

Tazreen two years on

Some improvement, but a long way to go

IT is reassuring to note that safety conditions of factories have improved since the devastating Tazreen Fashion fire incident back on November 24, 2012. The credit for this goes to diligent inspection efforts by the two buyer-sponsored agencies -- Accord and Alliance -- assisted by the government, labour rights organisations and BGMEA. But we have to bear in mind the fact that improvement work is still in its initial stage and a large number of factories remain beyond any form of oversight. Inspection of all factories and at the same time proper functioning of the already safe ones should be ensured to create a failsafe work condition in this vital export sector. Another relevant question is: how far will the oversight system be sustained? So far the oversight work has been done largely due to buyer pressure. The government and all the key stakeholders have to play a concerted role in continuing the oversight operations.

In spite of the improvement, compensation remains a big issue for the victims. They are yet to get recompensed in line with ILO conventions and many injured workers are suffering due to lack of proper treatment. So far only a Dutch buyer has agreed to pay compensation to the victims. We would urge all other buyers that sourced from Tazreen to follow suit. The government and BGMEA also cannot avoid their responsibility in this matter.

The home ministry's investigation termed the huge loss of life in Tazreen as "death by negligence" of the owner. But the culprit is yet to be punished. Labour rights groups have criticised the authority's leniency towards the culprit, Delwar Hossain, who has been set on bail. The same owner has closed down Tuba garments without paying rightful compensation to the workers. The implication is that such denial of justice could only result in more incidents of injustices.

While we welcome the improvements in safety condition it can hardly be overemphasised that the garments manufacturing industry cannot progress without safe working environment and ensuring labour rights and justice.

We top mobile users' list in South Asia

Harness the advantage fully

ACCORDING to a report by an international mobile research and development body called mobiforge, Bangladesh tops the list of mobile users in South Asia followed by Pakistan and India. This has been unveiled by a report in a prominent Bangla daily. The research report further says that for the first time Bangladesh has been included in the 100 million users' club of fourteen countries. The sheer number of mobile users in Bangladesh, being 75% of its population, reflects a huge stride taken in ownership of a powerful communication device.

While the trend of accessing the internet via mobile has increased, mobile phone is being widely used for exchange of information and data related to marketing, agriculture, health and education. Decisively, this has been an important tool for banking and financial transactions. According to The Economist, some Tk. 250 crore is transacted daily via mobile phones in today's Bangladesh.

However, public and private sectors should now work together to foster a conducive atmosphere for promising youngsters to invent subject specific apps so that the numbers of services are multiplied. Now the task is to create mobile based employment opportunities to the fullest. The quiet mobile revolution will now have to be taken forward to a more vibrant multiple mobile usage culture.

First clear the sidewalks

RIDWAN QUAJUM

IN the 'Letters to the Editor' section of *The Daily Star*, one of the writers mentioned that the Chittagong Metropolitan Police has evicted all the makeshift shops from the sidewalks in the Chittagong EPZ area. The eviction has reduced the traffic congestion in the EPZ area because pedestrians are now able to walk safely and comfortably on the sidewalk instead of the road without jeopardising their safety and without disrupting traffic flow.

Although about 20% of the people in Dhaka commute by walking, the city severely lacks walking-friendly environment, an important aspect that determines the quality of life in a city. A report by *The Daily Star* says that most of the sidewalks are occupied by illegal makeshift shops, illegal extension of shops adjacent to the sidewalk, construction materials and equipments, slums, garbage and illegal parking. In many areas the sidewalks are also in poor condition.

Many road crossing facilities, such as footbridges, are occupied by hawkers. Some of the footbridges have even been closed because of their poor state as a result of lack of regular maintenance. Mugging is common on the footbridges and in underpasses.

Due to illegal obstruction, poor state of the sidewalks and mugging incidents in the road crossing facilities, pedestrians are sometimes forced to jaywalk. Jaywalking is one reason why pedestrian to vehicle collision rate is quite high; and it is also a reason for the city's horrendous traffic congestion.

It is appreciated that the Dhaka Metropolitan Police (DMP) has decided to crack down on jaywalkers by fining or imprisoning them, but to make the drive fruitful it is essential that the DMP first clears the sidewalks and road crossing facilities to improve the walkability of the city.

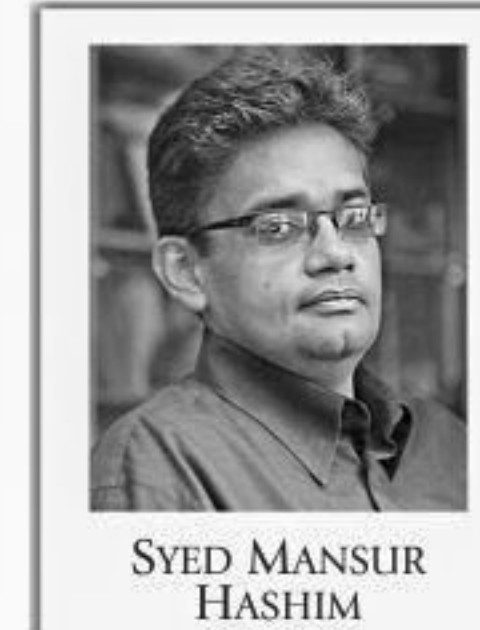
Similar to Chittagong, the DMP should first evict all the makeshift shops and slums from the sidewalks, footbridges and underpasses in the city. To ensure that after the eviction these shops and slums do not return, the city authority may allocate space for them to relocate.

DMP should also consider fining contractors and shop owners who occupy public space with construction materials and equipments and illegal extension of their shops. In addition, vehicles illegally parked on the sidewalks should be ticketed regularly.

The city authority should relocate dumpsters from sidewalks to places not in public sight and, most importantly, regularly clean and maintain the sidewalks and the road crossing facilities. This may help to reduce traffic congestion and enhance the safety of pedestrians.

The writer is a Transportation Engineer working in Thailand.

Saarc Summit: Hopes and fears



SYED MANSUR HASHIM

PERCEPTIONS have changed with the possibility of three major deals that may be signed during the summit. These include: (i) An Agreement for the Regulation of Passenger and Cargo Vehicular Traffic among member States; (ii) Saarc Regional Agreement on Railways, and (iii) Saarc Framework Agreement for Energy Cooperation. With the last two agreements signed off by the government, the Bangladesh side is hopeful to get some serious discussions ending in firm agreements in Nepal.

The first agreement would facilitate "allowing the vehicles of other Member States to ply in their territory for transportation of Cargo and Passengers to various terms and conditions in the Agreement and obtaining permits for such transport from Members States as per procedure and protocols prescribed in the Agreement. The agreement if signed will result in closer regional economic cooperation and integration through enhanced regional connectivity by allowing movement of goods and passengers in the region through road transport." The details will have to be thrashed out among member countries on operators that will be allowed to carry passengers and cargo. Other factors that will come up for consideration will be on the nature of permits and the traffic volume allowed by each country, and the entire regime of tariff will have to be worked out at the various entry points. The agreement will be reviewed every three years and can be amended or ratified then.

Like the road deal, the agreement on railways will allow for the ferrying of cargo and the movement of passengers along proposed routes. This agreement would allow for direct rail links on various routes connecting Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Bhutan and Nepal. It opens up bright prospects for landlocked Nepal and Bhutan; both countries will gain access to two Bangladeshi ports of Chittagong and Mongla. Terms and conditions for

using infrastructure in various countries will have to be worked out. As per a Daily Star report on November 23, "according to the draft, the countries will have to take measures for maintaining trains and servicing locomotives at interchange points, providing immigration and visa facilities, and ensuring security for passenger and cargo transportation." This agreement will certainly be to our advantage, as it will provide Bangladesh Railway to earn meaningful profits by carrying cargo to various destinations.

But it is the last agreement that has the greatest potential and hope for the economy. Much has already been written on Saarc Framework Agreement for Energy Cooperation. The agreement would provide a platform for surplus-energy producing member countries to "export" electricity to energy-starved nations like Bangladesh and India. Were this agreement to see the light of day, it could open up the possibility for us to import hydroelectric power from other member countries. This is a deal that has generated much interest over the last four years since severe power crunch has left industrialisation plodding along an uncertain trajectory.

That said, all these deals have reportedly run into hot water ahead of the Summit. According to what has been published in the press on November 24, besides Bangladesh, Nepal and India, other members are far from ready with preparations to ratify these agreements. That is going to

be a huge disappointment for policymakers who had hoped that the agreement signing would open up for a Saarc Market for Electricity (SAME). It would help expand the existing power trading that is already happening between India and Bangladesh. Were the agreement signed, Bangladesh could forgo (to a large extent) expensive electricity generation and turn to countries like Bhutan and Nepal and import electricity through interconnected power grids. It certainly is a major disappointment to see that the experts have probably not been able to work out the regulatory issues governing such a system. Similarly, Saarc remains one of the least networked regions in terms of physical connectivity leading high costs and low volumes of trade. The failure to agree on the railroad and road agreements will put back plans for transforming Saarc into a true trade bloc and hence missing out the opportunities associated with greater trade in the region. Disappointment at failure to ink three key pacts will be felt throughout Saarc.

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BANGLADESH

Asia's new energy superpower?

JACK DETSCH

IMAGINE you are a major energy magnate, poring over maps to find the world's next natural gas superpower. Where would you invest?

Even though Bangladesh just hit an energy mother lode in July -- winning the rights to 20,000 square kilometers of natural gas-rich waters from India in a UN territorial arbitration, chances are you probably wouldn't think of it. To most, the territory still looks like a high-risk investment, given the political tensions, pervasive poverty, and highly subsidised economy which undermines growth and limits spending on energy infrastructure. Dhaka and Chittagong, swathed in slums, are a world away from the air-conditioned shopping malls of Riyadh, Doha, and Dubai.

Yet, looking the part isn't everything: Nigeria, Chad, and Venezuela have fared well in oil markets despite endemic poverty and violence; but Bangladesh's troubles could help explain why investors haven't been biting. In fact, quite the opposite; Australia's Santos pulled the plug on Bangladesh's only offshore gas field last year, citing poor production. With the help of KrisEnergy, a Singaporean company, Santos plans to begin drilling in shallow waters later this year. PetroBangla, the national oil company, attracted just two bidders in a 2012 auction for offshore drilling rights: India's Oil & Natural Gas Corporation and Houston-based ConocoPhillips.

Interest in "dispute-free" offshore oil blocks, which PetroBangla opened for auction last April, has proven sparse. Companies have complained about the lack of access to onshore blocks, and the terrible terms for drilling offered by PetroBangla. Earlier this year, Conoco and Russia's StatOil paired up to bid on three of Bangladesh's deep-water oil blocks, 30,000 feet below sea level. Conoco later attempted to win an agreement on two more deepwater blocks. Yet outside of these companies, few are betting on Bangladesh.

It might be a smart time to place a wager. With its new territory, Bangladesh's natural gas reserves are now estimated at 200 trillion cubic feet, the largest supply in the Asia-Pacific. PetroBangla will auction off 18 new oil and gas blocks by the end of the year. "Assuming Bangladesh could recover all of that, it would make it one of the largest natural gas producers in the world," says Neil Bhatiya, a Policy Associate at the Century Foundation.

That's a big if. Robin Mills, head of consulting at Manaar Energy, says there's no way to be sure what's there. "We just don't know whether 100 to 200 trillion cubic feet, or indeed anything at all, will be discovered in the new area." Bangladesh's gas reserves are probable, not proven, so that estimate is a fifty-fifty proposition, based on existing geological and engineering data.

Bangladesh needs a comprehensive plan to survey and derive this energy, but the government lacks basic competencies to drill in deep water, from trained oceanographers to laws that safeguard against spills. Bangladesh's Petroleum and Exploration Company has done experimental gas drilling, but it lacks the money and the energy infrastructure needed to explore the new territory.

Drilling also presents an environmental risk: cabinet secretaries have promised to deploy the government's few tools to guard against environmental disasters, but

they will need to import talent from energy majors to prevent methane leaks into the bay. Bhatiya says that problem can be mitigated using production agreements with Conoco and StatOil to extract the gas safely.

PetroBangla's chief, Hossain Monsur, echoed that notion in a statement released just after the UN's decision in July. But to achieve this, Bangladesh must first make peace with international oil majors, reconciling disputes that PetroBangla has enflamed over the price of gas, which Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has fought to keep down. "Bangladesh may be willing to fast-track pricing reform if they think it'll lead to the large-scale extraction of these resources," Bhatiya says.

In the Bengal Delta, where poverty is pervasive, pricing reform may prove unpalatable. Families that depend on government subsidies to keep the lights on and put food on the table will not be able to stomach higher bills. If Dhaka pays the bumped-up tab itself, those expenses could wreak more havoc on the beleaguered economy: boosting inflation, hiking the trade deficit, and chewing up big bites of tax revenue. Energy subsidies alone cost Bangladesh \$1.9 billion in 2013, and much of the food subsidy has been choked away by corruption in recent years. By going further into the red to subsidise its poor, Bangladesh would tack onto its budget deficit, a mess that the tax base couldn't possibly clean up.

With foreign investors clamouring to get involved in the gas industry, and the presence of corruption lurking throughout Bangladesh's ministries, rated some of the

worst in the world by Transparency International, much of the energy, and revenue won from the UN settlement may not get back to the poorest citizens. That means the pain of energy shortages could persist, abetted by corruption in the state sector, and cause lasting damage. Political instability is also a grave threat: hundreds died in violence

leading up to January's election, the bloodiest campaign since Bangladesh declared independence in 1971. With Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and the rival Bangladesh National Party still at loggerheads, that tumult could flare up again.

More money begets more problems. Still, Bangladesh's new territory also puts it in an advantageous position to win concessions from China and India, its two primary benefactors, who are both increasingly hungry for new sources of energy. China has already invested a significant amount of money to build an airport at Cox's Bazar, just south of Chittagong, a tab that continues to increase. Bangladesh remains a key part of Beijing's strategy of encircling India with development money, and the infusion of natural gas should reaffirm that status.

Major energy finds in the Bay of Bengal could make a huge difference in pushing the economy forward, sending a rush of foreign investment into the country and helping growth rebound. "With natural gas consumption expected to grow worldwide, but particularly in the developing countries in South Asia, there is likely to be a strong market for the gas," Bhatiya notes. Bangladesh's oil riches are its best opportunity to rise from poverty, creating an equitable distribution of wealth to stabilise the government and the country. Dhaka must seize the moment.

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LETTERS

TO THE EDITOR

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Parochialism splits Bangladeshis in New York

THE Bangladeshi community has been rapidly growing in the United States especially in New York, but unfortunately the community does not have any single platform to talk about the issues faced by Bangladeshi immigrants. If the community speaks its problems in one voice, then the mainstream political parties would listen to the issues and they would try to find the solutions. Instead of taking under a single banner, the community has hundreds of small and tiny associations, which are unable to exert any influence in the mainstream local elections. For example, there are more than fifty Sylheti and Chittagonian organisations in New York. These associations are not only responsible for the disintegration of the Bangladeshi community, but also for the rising spate of internal feuds within the community. The community should work together for the betterment of the community as a whole instead of narrow and shallow regionalism.

Nawfal Thalukhdar
Woodside, NY, USA

The selfish affluent class

A few days back, a male friend of mine was wearing a traditional Moroccan dress. He told me that the dress was presented to him by a friend who owns a holiday home in Morocco and that he often goes there for holidays. That set me thinking. Wealth has become abundant in Bangladesh. Enormous amount of wealth has been amassed mostly by the business people, civil servants, lawyers, doctors, engineers, bankers, smugglers, etc. through dubious means.

Many of our RMG exporters, manpower exporters, professionals, industrialists, etc. have 'bought' immigration to safe havens like Canada, Australia, second home Malaysia etc. They are even happy to be relegated to second class status in those countries. They bought all the above privileges with the wealth earned in Bangladesh. They take recourse to various channels and methods to create wealth and make their own lives as well as those of their children and other family members secure.

A pertinent question arises, where is patriotism? Where is the desire to pay back the debt they owe to their own country and people? After earning all the wealth on the soil of Bangladesh, these people are enriching other countries. Super-rich people of India and many other countries are imbued with a sense of responsibility and patriotism. They re-invest the wealth earned at home and abroad in development of their own country. It is high time our fortunate one percent 'super rich' showed patriotism and became partners in the development of their country. The government can also employ agencies to investigate and track down this class of Bangladeshis to stop the flight of capital.

Dr. SN Mamoon
Dhaka

Comments on news report, "He was no atheist," published on November 22, 2014

Palm Springs Petanque

"Those who killed him were purely an ignorant lot. They call him an atheist solely because they could not grasp the meaning of the path he followed to pray to God..." "One cannot be called an atheist for choosing a path which does not conform to those followed by a certain group of people." These statements concern me because they imply that if he was actually an atheist, then the murder was justifiable. Why is so much of the article devoted to proving that he wasn't an atheist? Why not condemn this atrocious act because of the fact that religious affiliation (or the lack thereof) can never be a ground for murder?

OpeeMonir

Islam has no place for this type of murder.

Sharif50077

Ignorance, lack of proper education and lack of law enforcement -- all have to be blamed for this heinous act.

"Will God save us from a nuclear disaster?" (Nov. 22, 2014)

Zillur Rahman

Wise and visionary man thinks ahead, in most of the cases what we don't.

"One killed in BCL factional clash" (Nov. 21, 2014)

Nasirullah Mridha, USA

The prime minister should take stern action against the activists of Bangladesh Chhatra League for their organised killing spree.

"Rajshahi University and the death trap" (Nov. 20, 2014)

Nazmul Hasan Sajib

How can a nation tolerate this!