

EU action plan heralds new hope

We must live up to it

UNLIKE the step by the US authorities to suspend Bangladesh from its preferential list of exporters under GSP programme, the EU have decided stand by us. In a recently launched initiative from Geneva, the EU, ILO and Bangladesh government have reached a tripartite agreement titled Global Sustainability Compact. This envisages improvements in terms of labour rights, their working conditions and factory safety, especially in the RMG sector.

The initiative sets a nine-month deadline for Bangladesh to improve building and fire safety conditions in the RMG factories by June 2014.

The deadline, though somewhat tight, places a challenge before us. To live up to the EU's offer of assistance which is important to the implementation package, all concerned must strive to meet the deadline.

Bangladesh will also have to reform its existing labour law to strengthen workers' rights, particularly through ensuring their freedom of association, right to collective bargaining and improving their occupational health and safety. To ensure effective enforcement of the law, ILO has agreed to monitor the progress.

This course of action promises to beef up the country's highest foreign exchange earning sector and welfare of its precious workforce.

In addition to the tripartite initiative, 70 international retailers, mainly of EU origin, have also signed an accord to inspect building and fire safety standards in the RMG units that supply them apparel products.

We believe the international moves from Geneva provide a rare opportunity before the government and the RMG unit owners to improve their image and status.

Traffic snarl-up in the capital

Remove bottlenecks fast

IT seems the capital dwellers will have to brace for another spate of traffic jams and inordinate hold ups on the roads of the capital during the month of Ramadan. This unfortunately is the situation which is getting horrendously repetitive every year without any signs of improving any time soon.

The current traffic situation has been caused due mainly to the service agencies taking undue time for road repairs, unregulated roadside markets, piling of construction materials on the roads, and, off late, the under construction flyovers. It is extraordinary too that these works are carried out during the worst part of the year, the wet season. Add to that the predilection of the drivers to flout traffic rules and the haphazard parking of public transports on the road, not to say anything about students and workers who find laying siege to roads and blocking traffic a convenient way to ventilate their grievances.

It seems rather odd too that only the day before yesterday, the Dhaka-Chittagong highway was blocked by students demanding solution to traffic jam, without their realising that their action has had fallout on the traffic situation in Dhaka city.

We are afraid the situation will compound life in Dhaka city even more given that the Ramadan-Eid shopping spree is about to get underway, unless some corrective measures are taken immediately. Something urgent must be done to control movement of rickshaws as well as to restrict flow of vehicles on only one direction in some specific areas of Dhaka.

FROM FOREIGN PRESS

Tackling Syria

EDITORIAL DESK: THE BRUNEI TIMES

THANKS to the dithering and divisive international diplomacy, the 27-month unceasing civil war has been hurtling the beleaguered Syrian nation deeper and deeper to an abyss. This apart, from time to time, other global disturbances have been overshadowing the Syrian stalemate. The upheaval in Egypt is the latest to eclipse the chaos. In spite of their conciliatory statements and amicable facade, the US and Russia, the main players, remain deeply divided over the issue. Though US Secretary of State John Kerry at a recent meeting with his Russian counterpart Sergei Lavrov, stated that "we narrowed down some of the options," no specific date has yet been decided on the second Geneva meet to discuss and resolve the stand-off.

Amid the foot-dragging by the so-called international troubleshooters, including the haggard and hapless UN-Arab League peace envoy, Lakhdar Brahimi, the rebel fire and the regime artillery and aerial bombardment have been causing mayhem resulting in death and destruction. Over 100,000 people have been killed since the unrest started in March 2011, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.

After being leaderless for quite some time, the fractious Syrian National coalition (SNC), the umbrella organisation of the Syrian opposition, has finally, on Saturday, elected Ahmad Assi Jarba, seen close to Saudi Arabia, to propel the movement forward. But the ragtag rebels are desperate for Western weaponry and aid, given the relentless assaults by the well-oiled regime war machinery aided by the Hizbullah fighters. But the global community needs to realise that arming the rebels or the regime forces won't ease things, but would further deteriorate the crisis.

Hence, let's hope the second Geneva conference is held at the earliest, with the participation of all stakeholders, to unfold a dialogue process for a political negotiated settlement of the issue, ushering in the much-needed calm in the war-torn nation.

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Living in twilight times

GROUND REALITIES



SYED BADRUL AHSAN

with a political, albeit interim, administration in charge.

The Awami League-led government, therefore, deserves credit over the transparent manner in which the elections were held. That the Election Commission was able to preside over a series of good elections simply rebuts the argument of the BNP-led opposition that a political government cannot be trusted to hold free and fair elections. When the chairperson of the BNP argues that her party's triumphant candidates would have obtained more votes than they actually did and that the Awami League's nominees would have had their security deposits forfeited, she misses the point. And the point is one, just one: these were good elections, the veracity of which claim has been noted by citizens across the board. A good politician never quibbles over her nominees' triumph.

And now let us move to other things. The reality following the five corporation elections is that in all these five cities, it is the good politicians who have lost. Despite their record of good performance or good character, they failed to prevent the deluge that was ultimately upon them. But, again, it was not these five men who lost. It was the ruling party that was given a sound knuckle rap at the elections. For all their successes or the positive armour they wore as shields, these five AL-backed men lost because a shrewd opposition chose to focus on issues that have exercised the public mind at the national level.

And those issues were what the media have repeatedly drawn attention to and which the government repeatedly brushed aside as matters of little consequence. The Padma Bridge funding was a scandal the electorate was not willing to forget; that a minister needed to be eased out of the government was a reality the prime minister did not accept; that another tainted minister ought not to be kept on as minister without portfolio was a truth not welcome; that the Grameen Bank issue should not have been blown out of proportion was a fact not realised in the corridors of power; that the share market and Hall-Mark issues would haunt the powers that be was treated with cavalier indifference.

The decline of the Awami League is a lengthening of the shadows of despair for secular, liberal voices in Bangladesh. The responsibility for this growing depression lies, first, with the Awami League itself and then with an opposition that clearly threw every scruple aside in its bid to capture electoral territory. A centralised leadership, with power concentrated in the hands of the party leader, stymied all efforts by the Awami League to bring about the change it promised before the last general election. New leadership did not grow. Veterans in the party were carefully kept out of policy-making. In the party and in the

LET us get into first things first. The elections to the four city corporations in mid-June were without question free and fair. In similar fashion, the triumph of the BNP-backed candidate at the Gazipur city corporation election was a sign of how fairly and properly elections can be conducted under a political government. Considered from the perspective of the nature of the five elections, one can reasonably argue that it is possible in this country for the right of franchise to be exercised freely



government, the atmosphere was one of a school where the headmistress is all and the pupils are there to obey. Every decision was basically the party leader's decision. In consequence, every blunder was the party leader's. The party is paying for those blunders.

The opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party, having lost the election in December 2008 for all the right reasons, tarried in the woods, disconsolate and angry -- until the ruling party decided, in foresight that was as poor as it was suicidal, that the caretaker government system could be dispensed with. The Awami League ignored half of the judiciary's ruling on the issue, opting for the half it liked. It felt little need to consult the opposition. Suddenly the BNP had an issue. Desperate to get back to power, it kept up its boycott of parliament, said nothing about the war crimes trials and began demanding, not a change of government but the fall of the government. Its hartals hurt the country. It did not care. Education suffered. It looked the other way. Its activists, along with those of its rightwing allies, caused mayhem on the streets. It was not worried at all. With the clerics, it went about identifying 'atheists' to be punished by the 'faithful.' That the ploy was lowly politics did not matter.

Only a miracle can now lead the Awami League back to power next year. Or a purposeful change in style and substance and policy will. Hubris has done enough damage; bad performance in government has had a telling effect on public sensibilities. A defeat for the Awami League at the next election will mean more than a dimming of the lights of liberalism. It will be a leap into the dark. It will be the death of values and every rainbow dream this nation has shaped and nurtured over the decades. When the Awami League loses, it is an entire nation which loses.

And what happens if the BNP, riding on the wings of its rabid rightwing allies, storms back to power? One would like to believe that there will be no terror of the kind unleashed within hours of the election of October 2001. One would like to think that the government it forms will not be a kleptocracy once again, that it will pursue politics rather than vendetta. But none of that is likely to come to pass, for the BNP has the Jamaat-e-Islami and the Hefajat-e-Islam with it. The Jamaat remains as ferocious as it was in 1971. The Hefajat is on standby to pull every value down, to pull the country into a fathomless darkness of medieval proportions.

The carelessness of the Awami League has placed the future of all citizens at risk. The desperation of the BNP and its allies does not promise a dawn we envisioned for ourselves five years ago.

These are times of questionable intent. Our twilight passes speedily from gray to suffocating night.

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China, US have much to work for

JIANG JIANJIAN

ACCORDING to Horizon Research Consultancy Group surveys on Sino-US relations over the past decade, Chinese people basically recognise that the United States is an advanced society and civilisation, and offers a high-quality life. They have also shown relatively high interest in American culture, and dating or marrying Americans.

Emotionally, Chinese people's favourable attitude toward the US since 2006 has been above the 50% level, which is roughly the same that Americans have toward China.

Economically, Chinese people see the US as China's most important partner, and an important tourist destination, commodity supplier and source of multinational management experience. So we can assume the favourable attitude of both peoples toward each other can ensure the continuity of the basic pattern of Sino-US relations. The only question is: Will there be more competition or more cooperation?

In terms of overall cooperation, however, there is a great cognitive difference in public opinion in the two countries, which is difficult to overcome in the short term. The Chinese pay more attention to politics in international relations, such as US arms sales to Taiwan, the Tibet issue, human rights, the Diaoyu Islands dispute and other issues, because Washington's political actions have a major influence (40%) in shaping their views toward the US.

Although Chinese people have to learn to adapt to China's great power status as the country faces increasing criticism and is viewed with greater suspicion, they are still strongly conscious about protecting their history and interests. Therefore, any attempt by the US to provoke Chinese people over major political issues will backfire.

The Barack Obama administration's strategic rebalancing to the Asia-Pacific region since 2011 broke the decade-old relative calm in the region. And though the US has repeatedly said it has no intention of containing China, many of its diplomatic and military actions have made Chinese people feel threatened.

Chinese people recognise that their government is investing more energy in international affairs, which is important to make them feel like citizens of a powerful nation. But China's efforts to widen its global influence will clash with the US' ambitions.

For example, differences between China and the US over issues such as the Korean Peninsula, the Iranian nuclear issue and environmental protection will continue to persist. Also, China's initiative to play a more active role in the Middle East peace process will become a source of concern for the US.

According to HRCG surveys in 2010 and 2011, Chinese people's primary impression of the US is one of "hegemonism and power politics" (21% and 26%).

In fact, this concern has prompted the Chinese government to put its US-related political issues high on its prior-

ity list. For example, Beijing has been urging Washington to take a stand on the Sino-Japanese dispute over the Diaoyu Islands instead of holding an ambivalent position.

In contrast, survey results of US-based Pew Research and Gallup show that Americans are more concerned about economic issues, such as the impact of Sino-US trade ties on the American job market and their quality of life. It is thus likely for Americans to misunderstand why the US economy has been sluggish with a high jobless rate and resent the rise of China.

Chinese people, on the other hand, have begun to see Sino-US differences and economic frictions more rationally, and hope they would be resolved according to international rules to achieve win-win results.

According to HRCG findings, nearly 40% of the Chinese respondents said they understand why the US imposed punitive tariffs on Chinese products. This is surprising development because until a few years ago almost every Chinese found them unacceptable.

With regard to China's rapid economic development, Chinese people believe that Sino-US relationship is far from a zero-sum game with 35.3% of the respondents saying the US will be the biggest beneficiary of China's economic rise.

In contrast, according to a 2007 Pew Research survey, 45% Americans think China's economic rise is a bad sign compared with 41% who see it otherwise. The 2007 poll results are more anti-China than the one in 2005.

Fortunately, Chinese social elites play an important role in shaping people's opinion on Sino-US relations. According to HRCG findings, there is a big difference between how Chinese social elites and the general public view Sino-US relations. But social elites, who tend to be more rational in their approach and more concerned about economic issues, have an obvious influence on the public.

The cognitive differences between Chinese and American peoples have their roots in their cultural and psychological traditions. For example, Chinese people cherish their collectivist values while their American counterparts swear by individualism. These objective factors are difficult to change in the short term.

Therefore, to ensure that Sino-US cooperation moves forward steadily, the two peoples should first develop deeper mutual understanding through more people-to-people exchange programmes. Besides, the two governments should try to curb their differences and jointly promote pragmatic cooperation in fields where they can enlarge their common interests.

If the differences increase or are left to fester, the trust built between Chinese and American peoples until now could be compromised. Sino-US relations cannot develop smoothly without mutual trust. Let us hope dialogues between the two sides can help remove these differences and improve mutual trust.

The writer is Vice-General Manager of the Horizon Research Consultancy Group.

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LETTERS

TO THE EDITOR
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Pendulum of our politics

Gazipur election once again clearly proved that the pendulum of our politics swings with a five years' time period. But the irony is that the poor voters vote for opposition not because they are happy with their activities but because they get frustrated and feel betrayed by the activities of the ruling party.

People in 2008 voted AL to power, but they did not keep the promise they made to the people. Instead, AL used its power to show arrogance and take revenge and so did the BNP while in power during 2001-2006. I am sure if BNP is voted to power next time, it will do exactly the same and hence the pendulum will continue to swing predictably. We can see the body language of BNP that they are getting ready.

Dr. Kamrul Hassan

Professor
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Retired civil faculty members' plea

I wish to draw the kind attention of the chairman of the governing bodies of the cadet colleges to the sufferings of the retired civil faculty members and their hardship in life in these days of high cost of living. As long as the civil faculty members are in service, they enjoy many facilities offered by the cadet college authorities. For that we are grateful to the chairman and the members of the cadet college governing bodies.

No one can deny that the retired civil faculty members served the cadet colleges with dedication, efficiency and honesty. In return, they hope to get some facilities after retirement. I humbly request the authorities concerned to revive and extend the facilities including free medical treatment in CMH for own and family and ration facilities at subsidised rate for retired civil faculty members of the cadet colleges.

Prof. Abdul Ashraf Noor

Former cadet college principal

An appeal to President Obama

In a recently released US State Department Fact Sheet, President Barack Obama suspended Bangladesh from its GSP programme. The decision came after a multi-year review by the U.S. Trade Representative. Meanwhile in the same document, it is observed that "U.S.-Bangladesh relations are excellent." Being a bona fide friend of Bangladesh, the US should assist Bangladesh to take appropriate steps to adopt internationally recognised workers rights and in improving workers' overall working environment without putting any hindrance.

I would request the US president to please withdraw suspension of GSP facility for Bangladesh and help garment industries accomplish international standard in workers' welfare and management.

Professor M Zahidul Haque

Dean, Faculty of Agriculture
SAU, Dhaka

Comments on news report "AL not waking up to reality," published on July 8, 2013

Shahin Huq

Only 6 months are left, and then we will have general elections. Could we be spared from corruption, repression and misrule during this 6-month period, please?

Abul Kashem

Once they can understand the gravity of the situation, the nation will be much benefited.

Ahmed Zakaria

Yes, that's right. Time for AL to wake up.

Nazmul Haq

They don't have to wake up to the reality on the ground. They are daydreaming about conducting the parliamentary election under the present government with the present premier at the helm. They may have already set up the present administration at all levels with their henchmen. These obedient servants will do the bidding for the party in power.

Niloufar Sarker

Muith is saying it's a wake up call? The scandals of this government happened under his watch. How about not protecting the looters of Sonali Bank and the share market?

Doronto

It is really not understandable how AL will fix the crack created in the minds of the people of the country. AL government did not take action when garment workers were burnt to ashes at Rana plaza, Padma bridge project failed because of its policy to save Abul and the poor boy, Limon, was presented as a threat to the government.

"Bangladesh two years ahead," (July 8, 2013)

Sara

It's a good news.

Abdullah Al Fahad

I wonder where we could have reached, only if the greediness and corruption could be barely minimised. There is a lot that a government can do in terms of legal action to minimise it.