

Disagreement over
inspection standards

Bridging the gap is imperative

THE forum of some 150 European retailers and brands known as the Accord and Alliance for Bangladesh Workers Safety, which is the platform for some 26 European companies, has come up with inspection standards for readymade garments. The plan has been strongly contested by BGMEA as one that has set a standard too high to be met within the stipulated timeframe. The arguments against the standards set by the two platforms is that many recommendations do not fall within the national building code and that strict adherence to the standards would not be feasible for smaller and medium RMG factories. We are all too aware that retailers' primary concern is safety for workers, particularly in the backdrop of the twin disasters of Rana Plaza collapse and Tazreen Fashion fire.

But we also believe that Bangladesh is well acknowledged as an established destination for garments imports -- from retailers' perspective. Keeping that in the forefront, there is a chorus of demand that Bangladesh improves on the safety situation. However, the agenda of improving the situation substantially within a strict timetable may be somewhat difficult. Hopefully, this will be done on a gradual scale. Looking beyond the added costs involved, it is in the interests of all stakeholders not to have a repetition of either Rana Plaza or Tazreen. Given that this is a sector worth more than \$21 billion per annum and one that employs over 4 million people, the government, ILO, the foreign retailers and BGMEA must put their heads together to smoothen ruffled feathers and get an agreement on standards while the momentum for such course of action is strong.

Torture on the young
Correction centres need
corrective steps

THE recent goings on at the Gazipur Juvenile Development Centre make one thing absolutely clear. And it is that there are instances in the country when those in charge of such centres must first correct themselves before they can presume to correct others. We are happy that the High Court has come into the picture, for the sole reason that the interests of the juveniles at the centre need to be protected. That no fewer than twenty teenagers at the centre had to draw attention to the cruelty of the authorities through subjecting themselves to gashes is a shame. It begs the question: must those who suffer through social insensitivity inflict more suffering on themselves, on their own, before we take notice of their pain?

The supervisor of the centre has, as a result of the HC action, been put under suspension. That is a good step and yet something more ought to be done. The first move is to inquire into the nature of the torture these teenagers were put through at the centre. Precisely when such torture began and who knew about the activities of the supervisor-in-charge or abetted him in his misdemeanours must be made known. Then comes the question of treating the incident as one of a seriously criminal nature.

It is not enough to have any employee of the centre suspended and expect that the winds will blow over. That employee, and any others in league with him, must be tried for their criminality.

Rampal forewarnings

SHAHRIAR FEROZE

OUR case in point is simple: overall impact on the bio-diversity of the Sundarbans. The proposed Rampal power plant project will harm the World Heritage Site's Indian portion too. The Indian part of the forest is estimated to be around 19%, while the Bangladeshi part is 81%. Taking physical, biological, social, economic and environmental factors into consideration, impacts of the coal-fired power plant's negative and irreversible effects cannot be restricted by a mere border demarcation between the two countries. Cutting across the borders, it's the intertwined organic chain of the Sundarbans -- both in Bangladesh and India -- that's under a deadly threat.

Does India, like Bangladesh, realise it?

The construction on the acquired 1,834 acres of land on the bank of the Pashur River -- a dolphin sanctuary -- has begun amid huge criticism and resistance with no effect. According to experts, the Indian government does not allow construction of such scale and type near the part of the reserved forests that lies in its territory. Shouldn't we have similar laws too? The Sundarbans cannot be taken as an exception in this case since it is shared by the two neighbours. Moreover, in India, thermal power stations are permitted to be built at a distance of 25 km away from a forest area. If National Thermal Power Company (NTPC) abides by that law in India, then why is it tempting Bangladesh for setting up a plant so close to the Sundarbans in Bangladesh?

The Rampal project violates the environmental impact assessment guidelines for a coal-based thermal power plant not only in Bangladesh but in India too. As a 50-50 partner the Indian state-owned NTPC's role, with no investments as yet in the Rampal project, has been criticised by many quarters. But, uninterrupted supply of good quality coal is what is needed for a coal-based power plant. India itself is lacking in both good quality and quantity of coal, and even the NTPC could not produce energy as per its projections in some of the Indian states. So what suggestions does it have for Bangladesh that is yet to explore its own coal resources?

The Indian central and state authorities, as recently as 2010, rejected a NTPC proposal for building a coal-fired plant at Gajmara in Madhya Pradesh since a vast portion of double-crop agricultural land reportedly comprised the site, similar to Rampal.

Last but not the least is that Bangladesh has almost crossed the limits of violating the Ramsar convention, the international convention on wetlands of international importance. As a Ramsar signatory it is not following the wetlands protection guidelines and may be held accountable for environment destruction. Is our government ready for tackling the Ramsar violations?

The writer is Current Affairs Analyst, The Daily Star.

SUNDAY
POUCHASHFAQUR
RAHMAN

JUST as any big ministry, like the finance ministry, needs a full ranking minister to run its affairs, so does the foreign ministry. Indeed, the prime minister is in charge at present, and has appointed a capable state minister to run the affairs of this ministry. But let us be very clear. Bangladesh is not a small country in an insignificant corner of the globe. Here we have 160 million people who are increasingly being drawn into global competition and globalisation. Myriad problems stalk these people day in and day out, which originate outside Bangladesh but impact the country. They need to be attended to diligently and with deftness. So when and where can the ministry policy makers get their directions?

Bangladesh has much to look forward to from the international community. At the moment it is at the receiving end of much criticism in areas like human rights, labour rights, corruption and militancy. Any of these issues can be deflected with adroit and mature handling. Appropriate policy planning and a coordinated approach to their resolution under the direction of the prime minister cannot but bring in excellent results. The need of the hour is to see how we can make some in the international donor community keep to their commitments in matters pertaining to international aid, climate fund, etc., with the help of our friends in the international community.

On the matter of bilateral relations with our neighbours and our friends abroad we are yet to make a deep impression. In the past five years we have had some success with India. But it has taken more than its share of our pound of flesh. There are issues we are struggling with, which should have come through in our favour easily and smoothly. These include the land boundary protocol, opening up of the Indian market for our products, as well as keeping the peace along the border between the two countries. We have not changed our strategy and tactics whenever India put up reasons as to why they cannot be resolved easily. We have quickly ensured that terrorism in any form will not be exported from Bangladesh to India.

But with our other big neighbour China, we are still at a stalemate in our relations. This is because we have not been able to invite any of their top leaders to visit our country. This has restricted the scope of our bilateral relations. Indeed, China is showing interest in some mega projects in Bangladesh. But we have not sat down with China to see whether Bangladesh can benefit if China works with Myanmar to open up connectivity, which includes rail, road, energy and telecommunications. Our foreign office, with its complement of officials and a state minister at the helm, do not have the clout or capacity to talk with the high level officials in China. Same is the case with other important countries in Asia, Europe and the USA. The prime minister has too little time for looking into such matters herself.

Just look at the nature of visits to our region by foreign leaders. They come to India, Pakistan and sometimes even to Sri Lanka. They skirt Bangladesh. In the case of visit to neighbouring Myanmar, we have missed out on important visits by dignitaries when they were welcomed there on bilateral visits. We seem to be treated as a politically lumbering country that has a lot of potential yet will take a long time to get off the ground. Our prime

minister herself has not been invited by our neighbours, except a few, for a visit. May be the reasons are the same. It is difficult to seek invitations from leaders when the political situation is yet to assume a clear shape. With a state minister heading our ministry it is unfair to expect much more.

We have issues of import coming up in 2014. One of them is the determination of our maritime boundary with our big neighbour India through international arbitration. We are expecting a favourable outcome. In case that does not happen, then what? Are we to remain partially sealed off for the rest of time? We need to have clarity on these issues and policy options. Can the state minister help the prime minister? But more important is the looming threat from the EU countries on GSP suspension. Labour rights in Bangladesh is a contentious issue that does not seem to go away. The foreign office needs to work in tandem with line ministries to see an end to this soon. The team would need guidance from the prime minister and the foreign minister to handle the matter.

The immediate concern of this government is to tackle the international outcry over the non-inclusive elections to the Jatiya Sangsad. Here, the prime minister is the sole arbiter of the matter. But a foreign minister needs to be in close liaison with colleagues across the region and elsewhere to ensure that the political decision is clearly conveyed and understood. Then the matter of fall in remittance as well as difficulties of labour recruitment in several

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countries needs to be looked into, and new plans laid down. The foreign office needs to develop deeper political relations with these countries in order to overcome the labour recruitment hurdles. Bilateral high level visits need to be organised to see if such matters can be handled easily.

Our country is increasingly coming under the microscope of big and influential countries like the USA and some European ones. Also India, China and Japan are finding our country irresistible because of our economic potentials. Bangladesh is also known for ridding terrorism from its soil. Our working population is young and resilient in the face of adversity. It is important, therefore, for the government to send a high level delegation to the USA to speak to them and to give Bangladesh's perspective so that they do not continue to hold 'negative' views on issues of human rights, labour rights, extra-judicial killings, etc.

We have an excellent cadre of foreign service officers who are raring to plan and create strategies on behalf of the government. But with no helmsman and no easy access to the prime minister such talent is falling by the wayside. The prime minister may think now of appointing a foreign minister who can support her in the arduous tasks ahead.

The writer is a former ambassador and a commentator on contemporary matters.

E-mail: ashfaque303@gmail.com

Mastering our urban future

VISIONARY
VOICES

NOELEEN HEYZER

BY the end of this century, ten billion people will inhabit our planet, with 8.5 billion living in cities. This could be the stuff of nightmares. But, with sufficient political will, vision, and creativity -- along with some simple, practical policy changes -- we may be able to create cities of dreams.

Cities are hubs of economic and social power. They drive national and global development by concentrating skills, ideas, and resources in a single location. But rapid urban development comes at a heavy cost. As cities expand, they swallow up land that would otherwise be used for food production. They drain water supplies, account for almost 70% of global energy use, and generate more than 70% of greenhouse-gas emissions.

If global growth is to be sustainable and equitable, we will need to alter the balance between rapid urbanisation and the unrelenting consumption of resources that it fuels.

The battle to keep the world's cities -- and thus the global economy -- both dynamic and sustainable can be won by developing innovative ways to consume our limited resources, without diminishing them or degrading the delicate ecological systems on which they depend. To achieve this, the world must meet six broad challenges.

First, we must change the way we design cities. Sustainability must be central to all urban planning, particularly in coastal cities that will soon face the ravaging effects of climate change. Denser cities use land more efficiently, reduce the need for private cars, and increase the quality of life by making space for parks and nature. Likewise, tightly integrated mass-transit systems reduce greenhouse-gas emissions dramatically.

Second, we must rethink how we design and operate buildings so that they use less energy -- or, better still, generate energy. Buildings are responsible for substantial CO2 emissions, owing to the materials used in their construction, their cooling and heating requirements, and auxiliary functions such as water supply, wastewater, and solid-waste disposal. Our building codes need to promote energy-efficient engineering and construction technologies, which can be supported by tax incentives and stricter regulations. With almost 30% of city dwellers in the Asia-Pacific region living in slums, one of our greatest tests will be to improve their living conditions without wreaking havoc on the environment.

The third challenge is to alter citizens' transport habits.

This means shifting from private cars to public transportation, and from road to rail. Indeed, wherever possible, we should try to reduce the need to travel at all. Transport systems that favour cars and trucks cause accidents, pollution, and chronic congestion. Moreover, the transport sector accounted for 23% of all energy-related CO2 emissions in 2004, and it is the fastest growing source of emissions in developing countries. Instead, we need to integrate transportation, housing, and land use, encourage reliance on public transportation, and make our streets pleasant and safe for walking (especially for women and the disabled).

The fourth challenge is to change how we produce, transport, and consume energy. This includes creating more efficient energy systems and increasing our investment in renewable sources (which will, one hopes, create jobs in the process). We can also encourage households to consume less energy, and companies to reduce the amount of energy that they waste.

Fifth, we must reform how we manage water resources and water infrastructure, so that this precious resource can be re-used several times, and on a city-wide scale. This requires us to integrate the various aspects of water management, such as household supply, rainwater harvesting, wastewater treatment and recycling, and flood-control measures.

If global growth is to be sustainable and equitable, we will need to alter the balance between rapid urbanisation and the unrelenting consumption of resources that it fuels.

Finally, we must change the way we manage solid waste so that it becomes a resource, not a cost. In many developing countries, 60-80% of solid waste is organic, with open dumping causing excessive amounts of methane to enter the atmosphere. Cash-strapped local governments spend 30-40% of their budgets on waste management but derive little in return. Yet, with some simple technological and design improvements -- aimed, for example, at achieving higher rates of composting and recycling -- 90% of this waste could be converted into something useful, such as biogas and resource-derived fuel.

These six steps require a comprehensive and coordinated change in behaviour, and will require government at all levels to cooperate, invest at scale, share ideas, replicate best practices, and plan for the long term. It is a monumental and daunting challenge, but not an impossible one. If it can be achieved, the world may yet get the urban future that it deserves.

The writer is Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations and Executive Secretary of the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific.

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LETTERS

TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

No room for
climate-scepticism

Unfortunately, many scientists are not even ready to believe the threats due to climate change. Some reject the facts outright, while others are doubtful. But in reality the impacts of climate change are highly evident in our environment: the temperature has increased; the sea level is rising and the frequency of cyclones, tidal surges, floods and droughts, etc., have significantly increased.

Recently Prince Charles, who is known for his strong views on environmental matters, during an award giving ceremony at Buckingham Palace for green entrepreneurs, bitterly criticised the climate change sceptics saying they are ignoring overwhelming scientific evidence.

I call upon those climate change sceptics to wake up to the reality and join majority people in reducing the man-made elements that are accelerating climate changes causing disasters.

Professor M Zahidul Haque

Department of Agricultural Extension & Information System, SAU, Dhaka

Will education minister
apologise?

The photo story of the education minister visiting an SSC exam hall with camera crews and journalists all around frontpaged in TDS on February 10 has shocked us. How could he, so thoughtlessly, disturb the examinees in the middle of an important examination? It is an utterly irresponsible and disgraceful behaviour, to say the least!

The least he can do now is offer public apology to the students and their guardians for his behaviour!

A former student

Dhaka

Comments on news report, "Bangladesh headed in wrong direction," published on February 12, 2014

Shahin Huq

These are not news to Bangladeshis. We want solution. The question is: Will Sheikh Hasina and her colleagues pay any heed to such surveys?

Jafar Iqbal

Certainly Bangladesh is heading towards wrong direction with full responsibility of its majority population. They forgot how to kick out a dictator after they did in 1990 last.

M. Ashraf

The government will nullify the survey stating that it was influenced by external forces or just ignore it as background noise. There will be no next election as they know the public has had enough with them. With the majority in parliament, they can make up some other rule to win the election or ban the opposition. The only thing that is in favour of the current government is that the opposition has been weak and equally ignorant and arrogant with the hartals and movements harming the public.

Abul Kashem

Any opinion poll that goes against the satisfaction of our 'popular' government leaders will get least importance and attention as long as we are surrounded by our well-wisher patrons who are believed to have assured our ruling party not to be concerned about others' opinions.

Ash C.

Very interesting but not surprising at all in most cases. More than 75% wanting restoration of the caretaker government system is inevitable! Now let's wait to see what the AL and other political parties have got to say about the report.

Mofi

Thanks for covering this survey. Most of the findings are reasonable. Only striking piece of result is "48 percent people said the Election Commission was completely impartial." I wonder how the questionnaire was designed. We still remember the IT caricature of election commission with the asset statements of candidates. And the involvement of money or gifts for casting votes or not casting votes is a question of less importance as it was not a competitive election.

Himukala

Majority (52%) didn't support BNP in boycotting the polls while 40% supported it, 77% think caretaker government should be brought back, Majority (48%) think election commission was completely impartial, fair and independent while 42% disagreed.....So, you can see that this survey did not find anything convincing except that the people are confused.

Rezaul Karim

Thanks for reporting the obvious. Bangladeshis are not naive in politics, at least. I don't think anyone except for Sheikh Hasina and a few of her misguided followers believe that Bangladesh is heading in the right direction. Even, I believe, majority of Awami Leaguers don't believe in their heart that what's happening in Bangladesh is right and want to see an urgent change. This is extremely to the nationalistic people with unshaken morality across the political spectrum. The sooner it happens, the better for all.