

# President, his oath and affirmation

SOMETIMES truth is stranger than fiction. Our president's reference to his constitutional constraint proves the old adage right. Opposition leader Khaleda Zia met President Abdul Hamid last Tuesday, seeking his intervention to resolve the country's prolonged political crisis and thus ensure an inclusive election. But her hope apparently got dashed when the titular head of the state told her that no government in the past did anything to empower the president so that he could play a meaningful role during a national crisis like the one we are passing through.

Khaleda Zia met the president a day after the formation of a so-called interim government for election oversight. There was a rumour that the opposition alliance, after the meeting, would come up with an announcement that it would join the 'all-party' government and then contest the election. But nothing like that has happened. Though oppressed and deprived over the years, the people of Bangladesh are always democracy loving and optimistic. On October 26, when the country was abuzz with Khaleda-Hasina phone talk, the people had expected that something solid might come out. But, ultimately it turned out to be mere eyewash.

What the president brought into the limelight during his meeting with the opposition leader deserves serious attention as all the presidents in the past skipped playing their due role in any national crisis on the same pretext. The failure to empower the president goes equally to all the past 'democratic' governments. They did nothing to ensure a functional democracy in the country other than drumming up their so-called development activities. But it is also true that the spirit of the president's remarks has left little room for ambiguity that he is not ready to rise above the party line.

Despite the president's reference to his constitutional limitation, many believe that he could play a useful role in resolving the ongoing crisis. He cannot blind himself to the political realities which are clouding the country's bright prospect, putting its democracy in jeopardy. He could at least have come up with a strong call for all to save democracy rather than saying he would convey the opposition's message to the ruling party.

Though the president is only a figurehead and just abides by the advice of the prime minister, he takes oath to preserve, protect and defend the constitution. The president, as per the constitution, takes oath in the following form: "I,....., do solemnly swear (or affirm) that I will faithfully discharge the duties of the office of President of

Bangladesh according to law: That I will bear true faith and allegiance to Bangladesh: That I will preserve, protect and defend the Constitution: And that I will do right to all manner of people according to law, without fear or favour, affection or ill-will."

The oath and affirmation give an impression that the president can still do and undo many things. It can also be said that in case of any violation of the constitution by any state organ it is the responsibility of the president to look into it. Many constitution experts, after the en masse resignation of ministers and junior ministers last week and their continuation of office, said there had been a violation of Article 58 of the Constitution, which says: Article 58. (1) The office of a Minister other than the Prime Minister shall become vacant (a) if he resigns from office by placing his resignation in the hands of the prime minister for submission to the president...

Unfortunately, there has been no response from the President's Office despite controversy over the issue. Experts think that the president could be very effective even under the existing constitution by asserting his personality, integrity and competence.

What we are now seeing is dirty politics. The rumour which has long been in the air is now gaining ground that the ruling alliance is making a desperate move to isolate the opposition BNP politically by keeping it out of the election race.

It would be an irony of history if, today, the president does not use his good office in the name of constitutional restraint to save democracy from imminent danger because the brave people of this nation had fought a nine-month bloody war to establish a political system that would ensure their basic rights and economic emancipation.

They want all the political parties as well as the government to adhere strictly to democratic principles and the rule of law, thereby paving the way for free, fair, credible and inclusive elections. Creating a crisis to capture power and resorting to election engineering to perpetuate any party's rule are not acceptable in a democracy.

The political culture in Bangladesh has been confrontational. No matter who is in power, the ruling party always tries to sideline its opponents, prompting them to take to the streets. The culture of muscle flexing in the country's politics should go. To make that happen, the president should come forward, and this is the right time to do that.

A consensus between the ruling and the opposition camps on how to put in place an interim cabinet should be the first step towards establishing such a political culture.

The writer is Chief News Editor of United News of Bangladesh (UNB).

# RMG under threat

ABU AFSARUL HAIDER

THE raging controversy over wage hike in the RMG sector continues. Although the garments owners have agreed to pay the minimum salary of Tk.5,300 recommended by the wage board, workers have said that they would not settle for less than Tk.8,114. The current wage level is one of the lowest in the world and their fight against unsustainably lower wages is understandable given the growing cost of living.

At this stage of our industrialisation, RMG is the driving force of all economic activities. Despite the low wages, it still has brought about a big social change, especially in the lives of women.

There are number of stakeholders involved with this sector -- factory owners, buyers, workers, government, to name a few. An allegation against factory owners is that they make huge profit, but one needs to understand all factories are not same in size and capacity. Among many, only a handful of big factories are getting direct orders from the Western buyers and the rest of them are doing the sub-contract jobs and, as such, their production cost is different and so is their profit.

Moreover, in most cases fabrics and all other accessories needed to make clothes are usually supplied by the buyers and the factories get only the sewing cost. The breakdown of \$1 paid as the sewing cost for garments is somewhat like this -- the cost of fabrics 60 cents, other accessories 10 cents, wastage 5 cents, documentation and handling 3 cents, transportation 2 cents and establishment and overhead cost 20 cents. Actually, the factory has to spend the 20 cents to pay wages and meet mortgage payments on any loan, or meet fixed and other variable costs. Cost of productions becomes higher when shipment needs to be sent by air because of *hartal* or other disruption.

At present, we are producing mainly entry-level mid-market products, and opportunity to get into other levels of apparel business is very high. In March 2012, McKinsey released a report stating that 86% of purchasing officers in Europe and North America expect to reduce sourcing from China, and 89% expect to increase sourcing from Bangladesh. Industry experts are claiming that buyers do come back to place orders repeatedly, but every year they lower the price further. Some independent garment activists have authenticated the fact that since 1988 the costs of women's clothing have fallen by 7% and men's by 8% in North America. In the UK, costs have dropped 20% since 2005. Retailers sell clothes at much higher rates than what they pay to factories. Shirts that sell for \$20 in United States are made in Bangladesh for about \$1.80, which is about 11 times of the FOB (Free On Board price).

The above situation reminds one of the British Raj, when our poor farmers had no choice but to cultivate indigo. Prices were dictated by the planters, which were so low that the farmers could not even recover their production cost. But the planters made profits by exporting indigo to other countries. Similarly, garments buyers are also making big profits in collaboration with some local agents, but most of the factories are struggling because of low prices offered by the Western buyers.

Nevertheless, we must accept the fact that it is the cheap labour cost that has made Bangladesh a competitive place for apparel manufacturing. Having said that, low wages for protecting the cost advantage is not a sustainable solution. We need to find other ways to become competitive.

The government cannot escape its responsibility by merely announcing a minimum wage. In order to make the sector competitive it needs to provide required infrastructure, uninterrupted power and gas supply and, most importantly, security and safety for all.

Our labour productivity is known to be lower compared with our regional competitors. Garment workers are mostly women with little education and training. The employment of unskilled labour by the garment factories results in low productivity and comparatively more expensive apparels. Therefore, all the stakeholders must take measures to enhance the skill of workers by providing vocational training.

Many owners are claiming that 77% increase in minimum wage might force some factories to close if they are not able to pass the cost to buyers. Since western buyers are the main beneficiaries and have plenty of room to adjust, they should offer fair prices to make the situation better.

Labour movement needs to do things to improve workers' lives, and is most beneficial when it is tied to the fortune of the industry and not the politics of the country. But in the name of protest, the burning and vandalising of public transport, private vehicles, trains, shops and factories might bring more harm than good to them in the long run as businesses generally tend to avoid unstable and conflict-prone areas.

With no other sector looking as potent as RMG sector, it is fair to assume that the country will be dependent on this sector for the next ten-fifteen years. Many have termed this sector as a Golden Goose; unfortunately the golden goose that lays golden egg is under threat of being slaughtered at the hand of a section of greedy and unruly people. Let us preserve the Goose until we find some other business and move up the development ladder.

# UN demand, Myanmarese defiance

C. R. ABRAR

LAST week, the United Nation's human rights committee passed an important resolution urging Myanmar to grant equal access to citizenship to the Rohingyas. It also called on the Myanmar authorities to crack down on Buddhist violence against the members of the Rohingya community and other Muslims. Under the General Assembly rules the resolution will be unanimously approved later this year.

Welcoming the Myanmar president's statement that there will be "no prisoners of conscience ... by the end of the year," the resolution "expresses concern about the remaining human rights violations, including arbitrary arrests and detentions of political activists and human rights defenders, forced displacement, land confiscations, rape and other forms of sexual violence and torture, and cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment, as well as violations of international humanitarian law, and urges the government of Myanmar to set up its efforts to put an end to such violations." The resolution expressed its serious concern about communal violence and other abuses of the Rohingya community in Rakhine state and on attacks against Muslims elsewhere in the country.

The adoption of the resolution was the rational outcome of the international community's recognition of the dire conditions that the Rohingyas and other Muslims currently face in Myanmar. Despite repeated promises of providing protection and mitigation of their problems little progress has been made to bring about a solution to the plight of the Rohingyas. Sectarian violence no longer remains contained within the Arakan region. The Muslims and their properties are targeted in other parts of the country as well.

There have been well-orchestrated hate campaigns against them by the extreme nationalist and Buddhist religious groups. Often, such campaigns lead to violence, taking toll on human lives and property. So far, 240 people have died. About quarter of a million more, mostly Rohingyas, had to flee their homes. Thousands of families are living in squalid camps with very little basic amenities such as proper shelter, potable water and hygienic sanitation. These Rohingyas live in constant fear of attack on their life and belongings. Life in camps has been particularly

challenging for women, children and the elderly. The international community is deprived of regular access to those uprooted by violence. While adult members are denied livelihood opportunities, children suffer due to lack of access to food, nutrition, health care and education.

There is little evidence to indicate that the Myanmar authorities are committed to take action against the perpetrators of violence. The bias of the members of the law enforcement agencies in favour of the majority community has been amply recorded by international observers and human rights organizations. Seeking redress from the judiciary has also proved to be an unrealistic option for the Muslims as this institution has also become a blatant party to the ethnic dispute. The courts have been meting out disproportionate punishment to the Muslims while condoning those of the Buddhist violators of the law.

Under such difficult conditions, a resolution urging the authorities to grant citizenship rights to the Rohingyas was the least that the UN could do. It may be recalled that the Myanmar authorities failed to take any meaningful step in response to a series of appeals from many quarters, including the UN Secretary General.

The UN Committee resolution has elicited a mixed response in the Myanmar official quarters. The director of the country's President's Office, Zaw Htay, was cautious in his reaction and stated that steps were being taken to address the issue. He was forthright in his stand, denying that Rohingyas were "stateless" as the UN resolution had suggested. He stated that these people were either

Bangladeshis or Myanmar, and went to say that "we are not denying their right to citizenship. They will be given citizenship according to the law." He, however, failed to provide any details when and how such consideration would be made.

As against the above rather conciliatory gesture of the director of the President's Office, another presidential spokesperson, Ye Htut, gave a sharp reaction to the UN Committee resolution. He stated that the Myanmar government "absolutely does not accept" the word 'Rohingya' and maintained that the provisions of the 1982 Citizenship Act would be adhered to in letter and spirit. Those who would meet the criteria, including Bengalis in Arakan state, should be granted citizenship but "those who don't meet the criteria will not be granted citizenship regardless of pressure from anyone, and this our sovereign right."

In other words, the international community was again reminded that amendment to the 1982 Citizenship Act was not on the agenda of the Myanmar authorities and, thus, Rohingya claims to citizenship would continue to be kept on hold at least for the foreseeable future. This may very well be concluded as a defiant rejection of the UN demand.

It is interesting to note the response of the opposition party led by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi on the UN Committee resolution. It accused the UN of "interfering" in the country's internal affairs. A spokesperson of the party stated that "anyone who is eligible to become citizen will get citizenship but they cannot become ethnic nationals." The hard line taken by Suu Kyi on the Rohingya citizenship question

was further reflected in her refusal to meet the visiting delegation of the Organization of the Islamic Conference last week. It may be understood that the Nobel laureate's aspiration to become the next president of Myanmar has far outweighed her moral responsibility to stand up for the rights of the Rohingyas.

Daw Suu Kyi may be reminded of the call that twelve Nobel Peace laureates, including Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Shirin Ebadi, Muhammad Yunus, Tawakkol Karman and Jody Williams, called for immediate end to the violence against Muslims and other ethnic minorities in Myanmar. She may also be made aware of what two of her fellow Nobel laureates, Mohammed Yunus and José Ramos Horta, had concluded that the Muslim Rohingyas are "one of the most marginalised peoples in the world."

The laureates' statement came in support of a call by UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Navi Pillay, to conduct a UN investigation into the deaths of Muslims in Myanmar, as well as to investigate ongoing violence against the Kachin, Shan and other ethnic minorities. Pillay urged the Myanmar government to allow her office a "full mandate" in Burma to investigate human rights abuses. Thus far, the government has refused to entertain the idea.

It may be concluded that in an unfortunate way the Rohingya issue has finally been able to draw international attention. The UN Third Committee's latest resolution is a move in the right direction to exert pressure on the Myanmar authorities to accord citizenship rights to the Rohingyas and bring an end to discriminatory practices and violence they are being made to endure.

The onus lies on all to make sure that the Rohingyas are not subjected to further brutality and mistreatment. The countries of the region, including Bangladesh, should engage with the issue from humanitarian perspective. They should play their due role in continuing to pressure Myanmar to create enabling condition for the Rohingyas to live in Arakan in dignity, and those outside to return. Pending a durable solution, they should continue to provide asylum and support to those fleeing persecution.

The writer teaches International Relations and coordinates the Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit at the University of Dhaka. He is president of Odhikar.

**CROSSWORD**  
By THOMAS JOSEPH

**ACROSS**

- Price holders
- Venezia's nation
- Tricium on
- Lustrous fabrics
- Bender
- Catch in a net
- Hyde, to Jekyll
- Maximal shoe
- Marking
- Film prize
- Comically exaggerated
- Boosted
- "Put — happy face"
- Junior, e.g.
- One of the Titans
- Appraised
- Tricium amount
- Mendes of movies
- Sinbad, for one
- Like the Super Bowl
- Watch reading
- "Oh, my!"
- Corrosive stuff
- Monks' homes
- Scoundrels

**DOWN**

- "See ya!"
- Cain's brother
- Central American nation
- "Silk-wood" star
- "Got it"
- Lively dances
- Maximal shoe
- Golf position
- Powerful bunch
- Bat wood
- Spanish king
- Central American nation
- Lottery ingredient
- Tear
- Fossil fuel
- Pay to play
- Guarantee
- Like a Turkish bath
- Field worker
- James Cameron movie
- Pub choices
- Give off
- Cincinnati team
- Nabokov novel
- S. Dak. neighbor
- Collar

**Yesterday's answer**

NEW CROSSWORD BOOK: Send \$4.75 (check/m.o.) to Thomas Joseph Book 2, P.O. Box 534775, Orlando, FL 32853-6475

**A XYDLBAAXR is LONGFELLOW**

On letter stands for another. In this sample, A is used for the three L's, X for the two O's etc. Single letters, apostrophes, the length and formation of the words are all hints. Each day the code letters are different.

**10-19 CRYPTOQUOTE**

KSRPZZKF DPXA APL CPYK

LKTLKL VWT KJZHEOKL XAK

RTPYKOLK WOERTF APV WTF

NWHHL XAK WFKYTXROK

LNPKTNK. — KFDPT ARGGHK

**Previous Cryptoquote:**  
WHAT IT LIES IN OUR POWER TO DO. IT LIES IN OUR POWER NOT TO DO. - ARISTOTLE

**BEETLE BAILEY**

by Mort Walker

HUP! TWO! THREE! FOUR!

SARGE, CAN WE REST? MY FEET ARE KILLING ME

NO WONDER, ZERO, YOU DON'T HAVE ANY SOCKS ON YOUR FEET

MY EARS WERE COLD

**HENRY**

by Don Trachte

**QUOTABLE Quote**

"Sometimes when you innovate, you make mistakes. It is best to admit them quickly, and get on with improving your other innovations."

Steve Jobs