

Urgency for RMG sector restructuring

Greater productivity key to competitiveness

EXPERTS are of the opinion that for Bangladeshi RMG sector to expand its business up to \$50 billion per annum by 2021, a major thrust has to be given to upgrading technology and improving worker productivity. Enhancing capacity to produce high-end products will require serious investments in upgrading human capital. Bangladesh can ill-afford to remain content with its present levels of achievement in the field. Going by media reports, new entrants like a number of African countries could in the near future undercut the Bangladesh position on competitive pricing.

On the productivity issue, Bangladesh lags behind its nearest competitors by a significant margin. According to BGMEA data, we understand that Bangladeshi workers on average earn \$69 per month with productivity standing at 77 per cent. In comparison, Vietnam pays a higher monthly minimum wage of \$78 while their workers boast of productivity at 90 per cent. Indeed, all other nations including Pakistan claim higher productivity rates than Bangladesh, a trend that might eventually threaten to erode Bangladesh's coveted position as the second largest garment exporter after China.

Such an eventuality, if left to play out on its own, will have disastrous implications for the country. RMG constitutes about 80 per cent of our foreign exchange earnings. It has become imperative for policymakers to look into ways to improve the skills of our workers including providing favourable work environment. Skill development will be greatly helped by introducing technical curricula in secondary schooling and higher secondary schooling levels that would produce workers armed with the required skills who could contribute to making high-end garments products.

Vandalising of monuments

Such outrage must not be tolerated

IN the past many years, grievous assaults have been made on the nationalistic spirit of the country. Many of these attacks have come in the form of a desecration and vandalizing of monuments honouring the martyrs of the Language Movement as well as the War of Liberation. This year too, on the eve of Ekushey, vandals in Kushtia's Kumarkhali upazila thought little of destroying the shaheed minar set up on the premises of the century-old Jodubaira High School.

Going by the history of the monument, which was built as long ago as 1968, it has come under assault twice. The first time was in 1971, when the local collaborators of the Pakistan army destroyed it. The second time was, of course, on Thursday. Only a month ago, as the caption in the front page picture of the vandalized monument notes, another shaheed minar was attacked in the same upazila.

All of this is a matter of serious concern, not only because these monuments happen to fall under the same upazila but also because shaheed minars have been under assault elsewhere in the country. The simple question before us is: where do these anti-national elements get the courage to indulge in such reprehensible acts? There is another: how is it that the local authorities are generally unable to track down these successors of the 1971 generation of Pakistani collaborators and bring them to book?

Zero tolerance is the need here. No one and nothing that goes against our nationalistic spirit must be allowed to happen. Such impunity is outrageous and must be stopped ruthlessly.

Offshore woes

SHAHRIAR FEROZE

CONCERN over multinational companies overcharging for gas, petroleum and other hydrocarbon resources have been raised by many, as the Indian state-owned Oil and Natural Gas Corporation (ONGC) and Bangladesh Petroleum Exploration & Production Company Limited (BAPEX) signed a deal last Monday. In the light of the recent deal, we are curious to know, for how long will Bangladesh remain technically incapable of exploring natural resources? How and when will it be able to procure state-of-the-art equipment for mineral exploration? The above questions may be basic in nature, but need to be answered by the government soon. In the less than 15 years since its inception, ONGC has been exploring India's offshore resources. Our BAPEX, after over 40 years of existence, still has a long way to go to acquire primacy in the field of off-shore exploration. We want to see prompt initiatives for capacity building of BAPEX, or the 13.77 trillion cubic feet (0.2%) of the world's total hydrocarbon properties that belong to Bangladesh (according to British Petroleum) will be solely dependent on joint ventures with the OIC's. In times of exploration, not only will we have to share a large amount of our hydrocarbon resources, but will also be compelled to act according to their demands. Gaining full capability in oil and gas exploration is time consuming and a long-term solution, but it needs to be addressed through a series of upgradation stages as soon possible. As the government eased some of the major conditions in the Production Sharing Cost (PSC) by an amendment in 2012, it removed the export provision from the earlier PSC model, the exclusion must be reassessed and if needed reinstated in the PSC. The BAPEX-ONGC deal further says that if any hydrocarbon discoveries are made, the ONGC will take 55% of the discovered gas in the name of cost recovery. We need co-ordinated and strict measures for monitoring the ratios of share, since our dealing of cost recovery matters with OIC's have not been satisfactory in the past. As two more agreements are about to be signed this month -- one with the American ConocoPhillips for the shallow-water Block 7, and the other with Santos Criss Energy for Block 11 -- we expect the government to answer the worries regarding deals raised by the various quarters, and convincingly.

The writer is Current Affairs Analyst, The Daily Star

Upazila elections: Ups and downs of parties

M. SAKHAWAT HUSSAIN

THE first phase of the 4th upazila elections in 96 out of 97 upazilas elections ended in a relatively peaceful atmosphere, barring a few incidents of violence in which some ballot boxes were damaged and, reportedly, a few ballot papers were snatched. There were three instances where polling was boycotted. However, these few incidents in no way seriously affected the overall election atmosphere. The turnout may have been modest but good enough for this particular local body election which, by design, is supposed to be non-party. In reality, starting from filing of nomination to campaigning, the character of the election did not remain non-party, rather it became a contest among three parties in all the 40 districts where first phase elections were held.

The party positions became much clearer after the results were announced. BNP emerged as the leading party securing 40 chairman, and 34 male and 38 female vice-chairman posts followed by its arch rival, ruling Awami AL, which secured 34 chairman, and 27 male and 36 female vice-chairman posts. To the surprise of many, Jamaat secured 13 chairman, and 23 male and 10 female vice-chairman posts. On the other hand, the parliamentary opposition party, Jatiyo Party (JP), secured 1 chairman, and 3 male and 1 female vice-chairman posts. The turnout, around 63%-64%, was much less than expected, considering that the January 5 elections saw the lowest voter turnout in the election history of Bangladesh.

Though it is still premature for a critical analysis of all aspects of the elections, particularly the voting pattern and respective party performance, some of them have already come under scrutiny, particularly the popular support of the party positions at grassroots level. This particular aspect has generated some analysis of each major party's show and the level of popular support. As was believed by many analysts, the results confirmed the earlier comment that there has been significant slide in popular support for the ruling party and the coalition led by it. The point to note is that, besides AL, no other party of the alliance had nominated any candidate other than AL supporters in the elections, defying the party whip. Most surprising is the noticeable presence of Jamaat in spite of the fact that the party is going through the worst crisis in its existence.

The results certainly are an indication of persistent anti-incumbency factor. AL may deny it, but a serious soul searching would do well for it in the next phases of the elections. A large number of voters are still haunted

by the fact that the 10th national assembly elections had disenfranchised them. The disappointment was indicated by the lesser turnout despite the fact that a large number of the voters remained absent in the national assembly elections held a little over a month ago. BNP's edge over AL may not indicate its popularity entirely, but the pattern rather shows that grassroots support for AL is on the wane for multiple reasons. Chief among which is the one-sided election in which more than half of the national assembly seats was filled up by the uncontested winners, largely from AL.

The unexpected result that Jamaat has shown could simply be brushed aside with the explanation that it got its share from those blocs that it believed it dominated. But a couple of BNP-dominated upazilas went to Jamaat at the cost of the BNP candidates. It may indicate that there is some sympathy for Jamaat in these places, where a large number of their supporters were killed in police action few months ago. Religious



sympathy may also have been a contributory factor. However, one cannot help but mention that the country's third largest party and the opposition in the 10th Parliament, JP, seems to be on the brink of extinction. Its dismal performance raised many questions about whether it has any support at the grassroots or whether it has lost support because of its ambivalent position during the 10th Parliamentary election. There is no doubt that its supporters have shown no confidence in the present leadership. It goes without saying that JP minus Ershad does not look as appealing as it had under him. This is bad for multi-party democracy.

Be that as it may, one has to wait to see the trend in the subsequent elections to be held at the end of this month and thereafter. The next phase of elections, for many reasons, may not be as smooth as the first was. The next phase could bring challenges for the EC, which has done better than before. One also has to see how EC handles the small hiccups like the ones that it faced in several places and may face again.

The writer is former Election Commissioner.

Compliance Catch-22?

RUBANA HUQ

BUILT thirty years ago in empty spaces where all of us found promising vertical opportunities to grow, the tight and cramped buildings, till date, try to survive amidst residential areas. The old and the cramped, the new and the glitzy, the moderate and the mild ... all of these stand on their ground and take pride in the \$22 billion export figure that Bangladesh has today. And yes, Spectrum had shaken us, Tazreen had shamed, and Rana has humbled. With lessons learnt, it's indeed time for the export sector to make amends and resort to remediation.

While the buyers are stressing on structural integrity and asking for soil reports, architectural, structural, electrical drawings, approvals, and even the test results on materials during construction, the manufacturers are arguing about how difficult providing all of these will be if the building is an old one. With no requirement of Rajuk approval in the '80s, how could one turn the clock back and provide approvals, knowing full well that this process will set off yet another cumbersome, tedious and costly one? How will one possibly argue that the reinforced steel used in most of our buildings is of 40ksi and not 60ksi as suddenly required now? How will one argue that the earthing continuity conductors cannot be of 3.24mm² as most factory buildings had used 1.50mm² when they were built? How will one argue that the Bangladesh National Building Code came into existence only in 2006 whereas many buildings were built during 1980-2006? How shall we actually comply?

Factory buildings having more than 22,000 sq ft per floor or more than 75 feet in height must have automatic sprinkler, hydrant and self-addressable fire detection and alarm system. Emergency power is a must for lifts, exits, fire pumps, fire detection systems, smoke control systems, while battery-run signs and exit lights must be provided as well. Atriums must withstand 1-2 hours of fire while walls within the factory must be fire resistive up to 1-3 hours. Fire doors are now mandatory to protect the workers. Half of the factories in Bangladesh having more than 500 workers on a floor don't have three exits. The new rule makes three exits mandatory. Many factories, even after complying with Bangladesh National Building Code of 2006, still won't qualify as compliant units if sprinklers are not set up. Many factories will not be able to adhere to the rule that the circuits with more than one outlet cannot be loaded in excess of 50% of their current carrying capacity as many existing factories carry load of up to 65-70%.

In brief, the newer standards laid out for us are tough to follow while the immediate challenges for a manufacturer involve load distribution, stair width, smoke control, sprinkler, reservoir capacity, the requirement of over current protection, approval plans, exit enclosures and fire doors.

Yet, some of these factories, which have few of the

above, produce excellent products for the world's most reputed brands, and the workers in these factories have acquired incomparable skills. Where shall we relocate? How would we readdress the structural requirements keeping the production flow unhampered? And, most of all, who's going to pay?

Accord and Alliance, initiatives of the European and North American retailers, respectively, have both committed to pay for the remediation of the factories that they work with in Bangladesh. Point is, after these initiatives fully unfold their presence in Bangladesh, the factories that remain untraced and unauthorised and work as subcontracting units may not be producing apparel with labels of reputed brands on them, but does that make the lives of the people working there any cheaper? Compliance has to mean more than protecting reputational risks for all the stakeholders.

There are lots of issues at stake here. Cost is one of them. Time frame is another. And partnership and trust are crucial. A hydrant system costs around \$40,000 for an average 4-6 line factory. As time lines are being set for factories to comply with, we also need to urge the retailers and brands to engage in a dialogue with the manufacturers to discuss payment terms for remediation. Factories also can't be expected to transform instantly. Post Rana landscape may demand an overnight makeover of RMG, but it is by no means a reality. Remedial action requires time and, thankfully, both Accord and Alliance have committed to a five-year long engagement with the sector.

Changes may be expected phase-wise. Immediate risk assessment and basic compliance must be taken care of first. Then comes the issue of remediation and up-gradation.

A quick look at the world now; China's textile and apparel exports reached \$283.9 billion in 2013, up 11.4% from 2012, compared with only a 2.8% growth year-on-year in 2012. The 16 local unions, including the Cambodia Alliance of Trade Unions and the Cambodian Coalition of Apparel Workers' Democratic Union, announced their intention to strike mid-March after a decision last week by the Phnom Penh Court of Appeal to deny bail to 21 protesters arrested in January. And last but not the least, in Bangladesh, apparel exports rose to \$14.17 billion in the period from July to January, up from \$12.04 billion a year earlier, exceeding target of \$13.4 billion. Strangely, in terms of figures, we don't look too bad globally, but all it'll take is just a fire or an abuse to trigger alarms on the world stage and pave the way for the world to cease sourcing from Bangladesh, or at least prepare for a gradual exit.

But, with costs going up, it's also up to the brands to reconcile with the fact that Bangladesh may not remain the cheapest manufacturing hub forever and, with the compliance standards being set so high, all stakeholders need to accept that meaningful safety should be affordable at this point of time.

The writer is Managing Director, Mohammadi Group.

LETTERS

TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

Juveniles at correction centre need treatment

The recent incident at a juvenile correction centre at Tongi caused much uproar in the news media. But the solution has not been discussed. Juvenile correction centres accommodate children who have had criminal records. These children may have various psychiatric illnesses like conduct disorder, substance abuse or drug addiction, hyperactivity disorder, personality disorder, etc., which require psychiatric attention. Moreover, their sudden rage or impulsivity requires prompt treatment with psychiatric medications.

Apart from all those administrative measures taken, I think psychiatric assessment and treatment of these self-harming boys are necessary. Dillydallying in such treatment may make their recovery difficult if not put their life in peril.

Dr. Shafquat Waheed

Assistant Professor

Department of Adult Psychiatry

National Institute of Mental Health

Sher-e-Bangla Nagar, Dhaka

GEC crossing at Ctg needs footbridge

GEC crossing is one of the busiest areas of Chittagong city. From morning to night, hundreds of vehicles pass through this junction. Vehicles come from all directions making it almost impossible for the pedestrians to cross the road. As there are a few schools and colleges near this junction, hundreds of children move around this area. A footbridge could reduce the sufferings of the passers-by. An overbridge has been constructed near WASA office recently. A similar type of bridge is required at GEC junction too.

Zabed Wali
Chittagong

Md. Yamin Khan

Shyamoli, Dhaka

Resist the religious fanatics

The religious extremists are hatching conspiracy to destroy the country by creating chaos. By doing so they are creating division among the countrymen. Recently, the terrorists of Jamaat-Shibir and BNP pounced on the journalists of Desher Patro in Rangpur, Chandpur and Kishoreganj with sticks and sharp weapons and injured them severely for carrying out protests against them. They should be stopped right now before further damage is done to the country. The government should resist them with all its strength.

Md. Yamin Khan
Shyamoli, Dhaka

Comments on news report, "First cheer BNP's," published on February 20, 2014

Shahin Huq

Fair elections would have given a different picture. Public support for Awami League (for its repressive measures and murderous activities) is next to zero now.

Nds

It reinforces the fact that BNP committed a blunder by boycotting the last national election. They would have definitely got the similar result in spite of the ruling party's attempt to rig the election process.

Shahid

AL should understand that people don't like them to rule the country any more. All the elections before and after the 5th January's farce poll made it clear. The party would have lost even miserably, had not some goons intervened the elections changing the outcome in a sizable number of UP constituencies.

Molla A. Latif

BNP leaders are wrong when they say EC is biased, the government is not fair and the election cannot be neutral under AL government. They should have participated in the national election to know whether their speculation was right. They have failed miserably to prove their anticipation. They should realise it and congratulate the EC and the government for their fair play.

Fakhrul Islam

Now how will the AL government ban Jamaat?

Mortuza Huq

It is widely believed that the victory for the BNP/Jamaat supported candidates could be landslide if rigging didn't take place. The whole thing indicates a quick polarisation of the Bangladesh politics.

"CEC claims fair voting" (February 20, 2014)

Mofi

Areckless CEC!

Aasif Sarwar

Unfortunately, CEC does not have any wish to hold a free, fair and credible election.

Nasirullah Mridha, USA

CEC intended to hold the election in three phases. In the first phase ruling party cadres resorted to stray violence but CEC is satisfied with the environment. EC has failed to create a peaceful environment. The CEC needs to straighten his backbone if he wants to gain BNP's support.