

'Tarnished image' v 44 lakh young lives

TASLIMA AKHTER

THE young lives of tens of thousands of young garment workers of Bangladesh are integrally connected to the name of Bangladesh, to its economy, and to the international market beyond its borders. Forty-four lakh youths are giving everything they have to keep the wheels of the economy going, and to survive. Of them, 80% are women. In the Dhaka apparel summit at the end of last year, BGMEA expressed its hope of reaching the 50 billion dollar mark, from the current 24 billion dollar annual export, within seven years on the golden jubilee of Bangladesh's independence in 2021. The summit, in which two thousand people and institutions from different countries participated, took place from 7 - 9 December, 2014. But the question that remained unanswered in the summit was: is it possible to reach that goal without ensuring the safety and security of the lives of these youths? In addition to the grand ambition of reaching the 50 billion dollar mark, the owners also expressed another aspiration: "Recovering the tarnished image is the main goal of this conference."

In 2014, the issue of "bhabmurti" or image has been in the forefront of discussions surrounding the two major incidents of structural killing (so-called "accidents") in the last two years. On 24 November, 2012, more than a hundred workers died in the fire at Tazreen Fashion; exactly six months later, more than a thousand lives were lost in a building collapse at Rana Plaza. In the face of such tremendous loss, the government and owners should have lost sleep over how to develop the industry ensuring the safety and security of workers instead of being plagued by the fear of a tarnished image. If they were as concerned with workers' lives as they were about image, perhaps another disaster could have been averted after Tazreen. In fact, in protecting the workers, its image would also be intact. After 30 long years, it should be evident to the owners that it is impossible to both expand the market and uphold the image while keeping workers in uncertain and hazardous work conditions.

The hustle and bustle we saw at the end of the year over the owner association's summit was also apparent during the first-year anniversary of Rana Plaza in April. There was no shortage of national and international journalists, ministers, labour and NGO activists on 24 April, 2014. On a day that marked the largest number of industrial deaths anywhere in the world, naturally the attention of the whole world was on Bangladesh.

It was assumed that after Rana Plaza, the state and owners would prioritise the issue of safety and security of workers, and that under state initiative, people from different sectors, including engineers, experts and labour representatives, would work collectively to resolve this burning question. It is true that in this regard, the government has undertaken a National Action Plan (NAP), but it is not clear who the members are or what their role is. Rather, it seems that the government has given over the total responsibility of safety to the coalition of European buyers (Bangladesh Fire and Safety Accord, in short, Accord) and coalition of North American buyers, Alliance (North American Alliance, in short, Alliance). The government's own capability is now in question.

We had also thought that the government would pay attention to the legal right

of compensation as well as ensure that law-breaking employers are punished according to the law. Even though a committee formed by a High Court directive has proposed compensation packages for Rana Plaza victims, the workers, instead of getting compensation (as defined legally), are receiving charity. Meanwhile, the owners are finding their way out of jail with bail. A long orchestrated ploy saw Tazreen owner, Delowar Hossain, charged on homicide for the deaths of at least 117 workers, being bailed out of jail, not once, but twice. The chairman of New Wave Bottoms, one of the five garment factories housed in the ill-fated Rana Plaza, was also granted a six-month bail. This signals that in the future if incidents like Rana Plaza and Tazreen happen, the factory owners would find ways to spare themselves from the law exploiting the legal loopholes and that they would remain outside of the purview of inspection committees. Instead of taking action against culprits, the inspection committee seems to be busy covering up the malpractices of owners.

After the events of Tazreen and Rana Plaza, the issue of labour trade unions has

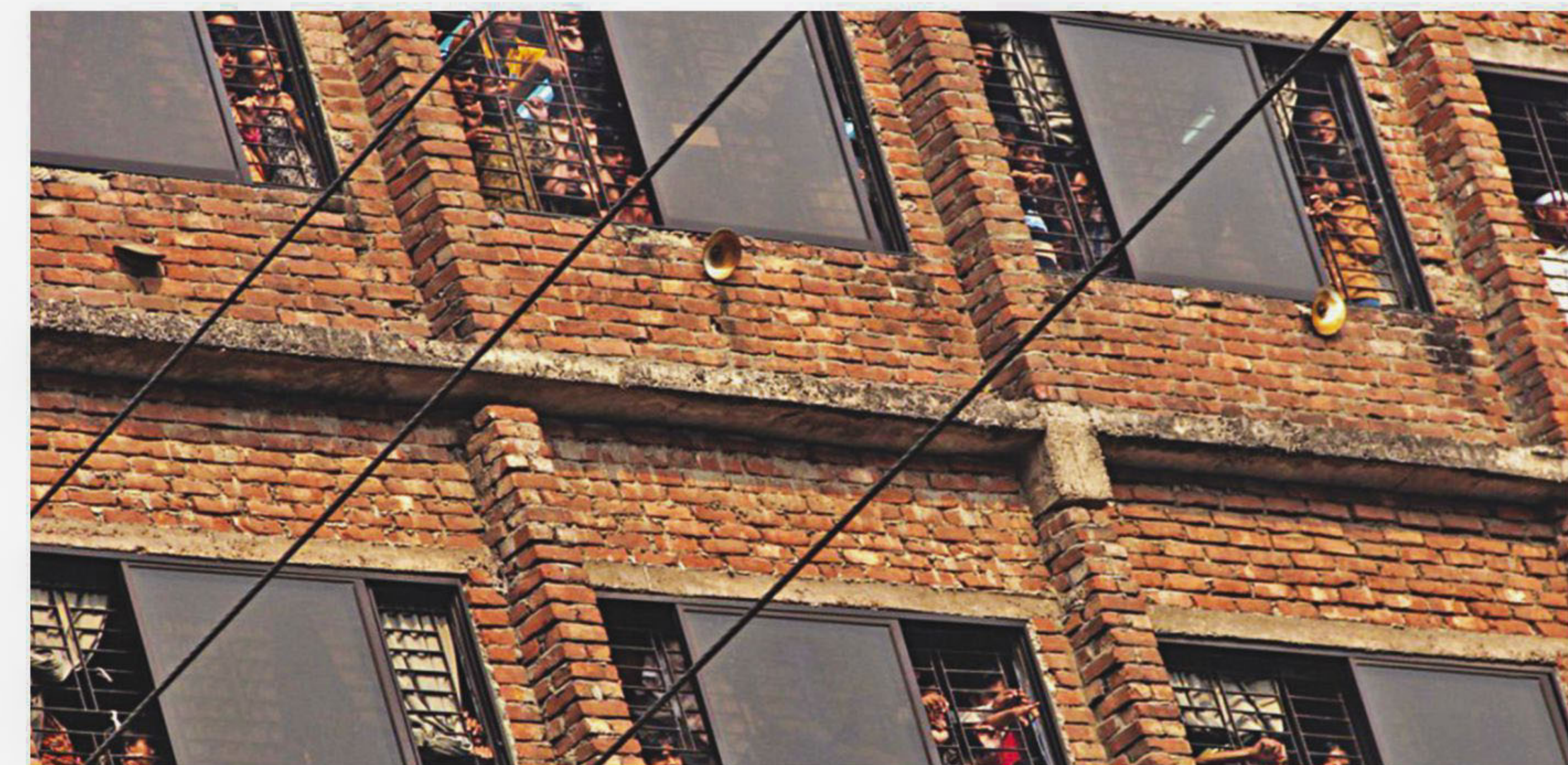


PHOTO: TASLIMA AKHTER

also been highlighted. Regulations regarding trade unions have been relaxed on pen and paper, but they have not furthered the interest of workers. There is still no proper structure for negotiations between workers and owners. We are all too aware of the division among trade unions. When asked about trade unions, the owners just show a long list of trade unions established in the country till date. Newspaper reports show that over the last two years, 334 trade unions got registered, but the sad reality is that trade unions that serve the true welfare of workers have not been allowed to stand on their own. People who are involved in trade unions currently are in one way or another loyal to the owners and sometimes even in their pay roll. Labour regions are controlled by the paid hooligans of the political parties in power and jhut-traders. As a result, people in good terms with the owners and those receiving foreign funding get the chance to create trade unions rather than true labour leaders in the area. If investigated, it will be found out that most of the trade unions are created by the owner themselves and for their own selfish benefits.

Last year, more than any other year in the last decade, saw debates on wage, security and trade unions on different fronts. On 21 November of 2014, a new pay scale for workers to be implemented from December was announced. But the increment did not match the long cherished hopes of the workers. While they demanded Tk. 8000 as the minimum wage, the government declared only Tk. 5300. At first glance, it may look like a huge increase from Tk. 3000 to Tk. 5300, but once we consider inflation, the rise of rent, gas-electricity prices, transport and medical expenses, the current amount seems inadequate. As such, although the workers' wages have increased in monetary terms, they have not increased in real terms. To add to this, the increase in electricity prices can only increase the sufferings of already struggling workers.

They not only work for the lowest wage in the world but also get fired whenever they demand arrears, bonus, allowance for lunch, or say anything against the management. When terminating them, the owners go to extraordinary lengths to prove that the workers were terminated because of

their own misconduct simply to deprive them from their dues. In these situations, a number of 'trustworthy' labour leaders take the owners' side and deprive workers in a mockery that is arbitration. Lay offs, attacks, and criminal cases are regular incidents in the lives of workers. This is exactly what happened during workers' unrest in Tuba Group. About 1600 workers, who went on fasting for 11 days demanding four months salary and festival bonuses, were attacked and tortured, and driven out of their protest site. At one point the owner was forced to pay the arrears. But the all of them lost the job as well as the hope of ever receiving the bonus they agitated for.

The protection of "image" and industry can both be safeguarded if we can ensure workers' security, trade union rights and fair wages. All these issues are still unresolved. The Rana Plaza incident has also raised questions about the responsibility of foreign buyers. The consumers of the T-shirts and trousers made in Bangladesh have become much more aware about how their clothes are being made. The consumers, are

also realising that it is not just the responsibility of government and business owners to ensure workers' rights, but theirs too. They are trying to exert pressure on their own brands to institute ethical business practices. As the subject of "ethics" has increasingly come to the limelight, it is not only the government and owners who are worrying about "image" but also foreign buyers and brands.

The garment industry exists under the roof of the global market of buyers-brand- government- owners. The main concern of our garments industry and workers is not the local market. Millions of youngsters in Bangladesh not only sew the label of "Made in Bangladesh" in clothes but also stitch brand names like Walmart, Primark, H&M, Joe Fresh and Mango every day. Raw materials like cotton and yarn come from China and other countries in Asia, which are then converted into outfits by our workers. Then ships and cargoes full of these clothes cross the seas and reach the market of UK and USA. Through this cycle, our workers become a part of globalisation. Despite the stakes of foreign buyers in the continued oppression of our

workers, however, there is no doubt that the primary responsibility of ensuring workers' rights lies on the state and industry owners.

Every time there is a labour movement, the government and owners, on one hand, cry conspiracy, and on the other, try to divert attention from the real problems by talking about "bhabmurti". Even after Rana Plaza, they tried to put the discontentment of the workers in that same conspiracy bucket. The political parties in power have not been able to establish a healthy foundation for the growth of local industries. Since their true intention has always been to misuse state power for looting and pursuing their own interests, they have paid no heed to the main precondition of industrial development - the protection of labour and labourers. Even the existing laws are not implemented. Without truly democratic rule and democratic government, the rights of workers cannot be established, nor the foundation of industrialisation strengthened.

The writer is photographer and coordinator, Garments Sromik Shonghati.