

A HELPLESS WORLD against a group of bigots

Finance Minister's bold admission

Time for PM's intervention

THE Finance Minister's exasperation in parliament, over the government's inability to take punitive action against a top official of Sonali Bank for his involvement in the Hallmark loan scam as well as of those in the Basic Bank scam, because of political backing, is a significant disclosure. We laud his bold admission. He has clearly exposed his helplessness in trying to deal with a matter that should be normally under his jurisdiction. His failure to exercise his authority points to the existence of a conglomerate of higher powers which scuttle any effort to punish the offenders.

The minister has also admitted that public confidence in the financial sector has drastically fallen after the Hallmark and Basic Bank scams. This is hardly a revelation for the people of this country, many of whom are victims of these horrendous crimes.

The Finance Minister has said that an investigation is underway and the government would take action on the basis of its findings. Lawmakers have demanded a list of defaulters be published to which the minister has agreed. These appear to be definitive steps and we hope that the Prime Minister will take the lead in catching those individuals who have siphoned off public money.

Now that no less a person than the Finance Minister has laid bare the facts, the onus is on the Prime Minister to assist the Finance Minister to pursue the matter and bring the culprits to book. It goes without saying that these scams set off a raging financial indiscipline in the entire sector, causing economic hemorrhage. The PM's intervention in ending the impunity culture could not come any sooner.

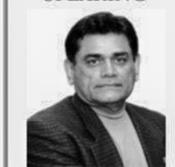
Cops' devious fund raising

Bribing for promotion!

WE are taken aback by the news that some personnel of Barisal Metropolitan Police (BMP) were involved in creating a joint bribe fund as speed money for promotion. The fund was meant for bribing ministry high-ups to expedite promotion of the 230 cops who had successfully passed departmental exam to be entitled to it. Success in exam would not be enough, which led to the creation of the bribery fund where each of the cops contributed between Tk 30,000 and Tk 50,000. How could a low paid policeman manage such a huge sum without resorting to illegal means in the first place? The most appalling fact is that a senior official brokered the whole plan. In Bangladesh police administration is generally perceived to be corrupt and this incident only goes to show how a chain of corruption can be contrived on short notice.

It is reassuring that the Police headquarters have suspended 10 cops for their involvement in this matter. But suspension is a temporary measure. The mediator police officer is yet to be taken to task. It is also important to find those high-ups for whom the bribe money was meant. We urge the police authority to take exemplary action against those found guilty because it involves a fundamental issue of raising the dwindling public confidence in the police force.

STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING



Brig Gen SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN
 ndc, psc (Retd)

"The good tidings of Friday: Factory in France, hotel in Tunisia, mosque in Kuwait, battles in Kobane, conquests in Haksaka."

ALTHOUGH the latest spate of Friday attacks in three continents in quick succession bear the hallmarks of IS operation, it has not claimed responsibility for the Tunisia attacks and we are not certain about the perpetrators of the attack in France; but that is how the IS supporters vented their joy at the killings and 'conquests.' Some experts are unwilling to accept that these were coordinated attacks but perhaps motivated by the same psyche. If that be so, is it a coincidence that June 26 was exactly a year to the day that the IS made a declaration of its Caliphate?

One wonders why the Jihadis tend to become more active during Ramadan. Only a few days ago, they had urged their followers 'to make Ramadan a month of calamities for the non-believers', but their targeting a Shia mosque in Kuwait suggest that it is not only the 'non-believers' that they are after and that they have extended the scope of the definition of 'non-believers' and have taken the war to the doors of those they consider as apostates. What is surprising is that the IS has extended their violent acts in countries that had seemed fairly safe from the acts of religious violence and influence of religious extremists like Saudi Arabia. And the cradle of the Arab Spring has again come under the extremist attack in quick succession, some aver because of its successful political transition to a more open and liberal society

It really does not matter whether the attacks were the work of the IS and coordinated centrally or merely the acts of 'lone wolves'. These acts and the results are seen as a feather in the cap by the active supporters of the IS and those who share their views on an Islamic Caliphate.

Amidst all these senseless killings, whose targets have been both Muslims and non-Muslims, in fact anyone who seemed not in line with IS views have been targeted, the world, the Muslim world in particular, seems helpless to stem the rise of a deviant group within Islam. What is even more disconcerting is that a good number of the people in the Muslim countries sympathise with this group and have joined

the extremists' ranks, getting embroiled wittingly or unwittingly in the pernicious efforts to implement al-Zarqawi's dream of creating a Sunni caliphate across areas of Iraq, Syria and Persian Gulf.

So what is the west going to do about the Frankenstein they have helped to create in the first place? Last year in September, President Obama had admitted, in the face of the swift push of the IS over a wide swathe of land in Syria and Iraq, that the US does not have a strategy to defeat the IS as yet. One wonders if the US has one, even after ten months of that admission, although very recently President Obama

that IS represents an errant group whose narrative, unfortunately, has come to be accepted by many in the Arab and Muslim world. Bombings will take out people but not ideas and most of the cases of the 'collateral damage' caused by aerial bombardment—the bodies of innocent civilians and destroyed buildings—will come in as handy tools to strengthen the IS narratives.

Bombings will kill people, not ideas. And that is where the first countermeasures must aim at. For this, it is not the US but the Muslim world, particularly the Arab world, which should take the lead. It is regrettable



Demonstrators in Washington, DC protest against ISIS.

PHOTO: AFP

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had said that the US does not "yet have a complete strategy." One wonders what a "complete strategy" would look like if the US is at all able to formulate one to stem the advance of the IS.

There are serious misgivings about the four-point anti-IS strategy of the US namely, air strikes, sending 475 more troops to Iraq, cutting off funding to IS, and ramping up humanitarian efforts, enunciated by Obama in September last year, particularly about the efficacy of air strikes. It is understandable why the US is unwilling to put more boots on the ground but the strategy exposes a gross misunderstanding of the nature of the problem. It is essential to understand

that not enough has been done in this regard. The vast majority of the Muslim world and their leaders have chosen to remain silent in the face of wrath that has the potential of not only causing immitigable damage to the existing social and political structure in a good part of the globe, but also has the potential to wreak immeasurable harm on Islam. It is for the Muslim world to breach the existing divide to coalesce against the IS, a breach that the IS has been benefiting from and one it would like to see continue.

The writer is Editor, Op-Ed and Defence & Strategic Affairs, The Daily Star.

"Distressed" RMG Industries

ABDULLAH SHIBLI

THE challenges our RMG industry faces as we approach 2018 when the current covenant expires are enormous, and the mood of the supportive, but fickle-minded buyers and multinational community might turn sour with another major industrial accident or disruptive labour unrest. As recent experience shows, time is not on our side and urgent and critical additional measures need to be carried through to reach the target of \$50 billion export in the face of shifting alliances and global market forces. Others, including some of the international participants voiced their concern that Bangladesh appears to have got a bad press. Areas where further progress was needed are labour organisation in EPZ, negative publicity regarding harassment of NGOs and labour unions, and lack of data and transparency on factory inspections.

This, in a nutshell, was the conclusion at the two-day international conference held at Harvard University on June 6-7, 2015 which was attended by over 200 participants from Bangladesh government, BGMEA and BKMEA, international organisations, and Bangladeshi experts from the US academic and private sector. For the second year, the Bangladesh Development Conference focused on the Bangladesh textiles industry and is a continuation of the efforts of the organisers to shed light on the progress of the Bangladesh garments industry and discuss the challenges it faces.

The theme of this year's conference was "Transformation Challenges and Opportunities for Bangladesh Garment Industry" and was organised jointly by Harvard University South Asia Institute, Harvard University Center for the

Environment, and International Sustainable Development Institute (ISDI), Inc. In his presentation on "Best Practices in Industrial Relations for Sustainable Growth", the Labour Secretary Mikail Shipar gave a quick overview of the progress made by Bangladesh in labour relations, workers' safety, and compensation to victims of Rana Plaza disaster. Nazma Akter, President of Sommilito Garments Shromik Federation strongly voiced her concern about some of the hurdles that labour leaders face as they attempt to increase the number of unions in the RMG sector.

The discussions on these questions were informative and led to some clear directions. John Smith, Adviser and International Coordinator Textiles and Garments, UNIDO, voiced the sentiment - which was supported by official, and garments industry, representatives - that Bangladesh must avoid another industrial accident similar to the Rana Plaza collapse since that might mortally wound the economy. There was also a consensus that the current practice of subcontracting must be better managed and the small and medium sized factories brought under regulatory supervision, particularly in view of the

on Bangladesh labour practices, he was threatened by some industrial leaders with lawsuits. He voiced the need for strong labour representation to keep workers safe, and declared that no amount of government inspection in isolation is sufficient to ensure compliance. He also voiced the need to protect workers and "whistle blowers" against retaliation.

At the Conference, a document circulated by International Labour Rights Forum based on a report by a delegation visiting Dhaka on the second anniversary of the Rana Plaza disaster, identified some gaps in the administration of the Rana Plaza Trust Fund, support for surviving family members, and implementation of the various measures adopted in the wake of the disaster in 2013. In contrast, Sanchita Saxena, a researcher at University of California, Berkeley, and author of a comparative study on garment industries in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Cambodia, offered a more optimistic point of view on Bangladesh RMG. Her optimistic outlook was based on the active role played by women in leading the change dynamics in Bangladesh. Her book, *Made in Bangladesh, Cambodia, and Sri Lanka*, takes to task the misconceptions prevalent in the Western media on the practices and conditions prevalent in the Bangladesh garments sector. Saxena is of the opinion that "it is important to recognise the improvements thus far" and to recognise that "manipulation of trading regime has created and continues to create both incentives and disincentives for the various stakeholders in this industry."

The writer, an economist, writes regularly on policy issues. He recently participated and presented at the Harvard Bangladesh Conference 2015.

Areas where further progress was needed are labour organisation in EPZ, negative publicity regarding harassment of NGOs and labour unions, and lack of data and transparency on factory inspections.

Some of the more interesting conversations during this conference occurred along the following threads:

1. How to estimate the total number of factories that are operating in the shadow market unregulated by the government?
2. After the year 2018, when the current agreements on safety and remediation run out, will the country be able to monitor the RMG sector and continue the progress towards safe workplace and fair wages?
3. Can Bangladesh stay competitive as the cost of the reforms and retrofitting mount?
4. Will the world be willing to support the Bangladesh garment industry if the price offered goes up with a surcharge for "Greener RMG"?

fact that there was currently a lack of data on many factories in the lowest tier out of 6,800 which are now operating under the radar. Various suggestions were also offered to better monitor the Utilisation Declaration to improve compliance of SME's.

Dr. David Weil, Professor of Boston University and Administrator of the Wage and Hour Division of the US Department of Labour in his keynote speech discussed the challenges he faces in his role as an enforcer of minimum wage laws in the USA. He stressed the need for unannounced audit visits and the obstacles that staff shortage pose in this task.

Steven Greenhouse, a news correspondent for *The New York Times*, revealed that while he was doing a report

COMMENTS

"Rampal Power Plant: PM blasts critics"
 (June 30, 2015)

▼
Sayedeh Sohag
 She should get some expert advice before making such statements.

▼
Muhammad Mainuddin Khan
 I disagree with her; we have lots of other places that are more suitable for this plant.

▼
Sultan Zubaer
 Bangladesh should not undertake any project that will be harmful to the Sundarbans.

▼
Shah Alam
 The government should not abuse power; experts' opinions should be taken into account in this regard. We should uphold the national interest above everything else. PM should be more pragmatic in decision making.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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It's time for a new strategy

Given the impasse between Israel and the Palestinians in the peace negotiations, the formation of a new right-wing Israeli government will make it further difficult for the two sides to come to terms on their own to reach a peace agreement. Leaving them to their own devices is inherently dangerous, which explains why the Obama administration might make one last-ditch effort to resume the peace process following the conclusion of the negotiations with Iran over its nuclear program.

What is needed is a new strategy and a new venue to create a new political dynamic that will compel the Israelis and Palestinians to deal with one another. Being that the French are planning to submit a new framework for peace to the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) - which requires

the full support of the US to have it passed - the Obama administration can shape the resolution to make it consistent with its overall policy of a two-state solution. At the same time, this will prevent the Palestinian Authority (PA) from submitting their own resolution seeking an end to the Israeli occupation and the establishment of a Palestinian state within a specified period of time, which can further complicate the conflict.

Contrary to common wisdom, the turmoil sweeping the Middle East, the convergence of multiple conflicts and future uncertainties has created new compelling circumstances that support the resumption of the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations.

Whereas the regional violent conflicts - particularly in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen - distract attention

from the currently less violent Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the relative quiet cannot be taken for granted. As the Palestinians' frustration continues to grow, so does the risk of a new violent flare-up, which must be avoided. Preventing such an outbreak would allow for the Israeli-Palestinian negotiating channels to remain open and for the Arab states to focus on the present danger posed by ISIS and Iran's regional ambitions. A solution now would prevent the creation of additional facts on the ground, including the expansion of Israeli settlements, and narrow the opening for ISIS to instigate unrest in the territories.

Dr. Alon Ben-Meir
 Professor, International Relations, Center for Global Affairs, NYU

Police force must regain their lost glory

From my childhood, I used to look upon the police personnel with reverence. Their presence gave us a sense of security and made us feel assured that they would be able to solve any problem. But with time, the image of our police force is being tarnished, as more and more news of misdeeds of a section of policemen are reaching us. They are committing crimes, from petty ones to murders and rapes, which is just unthinkable.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina on June 11, 2015 inaugurated "Police Plaza Concord" in the capital's Gulshan area, a commercial building of Bangladesh Police Welfare Trust. We hope the police force will look after the welfare of the people, not only of themselves.

Nur Jahan
 Chittagong