

'It will be against the interest of our female workers if we send them to the KSA without establishing shelter homes'

Dr. Tasneem Siddiqui, the founding Chair of RMMRU and professor of Political Science at Dhaka University talks with Naznin Tithi of *The Daily Star* about various aspects of manpower export to KSA.

The Daily Star (TDS): How would you evaluate Saudi Arabia's lifting of the 6-year ban on hiring Bangladeshi workers and the Domestic Services Workers' Recruitment agreement signed on Feb 10?

Tasnim Siddiqui (TS): I think it is good news that after a long break Saudi Arabia has reopened its manpower market for Bangladesh. But the agreement was signed only for recruiting female workers who will work in households. In fact, the KSA had never closed its market for our female workers. Our government could have sent them during this period.

I would have been happy if KSA had opened its market for our men as well, because the main market for Bangladeshi workers there is for males. But no agreement was signed for recruiting our male workers, even for working in the domestic sector. The government should have made this clear in its statements. As it didn't, a large number of job-seekers thronged the expatriate welfare ministry to register their names with the BMET right after the agreement was signed.

TDS: The ban was lifted on condition that Dhaka would not send nationals with criminal records to Riyadh. What measures can the government take to ensure that only legal Bangladeshi workers are recruited?

TS: When Saudi Arabia closed its market for Bangladeshi workers, they complained that the workers they sent back to Bangladesh because of their involvement in criminal activities were reentering the country with different names and passports. The government can do a lot to solve this problem. First, it should not allow anyone to go to the KSA without biometric passport (MRP). The problem is, in our country, a person can simply conceal the fact that he has a normal passport and apply for a new biometric passport. So relying on MRP alone will not solve the problem. What we can do is send the Saudi government the list of people we have decided to send there. They can check if those names are in their criminal list. Or we can request them



to send us the list. The BMET should take the responsibility to check this before giving clearance to our workers. They can make a database of people who are coming back to Bangladesh on out-pass by collecting the records from our airports. The database should include their photos and signatures. At the same time, the private recruiting agencies should also take some responsibility. If any recruiting agency is found guilty of sending persons illegally, the government should not allow that agency to send workers the next year.

TDS: As more of our female migrants would work as maids and housekeepers, there is increased risk of exploitation, including sexual assault. What can our embassy do in this regard?

TS: We sent very few female workers to KSA in the past. Now that we have decided to send female workers there, we have to be well prepared. I talked to some private recruiting agencies and came to know that they were sending workers without any preparation.

Our workers will work not only in Riyadh also but in some remote places of that country. As 10,000 workers will go per month, the government needs to build at least 20/30 shelter homes in the provinces of Saudi Arabia where our female migrant workers will work. To run those, we will need manpower. There are many Bangladeshi professionals working in the KSA. Their wives and children can be recruited on the basis of merit to work in these shelter homes. There are people who may agree to volunteer. India has established

service centres for migrant workers outside their embassies in the KSA and other countries. They even deliver passports through those offices on weekends. Our female migrant workers usually run away when they face any type of harassment inside the households and eventually fall victims to traffickers. If they know that there are shelter homes, they will go there in such situations.

The government should also make legal preparations, and appoint lawyers. If any worker comes to the shelter home and complains of physical or sexual harassment by her employer, our lawyer can file a case against the employer and fight the case in the court. After the disposal of the case, the worker can switch to another job. According to Saudi rules, an employee has the right to change her place of employment if she is mistreated by the employer. So, it will be against the interest of our workers if we send them to KSA before establishing shelter homes and appointing the manpower to run them.

Furthermore, all workers should be provided with a mobile phone. The government must ensure that the Saudi employers will let them use mobile phones. Establishing a hotline would also be very helpful through which workers would be able to contact us and talk about their problems in Bangla. The government should talk to our workers at least once a month to make sure that they are doing alright. To get this access, our government has to establish an institutional mechanism.

TDS: India, the Philippines, Indonesia and Sri Lanka have set several terms and conditions, including minimum wages and better working conditions. Why couldn't Bangladesh negotiate for higher pay and better working conditions?

TS: The government should have included some experts in the team who have negotiation skills. You don't get what you deserve, you get what you negotiate. We could have negotiated for higher salary if our workers were well trained. As we did not provide our

workers with skills training or language training, we had to agree to what they offered us. The training the government usually provides to our workers is theoretical, not practical. They don't even teach them how to use the electronic gadgets they will have to use frequently. Then there is corruption. Also, there are instances of misappropriation of the fund allocated for training programmes.

TDS: Jobs in Saudi Arabia are mainly short-term with specific contracts and workers have to return home after its expiry. Are there any chances of job extensions?

TS: Saudi Arabia will not let any worker stay for more than six years, because if they do, the issue of citizenship will arise. Basically, our workers will go on to two to three years' contract. In Saudi Arabia, the employers can renew the contracts if they want. But I don't know whether our government knows about this.

TDS: According to the Saudi government, around 200,000 Myanmar nationals entered the KSA with Bangladeshi passports over the past 20 years. Is that so?

TS: This assertion has no basis whatsoever. Whenever the Saudi government raises any allegation of criminal activities against our workers, the government blames it on Rohingyas right away. Some Rohingyas may have gone to the KSA with Bangladeshi passports, but this has happened because of the government's failure and corruption. Those passports were sold by people from within the embassy. What actions were taken against those embassy officials? What the embassy should do is develop a system where all information about the Bangladeshi migrant workers, including names, passport numbers, village addresses, etc will be recorded. This can be done but needs a lot of effort on the part of the government.

The Rohingyas do not have an official identity. By giving Rohingyas 'refugee' status, their assimilation into Bangladeshi society can be prevented and the means to obtain a Bangladeshi passport will not be as easy.

Pondering the imponderable

Ending politics of confrontation

ZIAUDDIN CHOWDHURY

A few days ago, in a news interview in Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) radio here in the US, a journalist covering events in Afghanistan provided a grim view of the prospects of democracy in that country. He doubted if Afghanistan could have a democratic government any time soon, and added that the people of Afghanistan would be lucky if the country could rise to the level of even Bangladesh in one generation. That was a compliment to Bangladesh I thought, however left-handed it might have been. At least there are people in the outside world who thought of Bangladesh as a democratic country. I wondered if the journalist was aware of what was going on now in Bangladesh in the name of democracy and democratic practices. But he was a savvy journalist, and I am sure he knew full well what was going on in Bangladesh.

That an international journalist considered Bangladesh a democratic country is not an endorsement of the current politics of violence in the country; it is a recognition of what the country achieved over last four decades to establish a tradition of democracy, however flawed it may be. It has not been always an easy ride, since the country that was founded on ideals of

democracy and secularism had its constitutional ideals badly mangled within four years of its birth.

It would take another two decades to reestablish democracy, but not before long periods of movements led by the same set of political leadership that paradoxically is bringing the country to its knees now. It is an irony that the leaders who fought shoulder-to-shoulder against an authoritarian regime and brought back the rights of the people would be engaged in politics of confrontation and apparently a battle for personal power.

This need not have happened if the major players of today's politics actually had the interests of the country in their heart. This would not have happened if the parties in today's politics of confrontation respected the wishes of the people they claim they are fighting for. Because what is really at stake is not their own political future, but the future of the country.

It took us more than forty years to come to where we are now. Our institutions may not be very efficient, but we built these institutions through hard work of our people who were led by one goal, that of building a new country that was born out of struggle and sacrifice of millions. Made in Bangladesh is a label displayed in products that are marketed globally and is a

matter of pride to Bangladeshis at home and abroad, as are the Bangladeshis who have earned a name for their country serving all over the globe.

The accomplishments of forty plus years did not happen in a vacuum, nor would these have happened if the country were a rudderless ship. Our politics may not have given us a statesman of vision, but despite the vagary of politics we got leaders who took their own

labour to countries that appreciated the quality and hard work of our people. The biggest irony, however, is that when the country was developing economically strong, politically it witnessed a downward spiral beginning the day democracy was restored. Politics of cooperation yielded place to politics of confrontation.

A new dawn ushered the country into an uncertain time and a more uncertain future. Normal politics

became the new characteristics of politics. Each of the two major parties that ran government in last twenty years (except for 2006-2008) faced boycott or violent opposition in their tenure with shutdown and strikes that would paralyse the country for days and cause the economy to founder.

Confrontation between political parties is expected, but within the parameters of law and institutional structure. Such confrontation would normally happen in election campaigns, wooing of voters, and in the parliament. But in our case this confrontation has only one meaning, violence and terrorism. The government bears down on opposition with repression and excessive force, and the opposition responds with greater violence. What the two parties refuse to admit is that, in this politics of confrontation, the people are their hostage and future of the country is at stake. By refusing to open a dialogue to end this confrontation they are only taking the country to a precipice of grave danger. Politics of confrontation and vengeance is not what Bangladesh was founded for, nor was it founded to benefit a coterie of political groups. Will sanity return to our leaders so they end this cycle of violence and terrorism?

The writer is a political analyst and commentator.



initiatives to build the country of their dream. They built institutions and teams who would give leadership in education, rural development, health, and employment generation.

Entrepreneurs built a large manufacturing sector employing hundreds of thousands of females, and filled in growing global demands for quality and cost-effective products.

The labour sector boomed, exporting

became abnormal, and the abnormal became the new normal. From this point, the country entered into a new paradigm of struggle for political power, in which street would replace the parliament, political debate would be replaced by armed violence and terrorism, speech would be replaced by bombs and explosives, and political campaigns by murder and arson. Vengeance, intransigence and intimidi-

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Confrontation between political

CROSSWORD by Thomas Joseph

ACROSS

- 1 Lion tamer's prop
- 5 Scarlett's home
- 9 Sharpens
- 11 Kathy of "Misery"
- 12 Quite impressed
- 13 Alaska native
- 14 French article
- 15 Annual report number
- 17 Mascara holder
- 19 Glimpse
- 20 "Ivanhoe" author
- 21 Nap site
- 22 Mayor before Koch
- 24 Early auto
- 26 Tony of TV and stage
- 29 Vacuum lack
- 30 A, in Morse code
- 32 China material
- 34 Diner dessert
- 35 Group of top players
- 36 Dodge
- 38 Outdoes
- 39 Gave a score to
- 40 College study
- 41 Colleen

DOWN

- 1 Even though
- 2 Sweethearts
- 3 I'll be right with you
- 4 Flock holder
- 5 Soft mineral
- 6 Relaxed
- 7 Was green, in a way
- 8 -- crow flies
- 10 Capitol group
- 11 Soaking spot
- 16 Los -- Unidos
- 18 Gray wolf
- 21 Crook
- 23 "Leave it to Beaver" star
- 24 Mob member
- 25 Composer Bloch
- 27 Mexican revolutionary
- 28 Stage comments
- 29 Addis --
- 30 River stoppers
- 31 Listens to
- 33 Chow
- 37 Kilmer of "The doors"

CRYPTOQUOTE

TWH'J JEPN JGN KARR KC JGN GWZHX,
JEPN GOP KC JGN JEOR; JGNH CWA MEH
RNJ LW BGNH CWA BEHJ JW.
-- IWXG KORROHLX

Yesterday's CRYPTOQUOTE:
LET US NOT BE TOO PARTICULAR. IT IS BETTER TO HAVE OLD
SECONDHAND DIAMONDS THAN NONE AT ALL.
-- MARK TWAIN

YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

FEWEST SING
AT ONCE IDEA
RANGER BEADS
INNER
MINT GRAS
FACE FIASCO
ORE GUN CAD
EDISON LONE
INTO NUTS
ASTOR
PRAEYER BEADS
ROPE OLIVIA
OWED TENANT

BEETLE BAILEY



HENRY



by Mort Walker



by Don Trachte



QUOTABLE Quote

Science is not only a discipline of reason but, also, one of romance and passion.

Stephen Hawking