or otherwise put pressure on the administration to improve workers' conditions?

The BGMEA, as the industry body and spokesperson, has failed to play a leadership role in improving workers' safety over the years. As the industry boomed, it was the appropriate time to make the difficult adjustments. The revenues were there to pay the cost of the higher wages and improved working conditions. Unfortunately, the response was reactive instead of proactive. Until the crisis came to a head, there was little or no serious action by the industry.

We have come a long way from those days. An industry that has made hundreds and thousands of crores taka for its owners hid its head in the sand like the ostrich hoping that the worst will not happen, and even if it does, they will not be impacted. They were wrong. How short-sighted is the strategy to exploit the workers.

The negative publicity from the GSP suspension has given Bangladesh a "black eye" in the global media, and may impact all exports from Bangladesh. In recent years, we have seen the industry failing to take responsibility for the action of its errant members. After the Tazreen fire, there was only a slap on the wrist of the owners.

Why were the owners and managers not disciplined? Why were the victims (and their families) not adequately compensated? Why were reforms not undertaken to prevent such accidents in the future? Then the tragedy at Rana Plaza happened, perhaps the worst industrial disaster in the nation's history. Again, there was no apology or sincere attempt to take care of the victims and their families. The factory owner was made the scapegoat, so that no systemic changes had to be made. The collective guilt was conveniently ignored. This strategy is a recipe for disaster.

And then we have the foreign multinationals that retail these apparels to the customer in the West. For

years, these companies have profited from the toils of the poorly paid workers, but have invested little or nothing for their welfare. Those companies have taken advantage of their enormous market power to gain huge profits. It is time they recognise that this greed is short-sighted. The poor workers are as much stakeholders in those companies as are the shareholders. They must be treated right. The customers of those companies demand "socially responsible" behaviour. The announced aim of the suspension is to put pressure on the government to improve its administrative and regulatory role.

The reason for discussing the past is to learn lessons for the future. What steps can be taken now so that the GSP facility is reinstated? Here is an incomplete list.

First, the wage board should move quickly and recommend a significant increase in the minimum wage for garment workers. This would be the right move for political, moral and, yes, economic reasons. Second, labour laws should be quickly revised and approved by the parliament to facilitate collective bargaining and to ensure that the workers have a seat at the table. This should discourage militant unionism as the workers will become true shareholders. A culture of trust and partnership has to be created.

There are factory owners who are farsighted enough to take good care of their workers. I have spoken to workers who have worked for over a decade in the same company because they felt the management was fair.

There is enough goodwill for the workers and people of Bangladesh to ensure that. The American people want Bangladesh to succeed in uplifting its millions of workers from poverty to the middle class. When Bangladesh reduces poverty and joins the ranks of prosperous nations, it will be a win-win outcome for both nations.

Since the Savar tragedy, the issue of building safety and fire code has progressed with major foreign buyers signing an agreement, and companies like Wal-Mart and Gap publicly stating their intent to invest significant amounts towards improving workplaces to reduce risks.

This leaves the issue of inspections and audits. A large number of inspectors have to be trained. Endemic corruption must be minimised. Surprise inspections and audits should be done by independent agencies with power to impose fines, or close down a factory until the codes are met. When violations happen and lives are lost, the owners (not just the managers) must be taken to task for criminal neglect. Above all, the compensation to the victims and their families should be substantial and swift.

Given the critical role that the Bangladesh garment export industry plays in the economy and life of the country, it makes sense to create a separate ministry to deal with its issues. This has been a long-term demand by the industry. It is time to implement this.

If these steps are implemented in good faith, there is no question that the GSP will be reinstated sooner rather than later. There is enough goodwill for the workers and people of Bangladesh to ensure that. The American people want Bangladesh to succeed in uplifting its millions of workers from poverty to the middle class. When Bangladesh reduces poverty and joins the ranks of prosperous nations, it will be a win-win outcome for both nations.

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LETTERS

TO THE EDITOR

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Whither rule of law?

The country is passing through a very difficult time. Every day numerous incidents of violence happen around us. Killings, arsons, lootings, etc. have become everyday affair. People get kidnapped; sometimes their dead bodies are found and other times they just vanish. The murderers of Sagar-Runi are still at large; there is no trace of BNP leader Ilias Ali and his driver; and the whereabouts of Ali Azam, driver of Suranjit Sengupta's APS, is still a mystery. The police could not solve any of these cases, but they were very prompt in arresting the two JCD men on suspicion of cocktail explosion at information minister's residence on June 9, 2013. BNP is saying that the action is politically motivated.

Our law enforcement agents are so busy pursuing the opposition political party that they have no time for anything else.

Nur Jahan
Chittagong

State minister's power

The state minister for health has given an astonishing statement on the recruitment of third and fourth class employees under the health department. He said that being a state minister and public representative, he can recommend someone for a job. It seems he has such power that he can recruit candidates without going through any formal procedure.

Such practice by our public representatives is very disappointing. It is high time they stopped doing this. We, the general people, want fair selection.

Arif Jewel
Bangladesh Agricultural University
Mymensingh

Hurling of abuse in JS

People elect the MPs so that they (MPs) can represent the constituents and reflect their hopes and aspirations in parliament. But the use of vulgar words in parliament is not at all acceptable. Both the major political parties are hurling abusive words at one another. Will the nation actually be able to learn something from them?

Md. Shamim Bhuiya
Department of Finance
Jagannath University

Bring educated people in politics

The lack of educational qualifications by a large number of candidates in the Gazipur elections seems to indicate that Bangladesh's "best and brightest" are avoiding politics, likely due to the poor reputation and behaviour of those practicing it.

The result is many people get involved that do not have the knowledge and critical thinking skills needed to independently make major decisions affecting their fellow citizens. This makes them dependent on the party leadership who, in exchange for complete obedience to the party, provide them with more lucrative positions than they could otherwise attain.

It is not elitist to demand a minimum standard of educational qualification for positions as important as these offices. A related issue is finding a way to attract skilled people back into politics by making it worthwhile and meaningful for them. The parties need to understand that candidates who bring knowledge and the ability to think for themselves are an asset.

Neil Taylor
On e-mail

Comments on news report, "Harsh, shocking," published on June 29, 2013

Ash C.

This talk about impending GSP suspension by the US had been in the news for long. Paying no heed to US concern, which can be termed arrogance of this government, has brought on the nation this stigma that most possibly will have far reaching consequences depending on how the EU reacts to this US suspension.

Iftekhar Hassan

It cannot be more shocking for the factory workers of Bangladesh. The owners are under shock because now they must spend money to fix all the problems. No more Rana Plaza.

Yousuf Sujon

It is not good for our country. The government should take the right decision at this moment.

"Social businesses thriving globally" (June 29, 2013)

SM

When very successful global CEOs are lauding this innovative approach, some Bangladeshis with their jealous and corrupt minds are trying to find faults with Dr. Yunus, only to demean him. It is quite disgusting to see people criticising him for doing something good while they are sitting idly doing nothing.

Monju Huq

No human, however great he or she maybe, is above criticism. We demand response from Dr. Yunus himself, not any hot-headed reaction from anybody else.