

Against all odds

FROM PAGE 1

too. Eighty percent of these workers are female who have suddenly come out of homes in hordes, started earning on their own and then retiring to a meaningful life setting up small businesses from goat rearing to small trade.

Their consumption pattern has changed, triggering investments in a whole new range of industries such as cosmetics and sandals and cheap clothes. Banks and insurance companies mushroomed. Transport business boomed. A massive backward linkage industry in yarn, clothing and accessories grew. Carton units were set up. Labels are printed in another kind of units.

It is actually very difficult to say which sector of the economy is not touched by the garment sector that is projected by McKinsey & Company to be a \$45 billion export powerhouse in another six years.

The journey that started with a mere 13 million francs equivalent to \$13 million in today's conversion rate has today matured into a major strength for Bangladesh. For every three people in Europe, one is wearing a Bangladesh's tag. In the US one in every five people is carrying the Made in Bangladesh label.

But this journey was fraught with challenges. The industry had to go through upheavals. First came the quota system from the US in the 1980s. Because of the pressure from American textile lobby, the US restricted the quantity of apparels that each country could export.

Bangladesh then exported only the most basic items starting with flannel shirts (one can still recall the quota category 340). Its handful of factories were merrily shipping shirts.

The US put a restriction that Bangladesh cannot export more than 212,000 dozens of shirts a year. But already Bangladeshi exporters had

shipped more than that quantity.

Bangladesh did not agree to the quota. So a team went to negotiate with the US Trade Representative in January 31, 1986. Finally the quantity was raised to 330,000 dozens.

But that was not good enough. Another negotiation took place and finally the quota was raised to 13 lakh dozens with an annual growth of eight percent.

That was a major breakthrough. Bangladesh got a secured quantity. This helped the industry grow under the quota regime.

Another jolt came when the quota system was abolished in December 2004 as part of the WTO rules. Everybody predicted a doomsday for our garment industry and thought buyers would go to other countries as they would be free to buy from anywhere.

History proved otherwise. Exports since then boomed as our entrepreneurs successfully roped in more buyers with their cheap rates.

Another blow came when the issue of child labour came to the fore with US senator Tom Harkin bringing up a bill. Underage workers then ruled the Bangladesh garment industry. If they were shed then the factories would close down.

But our entrepreneurs with the help of ILO and the government successfully phased out the child labourers to maintain their foothold on the market.

The industry was also often beset by workers' unrest over a raft of issues relating to wage and safety standards that sometimes peaked to widespread violence. Factories were burned.

But the biggest blow came in two macabre accidents -- the Tazreen Fashions fire that killed 112 workers and more recently the Rana Plaza collapse, killing 1,138.

The whole industry was reeling under the worldwide criticism. Many thought the last nail in the coffin has been ham-

pered.

But once again the united efforts of our entrepreneurs and the government steadied the ship. The government appointed factory inspectors. Two international inspection agencies Accord and Alliance came and inspected the factories. They gave an action plan to be implemented in five years.

The entrepreneurs have come to the understanding that they have to implement the plan if they have to stay in the game. Buyers' nerves are also soothed and exports go strong.

In this whole history of garment industry, a special salutation must go to the workers. Millions of workers with little education have shown the world that they are the best tailors. Despite the sporadic unrest, the workers are the best disciplined.

A US entrepreneur who has his own brand in America told me he can never think of any sourcing destination other than Bangladesh.

"I have tried other places -- Cambodia, Pakistan, India and Vietnam. But I have settled for Bangladesh. My conclusion is that Bangladeshi workers are the best," he said.

Another entrepreneur who had ventured into India, Pakistan and Africa also echoed the view.

Even then Bangladesh garment industry has to think of its future. Its productivity is still low at 40 percent compared to China and Vietnam's 80 percent. This calls for major technological and management changeover.

Energy and infrastructure will be the major challenges. And workers have to be skilled further. And we have to think of where the future workforce will come from because the demographic window of opportunity will not exist long.

Still given the feat Bangladesh has achieved -- from \$13 million to \$25 billion -- we remain hopeful of the future.

Latif falls ill, taken to hospital

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Sacked minister Abdul Latif Siddique was admitted to Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University (BSMMU) last afternoon for chest pain and high blood pressure.



The 77-year-old politician is now behind bars in connection with a case for hurting religious sentiment.

Brig Gen (retd) Abdul Majid Bhuiyan, director of BSMMU, said Latif was admitted to the Cabin Block of the hospital around 4:30pm.

Necessary tests have been performed and a medical board will be formed today for his treatment, Majid told The Daily Star.

Farman Ali, senior jail superintendent at Dhaka Central Jail, said they sent the prisoner to BSMMU around 3:30pm for treatment after he had complained of chest pain.

On November 25, a Dhaka court sent expelled Awami League leader Latif to prison after police produced him before it in the case filed for his derogatory remarks on hajj and *Tablighi Jamaat*. He surrendered to Dhanmondi Model Police Station around 1:30pm on that day, two days after returning home from India.

If he is found guilty in the case, he could be sentenced to one year's imprisonment or fine, or both.

Latif was accused in around 22 cases filed in 18 districts for offending religious sentiment. There have been multiple arrest warrants for him.

Blue light

FROM PAGE 16

Indian police believe he is linked to a plot to assassinate Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and stage a coup in Bangladesh, Reuters reported.

India's National Investigation Agency (NIA) along with police and central security agencies arrested Sahanur, one of the 12 Burdwan blast suspects with bounties on their head, from his brother-in-law's house in Assam, reports our New Delhi correspondent.

The results of the group's study were published in the latest edition of the journal *Appetite*.

The study involved 112 people who were asked to eat the same meals under different coloured lights.

Despite eating differing amounts of pancakes and omelettes, the results of questionnaires conducted afterwards showed participants registered the same levels of satisfaction.

Meanwhile, recent studies show being obese can shorten life by eight years and blight up to two decades with ill-health.

Scientists using a computer model recently warned that diabetes and heart disease are set to deprive an obese person of up to 19 years of healthy living.

For the very obese, with a Body Mass Index (BMI) of 35 or more, between one and eight years of life were likely to be lost.

Overweight people with BMI scores of 25 to 30 were predicted to have their lives shortened by up to three years.

Pal, pioneer

FROM PAGE 16

liquid form of metals like brass and bronze are poured.

At one point, the metals cool down and take the solid shape of the container. The outer layer of solid clay is removed afterwards.

"Finally, we colour and furnish the newly-born art," said Ananda. "Sometimes the fresh metal objects are given antique looks."

"We had no academic knowledge. We learned the technique all by ourselves... only by seeing others," he said.

Even though Mosharraf has passed away, Ananda still like to pass most of his time after his passion.

The sculptor said his items were very popular among the elites and abroad but he could have made more profit in the business had he got proper assistance from the government.

"The main problem is marketing. I have a lot of items in my stock," said a worried Ananda. "I need a helping hand of the government"

Shawon Akand, researcher and art scholar, says despite their massive contributions to the folk art, people like Ananda are never recognised as artists.

He said the mainstream art society and artists were against recognising Ananda as an artist as the sculptor earns his livelihood selling his items.

"The significant aspect of Ananda's work is his adaptation to change in the medium -- from clay to metal -- and his flexibility as an artist," added the researcher.

Tejosh Halder, an emerging sculptor, said many students at Dhaka University's Faculty of Fine Arts often go to Ananda and observe how he casts metal in the unique ancient way.

Up to 147pc hike

FROM PAGE 1

merged to make 15 grades, most likely the ones between 10 and 20, they added.

Recommendations would be made for providing public servants with various benefits and allowances like life, health, and accident insurances and education allowance for children of the government service holders.

For the first time, parents were being considered as members of the family of public servants while calculating expenditures of single family unit.

A member of the commission observed that the government staff were ill-paid and this, they think, was one of the main reasons behind rampant corruption in the country.

Moreover, the existing poor salary structure failed to attract meritorious jobseekers and resulted in deterioration in the quality of government services, the member added.

Another member of the commission said they were going to suggest a salary structure in line with the pay scales of government staff in neighbouring countries, especially India.

In India, the highest salary of a government service holder is Rs 80,000. However, in some selective posts including that of the cabinet secretary it is Rs 90,000. If other facilities enjoyed by them are taken into account, the highest salary amounts to around Rs 2 lakh in India.

However, if rupee was converted to taka and the purchasing power was taken into consideration, salary in Indian civil service was much higher.

Talking to The Daily Star, another member of the commission said it was not expected that corruption would drop and quality of government services would improve overnight. However, to make that happen, the first step was to increase the salary followed by other overdue reforms in the civil service, the member added.

Available statistics show total GDP

was Tk 2,73,200 crore in 2001-02 fiscal year, whereas the amount was Tk 13,50,920 crore in the last fiscal year.

Though the country's economy has seen much progress in the last two decades, the civil servants did not benefit from it, observed another member of the commission.

The member added that they considered the fact while making the recommendations, but how much the government could agree to it would depend on the government's economic capability.

In the budget for the current fiscal year, Tk 28,709 crore had been allotted for around 13 lakh government staff.

In August 2008, the then military-backed caretaker government formed a 13-member pay commission headed by former secretary M Mustafizur Rahman.

The Seventh Pay Commission took 14 months to submit its recommendations and the subsequent Awami League-led government implemented the pay rise retrospective from July 2009.

The Sixth Pay Commission was formed in July 2004, the fifth in September 1996, the fourth in July 1989, the third in 1984, the second in February 1976 and the first in July 1972.

The pay scale that came into effect in 1973 had 10 grades and the highest salary was Tk 2,000 and the lowest Tk 130. In 1977 the grades were converted to 20.

Teacher shot dead

FROM PAGE 16

shifted to Chittagong Medical College Hospital (CMCH).

Quoting Mosajjai, Shafiqul Islam, officer-in-charge of Manikchhari Police Station, said about seven to eight men entered Mosajjai's house around 7:45pm, shot the two and left the area.

Locals sent the injured to Manikchhari Upazila Health Complex where doctors declared Chingchamang dead.

No case was filed in this connection till 1:00am today.

Two deals signed

FROM PAGE 1

Baridhara to Bhutan for the construction of its permanent embassy.

The two countries yesterday renewed the bilateral trade agreement. Commerce Minister Tofail Ahmed and Bhutan's Economic Affairs Minister Norbu Wangchuk signed the trade agreement for their respective countries, while Foreign Minister AH Mahmood Ali and his Bhutanese counterpart Rinzin Dorje inked the deal on the land allocation.

The deals were signed following the official talks led by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and her Bhutanese counterpart Tshering Tobgay at the Prime Minister's Office (PMO). The two prime ministers witnessed the

signing of the agreement at the PMO.

Talking to reporters at the PMO, Commerce Minister Tofail Ahmed said Bhutan had earlier enjoyed duty-free export of 74 items from their country.

With the signing of the trade agreement, the two countries will now enjoy duty-free export of 90 items from each country, he said, adding that Bangladesh and Bhutan are moving forward to allow duty-free to all items from both countries.

Tofail Ahmed said the two countries would also sign a preferential trade agreement.

Bangladesh would allow duty-free import of boulder that would be used for the construction of the Padma

Bridge, he mentioned.

Fresh fruits and minerals are among the goods Bhutan exports to Bangladesh while Bangladesh exports limited amounts of readymade garment, ceramic, melamine, medicine and leather goods to Bhutan.

To enhance bilateral trade, Bangladesh has already offered Bhutan to use Chittagong and Mongla seaports as well as Lalmonirhat and Syedpur airports.

Presently, export and import between Bangladesh and Bhutan are being done through Burimari land port in Lalmonirhat using Indian territory. The two countries are discussing establishing new land routes in addition to the existing trade routes.

Partner us in hydro projects

FROM PAGE 1

hopeful that Bhutan's untapped hydropower potentials would come to meet our growing energy needs," she added.

Bangladesh, mentioned Hasina, is confident that Bhutan will not allow its hydroelectric projects on the common rivers, which would have adverse effects on Bangladesh.

Bangladesh has unilaterally offered Bhutan to use Chittagong and Mongla seaports and also Lalmonirhat and Saidpur airports. "You're also welcome to use our Paira seaport which is coming up," said the PM.

To enhance bilateral trade, Bangladesh has taken a number of measures, including development of trade infrastructure along its border, she noted. "These have resulted in a tremendous increase in Bhutanese export to Bangladesh. But the flow of our products remains quite low. We hope that Bhutan would allow entry of more Bangladeshi products into its market."

Hasina said connectivity remains the most crucial issue to enhance regional cooperation. Bangladesh needs to establish itself as the hub of regional connectivity so as to ensure seamless connectivity to the region and beyond.

Putting emphasis on enhancing cooperation in flood control and flood migration, she said more reliable flood forecast data from Bhutan would help Bangladesh tackle floods in the Brahmaputra basin.

Bhutan, he said, needs skilled workers from Bangladesh, especially doctors. In response, Hasina requested him to hike the salaries of doctors.

Tshering Tobgay urged his Bangladesh counterpart to use boulders instead of bricks in different construction projects in Bangladesh to protect ecological balance.

Earlier, Hasina along with her delegation members welcomed the Bhutanese leader to the PMO. Finance Minister AMA Muhith, Commerce Minister Tofail Ahmed, Foreign Minister AH Mahmud

Ali, State Minister for Health Zahid Malek and State Minister for Power, Energy and Mineral Resources Nasrul Hamid were present.

The Bhutanese premier was accompanied by Foreign Minister Rinzin Dorje, Economic Affairs Minister Norbu Wangchuk, Director General (policy and planning) at the foreign ministry Sonam Tobden Rabgye and Chief Urban Designer Tashi Penjor. It was his first visit to Bangladesh since assuming office in July last year.

RECOGNITION OF INDEPENDENCE Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina yesterday received a copy of the historic felicitation message sent by the third King of Bhutan, Jigme Dorji Wangchuck, to the then acting president Syed Nazrul Islam, recognising Bangladesh as an independent country.

The Bhutanese PM handed over the felicitation message to Hasina during their private conversation at the PMO, said a foreign ministry official.

10 lower-tier Biman officials sued

FROM PAGE 1

Asked what action was taken against the accused Biman staff, Khan Mosharraf Hossain, general manager (public relations) of Biman, said they were yet to receive any "documents" in this regard. "Once we receive papers we will take action against them as per law," he told this paper over the phone.

The accused Biman staff are: Mohammad Masud, aircraft mechanic; Anis Uddin Bhuiyan, aircraft mechanic assistant; Shahjahan Siraj, junior inspection officer; Abu Zafar, cleaning supervisor; Kamrul Hassan, junior security officer; mechanics Osman Gani and Mujibar Rahman, officer Saleh Ahmed, and employees Raihan and Maksud of Engineering Hanger.

The four others are: Gauranga Roshan, from Nepal; Milon Sikder, chairman of SS Cargo; Jasimuddin, a tailor of Cox's Bazar; and Jason Prince, an Indian.

Of the Biman employees, Masud and Anis are also accused in the case filed in connection with the haul of

105kg gold in April this year.

The six-member NBR probe body submitted the report on October 22. The NBR then scrutinised the report and sent it to the finance ministry for a go-ahead to take legal action against the Biman staff.

Getting the nod, the NBR sent letters to the home ministry requesting it to include the case in its Monitoring Cell and form a probe team comprising specialised law enforcers, added sources. It also asked the home ministry to use a speedy trial tribunal.

Customs officials believe several other Biman staff -- including the captain of the aircraft concerned, its co-pilot and crew members -- might also be involved in smuggling.

"Thorough grilling of the accused could help identify smuggling rackets and put them on trial," stated the report.

In its biggest ever haul, customs officials at Shahjalal International Airport seized 1,064 gold bars weighing around 124kg and worth Tk 54 crore on July 24 last year.

Following a tip-off, customs offi-

cials searched flight BG-702 about half an hour after it landed. The flight from Dubai landed in Dhaka and then flew to Kathmandu and returned once again to Dhaka before Customs Intelligence found the bars inside an air-tight chamber of the cargo hold.

In the case, the plane had been shown seized as evidence and was kept in the custody of the Biman managing director.

Customs Intelligence suspect that the gold bars were heading for India.

According to Customs Intelligence, they had seized 680kg of gold and arrested 90 people at the country's three international airports in the last 17 months. A section of the arrestees were staff of Biman and Civil Aviation Authority of Bangladesh.

Besides, Armed Police Battalion seized 112kg of gold and arrested 25 people in the last two years at Dhaka airport, said officials.

In a 12-hour operation since November 18 evening, detectives arrested five suspected members of a gold smuggling racket, including three Biman high-ups.

Ties stronger

FROM PAGE 16

Asked about Hasina's remarks, US Embassy Spokesperson Monica L Shie told The Daily Star through e-mail, "Our partnership with Bangladesh is today broader, deeper, stronger than ever, to the benefit of the people of both countries. We suggest that you refer your query to the Prime Minister's Office for clarification."

Meanwhile, the BNP has said government high-ups' "indecent" comments on the USA and its diplomats would worsen bilateral relations between the two countries.

The party also said LGRD Minister Syed Ashrafur Islam by making certain remarks on US Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs Nisha Desai Biswal had violated diplomatic etiquette, and those were also racist.

BNP acting secretary general Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir and Vice-Chairman Shamsher Mobin

Chowdhury yesterday said these at a press conference at party chief Khaleda Zia's Gulshan office.

Speaking in Khulna last week, Ashraf called Biswal, who recently visited Bangladesh, a "two-penny minister".

Referring to Hasina and Ashraf's comments, Shamsher said bilateral relations with any country do not necessarily mean only economics.

"Diplomatic relations deteriorate when the government tells such a lie or behaves like this," he said, adding Ashraf's remarks on US Ambassador Dan W Mozena is a sheer violation of diplomatic norms.

Fakhrul reiterated that Khaleda did not have any meeting with government officials on Thursday night. "Our chairperson regularly holds meetings at her Gulshan office as party leaders visit her. But the media reports on Thursday's meeting are not true."