

RMG labour unrest It should be fairly resolved immediately

THE incident at Tuba group is a typical example of how we managed to turn an isolated incident of workers' disgruntlement over pay issues into a national issue. With the deployment of high-handed measures in an effort to forcibly clear the premises of what was essentially a peaceful gathering of workers, we have managed to put the international spotlight back on the RMG sector. Overnight, an incident of agitating workers in a single factory has become a national issue that threatens wider labour unrest in the RMG sector.

We question the logic behind the use of police, especially when arrears over back pay and Eid festivity bonus were in the process of being paid. There are serious questions as to why even after the Managing Director of the Tuba Group was released on bail he has not been available to redress the issue of pay and bonus. At a time when the country is being watched by important international buyers of RMG and progress on the tripartite agreement on safety of workers at the workplace is coming up for review, surely we could have done better than allow a one-factory issue becoming a national one. The damage to our goodwill has been done. Now it is time to expeditiously sort out the situation with the government bringing all concerned parties, including the Tuba management and workers' union representatives to the negotiation table to sort out the mess before it turns into a fiasco with industry-wide ramifications.

Food output and prices Maintain balance, remunerate growers

WE note with mixed optimism the latest food ministry cereal production figures based on data from the Department of Agricultural Extension (DAE). Food grain production may increase by more than 1 per cent to 3.55 crore tonnes at final count in fiscal 2013-14 compared with the preceding year's total output. But this overall growth has been mainly because of stepped up boro rice production.

Still, we will fall short of the production target set at 3.59 crore tonnes for the outgoing fiscal owing largely to what is being euphemistically dubbed as less than expected production of aas and aman.

But for the better boro yields, we would have had an uncomfortable deficit. The upswing in boro output was helped by two factors: The area of cultivation exceeded the target, reaching 4.8 million hectares; and favourable weather conditions boosted both the acreage and yields. Steadier power supply to irrigate land and availability of other inputs facilitated boro farming. Boro's share being well over one-third of our total rice production, it should continue to be incentivized.

The current year's cereal prices are said to be lower than those of earlier years. While from the consumer's point of view this may be welcome but we have to ensure that the prices at the grower's level, beyond meeting the cost of production leave them a margin of profit to live on and feel encouraged in farming.

A significant outing in Nepal

EDITORIAL: *The Hindu* (India)

PRIME Minister Narendra Modi has concluded an important visit to Nepal, where he tapped all the right nodes of the relationship -- political, economic and cultural -- to turn around ties, which had begun to languish over the last few years. The visit seems to have caught the imagination of the people of Nepal. Partly, this was because Mr. Modi managed to connect with the common person through his carefully choreographed visit to the ancient Pashupatinath temple, and a generous announcement of donations to give the ancient place of worship an essential facelift. The prime minister's visit also created a buzz because he seemed to have fresh ideas, born out of a vision that Indo-Nepal ties can flourish only when they are connected with South Asia's promising future. Mr. Modi has re-emphasised that bilateral ties with neighbours must promote the overall well-being of the eight-nation South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (Saarc).

In his bid to reinvigorate the relationship, Mr. Modi underscored his penchant for using energy as an instrument to reinforce political bonds. During his stay, India pledged to bolster Nepal's energy security by agreeing to establish a two-phase products pipeline, which will eventually carry petroleum products from Raxaul in Bihar to Kathmandu. More significantly, discussions have been held to link Nepal with a gas pipeline from India. If that happens, it would lock India and Nepal into a genuine strategic embrace, opening up the possibility of Nepal benefiting from gas that India might in the future procure from a variety of overseas destinations, including Iran and Turkmenistan. India's energy pledge to Nepal follows a decision to build a pipeline channeling diesel and kerosene to Pakistan from its refinery in Bhatinda. Besides, India is planning to send gas, transported from Dahej in Gujarat to Jalandhar, before it is sent on to Pakistan. Nepal would be one of the beneficiaries if the project fructifies; it could also be connected with the futuristic Iran-Pakistan-India (IPI) and Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline networks. Following improved atmospherics resulting from Mr. Modi's visit, India and Nepal decided to "once and for all" resolve the pending Nepal-India boundary issues, including differences over Kalapani and Susta. Yet, both sides have their task cut out to remove the remaining impediments in the relationship. New Delhi and Kathmandu need to quickly revise the Treaty of Peace and Friendship of 1950, so that the archaic "big-brother" tag on India is swiftly removed. Besides, the two have to learn to work together with China, which has the political heft and the economic surplus to make solid investments in the Himalayan republic.

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STRAIGHT LINE



MUHAMMAD
NURUL HUDA

HERE is no denying that in late July and early August this year, there have been attacks on Hindu community's houses and places of worship on different pretexts. Whether it was alteration in the playing field or so-called mischievous posting on the Facebook or attempts to grab property, the fact was one of blatant assault and intimidation of the Hindu community.

That the tolerance threshold and mischief-mongering of a section of people has reached an unspeakable level is borne out by the fact that clashes between two groups in Noakhali over a football match, although amicably settled initially, ultimately resulted in vandalisation of Hindu homesteads, deities, and mandirs. Enquiry reveals long-standing land disputes as the motive of attack. Similar incident had also occurred in Barisal in the recent past.

In Bauphal area of Patukhali district the communally minded predators acted as unabashed grabbers when they forcibly dislodged Nakul Chandra and his family members and took possession of their homestead. When complaint was lodged police acted promptly and restored the property to the owner, but that was no solace for the victim family that has been threatened of expulsion from the country. There have been late night attacks on Hindu property and places of worship in Fatiakchari area of Chittagong district.

Under the circumstances, we in Bangladesh need to ask whether it is religion per se or the politicisation of religious identity and the mobilisation of this identity for community and state ends that have resulted in communal violence. We also need to find out whether the emphasis is on contests for power and resources. Have the recent violent outbreaks occurred with the acquiescence of the administration?

Experience indicates that quite often the outbreaks of communal violence have not been the result of spontaneous outbursts of passionately held religious beliefs; they are carefully planned and orchestrated and occur within a context of political mobilisation. Violence has been facilitated by the ability of some officials and criminals to behave and act with impunity. It has been seen that in circumstances in which the state acts resolutely violence prone situations do not erupt into large scale disturbances.

Coming to specifics, in Bangladesh, why do we witness attacks on Hindu properties? Is creation of hatred a ploy for some of the majority Muslim politicians and influential people to grab Hindu property? The torching of Hindu houses over a petty altercation quite clearly indicates the malafide intention of terrorising and dislocating the vulnerable minority. Simple common sense should tell that the ferocity of attack on Hindus is caused by the victims' weakness and the perpetrator's immunity from the process of law. Are the patrons of the mischief-makers too powerful to be dislodged?

The immediate imperative, under the circumstances, is to effectively deactivate the vultures that are on the watch to grab the lands and properties of panicked Hindus. This requires political will and stern administrative measures for ensuring continued security. However, beyond that, the minorities need to politically organise themselves in such a manner that in course of time, issues of their honourable existence become a focus of mainstream politics. Such course of action is expected to provide substantial relief.

The politicians cannot be part of a deliberate effort to realign state and cultural power in the interest of the majority because that will result in non-Muslim minorities being defined explicitly or implicitly as second class citizens of Bangladesh. It is only proper that the flowering of a nation demands proactive action from the state. Finally, let us bear in mind that the concept of 'Ummah' in the historic Medina Charter included all faiths.

The writer is a columnist of *The Daily Star*.

BROADCASTING POLICY, 2014

Strategy to muzzle the media

C.R. ABRAR

LAST week, the government formulated a policy that has major bearing on freedom of expression of the citizens. Article 1.2 of the Broadcasting Policy details the aims and objectives. They include "strengthening and making the broadcasting system dynamic," "adhering to international principles and standards" through pursuing values of "pluralism and diversity, accuracy, impartiality," and also ensuring people's unfettered access to information. They also highlight initiatives for improving the quality of broadcasting system through open and fair competition between private and public sectors, promoting public-private partnership, engaging the broadcast media in government's development activities and eliminating discrimination. These goals espouse "the fundamental freedom of the news media" that has been an integral element of the "spirit of the great War of Liberation," and are emphasised in the preamble of the policy.

While presenting the new policy the information minister pointed out that it was not directed "to control" the media, but to ensure that they "enjoy greater independence and accountability." The minister further stated that the initiative was essentially to "bring about discipline" in the broadcasting sector, a demand that was put forward by the members of the media. In reinforcing his claim of democratic decision-making process the minister highlighted "the participation of the stakeholders" in framing the policy.

There has been a lot of discussion in the print and electronic media about the contents of the new policy. The cabinet approval has drawn sharp response from various quarters. Rights activists view it as gross infringement on the freedom of expression, while a section of the stakeholders who participated in its formulation expressed their disappointment at the final outcome. In this essay an attempt will be made to examine the milieu in which the broadcasting policy has been framed, the likely intent of the government as reflected in the framing process, and the reasons why it should be deemed to be against freedom of expression and thus anti-democratic.

One does not have to be a discerning observer to conclude that freedom of expression has been under pressure all through independent Bangladesh's history. Evocation of the spirit of the War of Liberation has not been enough to cure the disdain against press freedom by both civilian and military factions of the ruling elite of the country. Every ruling party or coalition made brazen use of the state-owned media to promote its vested interests, with utter disregard for freedom of expression.

There is a propensity among some liberal commentators to equate lack of press freedom with authoritarian military rules and as a post-1975 phenomenon. However, one recalls the pressure that daily Ganakantha (People's Voice), an organ of the Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal of the current information minister, had to endure under the first Awami League government and how freedom of expression was curtailed following the passage of the Fourth Amendment of the Constitution that launched single party rule. All newspapers, barring 4 that were government-owned, were shut down.

In the post-Baksal phase, under the successive BNP, Jatiya Party and Awami League administrations, both electronic and print media continued to endure various kinds of stress that included arbitrary distribution of quota for newsprints and advertisements; formal and informal censorship; self-censorship; advice and other forms of diktat from the Press Information Department, intelligence agencies and the Offices of the Chief Martial Law Administrator and the Prime Minister, depending on political dispensation of the time.

The situation has been no less difficult since the Awami League-led alliance took over power in 2009. In recent times, issuance of radio and television licenses to individuals and groups on political consideration; injudicious amendment of the Information and Communication Act; arbitrary closure of television channels and incarceration of an editor; ill-advised directives to electronic media on whom to invite to talk shows and whom not to; imprudent pronouncements of a number of ministers that the media was enjoying "unfettered freedom that needed to be curbed;" and the frustration of the prime minister that "even the television channels which received license from

this government were taking positions against it," are all indicative of the frame of mind of those who are at the helm of affairs today.

In recent weeks, discussions about amending the Printing Presses and Publications Act for giving back the power of rescinding registration of newspapers to the deputy commissioners, though denied by the information minister, has further heightened the apprehension.

It is under such a situation that the Broadcasting Policy has been finalised. The policy only reaffirms the government's entrenched position in continuing with the culture of impunity extended to the members of law enforcement agencies and those in the civil administration.

One has reason to doubt if there has been any movement forward in the mindset of the Awami League leaders for creating an enabling environment for freedom of expression to flourish in this country since the Asafuddowla Commission report was jettisoned during the first tenure of the Hasina government. One wonders why the political leaders cannot come out of such a mindset. The objectives enshrined in the approved policy are in perfect harmony with the spirit of the Liberation War that Awami League leaders and their cohorts so loudly champion. So why are they reticent in realising these goals and why are the measures recommended in the policy so antithetical to freedom of expression?

In framing this national policy the information ministry opted to pursue a partisan approach and had chosen those who belong to the Awami persuasion from among the journalist community as members of the Committee. The extent of anguish even among those members of the Committee is palpable. Some among them raised the demand that the government should immediately set up an independent Broadcasting Commission with the mandate to review the policy and frame the broadcasting law and associated rules. However, the information minister has been on record stating that the law will be framed within a couple of months and it is only after framing of the law that the Broadcasting Commission would be set up. He indicated that it might take as long as five months to establish the Commission after the law is framed.

The time line proposed by the minister raises the question as to how such an important law can be framed within a couple of months. If formulating the law can take two months, then why would it take as many as five months to set up the Broadcasting Commission? One cannot help but reach the conclusion that that this delay in forming the Commission will only give the ministry unbound authority to continue to be sole arbiter on broadcasting matters.

In a major departure from the established practice of holding consultations before framing a public policy, as was followed in cases of anti-trafficking act and overseas employment and migration act by this government, the Broadcasting Policy was formulated without major public engagement. The reactions of the members of the committee to the final document betray the fact that very little, if any, of their contributions were included in the final document. The ministry should consider making up for its past lack of transparency by putting up on its website the contributions and suggestions that it received on the draft policy from the Committee members and those outside. This is likely to help fill the gaps in forthcoming law.

A major party, the BNP, has condemned the policy document. If the past record is anything to go by then not much trust can be laid on the party that it will rescind the document if it goes to power. Successive governments in Bangladesh have continued with the regressive policies of their predecessors, particularly those curtailing the democratic rights of citizens. Those include the Emergency Act, the Special Powers Act, the Printing Press and Publication Act and the laws that created various Special Forces.

One expected that this assault on freedom of expression would bring journalists of all hues together. It is disheartening to note that the media fraternity has failed to take a united stand on this. Perhaps time has come for other civil society organisations and the people at large to challenge this freedom curbing policy of the government. It is only by doing so that one can truly uphold one of the most cherished principles of the spirit of our great Liberation War, freedom of expression.

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LETTERS

TO THE EDITOR

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David Cameron's doubts

I must appreciate the world leaders who condemned Israel over Gaza killing. But I lament as others did nothing and the death toll rose to nearly 1900. The US president demanded "unconditional release" of one Israeli soldier (reportedly dead already) but said nothing about the Israeli massacre! Another shocking news we learn from the media is that David Cameron, the UK PM, said, "International law is clear that it's completely wrong and illegal to target children, if that's what's happened." What a cruel joke! He still doubts if such targeting by Israel has taken place?

How much more Palestinian children's blood will spill? When will our Arab brethren in the Middle East wake up?

A F Rahman

On e-mail

Where are those HR champions?

The most heinous and brutal killing continues in Gaza by Israel. And the world leaders are watching it. The west should never talk about peace again. They are supporting the barbarian Israel and yet they call themselves civilised. What a joke!

Bangladesh prime minister recently said that Bangladesh will always be with Palestine and against Israeli terror. We may not be a very rich country but our heart is bigger than those rich but hypocritical nations who lecture us about human rights.

Jannatul Ferdous Usha

Holy Cross College

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Why law enforcers engage in unlawful activities?

When a political party comes to power undemocratically and without people's mandate, they need the help of law enforcers to remain in power. As a result, law enforcers take full advantage of the situation. They get engaged in kidnapping, torturing, extortion, and killing innocent people for their own benefit.

My point is, it is not unusual for the law enforcers to behave unlawfully when they have to assist a government to stay in power forcefully. That's what we are observing now in Bangladesh. God save us!

Dr. Mujibur Rahman Sinha

Retired physician

On e-mail

Comments on news report, "27 more fake war heroes identified," published on August 4, 2014

Nazmul Haq

Investigation will find many more fake certificate holders. Cancellation of certificate is not enough. They should be prosecuted for forgery.

"Biman to get new chief in 2 months" (August 4, 2014)

Humayun Hyder

Biman is going to appoint a new MD. Our suggestion is, choose someone from Biman who has the experience and knowledge of running the national flag carrier.

"More than 100 feared dead" (August 5, 2014)

Hallucinator

It seems that in Bangladesh human life has no value.

Humayun Hyder

It has been heard that the launch had the capacity of carrying 85 passengers, but it was carrying almost 300 passengers. Moreover, the launch had no fitness certificate. How come a launch without fitness certificate runs on a regular basis? It is feared that most of the passengers are dead. I think the government must penalise those who are responsible for this accident.

"Chinese firm hid info in Padma bid" (August 4, 2014)

S. M. Iftekhar Ahmed

Thanks to the lack of accountability and rampant corruption! Only the most incompetent companies are now lining up for the most vital projects that are so crucial for the nation's development.

"No rules left to be broken" (August 2, 2014)

Enlightenedview

These universities are not only destroying the career of their students but also damaging the educational standards of the whole of Bangladesh. It is better to weed out these parasites as soon as possible.