

Realising RMG workers' demands

Violence cannot be an option

THE continued unrest in the RMG sector is highly disturbing, all the more so when the sector is struggling to emerge from near-debilitating incidents in recent times and is at the phase of recouping its image, including getting the US to rescind its decision on GSP.

The main issue revolves round the workers' pay, and there is already a wage board working to fix the minimum wage. We had disagreed in this very column with the suggestion of a twenty percent pay hike for them. The pay and allowances must keep in view the cost of living.

We should not overlook the fact that our garment workers are not only the lowest paid in the country they are the lowest paid in the world too. And given the recent chain of events, with the Rana Plaza disaster still fresh in our minds, we suspect that the workers are being made pawns in a wider political game, as we saw being done in a so called RMG workers' rally on Saturday.

A large number of factories have been damaged in the last few days, and a good many of the factories had to shut down because of workers' unrest. But we find it hard to believe that workers would deliberately destroy an establishment that provides for their livelihood. And if there are outsiders who are vandalising factories then the law enforcing agencies must nab them.

We empathize with the demands for workers' pay hike, but violence cannot be the means to realise those.

Amputees on their feet

Mission should go forward

BECAUSE of a collaboration between a 63 member Thai team from the Prostheses Foundation of Her Royal Highness the Princess Mother and the National Institute of Traumatology and Orthopaedic Rehabilitation (Nitor) a 100 handicapped Bangladeshis can walk again. The collaboration was proposed by the Thai government while the Bangladesh Prime Minister visited in May.

We would like to praise this collaboration which promises so many Rana Plaza victims to get back on their feet. This compassionate and humanitarian gesture by the Thais is endearing as well as hearty appreciation. On behalf of the beneficiaries and their dependents we express our gratitude to the Thai team. It means a lot to 100 people who are getting back their life and livelihoods through this process and perhaps this can be replicated through other collaborations in the near future. We understand that another team from India is expected to get into the act of making the amputees functional.

Small steps have always helped the bigger picture in the long run. We hope that the new steps will inspire many others to come forward and take such steps within our country and from the outside.

How much of a hand-holding and throwing of a lifeline this has been and promises to be will unfold in the near future. Meanwhile, the collaborative efforts should go forward unhindered by any unforeseen impediments.

"Mutti" is back to rule

SHAHRIAR FEROZE

THE late British premiere Winston Churchill once said: "Never let a good crisis go to waste", and if there is one crisis that the German politician Angela Merkel has capitalised on -- that's the Euro-crisis.

Mrs. Merkel not only led Europe's economic powerhouse to new strength, despite the turmoil all around - she also kept a calm and steady hand steering the EU through its most existential crisis till date or at least since the last great war.

Still, there are plenty of people -- both within Germany, and especially elsewhere in Europe -- who think she has been the wrong leader at the wrong time. But the reality suggests her need to rule Germany was well-timed.

Despite all odds the scientist-turn-politician joined the exclusive club which had only two members till Sunday evening, Konrad Adenauer and Helmut Kohl were the members of that club with a record for serving three terms as chancellors.

The recently ended German polls not only re-elected its incumbent chancellor but at the same time exposed a political outlook; a truth: glamour, political-lineage followed by extensive campaigning doesn't get a leader elected but, it's the set of skills he/she displays while holding office. No wonder if our two "politically-privileged" leaders got the message or not.

The world's most powerful woman had humble roots, entered politics after the age of 35 and struggled her way through internal and external obstacles but managed to keep the wheels of German economy rolling.

Having said that, Merkel's Christian Democrats (CDU) bloc took about 42% of the vote meaning she is expected to seek a grand coalition with the Social Democrats (SPD) who won about 26% of the vote. A grand coalition much akin to the alliance formed during her 2005-09 term.

Frequently referred as "Mutti" (Mother for German) German Merkel has even exceeded the ruling time frame of late Margaret Thatcher.

Now it's time to see how she carry's forward the European economic power house further ahead.

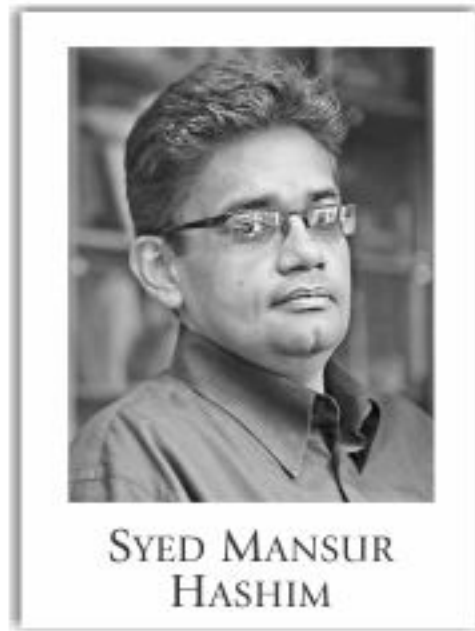
As per several political analysts: whatever the shape of the coalition that ends up forming the government, there probably will not be any significant policy shifts with an added slightly softer tone to Europe's debt crisis.

Last but never the least is Bangladesh's trade and economic relations with Germany -- over the past decade -- in spite of a global economic crisis -- thrived under Merkel's leadership like no other country in Europe or worldwide.

As said before: "Never let a good crisis go to waste."

The writer is current affairs analyst, *The Daily Star*.

Nothing substantial since Bibiyana



SYED MANSUR HASHIM

THE government brought out a supplement in major media outlets sometime in August titled 'National Energy Security 2013.' According to data presented there, we are apparently in full control of our onshore and offshore development activities for both oil and gas. Yes, there have been developments, particularly when one takes into account what the preceding government had done in the areas of exploration. We all want our state-owned enterprises to increase their capacity to explore hydrocarbon, for without energy and power no meaningful economic development can take place in the country.

Yet, the hard reality is that since independence, we managed to secure a mere 3.4 trillion cubic feet (tcf) new gas finds through our national companies (incl. BAPEX and its predecessors). As of today, the proven and probable gas discovery is approximately 27tcf. Of which, we have already utilised about 11tcf. Irrespective of our wishful thinking, our national institutional capacity has not managed to evolve itself so as to prepare for the challenges we have to face for developing the country's primary energy resources. Only 3.4tcf has been discovered by national companies, which means the rest were all discovered and developed by international oil companies (IOCs).

The facts actually speak for themselves. According to Petrobangla's September 19 production report, all of the producing gas fields in Bangladesh produced approximately 2,275 million cubic feet daily (mmcf). Of this, the IOCs produce approximately 1,262 mmcf (more than 50%). Chevron alone delivered 1,147.5mmcf and Bibiyana being the largest producing field of Chevron delivered 818.4 mmcf. Hence, 55.7% of the total produced gas on that day was delivered by the IOCs. And, demand and supply gap daily stands at about 500mmcf.

Available information suggests that Chevron will enhance its production to reduce this gas deficit. This implies that we will be more dependent on the IOCs. And that dependency will primarily be on Chevron. The ironic part is that we are wishfully thinking of enhancing our national capacity. But in true terms, our capacity has not been enhanced to the level beyond our exploration endeavours onshore and even in the difficult structures like CHT, is still an area of huge challenge for BAPEX.

For off-shore, BAPEX has stated several times that it is not ready to carry out exploration activities off shore. Not even to shallow offshore (shallow offshore areas of potential means areas where water depth is up to 200 meters). And the speculated possibilities of deep-offshore remain till date a distant prospect, which in the foreseeable future, will have to be dependent on professional IOC participation.



These are ground realities that never make it into fine glossy print.

Unfortunately, we could not secure any major breakthrough in the oil and gas exploration since Bibiyana field discovery and many petroleum geologists believe that the days of easy finds is long over. Already, the success ratio (used to be 3:1 i.e. 3 exploration wells secured 1 discovered gas find) has become more challenging. For instance, for shallow-offshore, hydrocarbon exploration, success rate has become 10:1. To put it more bluntly, the four and a half years of the present government unfortunately have been wasted, that is from the perspective of involving any meaningful new involvement of credible IOCs in hydrocarbon exploration in the offshore prospects.

This disaster has primarily to do with the nationalistic-hype that led policymakers into believing that IOCs would jump for oil and gas development business in the offshore area, no matter what conditions Bangladesh offered. And the unrealistic conditions in the PSC model 2012 (PSC – Production Sharing Contract) offered for attracting IOC participation in deep and shallow-offshore exploration prospects provided a recipe for disaster. Having no attractive exploration data in hand, it was expected that IOCs would be flocking to Bangladesh in their dozens to take part in the latest round of bidding. That has not happened. Hardly a surprising outcome, given that, besides lack of "speculative survey data" provided in initial bidding rounds, unrealistic expectations of IOCs paying corporate tax, "wheeling charge" (transmission of gas utilising pipeline) would be applied for using the pipelines, restricting market for gas supply at a fixed and unattractive price to Petrobangla only etc. -- all helped to produce a dismal turnout.

Policymakers have failed to gauge the complexities involved in putting together a regime for offshore hydrocarbon exploration. They have been led up the garden path into believing that the state-owned exploration sector was mature enough to take on the challenges. In the meantime, the tenure of the government is practically at an end and we are back to square one. While this is excellent news for those involved in the power rental business that can now safely look forward to a few more years of healthy growth and demand, it is less than good news for the economy and our "national energy security."

The writer is Assistant Editor, *The Daily Star*.

Bangladeshis are a tolerant lot

SAYEEFUL ISLAM

IF the geography of a land has some influence in shaping the psyche of a people then we are like our soil, soft. If the history of the land is an indicator of the psyche then through the ages we have been a society which has assimilated all that has come its way, forming a soup and not a salad where all the separate ingredients retain their identity. This tolerance and assimilation extends to all spheres -- especially religion.

Islam as the predominant religion has always been practiced in a moderate form with tolerance towards other religions. An indicator of the tolerant nature of the Bangladeshis is in the increasing number of Puja Mandaps that have been set up over the years. When BNP came to power in 1991 it for the first time in the history of Bangladesh extended financial support to the minority Hindu community by way of setting up a Fund exclusively for the purpose of celebrating Puja. The support was further extended by the members of the parliament who were instructed to distribute a part of their food grain allotment to the Puja organising committees in their respective constituencies. In addition, the government doubled the size of the core fund of the Hindu-Buddhist Kalyan Trust, interest from which is utilised for promotion of their religious activities. These initiatives have been retained till today.

BNP again came to power in 2006. The positive attitude of the regime towards Bangladeshis of all faiths was reflected in the fact that the number of Pujas in that period went up to an all time high of about 21,500. Clearly, BNP with an Islamist party in its alliance had established to the minority communities that it fully respected, supported and protected their rights to practice their beliefs in all forms, private and public. BNP was simply putting into its governance structure its understanding of the Bangladeshi psyche of peaceful coexistence.

The mood of the country as a whole towards religious sentiments can be looked at from another perspective.

In both the 1991 and 2001 elections the votes secured by the Islamist Jamaat candidates remained steady at around 5%. In the absence of any other substantiated data the 5% vote of Jamaat can be considered to be a measure of the intensity of Islamic tendencies in the country. The figure having stayed the same over two five year periods clearly showed that religion was not exploited for furtherance of the alliances electability by the BNP-led government.

In 2008 everything changed, overnight. The newly elected AL-led government started, surprisingly, and immediately, to go to extreme lengths to establish that Bangladesh was a 'secular' country and not a 'moderate Muslim majority' one, thus bringing the issue of religion to forefront of the political equation.

But then the great paradox emerges -- how and when, in this insistently 'secular' environment did the relatively orthodox Islamist organisation such as the Hefajat-e-Islam find the support, philosophical and physical, to be born and evolve? And in which timeframe, within this government's tenure, and in what nurturing conditions did it become such an important organisation that it could muster over a million followers in the centre of the capital? How did it become such a potent force that it could take over the centre of Dhaka, and that too at a time when the established opposition political parties were being denied their fundamental right of holding even the smallest rallies and meetings?

The question becomes even more perplexing when one considers that this took place at a time when the government was not only promoting itself as the champion of secularism but also portraying BNP as a Islamic fundamentalist party. If that was the case, Hefajat-e-Islam should have been born during BNP's tenure and nurtured by them to strengthen BNP's alliance. Why has the opposite happened? Why has the Hefajat-e-Islam, which was a non-entity even a year ago, come from nowhere and

emerged as a factor in the political equation in the regime of the self declared champion of secularism?

The paradox can be explained in two parts -- one in flawed thoughts and the other in flawed actions.

The first flaw -- in thought -- is that Bangladeshis cannot be 'moderate Muslim majority' and 'secular' at the same time. Trying to impose the 'secular' label, where the modernity it represents was already a way of life, and this too by suppressing the demographic reality, was a major faux pas.

The second flaw was in action. This was the result of not understanding where the boundary lines of the Bangladeshi's acceptance and tolerance lie, given that the Bangladeshis are accepting, even welcoming, of all that is logical and reasonable. Using religion as a tool for gaining political leverage has historically been the most dangerous game. It is no secret that the Hefajat-e-Islam, for weeks before it took over Shapla Chattar, was being courted by members of the cabinet. The credibility of an initial understanding between the Hefajat-e-Islam and the powers that be is underlined by the fact that the logistics of organising a million plus gathering in the commercial hub of the country could not have escaped the attention of the government agencies.

But then those playing the 'religion' card often fail to comprehend how high the card raises the stakes in the game. What exactly happened that fateful night at Shapla Chattar is not clear, but what is clear is that it lay squarely in the trajectory of events (symbolised by the Shahbagh episode) where, to many it had seemed, religion was made an issue in a manner which contradicted the basic Bangladeshi philosophy of co-existence.

There may have been a round where the 'religion' card was trumped by the 'secularism' card, but from the moment the lights went out at Shapla Chattar all bets are off on which 'card' will be the eventual winner in this most dangerous game.

The writer is President G9.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Blaming the victim

It makes me furious the way the U.S. invades weak nations like Panama, Grenada, Afghanistan, Iraq and others and blames the death and destruction it leaves behind on them! In other words, it's all their fault that they were invaded and devastated, with part of their army slaughtered and their citizenry becoming "collateral damage" just because they happened to be where the U.S. wanted to drop a bomb, shoot a missile, fire a tank, or shoot a rifle!

It's not a new U.S. tactic, either. It's one they've practiced for hundreds of years. Dear old Mark Twain had them pegged when he described the process that governments use: "Next the statesmen will invent cheap lies, putting the blame upon the nation that is attacked, and every man will be glad of those conscience-soothing fables, and will diligently study them, and refuse to examine any refutations of them; and thus he will by and by convince himself that the war is just, and will thank God for the better sleep he enjoys after this process of grotesque self-deception."

What he was saying is that it not only serves the government's purpose in blaming the war and destruction on the victim, but the people themselves are then able to soothe their conscience and feel justified, that "They had it coming to them," even if the excuse the government uses is flimsy as can be! People accept it anyway because they don't want to feel bad about themselves or about their government, and they can keep waving the flag and saying, "God bless America," secure in their goodness and niceness.

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DU teacher with fake Ph.D

Many dailies reported on this matter on 14th September. Nur Uddin, a teacher of Dhaka University, got away with a false Ph.D, obtained from the same university. This teacher or cheater must be sacked immediately without any notice and all facilities given to him should be taken back with legal action. His supervisor, who approved his thesis, should also be officially warned for his lack of serious supervision of the presentation made by the faker. A public notification, giving all his particulars and photograph, should be published in all dailies to let all know his misdeeds.

S. A. Mansoor
Dhaka

Popularising organic farming

Shykh Seraj's essay, "Purity of soil and crop," published in The Daily Star on September 18, 2013 has drawn my attention. Organic farming is getting popular day by day not only in Bangladesh but also in other agro-based countries due to its long-term effects on soil. To popularise organic farming and other agro-technologies invented by the agriculturists, the media can play a vital role and follow Shykh Seraj's example, who is trying to make farmers aware and helping them to uplift their condition.

M. G. Ferdous
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Bangladesh Agricultural University

Comments on news report, "Airlines plan big," published on September 21, 2013

SM

Great, this is only plan A. The complimentary plan B should be concentrating on CTG and Sylhet airports with proper services to handle this extra capacity. Plan C should be to make road /rail connections from these two cities outwards to take people to their destinations.

Sheikh Monirul Islam, Opee

Bangladesh is such a tiny country that it can accommodate only one major airline, be it a national or a private one. Internal traffic movement is so low and there is not much internal tourism other than some business travel. If airline wants to survive, it must go regional and international, must be able to generate travel in tourism industry. For example, Bangladesh has permanent and fixed number of hajj and umra'h passengers every year; yet GMC failed miserably to promote and sustain these packages. Why? Because of lack of capacity building due to gross inefficiency and horribly poor management.

"Minister's rally, so 400 factories shut" (September 22, 2013)

truthprevails53

I hope these poor, hard-working people will get what they deserve. The future intellectuals, stoic soldiers and future builders will come from them.

Akhtar Shah

I feel sad for the poor workers. The minister is only flexing his muscle for pure self interest. God bless BD.

Nasirullah Mridha, USA

Being a minister, Shajahan cannot force the workers to walk out of the factories by halting the production. The government mediation on wage raise and the minister's demand is contradictory.