

## TO THE POLLS WE GO

### Ensure peaceful conduct

AS the two major cities in the country go to the polls today to elect their mayors, there is a high degree of expectation tinged with a sense of apprehension. Stakes are high in the city polls for both the cities are in dire straits and are in an urgent need of an elected leadership who will be able to take the metropolises forward.

Even though the prelude to the much-awaited elections has been marked by a certain amount of tension, a good deal of positive energy was radiated by the candidates and their supporters. The campaign was by and large constructive; this is especially so for the agendas that have come forth through the face-offs between candidates, which generated an engaging public interest in the polls.

Even though city polls are supposed to be party-less, national politics loomed large over the whole electioneering process. Let's not forget that a high number of risk prone centres have been identified where adequate precautions must be put in place in a fail-safe way. The point can be hardly emphasized that the agents of all political parties should be present at the polling stations to keep a tab on the voting process.

We believe that the government, the EC, the ruling party and the other political parties should endeavour to ensure that an atmosphere congenial for the holding of a free and fair election prevails in Dhaka and Chittagong.

## ASSAULT OF JU TEACHER BY STUDENT ACTIVIST

### Culture of impunity fuels such behaviour

WE are outraged that a teacher was allegedly sexually assaulted on a campus by a student, that too, by an activist of a ruling party student wing. We note with concern that the said activist from Jagannath University has been released from custody, only hours after he was given over to the police by the university authorities. What is even more troubling is that the police are now denying that the authorities handed him over to them in the first place.

According to reports, there were witness accounts and photographs to show that the police left the campus with the culprit in their vehicle; in addition, the victim and her colleagues were present at the proctor's office when the accused was handed over. Under the circumstances, the Kotwali police station Sub-Inspector's denial makes us wonder about the extent to which our law enforcers are willing to go to protect errant ruling party student activists at the cost of justice.

We cannot condone acts of violence and intolerance targeted towards teachers of our esteemed public institutions; we have to ensure that the strongest institutional and legal measures are taken to punish the perpetrators and deter others from carrying out similar acts in the future, irrespective of their political affiliation. Unfortunately, the impunity enjoyed by certain student group members enables and encourages them to act in such a deplorable manner in campuses.

Law enforcers must be held accountable for their role in nurturing this culture of impunity; they must not forget that their duty is to protect the citizens of this country, not the members of any particular student wing.

# MAKING THE WORKPLACE SAFER - IT'S EVERYBODY'S RESPONSIBILITY

DR. SADEQUIL ISLAM

DOSTOEVSKY in his novel *The House of the Dead* wrote: "The degree of civilisation in a society can be judged by entering its prisons." In my opinion, the metric of measuring the level of economic civilisation of a country can be ascertained by entering the places where workers work and live. The Rana Plaza disaster in Bangladesh reminds us that a workplace for a garment worker can be worse than a prison.

In my research, I often depict Bangladesh as the text-book example of a labour-abundant country with a comparative advantage in labour-intensive products such as garments. In about three decades, Bangladesh has managed to become the second largest exporter of garments, employing more than four million workers. While dedicating the book to workers of Bangladesh, I expressed a benign hope that in an age of globalisation and trade liberalisation, Bangladeshi workers would become active players in shaping their destiny through acquisition of skills and better working conditions. On April 24, 2013, the shocking, live scenes from Rana Plaza in Savar that continuously flashed on Bangladeshi TV channels in our living room in Sudbury, Ontario, shattered that hope and forced me to reflect on human costs of Bangladesh's comparative advantage and success in garment exports.

Victims of the Rana Plaza disaster are now part of gruesome statistics; according to the ILO office in Dhaka, in Bangladesh, each year, about 11.7 thousand workers suffer fatal accidents, 24.5 thousand workers die from work-related diseases and another 8 million workers suffer from injuries at work.

The Rana Plaza disaster has generated debates on causes and solutions. A simple but anachronistic view is that the problem and responsibility are local, not global: the blame belongs to Bangladeshi owners, managers, and government. It's definitely true that the Rana Plaza disaster epitomises the serious governance deficit in Bangladesh at all levels. The global dimension of the problem, however, can't be ignored. Globalisation and trade liberalisation have intensified the "race to the bottom" whereby brand-name companies and international buying agents search for the lowest prices exploiting their monopsony power over many small, struggling garment companies in Bangladesh. In a globalised world, workers' health and safety have attributes of national and international "public goods," which can't be left solely to



owners of private firms and national governments.

A sustained solution to prevent Rana Plaza-type disasters has to be both local and global. National and international outcries and pressures have already forced the BGMEA and the government of Bangladesh to undertake some measures such as raising the minimum monthly wage from \$38 to \$68 dollars, amending the Labour Act in 2013 to allow formation of labour unions and upgrading the Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishments. Still, Bangladesh has a long way toward fair labour standards. First, among the major clothing exporting countries, Bangladeshi garment workers earn the lowest wage. According to a report of the Centre for American Progress, the prevailing wage as a percentage of the "living wage" in Bangladesh in 2011 was only 14 percent, lower than in other 14 countries. Second, the Bangladesh government is yet to establish a transparent and fair compensation system for garment workers' death and fatal injuries.

As a member of the ILO since 1972, Bangladesh has ratified seven of the eight core labour standards conventions, but not the Minimum Age Convention (No. 138, 1973).

Bangladesh also has not ratified a number of conventions related to labour standards, such as: 1) Promotional framework for Occupational Safety and health Convention (No. 187, 2006), Occupational Safety and health Convention (No. 155, 1981), and more importantly, 3) Employment Injury Benefits Convention (No. 121, 1964, Schedule I amended in 1980).

A serious issue in the context of Bangladesh is the lack of enforcement of conventions ratified by Bangladesh and

lack of awareness concerning labour laws enacted by the Government of Bangladesh.

My interviews with garment workers during the summer of 2014, reveal several facts: a) garment workers are not aware of their rights under the current labour laws; b) although the number of registered labour unions in the garment sector increased, harassment of workers for union activities continues to persist (only pro-government labour unions have been allowed to operate); c) many workers are unaware of the health centres operated by the BGMEA; d) some workers "voluntarily" work even if they are sick; e) unexpected medical expenditures pose a serious burden for some garment workers; and f) some garment workers often purchase basic consumer goods from local stores on credit often at higher than regular prices. My visits to places where some Bangladeshi garment workers live and work evoke the scenes and themes depicted by Charles Dickens of 19th century England.

Increasingly, the garment industry has become globalised through a network involving brand-name retailers, buying agents, input suppliers, main producers and their subcontractors. The brand-name companies may not be legally responsible for unsafe work places in Bangladesh; however, it's their moral responsibility to become part of the solution. Already a multi-stakeholders model involving international brand companies, buying agents, factory owners, the BGMEA, and the Bangladesh government, is emerging in Bangladesh to handle compensations for Rana Plaza victims and to upgrade safety of garment factories. The Donor Trust Fund, chaired by the ILO has been created to raise \$40 million; however, thus far only one-third

has been raised. Many brands are yet to pay up.

The United States is the largest importer of garments from Bangladesh, importing more than \$ 4.7 billion worth of garments in 2014. It is the only major advanced country which imposes duties on Bangladeshi products, collecting more than \$788 million import duties from Bangladeshi garments in 2014. As the eighth largest country generating import duties in the United States, Bangladesh accounts for more import duties than the U.K., France, South Korea, and Taiwan. Rather than continuing the ineffectual, punitive measure of suspended GSP benefits, the United States should provide duty-free access to Bangladeshi garments subject to improvements in labour standards. Alternatively, the United States can use part or whole of the collected duty toward health and safety standards of Bangladeshi garment workers.

There is a clear need for a multi-stakeholder model of governance to continuously upgrade labour standards in the garment industry and in other industries in Bangladesh. The Accord on Fire and Building Safety, Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety and the Better Work Programme of the ILO are first steps in the right direction. However, these programmes, by concentrating on a subset of garment factories, may be duplicative and may miss high risk garment factories. For a considerable period of time, the roles of Bangladeshi and international labour unions, Bangladeshi and international NGOs, the ILO, and activists will be critical in forcing factory owners, their association, and the Bangladesh government to promote labour standards in the garment industry of Bangladesh. In the long run, Bangladesh cannot and should not outsource its responsibility of upgrading labour standards to international brands and foreign governments.

A globalised economy driven solely by short-run profit motives is bound to have large and unpredictable blind spots which fail to anticipate death-traps like the Rana Plaza building. As is well known, in 1911, a similar disaster happened in the United States - the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire in New York City. The incident was a turning point in worker safety standards. The best way to remember the victims of Rana Plaza is to maintain persistent and concerted efforts involving all stakeholders, local, national, and international, so that the history of this Plaza is not repeated.

The writer is Professor of Economics, Laurentian University, Sudbury, Ontario, Canada.

## Unabated border killings

### BOTTOM LINE



BARRISTER  
HARUN UR RASHID

EIGHTEEN unarmed Bangladeshis were reportedly killed by the Indian Border Security Force (BSF) along the Indo-Bangladesh border in the last three months. Furthermore, BSF had killed one Bangladeshi on April 23 and two on April 11 at the Jessore borders.

At the last February meeting in New Delhi, Bangladesh Home Secretary raised the issue with his Indian counterpart to halt the killings. In 2014, the BSF killed 35 Bangladeshis, up from the previous year's 29, according to the Bangladesh human rights watchdog, Odhikar.

It may be recalled that the Prime Ministers of Bangladesh and India in paragraph 18 of the Joint Communique of January 13, 2010 agreed that "respective border guarding forces exercise restraint...and prevent loss of lives."

Since the flourishing of the illegal trade of cattle, involving \$500 million annually for beneficiaries of both sides of the border, most of the dead are found to be the unarmed cattle traders from Bangladesh. According to official statistics, around 1.7 million cattle were smuggled to Bangladesh from India in 2014 to meet the gap between supply and demand in Bangladesh.

However while visiting border areas of West Bengal-Bangladesh, the Union Home Minister of India Rajnath Singh reportedly said on April 1 that there was no such thing as a "non-lethal strategy" in place for BSF. "You

further intensify your watch so cattle smuggling stops completely and prices shoot up 70 to 80 percent more so that people of Bangladesh give up eating beef," he reportedly said.

The smuggled cattle to Bangladesh are brought from far flung Indian states like Haryana, Maharashtra and Rajasthan. By the time a cow reaches West Bengal, its price goes up to Rs.15, 000 from Rs.5,000 in those states. Finally, it is sold at Rs.40,000. Thus, it shows that Indian sellers make huge profits from such trades.

While talking about the technique of the illegal cattle trade, a BSF official has reportedly said that a boy from nearby areas of the border is first sent from Bangladesh. When the boy gives the green signal, illegal traders from both sides rush toward the fence. The Indian traders come with about a dozen heads of cattle. One by one, the animals are hung on improvised bamboo cranes and sent across to the Bangladesh side within a few minutes.

It is reported by cattle smugglers that police, customs, border security guards and even local politicians are involved because of the big bucks in the illegal trade. Many Bangladeshi nationals are killed when they apparently fail to bribe the border officials including the security guards.

A renewed thrust by Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is to ban cattle trade from India. Prakash Sharma, the national spokesman of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, reportedly stated, "India should basically be a milk-selling country, not meat-exporting." He further observed, "Cows have a special place in our hearts, we are against any kind of slaughter."

It is reported that India has been the world's fifth-largest consumer and second-largest exporter of beef in the world with 20 percent market share after Brazil. India reportedly earned Rs. 26,458 crore in 2014.

Critics of BJP warn that the beef ban will cost jobs and harm its economy. The chief minister of Goa has refused to back the ban, saying that around 40 percent of people there eat beef and he respected the rights of minorities. "Is the government going to tell us what we can eat and what we cannot eat? We've been eating beef for generations. It's like telling people they can't eat sugar. This ban won't work," said Danish Qureshi, a young trader of beef in UP.

The best way to halt the border killings of cattle traders is to legalise either cattle trade or export of beef to Bangladesh. Veteran journalist Subir Bhaumik stated that one former director general of the Indian Border Security Force (Ashis Mitra) had made suggestions about legalising the cattle trade so that the border guards could concentrate on checking the inflow of more dangerous contrabands like drugs and weapons.

Finally, the people of Bangladesh are surprised at the insensitivity of the Modi government toward the killings of Bangladeshi nationals. The New Delhi government may realise that if the border killings continue, the Bangladesh government will be put into great political difficulty in its efforts in further strengthening its partnership with India. A mutually acceptable solution on this sensitive issue is the call of the day.

The writer is Former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.

## COMMENTS

### "Brow-raising deployment" (April 24, 2015)

Unknown

Thanks CEC for his new edition of election procedure!

### "A 'new generation city'" (April 24, 2015)

Md. Nazrul Islam

It is awesome to see all the mayor candidates (especially north) are educated, enthusiastic and goal-oriented. I hope a better Dhaka awaits us.

### "Don't mar the mayoral elections" (April 23, 2015)

OpeeMonir

Most of the mayoral candidates were born with a silver spoon; how can we expect them to meet the aspirations of the common people?

ATM Nurul Amin

A timely and powerful plea, made objectively and persuasively. Hope those who matter heed to the plea. Even this city level election, if free and fair, can set a new beginning that the citizens of this country so desperately need.

### "Bank looters kill 7" (April 22, 2015)

Shakir Rahman Shuvro

Government should find those butchers as soon as possible. And every local branch of banks should be made more secure.

Dev Saha

Seven lives perished only for 35 lakhs taka? This is insane!

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters @ thedailystar.net

### BANKERS ARE FEELING INSECURE

People in the banking profession now feel very insecure after the grisly bank heist which took place in Ashulia Industrial Area on April 21 in broad daylight. Banks lack adequate security measures and must immediately take measures to address this issue.  
S. M. IMRANUL ISLAM  
RAJON  
Executive officer  
Janata Bank Limited

### AFRIDI'S COMPLAINT OF POOR UMPIRING

After the Bangla-wash of Pakistan cricket team, Afridi complained of poor umpiring in public. ICC condemned Mustafa Kamal's public utterances regarding the questionable umpiring decisions during the Bangladesh-India quarterfinal match in World Cup 2015. Will they do the same for Afridi? Looking forward to see it.  
DR. B. SULTAN  
Indira Road  
Dhaka

### BANGLADESH DESERVES THESE VICTORIES

Congratulations Tigers, now you are playing superb! You deserve your latest victories against Pakistan for being extremely patient. These victories belong to the entire country. God bless you. Hoping for another victory in the test match against Pakistan.  
SCOTT ELLIOTT  
On e-mail



PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED