

US' 'No' to GSP

One-sided love affair!

PLEASURE IS ALL MINE



SHAH HUSAIN IMAM

THE exclusion of Bangladesh from Generalized System of Preferences (GSP) is as humiliating as it is heartbreaking. We are righteously indignant.

At the outset, we need to look up-close at the broader picture. The denial to Bangladesh of the facility is out of steps with the US'

generosity surging in its relations with some formidable adversarial countries.

Undeterred by lambasting critics, Obama administration has lifted crippling sanctions on Iran in exchange for verifiable curbs on Tehran's nuclear ambitions. Significantly also, we see Washington spectacularly rebuilding ties with Cuba, its former implacable foe. Resumption of full diplomatic ties between the two countries snapped decades ago is clearly in prospect.

The US is so keen to reach out to the region that it is shaking hands with its former enemy Venezuela and its ally Ecuador. Even these two countries appear on the list of 122 beneficiaries of the GSP facility, but not Bangladesh with whom the US otherwise has had multi-layered interactions generally viewed as being mutually beneficial.

Like between two individuals, a pair of countries or governments may have a love-hate relationship. It is as though gripe and attachment are two sides of the same coin. Though US-Bangla interactions have evolved on a love-hate trajectory, an exception is made in relation to the GSP facility for Bangladesh. Dhaka's obsession with it has not been reciprocated by Washington. It has been a case of unrequited love.

Even as the US ambassador to Dhaka Marcia Bernicat tries to assure us that there is no political reason behind the 'suspended GSP', we are reminded of a Kefner quote, 'An official denial is a *de facto* confirmation.' After having met most of the 16 conditions laid down for our re-entitlement to GSP, are we to believe that all the countries that have been accorded the facility have claim to lily white labour rights and work environment credentials?

Therefore, we carry the inevitable impression that Washington is spelling a message across to Bangladesh with some political overtones.

What deserves our utmost attention now is completing the unfinished tasks viz.

implementing rules under the new labour law, reforming law on export processing zones, and responding promptly to cases of unfair labour practices.

The sense of loss for the exclusionary treatment is much greater than is instantly realised. Some people may take consolation in the fact that after all only 5 percent of our trade with the USA is going to be hit, the remainder 95 percent comprising garment export is left unscathed because it doesn't come under the pale of GSP. But isn't it highly ironic and expedient that the US has secured compliance in most part from the garment sector, thereby legitimising apparel exports which they need while giving a raw deal to other exports just to make a point or two to Bangladesh?

For our part, we need a radical change in outlook. Our national psyche is so

conditioned that unless told and pressured by external quarters we do not wake up to an unfolding catastrophe. What we should be doing ourselves in good time comes foisted on us by international regulatory mechanisms. This is poor self-management amounting to parting with a modicum of economic sovereignty.

There's no room for any skin-deep interpretation of the level of denial faced by Bangladesh. Note that the GSP programme boosts economic development of the countries on the list by eliminating duties on up to 5,000 types of products to be exported by them to the USA. This has two implications: One, the 5 percent export from Bangladesh would be grossly uncompetitive because of paying high tariffs and couldn't, therefore, hope to expand even that tiny

basket; Two, more importantly, we would fail to diversify our exports and widen our market share of non-traditional items in the world's largest economy. But didn't we see it coming? Quite clearly, we failed to read signals allowing them to be blurred in a haze of compliments paid to Bangladesh's huge potential by US dignitaries. Our diplomatic naivety played out even just a couple of days before the negative announcement came forth. An online news item on August 11 blared out: 'US Congresswoman Carolyn B. Manoley, also a member of the Bangladesh caucus, expressed support for Bangladesh's persistent call for restoration of trade benefits for exports to the US market.' The US Congresswoman aired such views in her meeting with the Bangladesh ambassador to USA Mohammad Ziauddin in New York.



Earlier on July 30, Christopher S. Murphy, US Senator, urged the US administration to restore the GSP facility for Bangladesh. In other words, our envoy in the USA had no clue as to what was coming or maybe he was just making a last-ditch attempt to salvage a desperate situation. If the latter is the case, it couldn't be anything but applying a band-aid on a gaping fissure. Both ways it is indicative of a diplomatic failure or a joy ride through a garden path, simply to an empty space.

As J. K. Galbraith said, "There are few ironclad rules of diplomacy but to the one there is an exception. When an official reports that talks were useful it can be safely concluded that nothing was accomplished."

The writer is Associate Editor, *The Daily Star*.

Champions of Mediocrity

HUMOROUSLY YOURS



NAVEED MAHBUB

WHEN it comes to TV viewership, the Zee TV serials are at the center of the universe. Homework has to be finished. The baby's diaper has to be changed and she has to be put to sleep. (How old is the baby? Well, she was born exactly three years after the last episode of *Kyunki Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi* was aired...). Dinner has to be done. Sorry no eating and watch-

ing, not only for fear of the cutleries clinking right when it is announced on screen as to who the father of the child is, but also because the *bua* wants her work to be done in time so as not to miss out on that fateful announcement.

Finally, the virtual 'Do Not Disturb' sign is up. Even the 'blockbuster' TV show in Bangladesh has to compete with the Hindi serial timing. After all, Bangladesh's prime time is when the viewers are at home AND the Hindi serials are NOT on. Thank Heavens there is a half hour time difference between the two countries.

As the serial continues on, the volume of the TV gradually and unwittingly goes up as the volume of the dialogues (short bursts of stinging and triple meaning words, all few and far between) gradually goes down, heading towards the ultimate threat or the ultimate revelation, uttered in a whisper bordering the human audibility threshold where bats can also enjoy the evening.

And then comes the climactic music, kicking off with a sonic boom.

Oh, man! That wakes up the baby!! You go to put a bottle in the baby's mouth and put her back to sleep. You rush back to the TV room after ten long minutes. But lucky you! You still see the same set of six people on screen, intertwined in complex relationships, darting their looks from left to right, right to left, bottom to top and up to bottom, all in an infinite loop of repetitions and with perfect intervals (one waiting politely and patiently for the other to complete his darting scan) with the beat of the drums, all triggered by that one word whisper.

As the heads move in all possible directions, the storyline has graciously paused just for your (and the baby's) convenience.

So, why is this fascination with the Hindi serial? Perhaps it is a great way to unwind and decompress after a long, hard day's work, whether you are in the city or the rural areas. After all, the last thing you want is too much of cerebral exercise.

Am I big fan of the pretty faces, the five o'clock shadows and the fake grey hairs? No. But that is immaterial. The numbers speak for themselves. Can't deny that the only viewers of Zee TV serials are not just limited to India. When there is a market, there is a supply and when there is a healthy supply, there is *chi ching*.

Sure we can block or ban what a large group of consumers in Bangladesh crave. That then becomes a form of protectionism which makes it a bare playing field for the protected to become the champions of mediocrity without knowing what competition to beat.

As our radios play *Kal Ho Na Ho*, there is no *Ei Mon To Aar Maney Naa* on Mumbai's FM waves. As we watch *Raaga Anurage* on Zee Bangla, there is (was) no *Bohubrihi* on Kolkata screens. Even if there were no commercial or regulatory barriers (ok, that's euphemism for the protectionism in place across the fence) for our shows being on Indian screens, the question is how many of our neighbours (and us too) will switch away from *Indian Idol* and watch *Bangladeshi Idol*.

Yes, a bar on Hindi music as mobile phone ring tones is in line with Bangladesh's import policies in this area. A well meaning effect of it is also to promote local creative content (hey, there are no Habib Wahid tunes offered by Vodaphone to its customers...). However, it is up to us who are in the world of creative media, to get out of our comfort zones, step up and push the envelope AMIDST the prevailing dominance to lure in the one plus billion in the whole subcontinent to tune away from what they watch (listen) to what we create in Tejgaon, Kawran Bazaar, Niketon, Moghbazaar...

For now, the Ptolemy Theory holds that the Earth is at the center of the universe. But there is a Copernicus out there right among us. The center of the universe is about to shift...

The writer is an engineer at Ford & Qualcomm USA and CEO of IBM & Nokia Siemens Networks Bangladesh turned comedian (by choice), the host of NTV's *The Naveed Mahbub Show* and the founder of *Naveed's Comedy Club*. E-mail: naveed@naveedmahbub.com

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"The US should give us the GSP to inspire us to do better"

MD. ATIQUIL ISLAM

IT is very unfortunate. The world knows that conditions are getting better in Bangladesh. We are working closely with the government, the ILO, the EU and others. The EU offers us GSP. Our goal is to turn the garment sector into a \$50 billion industry by 2021.

The labour law was amended. Labour rules have been approved by the Ministry of Commerce and the Ministry of Labour. They are waiting to be vetted by the Ministry of Law. The number of trade unions has gone up to more than four hundred from less than a hundred. Labour inspectors have been employed.



We are giving the highest priority on safety issues. We have made very genuine efforts to meet all the 16 conditions laid out by the US government. We may not have achieved 100 percent on all of them; perhaps we have achieved 60 or 70 percent on some. But we are trying our best. They should give us the GSP to

inspire us to do better. The suspension does not hurt us financially but it reflects poorly on our image. We feel demoralised.

We want to work together for a better future for us all. We request the US government to continue the GSP to Bangladesh.

The commentator is president, Bangladesh of Garment Manufacturers and Exporter Association (BGMEA).

"It smells of double standards"

M.M. AKASH

Iam not in support of the fact that Bangladesh was left out of the GSP programme by the US. It smells of double standards. The reason behind Bangladesh's exclusion is her failure to fulfil the 16 conditions that the Obama administration had stipulated when it revoked the privilege two years ago because of poor standards of workplace safety and labour rights. But the conditions which are connected to the welfare of labourers should be fulfilled for our own interests.

Bangladesh is yet to implement rules under the new labour law. If these rules were implemented, then the interests of garment owners would have been curbed. Their interests are largely protected by a powerful lobby in the parliament and in the political arena. That is why the government was hesitant to implement these rules. As far as the question of why the law on export processing zones has not yet been reformed is concerned, I don't want



to go into it without fully assessing its provisions.

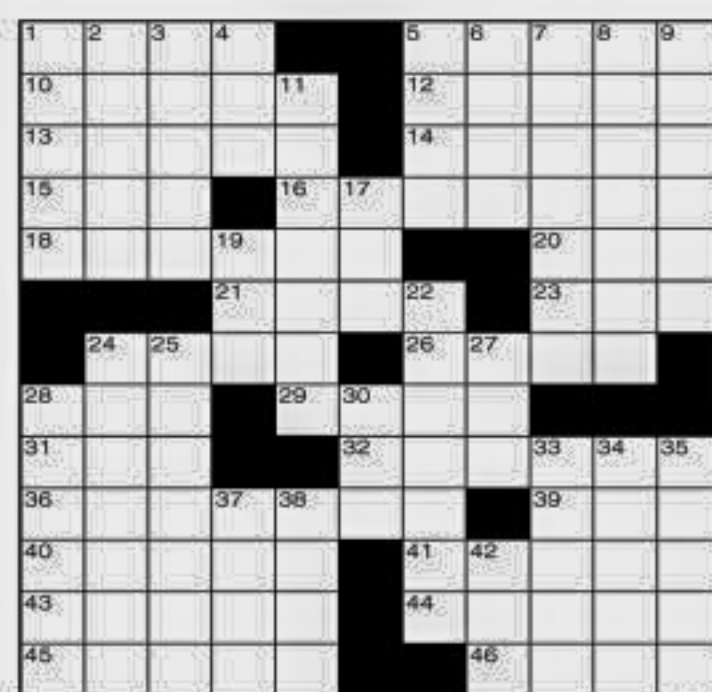
Now concerning the motives of the US to exclude Bangladesh from the GSP, bear in mind that the US may have many geopolitical interests. For instance, the US may want to garner support of Bangladesh and India to encircle China. The US may also want to increase its military presence in the Bay of Bengal and other

things like that. So the move by the Obama administration to leave Bangladesh out of the GSP may not completely be removed from the aforementioned motives. Other motives may be linked to putting political pressure on the Bangladesh government since the US has a history and a general policy of imposing its interests on sovereign states through economic manoeuvres. They do this as they please and sometimes, their actions backfire.

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CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS**
- Folder features
 - Louvre location
 - Cornhusker city
 - Vote in
 - Less diluted
 - Tough puzzle
 - Inquire
 - Kitchen tool
 - Kitchen tool
 - Chess piece
 - Adam's grandson
 - Wrap up
 - Skimpy skirt
 - Designer Oldham
 - Photographer Goldin
 - Adam's son
 - Skill
 - Kitchen tool
 - Kitchen tool
 - Saloon quaff
 - Thus
 - Arm bones
 - Beginning
 - Page of music
 - Future flowers
 - Prom attendee
- DOWN**
- November birthstone
 - Tickle
 - Sounds from pounds
 - That lady
 - Music's Salt-n--
 - Oodles
 - Took up again
 - Onetime Danish province
 - Maroon
 - Deadly element
 - Debate side
 - Toe count
 - Saddle attachment
 - Dietrich film
 - Powerful
 - Stop -- snack
 - Cantina snack
 - Historic time
 - Aunt, in Arles
 - Delight
 - Pine product
 - Served well
 - Horse healers
 - Back muscle, for short



Yesterday's answer

PAGERS SHAG
EYELET CARE
PEEWEE ONTO
ALMOND
ASHA PESTS
PTA TEASTOP
HON EEL AWE
INDEXES KEN
DEBRA HERD
RANCHO
ALAS LATEST
MIKE AVENUE
PEER MELDED

BEETLE BAILEY

by Mort Walker



BABY BLUES

by Kirkman & Scott



QUOTABLE Quote



FIDEL CASTRO

THEY TALK ABOUT THE FAILURE OF SOCIALISM BUT WHERE IS THE SUCCESS OF CAPITALISM IN AFRICA, ASIA AND LATIN AMERICA?