

# RMG labour unrest must be contained

## Buyers wary of placing orders

THE widespread labour unrest being witnessed in industrial areas of Dhaka district could very well threaten the interest of the readymade (RMG) sector. As per media reports foreign buyers are already having second thoughts about placing new orders unless the explosive situation settles down. The outburst of workers cannot be a formula for shutting down industry for days on end. It is essential that the wage board formed and which is due to give its decision on a revised pay scale for the RMG sector be allowed to complete its work by November.

That there is need for an upward readjustment of minimum wage is not contested by any party. To what extent or within what timeframe these adjustments will be implemented is a matter of tripartite negotiation among workers' representatives, factory owners and the government. The vandalism and destruction of property are hardly a conducive way to settle differences – that may only be reached through bargaining across the negotiating table.

Sadly, that is not happening. Contentious issues such as the institutionalisation of collective bargaining agency on factory floors or what is considered to be “fair” wage for a day's work are all sensitive issues and views vary widely on them. At the end of the day, RMG brings in the highest foreign exchange earnings for the country and is the single largest sector to employ an estimated 4million people directly. Any disruption in this sector will cost the country and those involved in it dearly.

## Tragedy under the wheel

### Deterrent punishment imperative

RECKLESS driving has claimed another life on Tuesday as a minibus hit a rickshaw from the side near Kamalapur in the city and crushed under its wheel Roksana Begum, who had fallen on to the street. The woman was taking her little daughter home from her school. This is just another case added to the long list of tragedies on the road taking place rather frequently. And as in most cases, the delinquent driver and his assistants could flee the scene of accident unscathed.

The circumstances of the accident as reported in the media clearly demonstrate that the killer bus driver could easily save the victim, had he been a little careful.

We may recall a similar tragedy that took place in front of Willes Little Flower School at Kakrail more than three and a half years back. In that accident a speeding bus killed KG student Sheikh Hamim and critically injured his mother as they were crossing the road on their way home. Unlike in Tuesday's case, the driver of Hamim's killer bus was caught by the public. Even so we are not aware, like in numberless other cases, if the driver was duly punished for his offence.

Cases of careless driving ending up in such sad accidents deserve harsher punitive actions than are in practice. We would urge the government to have a serious rethink on the issue so that stern penal measures with deterrent effect are instituted to deal with reckless driving.



## Ban on Muslim Brotherhood

EDITORIAL

THE order of an Egyptian court on Monday banning the Muslim Brotherhood from operating and freezing its assets does not bode well for Egypt, which has stumbled from one crisis to another since the strongman, Hosni Mubarak, was ousted in February 2011.

The Tahrir Square uprising against Mubarak ushered in what people called the Arab Spring. It was assumed that the change in government would lead to a democratic era and the civilian set up would initiate reforms both political and economic for the betterment of the Egyptian people.

When Mohamed Morsi of Muslim Brotherhood was elected president in the first democratic elections, it was expected that he would take along with him all sections of the society and put Egypt on a path to recovery. However, his ouster by the army pushed the country into a new round of chaos, violence and social unrest.

The violent demonstrations by Morsi supporters following his ouster and subsequently military crackdown resulted in more deaths and destruction.

The Muslim Brotherhood since its formation in 1928 has faced long spells of ban but it has remained on the political landscape.

Given the circumstances prevailing in Egypt, banning Muslim Brotherhood is hardly a solution. In fact, it may trigger another round of violence and chaos.

The 2011 Arab Spring has made it impossible for Egypt to return to past and rolling back its gains. Egypt requires a major rethink on the part of all stakeholders.

Instead of barring Muslim Brotherhood or any other group, efforts should be made to reintegrate political groups of all colours for starting a new process of reconciliation.

Since the 2011 uprising, the Egyptians have paid a very high price and cannot afford to prolong this chaos and political and social unrest any further.

# RMG unrest, conspiracy and the enfant terrible!

## STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING



Brig Gen  
SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN  
ndc, psc (Retd)

The assault is sometimes from inobtrusive vicious forces whose identity one finds difficult to establish.

It is not for the first time that we are seeing the RMG sector come under severe strain. The question is whose, if any, and why, is our RMG industry the target?

The conspiracy theory is being bandied again, and perhaps, there are reasons to believe that the RMG sector is once again being used for political profiteering. And, given the inexplicable involvement of the shipping minister, who having arrogated, if not appropriated, the responsibilities of the labour as well as the industries ministers to himself, has compounded the matter by his indiscrete and irresponsible remarks. He has willy-nilly become the enfant terrible of the establishment.

Let us take the conspiracy theory first. In this instance it no longer is a 'theory' since the RMG owners have alleged that the local and international media reports on wages and working hours are but a conspiracy to run down the largest source of foreign exchange for the country. And the ubiquitous shipping minister has even identified the conspirators. When accused of fomenting the recent violence and vandalism of the garments workers, he put the blame on the fundamentalists, for the recent inexplicable spate of violence wreaked by the garment workers over the last four days...and continuing.

Conspiracy theory has been a good excuse in the past, used by our political and business leaders, and in some cases our security analysts, to hide their failure to act or react to certain developments or their inability to explain certain occurrences.

EVERY so often our RMG sector comes under battering, most of which are self-inflicted. Some are delivered by the owners and result from violation of rules and norms that wreak losses in terms of lives of workers and destruction of the factory. And sometimes the damage is inflicted by the workers themselves who, allegedly, always are either outsiders, whatever that means, or belong to factories other than the ones that are made the target of vandalism.



*If there are conspirators then we are ourselves creating conditions for their success. It is for the BGMEA to prove the media wrong instead of carping. By soft pedaling on the interest of the RMG workers we create conditions for dissension which then lay the workers open to exploitation.*

Conspiracy or not, our galloping growth in RMG export has been looked at with envy by many potential competitors. That we are the second largest exporter of readymade garments has certainly caused flutters in many RMG exporting countries, and the achievement has been not because, but in spite, of the government. We take nearly 5% percent of the RMG export pie worldwide with a potential to reach \$36 billion by 2020 if everything remains equal. However, one finds it difficult to believe that our competitors would devise means fair or foul to subvert our production capacity to capture our market.

And how much of what we have seen has a political angle to that? It may sound daft given the fact that nothing that we do as individuals or groups falls outside the ambit of politics or economics. But the goings on of recent days starting from the so-called rally of the garment workers on September 21 at Shurawardy Uddyan, called by, of all the people, the shipping minister, where many of the garment workers were made to 'volunteer' their presence at the cost of production, where transports were placed at the disposal of the rally participants, courtesy again of the shipping minister by virtue of his being the president of the transport workers' union, smells more than a rat. One wonders why Mr. Khan is taking upon himself added responsibilities when our natural inclination is to do the opposite.

If it is an attempt to garner votes of the garment workers like the way he tried of the bus and truck drivers by extracting concessions from them from the home minister only a few days ago, much of which are against public interest, then it is an extremely bland attempt. In fact, by posing as the garment workers' well wisher and calling for a minimum wage of Tk. 8,000 he has compounded the salary issue of the RMG workers, more so when a wage board is working on the matter. The minister cannot escape the responsibility for the continued violence since the rally.

If there are conspirators then we are ourselves creating conditions for their success. It is for the BGMEA to prove the media wrong instead of carping. By soft pedaling on the interest of the RMG workers we create conditions for dissension which then lay the workers open to exploitation. And exploiting their grievances for political ends can have disastrous outcome such as we having been watching for nearly a week.

The writer is Editor, Oped & Strategic Affairs, The Daily Star.

## Nepal elections: Challenges for democracy

MAHMOOD HASAN

POLITICALLY seen, Nepal is in a weird situation. It has had neither a Parliament nor an adopted Constitution for the past 15 months, and is currently being guided by an Interim Constitution (2007). How did the Himalayan nation arrive at this juncture?

The Constituent Assembly (CA) elected on April 10, 2008 was dissolved in May 28, 2012, four years after it failed miserably to draft the National Charter. The CA had mandate to draft a new Constitution within two years. Even after four extensions of its tenure it was unsuccessful in producing the document.

At the last elections the Unified Communist Party of Nepal (UCPN-Maoist) led by Pushpa Kumar Dahal (Prachanda) secured 229 seats. The centre-right Nepali Congress got 115 seats and the centre-left Communist Party of Nepal (United Marxist-Leninist) obtained 108 seats. The remaining 149 seats went to smaller parties. Though the UCPN got the largest block of seats it failed to obtain a clear majority in the 601-member CA. That probably was the root of its undoing.

However, after a bitter power struggle Prachanda succeeded in becoming the first prime minister of democratic Nepal, heading a coalition government. Under Prachanda's stern control, the first session of the Assembly on May 28, 2008, abolished the 240-year old Shah Dynasty. The Interim Constitution was amended and the nation became “Federal Democratic Republic of Nepal” from “Kingdom of Nepal.”

Ideologically, Nepali Congress and the CPN-UML are nearer to each other and, given the numbers in the Assembly, they formed the main opposition to UCPN. Since becoming prime minister Prachanda faced stiff opposition from the NC-UML combine. The other smaller parties shifted their allegiance continuously according to convenience. Prachanda finally resigned in May 2009 after an unpleasant confrontation with President Ram Baran Yadav over the dismissal of the army chief.

The past five years saw five prime ministers—each undermined by conspiracies hatched by those not in power. Prachanda was succeeded by Madhav Kumar Nepal (UML) from May 2009 to February 2011. He had to quit under intense pressure from UCPN. Actually, between June 2010 and February 2011 there was no effective government in the country. Jhala Nath Khanal (CPN-UML) came in February 2011 and had to leave in August 2011, when he failed to give in to UCPN demands. Baburam Bhattarai (UCPN) was prime minister from August 2011 to March 2013. He dissolved the Assembly in May 2012, when it failed to deliver the Constitution and the Supreme Court ruled that a fifth extension of the CA would be unconstitutional. Fresh elections were announced for November 2012.

The dissolution of the Parliament immediately triggered political and legal uncertainties. Because of legal ambiguity a struggle began over the powers of the president and the prime minister. Baburam Bhattarai insisted that since the Parliament did not exist he would exercise all executive powers. President Ram Baran Yadav (NC) refused to give any leeway to the Maoist prime minister. The other major issue that they failed to resolve was whether the country should be divided into federal states

along ethnic lines.

Bitter debates on these and other issues spread across party lines and polarised the nation. Rebellion within the major parties also surfaced. Inter-party and intra-party squabbling reached feverish heights. Political parties representing ethnic and marginalised groups also pitched in, supporting either the Maoists or the NC-ed alliance. Constant bickering made the politicians inflexible—unable to arrive at a consensus on any issue.

By February 2013 the situation became explosive. Maoists-led parties demanded postponement of the election date, while the NC-UML led parties wanted to get rid of Bhattarai. Maoists were apprehensive that NC President Sushil Koirala may become prime minister. The stalemate led to talks among the major parties on March 13, 2013, at President Yadav's “Shital Niwas” residence. A syndicate of four parties emerged, known as “High Level Political Committee” (HLPC), which agreed on an 11-point agreement to oust Bhattarai and form an election-time government headed by the chief justice. The HLPC consist of leaders of UCPN, NC, UML and United Democratic Madhesi Front.

Maoist Baburam Bhattarai finally quit on March 14, 2013, and handed over powers to Khil Raj Regmi, Chief Justice of the Supreme Court. Regmi, who refused to give up his Supreme Court post, is heading an 11-member technocrat cabinet to supervise the upcoming elections. The setting up of Regmi government was clearly an extra-constitutional step taken by the president at the bidding of the HLPC. Regmi announced that elections will be held on November 19, 2013.

Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) led by Mohan Baidya is a breakaway faction of the larger UCPN led by Prachanda. Baidya claims he leads an alliance of 33 parties, and questioned the legitimacy of HLPC taking decisions of behalf of the Regmi government. Baidya warned that no elections could be held unless Regmi resigned and the Interim Constitution amended to hold elections.

Nepal's two big neighbours are not sitting idle to what is happening in Kathmandu. Indian Foreign Secretary Sujatha Singh was in Kathmandu on September 14 and held talks with top Nepali leaders. She said she was hopeful that elections will be held on time. Hardline Maoist leader CP Gajurel accused India of interfering in Nepal's politics. China also dispatched Cai Moinszhu, State Minister for Information, to Kathmandu on September 19 to hold talks with Nepali leaders. Clearly, the two neighbours are deeply concerned about what goes on in their sandwiched neighbour.

Nepal has been in turmoil since the rise of the Maoist insurgency. After more than 12,000 people were killed the country took to the path of peace and reconciliation in 2006. The democratic process, which began in 2008, has repeatedly been stymied. Their collective failure at the CA reflects the nature of the power struggle that goes on unendingly in Nepal. Unless the politicians face the challenges and rise above their petty personal gains and hold elections next November, Nepal's peace process and democracy may be jeopardized.

We in Bangladesh can probably take lesson from the developments in Nepal.

The writer is a former ambassador and secretary.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### Climate change hazards facing us

Bangladesh is one of the countries of the world most vulnerable to climate change, though it is contributing little to greenhouse gas emissions. In short time Bangladesh may face deadly hazards like severe tropical cyclones, erratic rainfall, river bank erosion, increased sedimentation, increased saline water intrusion, etc., because of climate change. These kinds of disasters cause loss of lives, damage to infrastructure and economic assets, and adversely impact on lives and livelihood. Though the developed and powerful countries are mainly responsible for climate change, they don't agree to sign a treaty for removing the climate change risks. Policy making for climate change adaptation may be a process to reduce risk or increase resilience. We cordially request the developed world to realise our problems and help us live a risk-free life.

Md. Shaharul Alam  
Dhaka University

### Hold talks for a credible election

On 2nd September 2013 Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina said the general election would be held without dissolving the current parliament and the cabinet. Prime minister said the House would not be in session and the cabinet would take no important policy decision during the 90-day timeframe (October 27 to January 24). She did not pay any attention to BNP's demand for restoring the caretaker government. We request both the parties to solve the crisis by holding talks and present the people with a free, fair, and credible general election.

Hasna Begum  
On e-mail

### NU students' plight

It is so sad that our education minister has overlooked the plight of those who are studying at the National University. We wish to do well in life through getting best education. Five years have passed since we got admitted to Dhaka College. We have no idea how long it will take to complete the Honour's course. It is of utmost importance that NU students complete their study in time and get into jobs so as to support their families financially. It is not possible for our parents to keep financing our education for an indefinite time.

We urge the prime minister, the education minister and the NU authorities to take steps immediately and stop prolonging our academic session. They could start by holding our examinations seriously and publishing our results timely. Establishment of divisional offices, promised earlier by the present government, may also help our cause.

Bipul K Debnath  
Dhaka College, Dhaka

### Comments on news report, “Too much, too little,” published on September 24, 2013

Nds

No, it is not at all too high. It is even less than what can be termed as modest. Don't have too much fetish about arithmetic jugglery. Just be reasonable as well as sensible to the astronomical disparity that exists between the income of the owners and workers that accrues from the industry.

### Sheikh Monirul Islam, Opee

Would like to attract attention to CPD director's statement regarding RMG sector's minimum wage issue. This government and its politicians often justify that cost of living has gone higher, but a day labourer gets around 400/500 tk. per day which makes things comparatively affordable. RMG sector owners' proposal of tk. 3600 gives a worker tk. 120 per day. My question is: how would a worker survive with such a low pay? Under current economic reality a salary of tk. 6000 should be minimum pay.

### Shafquat301

Theories are all good. System and people need to be changed if possible. If there was a socialist approach to our politics and economy, we wouldn't have half the problems.

### Sheikh Monirul Islam, Opee

Yes Sir, we need a revolution. The politicians did not leave the room for maneuvering. Please join the revolution and support it actively.

Sara

The initial demand of tk. 8000 may be a bargaining strategy... the workers probably will haggle and settle at 6000...

### Sheikh Monirul Islam, Opee

Tk. 6000 may be justified, but a big number of small units have to go out of business as they won't be able to pay their workers next salary.

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### “Indian rights group to seek compensation for Felani” (September 21, 2013)

### Nasirullah Mridha, USA

What message the government wants to give its people by barring the rights activists to enter Bangladesh?

### Shahin Huq

We feel indebted to them. While our government is busy ingratiating itself with the Indian establishment, these Indian rights activists have shown their concern for a human life.

### Deep purple blue

Thank you, Masum, for fighting for our cause! Please name a street after Felani as we named the Indian high commission road at Gulshan in the name of Felani.