

## Rethink foreign recruitment freeze

### Malaysian government should help its industry

WE join the Malaysian industry's demand that the freeze on foreign labour recruitment initiated by that country's government is putting severe pressure on several sectors including furniture making and export-oriented sectors. Indeed the calls for a revisit of the decision is gathering steam as industries desperately need foreign workers to help with production and apparently these demands are now being openly discussed in the Malaysian political sphere. It is interesting to note that the parties that had originally pressurised the government to put the freeze on foreign labour recruitment are now rethinking their demand since it is the Malaysian economy that is suffering the brunt of acute labour shortages.

It is clearly in the interests of both countries that the workers are allowed to stay. We are somewhat surprised at the constant exchange of words and commitments made by both the governments of Malaysia and Bangladesh and equally surprised at the about face decision in February by Malaysian authorities that froze all foreign recruitment. This came a day after the signing of a memorandum of understanding between the two governments that was supposed to pave the way for recruitment of 1.5 million workers from Bangladesh over a three year period!

Now that Malaysian entrepreneurs themselves have raised the demand for foreign workers, we urge the government of Malaysia to rethink its ban and renew the talks with its Bangladeshi counterpart to take our workers to power the wheels of the Malaysian economy. This is a win-win situation for both nations and the time to act is now.

## Clean, well managed public toilets?

### Success depends on good management

THE opening of two new public toilets by the Dhaka North City Corporation is certainly something to celebrate in a city that is notorious for lack of such facilities. What is even more promising is that our Mayor of DNCC has declared that around another 90 will be constructed.

The glaringly few public toilets in a city of two crore people show how little thought our city authorities have given to this essential public service. The ones that are available are so filthy that they are unusable for people. The result has been for city dwellers to treat walls, drains and garbage dumps as public toilets, adding to the stench and unhygienic conditions that many parts of the city are plagued with. For female city dwellers it has meant refraining from going to the bathroom for hours, a major cause of infection and kidney disease.

In such a bleak scenario, it is refreshing to note that the new toilets, constructed with the help of H&M Conscience Foundation and WaterAid Bangladesh, have separate facilities for female and disabled citizens. There are separate male and female chambers, showers and lockers, safe drinking water and round the clock surveillance cameras to ensure security.

We commend the mayor for taking this much-needed initiative and hope that he will be able to complete his mission. It is however extremely important that these public toilets are managed properly with regular cleaning and maintenance. We note that professional cleaners and female caretakers have been employed for the current facilities. We hope we will see many more such toilets in the city in the near future.

## COMMENTS

### "Worker dies at Chittagong shipbreaking yard"

(April 18, 2016)

▼  
Khadiza

These kinds of accidents are not uncommon in shipbreaking yards.

These are not deaths, rather murders, as the owners do not provide their workers with proper safety gear. They should be charged for killing people.

# "Not Good Enough"



KNOT SO TRUE

RUBANA HUQ

NEITHER am I surprised by what the Commerce Minister asked a high-powered delegation visiting Bangladesh, nor am I going to be shocked by the outcome that will follow. The honourable minister in a meeting with them had asked if they raised the same questions regarding trade unions in Vietnam. The team said, "yes." To this the Minister responded and asked if they could name a trade union leader's name over there. The team couldn't name any. Most of us know that the pressures on Bangladesh are far from over. And therefore the accusations of Bangladesh being "slow" with remediation, of Bangladesh requiring to do "more", of Bangladesh not "cooperating", have come up in the media for the last two and a half years or so. So, how bad have we been?

In less than five days from today, the third anniversary of Rana Plaza will be observed. There will be discussions, seminars, symposiums, protests and many more events to mark the occasion. Once again, the entire readymade garment industry will be reminded of the tragedy that scarred Bangladesh forever. The entire industry will stand in shame, with all our heads down and nowhere to run. Once again, our report cards will be reviewed and very few of us will have a passing grade. Needless to say, we have unhappy examiners at the other end, trying to evaluate with a scale that requires microscopic examination.

How demanding are our auditors and how badly are we failing? Beyond Rana Plaza, the exports from Bangladesh have gone up. In March, the export is up by 9.2 percent, compared to 2014-15. Import of capital machineries has also gone up by 46 percent compared to last year. Many of us are setting up new factories and going ahead with added production lines. Many of us are running around like headless chickens trying to remediate in existing buildings and somehow meet the bare minimum bars of compliance. That only clearly indicates that the manufacturing landscape is changing. There are Corrective Action Plan sheets that every manufacturer listed with Accord and Alliance is bound to submit and get feedback on. If the Corrective Action Plan submission and timeline don't satisfy the auditors, one has to review and give an acceptable solution. That is how the entire plan works. It is, however, the manufacturers' sole responsibility to remediate and no

one else's. Fair enough.

Now, let's look at a few grim realities. It takes three years to build a new factory, in case someone has land. A month ago, when I told this to a buyer of mine, he looked at me in utter disbelief and said, "Huh? It takes China only a fortnight to build new roads! And buildings? They complete within a year!" How would I be able to explain to this gentleman that China has a GDP per capita of \$6,900, whereas Bangladesh is at less than one sixth of it? How would I explain to him that our GNI was 500 billion PPP dollars as opposed to China's 16 trillion? The fault lies entirely at our end. With comparable, competitive supply of garments to the entire world, Bangladesh has somehow conveyed the message of readiness to complete remediation even

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without the active funding support from any brand. We have somehow told everyone that we can do almost anything, achieve the impossible, change locations, remediate 100 percent... all in less than three years.

In reality, we do what we need to do. We have no alternative to doing business. Therefore, we compromise and never question. At the end of it all, we believe that if we stay afloat, business will follow. Problem is, what are we promising the brands and the auditors and at what cost? The funds being made available to the manufacturers are being given at a much lower interest rate than the manufacturers are finally getting them for, since these funds are being routed via the Finance Ministry, Bangladesh Bank and

then finally the commercial banks. Securing the loan is equally cumbersome. So, the detection and the protection system, which will cost any factory a minimum of USD 200k, the remediation cost of at least another USD 100k, etc, will all have to be on the shoulders of the vendor. If a factory has to shift, a whole new scene begins to unfold, as has been the case of your columnist.

I had to shift one of our factories to a new location. Neither do I have gas in that location, nor do I have constant electricity in that new factory. A brand new building with 60,000 square feet a floor, a factory qualified to be green with energy saving utilities all over, is running at less than half efficiency and causing me a loss every day. Workers in the new location are not skilled, therefore, after suffering load shedding for at least four hours a day, production in that factory is extremely challenging. This is only one scene of relocation.

In times of remediation, extreme hiccups pop up. Every fire resistant wall of 10" takes up more space in the factory; every generator or substation to be relocated outside the building needs additional area; every fire door installed needs a new frame, and a wider area for swing; every fire hydrant system means readdressing the entire floor structure and the list can go on.

Even worse is when a manufacturer suffers sleepless nights, anticipating the next moment, the next mail in the inbox with an escalation notice for not having done "enough". Irrespective of the physical, infrastructural or human constraints, the shift or the remediation has to happen, otherwise business will cease. Above all, there's also a case of extreme shaming by being exposed in the public domain of being named as the non-compliant supplier, which may result in permanent termination of business. With so much at stake, can a Bangladeshi manufacturer dare not address these issues? Absolutely not...

But then progress is most likely to be "unsatisfactory" and "insufficient". Apart from addressing the labour law amendment, minimum wage adjustment, remediation, relocation, we must accept that our progress report is most likely to be "slow" as no one is ever likely to believe us when we pledge deadlines. After all, we lost that right in 2013. After all, we killed 1,134 of our own children three years ago. And we will never be good enough for anyone anymore.

The writer is Managing Director, Mohammadi Group.

# Healthcare solutions that are smart

BJORN LOMBORG

EVERY hour, tuberculosis kills nine Bangladeshis. Another seven die each hour from arsenic in drinking water. Simple and cheap solutions are available to avoid almost all these deaths.

Bangladesh has made incredible progress over recent years on many health indicators. But the country continues to face great challenges, like tuberculosis (TB) and arsenic, two of the biggest killers. Many other grave health issues remain too, including factors that threaten mothers and their children.

Bangladesh Priorities can help identify the smartest solutions to national health challenges, as well as many other development issues.

TB kills 80,000 Bangladeshis each year, constituting about nine percent of all deaths. New research by Anna Vassall, a senior lecturer in health economics at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, outlines a cost-effective TB treatment strategy using community health clinics.

There are well-established ways to treat TB at low cost. Standard drugs for TB treatment and follow-up through community clinics cost Tk. 7,850 per patient. By treating one person for TB, you also prevent that person from infecting others, which makes treatment an even better investment. In total, each taka spent will do Tk. 21 of good.

Some strains of TB, however, are so-called "multi-drug resistant," meaning that traditional treatments are not effective. Nationally, there are about 4,700 cases of this type of TB each year. The World Health Organization (WHO) is piloting a "Bangladesh regimen" trial in the country that shortens treatment time for these strains from 24 months to just nine months. But because multi-drug resistant TB is up to 45 times more



PHOTO: WWW.TBALERT.ORG

expensive to treat, each taka spent will do just Tk. 3 of good. This shows that it can be much more effective to help the larger group of people who can be treated with conventional methods.

Even though 98 percent of Bangladeshis have access to either piped water or a well, 25 percent of households' water sources contain arsenic levels that exceed the WHO guideline. New research investigates three water supply options that can largely prevent arsenic exposure: deep tube wells, rainwater harvesting, and pond sand filters. These options would cost between Tk. 1,250 to 1,850 annually per affected household and avert virtually all deaths related to arsenic. It would do about Tk. 7 of good per taka spent. Focusing efforts on the 20 percent worst affected, however, can do even more good—up to Tk.17 in benefits for each taka spent. And

because much progress has already been made toward improving sanitation and hygiene, it turns out further investments in these areas would not be nearly as cost-effective as preventing arsenic exposure.

Another pressing health concern is child and maternal mortality. Even though Bangladesh has greatly reduced these deaths, the progress has been uneven. According to the World Bank, the mortality rates are nearly twice as high for infants and young children in the poorest 20 percent of the population compared to those in the richest 20 percent.

New research by Jahangir A.M. Khan, senior lecturer in health economics at Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine, and Sayem Ahmed, research investigator at The International Centre for Diarrhoeal Disease Research, Bangladesh, looks first at making births

safer. Getting more women to deliver in medical facilities, which only half do now, could help.

It would cost an estimated Tk. 6,000 per delivery but is not practical for everyone, particularly in remote areas. The experts estimate that total spending of Tk. 8.94 billion (Tk. 894 crore) could move 80 percent of currently unattended births, or 1.5 million deliveries, into medical facilities. This would avert an estimated 3,260 maternal deaths and 34,467 neonatal deaths. Overall, each taka spent would do Tk. 8 of good.

An even more effective option is for community health workers to visit mothers at home both before and after birth. This option is very cheap—just Tk. 850 over the course of a pregnancy. Nearly 750,000 pregnant women could be targeted, and in all, homecare visits could save lives of more than 8,900 infants. Benefits for each taka of spending would be an impressive Tk. 27.

Lastly, the experts look at vaccinations. While 85 percent of children aged 12-23 months are fully immunised, that figure is just 51 percent for children in remote rural areas and just 43 percent for those in urban slums. Vaccinations cost Tk. 1,400-1,900 per child and could save more than 4,100 lives each year. Each taka spent immunising children would do Tk. 10 of good.

These new studies suggest some of the smartest solutions for the health challenges that still plague the country. Would these strategies be some of your top priorities for Bangladesh? Let us hear from you at <https://copenhagen.fbapp.io/healthpriorities>. We want to continue the conversation about how to do the most good for every taka spent.

The writer is president of the Copenhagen Consensus Center, ranking the smartest solutions to the world's biggest problems by cost-benefit. He was named one of the world's 100 most influential people by Time magazine.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### Earthquakes in Bangladesh

On April 13, 2016, Bangladesh was jolted by a strong earthquake; many buildings were tilted and people were injured. It has been reported that Bangladesh had 27 earthquakes in the past year. Bangladesh is positioned at the junction of several active tectonic plate boundaries. Moreover, it sits atop the world's largest river delta close to sea level, facing the risks posed by a quake and secondary risks of tsunamis and flooding in the aftermath of an earthquake.

Are our leaders concerned about it at all? Hope they take pragmatic measures to prepare citizens for such disasters.

Nur Jahan  
Chittagong

### New Year should bring real changes

Right from the moment of the commencement of the Bangla New Year in Kolkata, deafening firecrackers reverberate across the midnight sky rendering horror in the hearts of infants, children, senior citizens and patients. The party continues on the streets, bars and night clubs till the wee hours of the morning. With the arrival of dawn, picnic parties start their journey towards various destinations playing music in decibels much louder than the permissible limit.

I am, however, starting to wonder if these frenzied activities serve any real purpose. Do these revelers care about the less fortunate members of the society? I think they are missing the point: The New Year is a moment in time when we all should take a hard look at ourselves and assess what we have done wrong and how we could do things better to make the world a better place.

Kajal Chatterjee  
Kolkata, India

### Widened roads to access

#### Rayerbazar mausoleum

The Rayerbazar Buddijibi Smritisoudha remains somewhat inaccessible to the public for a lack of well-built roads. It is important to open up the site to the public; especially to the youth in order to educate them on our past that laid the foundation for our nation. The roads linking the historic site with other parts of the city should, therefore, be widened so that people of all walks of life can visit the place without any difficulty.

Kazi Zillur Rahman  
Mohammadpur, Dhaka