

Safety key to RMG success

All stakeholders need to act together

SPEAKERS at the Dhaka Apparel Summit on December 8 agreed that workers' safety in readymade garments (RMG) factories remains one of the key prerequisites for ensuring Bangladesh's dominance in the global apparel sector. Guarantee for physical safety in terms of proper fire preparedness, field inspection and training of workers to tackle an emergency will have to become part and parcel of the way the industry is run. And it is not merely about more unionisation at the workplace, but finding and putting in place various forms of dispute resolution which can help workers and management resolve issues without matters turning volatile.

For any of this to work seamlessly would require government institutions to build their capacity to work as proper regulators particularly in the area of ensuring that faulty structural designs are remedied and these adhered to. There is need for industrial zones replete with fire stations to combat emergencies. These are all necessary changes that need to be undertaken to transform the sector and propel its growth. It will be, however, take serious commitment of all stakeholders including the Brands, BGMEA, owners and the government to deliver to full potential.

Some initial steps have already been taken. Tax has been waived on critical firefighting equipment that is imported. The government is in the process of beefing up its pool of factory inspectors. The industry is responding to calls for unionisation and the first steps are being taken to make factories adhere to standards. The road to safety is a long one, but we need to remember that there can be no repeat of Rana Plaza that ended 1,250 lives.

Arrest Biswajit's killers

End culture of impunity

IT is unacceptable that, two years after the gruesome murder of innocent youth, Biswajit Das, the police have failed to arrest 13 of 21 convicted killers, despite reports alleging that many of the convicts can be seen roaming around freely in the capital.

The harrowing images of unruly BCL activists hacking, pounding and beating the non-partisan Biswajit to death during an opposition-sponsored blockade must still be fresh in the minds of all those who saw the footages of the killing. The images must especially haunt his family, who are still waiting for justice to be served.

Public outcry compelled the government to try the BCL activists of Jagannath University, and a Dhaka tribunal condemned 8 of them to death and sentenced 13 other BCL men to life imprisonment last year, initiating hope in people's minds that justice will prevail.

However, the fact that a majority of them – two of whom were sentenced to death and 11 were given life term – are still running free only goes to highlight the existing culture of impunity enjoyed by criminals, especially those claiming proximity to the ruling party.

Media reports and eye-witness accounts contend that many of the fugitives can be seen fearlessly parading in the capital, even around Jagannath campus, but the police have turned a blind eye towards them.

We urge the government to end the culture of impunity and ensure due process of justice. It must demonstrate that it values the freedom and lives of its ordinary citizens more than that of its party affiliates by arresting the fugitives immediately.

Excuse me, Sir, were you alive last month?

ABDUL MATIN

Aretired government servant went to the treasury to withdraw his pension. At that time, a pensioner had to produce a certificate from a gazetted officer authenticating that he was alive during the month for which he claimed the pension. The retired servant also submitted an arrear bill for the previous month. The treasury officer agreed to pay him the pension for the month for which he produced the certificate but declined to pay him the arrears as he did not produce another certificate authenticating that he had also been alive during the previous month! The story, though old, reflects our clerical mentality that was implanted in our hearts and souls by the British Raj.

Years have passed but have we overcome the same mentality? Often my bank account is frozen. The reason is I do not update my account information. Every time I go to the bank, I am asked to fill out a new but huge account opening form and submit several documents. "I understand why I need to update my residence address and telephone numbers, if they are changed. But why is it necessary to update my date of birth and my parent's names? Do they also change from time to time?" Once I asked the manager. He was embarrassed. "This is a requirement by the Bangladesh Bank. We only follow their instructions," he replied apologetically. I fill out the form in order to re-activate my account. It appears that the Bangladesh Bank has great ingenuity in inventing new forms periodically to make our life as difficult as possible. I cannot recollect how many times I updated information of the same account.

In this digital age, we are required to submit too many supporting documents for any official work even though most of the documents are available with them. Nobody is keen to dig files. Everyone wants readymade information. Most offices, banks in particular, have a tremendous appetite for passport-sized photos and copies of national identity cards and e-TIN certificates. No matter how many copies you make, they just vanish in no time! Instead of having one national identity card and a separate e-TIN certificate, can't we have only one digitized national identity card with all information (including the e-TIN) for all purposes to make life easier for us? Since the identity card contains a photograph, what is the necessity of additional photos?

I wonder when we shall get rid of our clerical mentality and the unnecessary paperwork.

The writer is a former chief engineer of Bangladesh Atomic Energy Commission.

The tale of 'Just-A-Man' and our \$50 billion



RUBANA HUQ

KNOT SO TRUE

IT'S not the best hour to land at an airport and it's certainly not the best time to pen a column. At 5:00 am Kuala Lumpur is also not as pretty as it normally is. But there are too many faces asking for direction to immigration, baggage claim et al. And your columnist has just turned into a happy tourist in transit providing services. These are the people who shape the contours of Bangladesh today. A quick look at yesterday's *The Borneo Times* would make anyone happy. A new deal between the Malaysian Human Resources Minister Datuk Seri Richard Riot and Bangladesh's Minister of Expatriates' and Foreign Workers' Welfare Khandker Mosharrar Hossain has just been inked which will facilitate employment of 12000 more Bangladeshi workers. These 12000 workers will be joining the palm oil plantations. Incidentally these are the faces which bring back home floral quilt covered suitcases, occasionally face the immigration humiliation and yet send remittances that make us rich. In the first nine months of the country, Bangladeshi workers from Malaysia have remitted RM4.28 billion back home. Apparently only in Malaysia, ranked right after the Indonesian workers, Bangladeshis send in most of their money home.

It is this 'Just-A-Man' who makes all the difference in our lives. At the recently concluded Apparel Summit organised by the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA), the focus was on predicting a \$50 billion export on the 50th birthday of Bangladesh in 2021. Both the 50's made sense. Yet, what was it that would make this happen? What would power this dream? Policy support or people? While we speak about productivity, technology upgrades and infrastructure, the key element that usually goes missing in these discourses is the conversation on labor. For many years, Bangladeshi apparel manufacturers have stood resilient with their labor forces and have triumphed over many odds. For years the sector has been able to withstand natural calamities, labor unrests and challenging infrastructural set up and yet for all these years what kept the sector going was simply labor. Therefore, today, while we pin our hopes on the big 50, we need to pin it alongside our commitment to bridge with labour.

And while we do that, it's also time to stop calling our labour: cheap. The practice of labeling labour as 'cheap' should not sell anymore. A product maybe cheap, but labour is not. If we go by the words of the World Bank President Jim Yong Kim, then we must assume that by 2030, poverty will be over. If one were to follow the consumption trends in the developing countries that have increased five times in between 2000 and 2010 in comparison to the 1990s scenario, then one would also have reasons to assume that by another decade or two, the global target to eradicate poverty would actually happen. The Boston Consulting Group (BCG) predicted in November that the world would come close to losing its low cost manufacturing hubs by a decade or so. If so, and if the number of underemployed people truly decreases, would retailers be able to source from countries, which boast of 'cheap' labour? No. Even today, the average price of one square meter of apparel exported from China to the U.S, in the third quarter of 2014 has been 1% more expensive

than in 2010. Yet in the same period, the U.S, in spite of the increase in price, has imported 4% more apparel from China itself. That gives us hope and that only means that eventually the garment manufacturers won't ever have to manipulate the terms and conditions of the workers and that pretty soon, manufacturers will be supporting sustainable livelihood for workers in place of simply refixing the occasional review of the minimum wage levels.

Yes, there is a chance that more competitive new markets will be opening up for the brands. Yes, Ethiopia makes sense, especially with the workers' monthly wages being as low as \$50. But even with the low land and electricity costs, the innumerable textile and training institutes, the lure of infrastructure, the fiscal incentives for the investors, its impressive macro economic growth and its favourable trade connections like AGOA and EBA, does it really make sense to push labour to the edge in the name of development? No. The basic reality is that the low productivity in Ethiopia will soon be killing its prospects of 'cheap' labour. A country cannot have higher productivity with low cost labor. It's as simple as that. As soon as skill upgrades take place, the price of labor is bound to go up. And that is where Bangladesh wants to be. Bangladesh RMG sector does not want its share of the basic pie anymore. Four decades of manufacturing has given us confidence to dream of becoming a Middle Income Country by 2021; it has also given us the right to dream of capturing at least 10% of the global market share of apparel sourcing within the next decade. Most of all, our own challenges have taught us more resilience and has induced more conviction of staying alive with dignity along with our workforce.

It is indeed time to celebrate 'Just-A-Man', who impacts our lives in more ways than we can imagine. Only a few days ago, an exporter friend of your columnist shared a rare story...

On 28th November 2014 en-route to Chittagong, a covered truck with export goods was apprehended by 7 to 10 dacoits who attempted to take possession of the truck and cargo at about 4 kilometre from Feni Town at 4 am when the rail crossing barrier was down. They took what they could, including money and personal belongings of the people who were on the truck. But, the driver refused to hand over the ignition and cargo door keys upon which he was violently attacked and hacked with lethal weapons. Md. Seraj (cell 01683745909), holding a valid license #0480341 totally disregarded his own safety, held on to the cargo, in spite of the dacoits chopping one of his fingers off. Seraj drove to Chittagong in that condition just so that the cargo would not miss the vessel's "cut-off" time to load the goods. He had not stopped at the nearest police station as he thought that the police would first seize his truck and start investigation later. Seraj, after having dropped the cargo off at the port, had finally headed off for Chittagong Hospital.

Truth is, it is not promises, assurances or dreams that shape this country. It is 'Just-A-Man' Seraj and the millions tirelessly working behind the sewing machines, who makes us survive, thrive and sustain. If the lives of these people are labeled as 'cheap' and if it is their services that we offer with the same inexpensive branding, then the dream to hit \$50 billion will only remain a utopia. Branding our labour with pride and attaching optimum human dignity to these heroes is the only box to be ticked today. Rest will only follow by default.

The writer is Managing Director, Mohammadi Group.

PROJECT SYNDICATE

The myth of net-zero emissions

LILI FUHR and NICLAS HÄLLSTRÖM

THE emissions from burning coal, oil, and gas are heating up our planet at such a rapid rate that increasingly volatile and dangerous climate conditions seem almost inevitable. Clearly, we have to reduce emissions fast, while developing alternative energy sources that allow us to leave fossil fuels in the ground.

This imperative is almost shockingly straightforward. Yet climate change has been subject to so much political inertia, false information, and wishful thinking for the last few decades that we continue to see ineffective or impossible solutions, rather than an effort to address root causes. Often these "solutions" are based on non-existent or risky new technologies.

This approach is highly expedient, for it threatens neither business as usual nor socioeconomic orthodoxy. But climate models that depend on elusive technologies weaken the imperative to enact the deep structural changes that are needed to avoid climate catastrophe.

The latest such "solution" to emerge is "net-zero emissions," which depends on so-called "carbon capture and storage." Though the technology still faces more than a few shortcomings, Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Chairman Rajendar Pachauri issued a



deeply problematic statement last month, saying that, "With CCS it is entirely possible for fossil fuels to continue to be used on a large scale."

To be fair, the IPCC's latest assessment report highlights the imperative of cutting CO2 emissions drastically to avoid exceeding the world's small – and still risky – carbon budget. But to shift from clear-cut goals like "zero emissions," "full decarbonization," and "100% renewable energy" to the far hazier objective of net-zero emissions is to adopt a dangerous stance.

Indeed, the net-zero idea implies that the world can continue to produce emissions, as long as there is a way to "offset" them. So, instead of embarking immediately on a radical emissions-reduction trajectory, we can continue to emit massive amounts of CO2 – and even establish new coal plants – while claiming to be taking climate action by "supporting" the development of CCS technology. It is apparently irrelevant that such technology might not work, is riddled with practical challenges, and carries the risk of future leakage, which would have major social and environmental consequences.

Bioenergy with Carbon Capture and Storage is the

poster child for the new "overshoot approach" of net-zero emissions. BECCS entails planting a huge amount of grass and trees, burning the biomass to generate electricity, capturing the CO2 that is emitted, and pumping it into geological reservoirs underground.

BECCS would have enormous development implications, provoking large-scale land grabs, most likely from relatively poor people. This is not some far-fetched scenario; rising demand for biofuels has spurred devastating land grabs in developing countries for many years.

It would take a lot more land to offset a substantial share of CO2 emissions. Indeed, an estimated 218-990 million hectares would have to be converted to switchgrass to sequester one billion tons of carbon using BECCS. That is 14-65 times the amount of land the United States uses to grow corn for ethanol.

Nitrous-oxide emissions from the vast amount of fertilizer that would be required to grow the switchgrass could be enough to exacerbate climate change. Then there are the CO2 emissions from producing synthetic fertilizers; clearing trees, shrubs, and grass from hundreds of millions of hectares of land; destroying large reservoirs of soil carbon; and transporting and processing the switchgrass.

Even more problematic is the revelation that CCS and BECCS would most likely be used for "enhanced oil recovery," with compressed CO2 pumped into old oil wells for storage, thereby creating a financial incentive to recover more oil. The US Department of Energy estimates that such methods could make 67 billion barrels of oil – three times the volume of proven US oil reserves – economically recoverable. Indeed, given the money at stake, enhanced oil recovery could actually be one of the motives behind the push for CCS.

In any case, no form of CCS advances the goal of a structural shift toward full decarbonization, which is what social movements, academics, ordinary citizens, and even some politicians are increasingly demanding. They are prepared to accept the inconveniences and sacrifices that will arise during the transition; indeed, they view the challenge of creating a zero-carbon economy as an opportunity to renew and improve their societies and communities. Dangerous, elusive, and pie-in-the-sky technologies have no place in such an effort.

A clear understanding of the climate crisis expands the range of potential solutions considerably. For example, by banning new coal plants and shifting fossil-fuel subsidies toward the financing of renewable energy through feed-in tariffs, sustainable energy could be brought to billions of people worldwide, while reducing fossil-fuel dependency.

While such innovative and practical solutions are prevented from being scaled up, billions of dollars are pumped into subsidies that reinforce the status quo. The only way to reform the system and make real progress toward mitigating climate change is to work to eliminate fossil fuels completely. Vague goals based on nebulous technologies simply will not work.

The writers are Head of the Ecology and Sustainable Development Department at the Heinrich Böll Foundation in Berlin, Germany and Director of the What Next Forum in Uppsala, Sweden, respectively. Copyright: Project Syndicate, 2014. www.project-syndicate.org (Exclusive to The Daily Star)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Charging SSC candidates extra fee

Many schools take extra fees from the SSC candidates during filling-up of exam forms. Though the High Court has ordered not to take extra fees, these schools just don't give a damn about it. Guardians and students are being forced to pay extra charges. We urge the government to take stern action against the schools which are not complying with the High Court order.

Md. Nazmul Islam
Jalshuka Habibur Rahman College
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Importance of inter-religious harmony

The Reuters report "A strong message from Pope Francis" along with a photograph, published in the



PHOTO: AFP

International page of your daily on 30th November, is a very significant one. It's an important step towards achieving inter-religious harmony. This news item should be widely reported in most countries across the globe as this can bring more understanding among the people of different faiths.

If only the Israelis could forsake their 'extremism' and learn to live peacefully with neighbouring Muslims, then the world would be a much happier place.
Engr. S. A. Mansoor
Dhaka

Indian visa hassle

This is in response to the letter titled "Remove obstacles to obtaining Indian visa," by J. Taher Mohammad, published in your esteemed daily dated 8-12-2014. I have written to the Indian High Commission regarding the problem of not getting an application submission date online on IVAC website. Their reply was very cool: "Report the matter to local police to take action against the agents."

My suggestion is, an applicant applying online should be given a date whenever available within a month or two. As most of the applicants are not in a hurry, getting a date within a month or later should be of no problem to them. It is very much evident that IVAC is not under the control of Indian High Commission and manipulation is going on in IVAC's website.

It is high time the Indian High Commission woke up to the problem and look into the matter in the interest of our good relationship with India.

Ziauddin Ahmed
On e-mail

Comments on news report, "Farmers suffer for weak marketing infrastructure," published on December 7, 2014

Kaabir Chowdhury

Our government is not worried about the farmers although they are the most important people of the country who grow our foods.

"Love for maths stands tall" (Dec. 6, 2014)

Rizwan Islam

Gratitude to all the great people who have helped building it.

"Police brutality against Barisal students" (Dec. 6, 2014)

Ahmed Aziz

It happened before and this practice will only escalate until the masses mobilize against the tyrants.

"Understanding China's 'one belt and one road' policy" (Dec. 7, 2014)

OpeeMonir

Geopolitics is changing fast and China is getting ready to take on the global leadership. China has taken a very different approach which is connectivity, a key to the global economy.

A region is able to prosper only when its developing partners are ready to develop along with it, not separately but inclusively. We are at the crossroads and our national security policy must be formulated now. Or else we shall be left out.