

## Saudi ban on recruitment goes

Transparent process mandatory

**A**FTER a seven year hiatus, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) has finally lifted the ban on recruiting male Bangladeshi workers. As the largest destination for our workers, the news is very welcome. A lifting of the ban means that both skilled and unskilled job categories are open for Bangladeshis interested in getting employment in KSA.

We are informed that agencies will not be able to charge extra for visas to the kingdom as had been the case before and that from now on Saudi employers will bear all the costs including air fare and service charges that used to be levied on the workers. Previously when there was no ban on travel, workers were forced to spend anywhere between Taka five and 10 lakhs to get visas. It is expected that this will not be the case anymore. The breakthrough comes after Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina paid a visit to KSA in June and now comes the acid test of minimising recruitment costs.

But for any of this to become binding, one would expect a comprehensive memorandum of understanding to be signed between the relevant agencies in the two countries so that our expatriate workers are not short-changed either here by the recruiting agencies, whether public or private, or by their employers in the host country. Authorities need to put in place a transparent and workable recruitment process that agencies will have to adhere to. Otherwise, unscrupulous recruiters will find ways to fleece unsuspecting workers of monies in the name of visa processing.

## Desperate plea of tea garden workers

Authorities should respond immediately

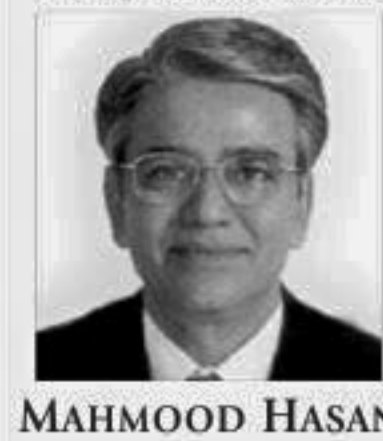
**I**N the midst of severe food shortage and being denied of their due wages for 15 weeks straight, workers of Baikunthapur tea garden in Habiganj made an emergency food aid appeal to the government, after the owner of the tea estate broke his promise of paying some 400 workers on Thursday. Trapped in what can only be described as a form of modern day slavery, workers and their families have had to survive on liquid extract from boiled rice, mashed tea leaves and chilli peppers.

As most of these workers are poor and live nearly hand to mouth on their weekly wages, around 2,400 people, including workers and their family members, have been forced into such horrid conditions by the estate authorities who shamelessly continue to receive their labour and not pay them in return because of, according to the tea garden administrative staff, incurring losses. Meanwhile, with members of their families starving, many of the workers have had to run into huge debts. Some have fallen sick, and if the problem continues, will die, according to workers and their family members.

Such treatment of workers is in no way acceptable in a civilised country. And even if the tea estate is incurring losses that can in no way justify not paying the workers their due wages. Thus, the authorities should immediately provide workers and their families with food aid as requested and, furthermore, instruct the owner of the estate to pay the workers what is owed to them without delay.

# SAARC meeting and Indo-Pak spat over Kashmir

FROM A BYSTANDER



MAHMOOD HASAN

**I**NDIAN Home Minister Rajnath Singh was in Islamabad to attend the 7th SAARC Home Ministers Meeting, which discussed SAARC conventions on "Suppression of Terrorism" and "Additional Protocol and Convention on Mutual assistance in Criminal Matters". The Indian minister's visit to Pakistan came at a time when tensions between the two nuclear armed states of South Asia is running high, because of violent unrest that has gripped Kashmir since early July this year.

Burhan Muzaffar Wani, a young Hizbul Mujahideen commander in Indian Kashmir, effectively used social media to create a huge following, particularly among the younger generation. Wani, who carried a reward of Rs. 10 lakh, came out of his hideout for Eid celebrations and was killed along with two associates by the Indian Army on July 8, 2016. The news of Wani's death immediately triggered massive protests across the valley. In an outpouring of grief, thousands of people participated at his funeral prayers.

The valley has been under continuous curfew since July 8 - continuously violated by angry stone throwing youths. So far killed 55 people have been killed in the violence and more than 5,000 injured, hundreds with pellet wounds on their faces. A Pakistani critic described it as "Kashmir's Intifada".

According to SAARC practice, Pakistan, which will host the 19th Summit, has to organise a series of meetings preparatory to the summit. Accordingly, the 7th Meeting of Home Ministers was organised by Pakistan from August 3-4, 2016. As Home Ministers from Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka were not participating, Indian Home Minister Rajnath Singh also originally thought of skipping the conference. But when Pakistan's Parliament passed a resolution asking the United Nations to investigate the "human rights violation" in Kashmir, the Indian minister decided to attend the meeting to counter this position. Earlier, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif called Wani a "martyr" and observed July 19 as a "Black Day" in 'support' of the people of Kashmir.

Speaking at the meeting, Rajnath, without naming anyone, stated, "It also needs to be ensured that terrorism is not glorified and is not patronised by any state. One country's terrorist cannot be a martyr or freedom fighter for anyone". Pakistan's Interior Minister Chaudhry Nisar Ali Khan in response said, "Violence against freedom fighters in a disputed territory under Indian occupation is state-sponsored". He called for respecting the fundamental rights of people and stressed that legitimate freedom struggles should not be suppressed in the name of fighting terrorism.

Actually, this is where the fundamental difference between the discourses of the two countries lies. Any movement in Kashmir is seen by India as terrorism, abetted by Pakistan. Pakistan, on the other hand, claims uprisings in

Kashmir to be a struggle for freedom that is 'suppressed' by India.

Rajnath did not have any bilateral meeting with Khan, barely shook hands with him, did not attend the luncheon organised for the delegates, and seemingly left the meeting in a huff. Khan also demonstrated his ire by walking away from the luncheon, which other attending delegates found insulting. Rajnath's coolness towards Pakistan and Khan's discourteous behaviour once again reflected the bitterness in their countries' relations.

Interestingly, the media in India did not report what Khan said at the meeting. Pakistan too blacked out Rajnath's speech. Rajnath's 25-hour trip to Pakistan has come under severe criticism by Indian media. A senior journalist described Rajnath's trip as "journey to nowhere", while another accused him of giving Pakistan an upper hand. On the unrest in Kashmir, Indian newspapers accused Delhi of "living in denial on Kashmir." It does appear that this meeting did nothing for either India or Pakistan.

As Kashmir continues to bleed Congress MPs criticised Modi and Rajnath for not taking any initiative to restore peace in the valley. Delhi is busy accusing Pakistan and does not seem to have any policy on how to handle the situation. It wants to quell the uprising militarily and has given the army carte blanche for "area domination". So far there has been no attempt by Modi to open political dialogues with Kashmiri leaders, although he has finally issued a statement, reaching out to the people of Jammu and Kashmir, seeking dialogue with them on the basis of "insaniyat

(humanity), jamhuriyat (democracy) and Kashmiriyat." The PDP-BJP coalition government, led by Mehbooba Mufti also seems to have run out of ideas on how to restore normalcy in the valley.

The other most significant development is the generational divide in the valley. The new generation of youngsters, totally alienated from mainstream Indian polity, were not even born when unrest broke out in the 1990s. They have grown up in fear, hatred, and disillusionment. The 1940s generation of older Kashmiris, who were familiar with the narrative of the Partition of 1947, are either long dead or no longer active. Mirwaiz Umar Farooq, Chairman of All Parties Hurriyat Conference recently wrote, "Over 100,000 Kashmiris have laid down their lives. The baton of freedom has passed on to our fifth generation".

Pakistan, it seems, is unable to connect with young Kashmiris - politically or religiously. Pro-Pakistan sentiment in Kashmir is on a decline.

What is disturbing is that both these ministers departed from the SAARC Charter by introducing a contentious bilateral issue at a SAARC meeting. It is unfortunate that high drama Indo-Pak spats at almost all SAARC meetings stymies the organisation's effectiveness. Delegates from other member countries are always careful not to be seen taking sides in these unsavoury incidents.

As the demand to hold talks grows, Modi will surely step in to restore peace, which will no doubt be ephemeral, as the main issue remains unresolved.

The writer is former Ambassador and Secretary.

# ASEAN should not drop the ball



RAVI VELLOOR

**A** few days ago, I sat down with Mr. Dwight Hutchins, chairman of the American Chamber of Commerce (AmCham) in Singapore, to discuss the chamber's 2017 ASEAN Business Outlook Survey. Published in collaboration with the US Chamber of Commerce and conducted on behalf of companies from a nation that is the largest investor in South-east

Asia, the document makes for interesting reading. More than half of the US firms reported that ASEAN markets had become more important over the past two years in terms of their worldwide revenue. That's chiefly because of the brisk pace of economic growth here, added to a rising middle class and an expanding consumer class, and regional integration. Nearly nine out of 10 companies anticipated that their level of trade and investment in ASEAN would increase over the next five years.

Topping the list of ASEAN states where US companies were the most optimistic because of an improving business climate were the Philippines, Vietnam and Myanmar. The last two, along with Indonesia, were priority markets for expansion.

Interestingly, for US companies that are in Cambodia and Laos, regional integration was the strongest reason for the growing importance of ASEAN markets.

And it is not just the Americans. The Japanese, who are nearly as big an exporter of capital, also are turning back to South-east Asia. In 2015, for a third straight year, the amount of foreign direct investment from Japan to the ASEAN states exceeded such investment in China and Hong Kong, according to the Japan External Trade Organisation.

The Japan Bank for International Cooperation (JBIC) says about 56 percent of Japanese firms are looking to expand in ASEAN in the next three years. Just as significantly, the share of Japanese companies looking to invest in China had fallen below 50 percent, from 73 percent in 2011.

Analysts have been aware of these trends for a while. Indeed, they have noticed that the pace is accelerating. In March, for instance, DBS Group Research pointed out that Japanese investment flows to the so-called ASEAN Six (Singapore, Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, Philippines and Vietnam) had averaged US\$20 billion (\$26.9 billion) per year for the past five years, with the exception of 2012, when flooding in Thailand caused a drop in flows to the country. In contrast, the 2006-2010 period had seen flows of just US\$7 billion to US\$10 billion.

What began as a mere risk dilution strategy in the boardrooms of Tokyo and Osaka seems to have evolved into something bigger and healthier, one based on South-east Asia's inherent attractiveness. The AmCham survey and the JBIC report merit the attention of not just the business people of ASEAN but its government lead-

ers as well, coming as they do at a time of both opportunity and challenge for South-east Asia.

In China, American companies are finding the business environment steadily more difficult and profits are dipping year by year. In one of the extreme cases, Uber, the car-hailing firm, has just thrown in the towel, surrendering to a combination of stiff competition from a domestic player and regulations that work against its model. The story is repeated across many industries. Little wonder that a tenth of American companies in China are looking to diversifying from the mainland and into ASEAN.

But, if political risk and a slowing economy in China are opening significant opportunities for ASEAN companies to capitalise on, fresh challenges are rising nearby as well.

Last week in India, the government managed to successfully steer through tax legislation that holds the promise of turning the vast land into a single market for production and distribution. That is an unquestioned



boon to investors, and of course, Indians themselves. But an India rising in attractiveness for investors can be a formidable challenge for South-east Asian economies because its economy, unlike China's which is steadily and deliberately moving up the value chain, will compete with them at every section of the scale.

From the low-skilled garment industry jobs that have moved to Cambodia and Myanmar to those that require higher skills, including weapons manufacture, all of them can be done in India, sometimes at lower cost. And it is not about just wages only. Productivity in India has been rising by nearly 4 percent per year. Equally, it also has the stout strategic backing of the US and Japanese governments, both of which clearly want the nation to succeed.

ASEAN would never wish to see a neighbouring nation, whether China or India, beggared. That said, if ever there was a time that it should, as a bloc, put its 10 heads together and coordinate its steps in every way, it is

now. There's so much going for it - the Asian Development Bank says ASEAN's intra-regional trade intensity index was 3.54 in 2014, higher than the European Union's 2.04 and East Asia's 1.54 - that it would be foolish to not keep a good thing going.

Yet, the integration that is so key to the future of South-east Asia may well be at risk. The consensus-based grouping that charmed the world and succeeded in convincing most outside powers to grant it the "centrality" it sought, is in danger of dropping the ball as internal fissures surface all too often.

A decade ago, the issue that nearly collapsed an ASEAN summit was Myanmar's steadfast refusal to let a United Nations Special Envoy brief its summit on the progress he was making as a mediator between the junta and the democratic opposition. Today, that seems like a mere hiccup. Myanmar, happily enough, now has an elected government and is increasingly rising on the radar of global investors. Since 2012, though, the dissonance has become more serious and a lot of it has stemmed from the actions of Cambodia, ASEAN's youngest member, and its anxiety to please China.

Four years ago as host nation for the Asean summit, its refusal to countenance references to the South China Sea in the conference document led to the unprecedented situation where a summit ended without the usual joint statement. Last month, in Vientiane, it again successfully fended off direct references to China, even though it is itself not a party to the dispute. What's more, the meeting was held in the aftermath of a decisive ruling against China from the arbitration tribunal at The Hague.

The US\$600 million grant that Cambodia received a week before the Vientiane meeting may be useful for it today, but the political payoffs involved may not be worth the price, long-term. Indeed, some senior ASEAN diplomats even took to social media to suggest Cambodia should be asked to leave ASEAN.

There was a time when ASEAN's fault lines used to be regarded broadly as those between the mainland states of South-east Asia and the maritime ones. As the big powers jockey for influence in the region, and open their pocketbooks to press their influence, more fissures must be expected. Already, there is some moderation of expectations going on: See how the language on an ASEAN Economic Community has changed. Not too long ago, the pitch was about developing a single market and production base. These days, we seem happier with less ambitious formulations such as striving for a "highly integrated economy".

To hang together holds the promise of a shared future of prosperity. As the AmCham survey indicates, quite a bit of the interest overseas companies have in being here stems from South-east Asia's efforts to integrate, not stand separately. This is something to think about.

The writer is Associate Editor (Global Affairs), The Straits Times, Singapore. This is the seventh article in a series of columns on global affairs written by top editors from members of the Asia News Network and published in newspapers across the region.

## COMMENTS

**"BB moves to check terror financing"**  
(August 11, 2016)



**Emi**

Finally, they have taken a pragmatic decision.



**Zarina**

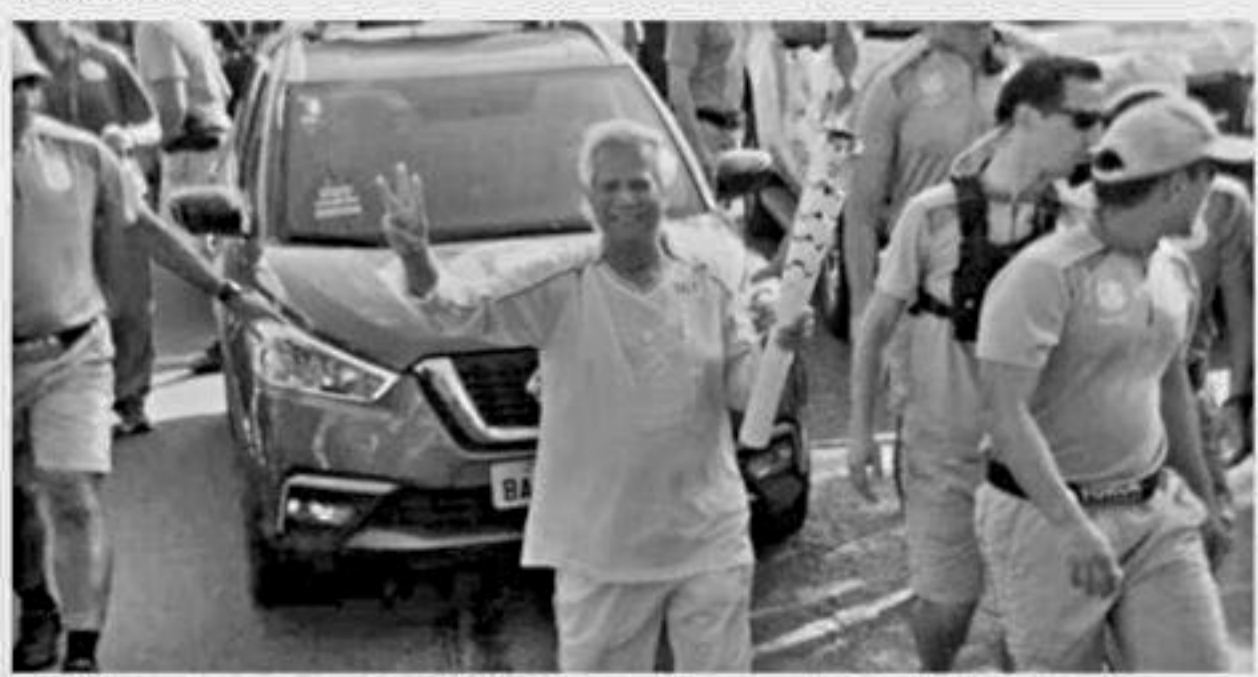
They should have taken this move much earlier.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### Dr. Yunus, the torch bearer at Olympics 2016

Nobel Laureate Dr. Muhammad Yunus was invited to carry the torch in the Rio Olympics 2016. It is a great honour for Bangladesh and we are proud of him.  
**Kowsar Rahman Sadit**  
Uttara, Dhaka



### Our environment vs. power generation

Despite the opposition from environmental organisations and the common people, the government is going ahead with the construction of the Rampal Power plant. India did not allow a similar power plant in their country but our government is planning to build it jointly with India. What an irony! The government is also going to set up a nuclear power plant at Rooppur. Authorities should immediately cancel the contracts of these projects considering the adverse effect on our environment.  
**Nur Jahan, Chittagong**

### Suffering at Daulatdia-Paturia ferry terminal

Daulatdia-Paturia ferry terminal is one of the busiest of the country. Recently, the mighty Padma has washed away three of the four landing stations at the terminal. As a result, BIWTC had suspended the ferry services. According to reports, labourers are repairing the connecting roads to the landing stations by dumping sand bags. We urge the authority to take permanent measures such as using concrete slabs instead of sand bags and bamboos. That will put an end to the needless suffering of the people using the terminal during the rainy season.  
**Md. Abdul Karim, Alamdanga, Chaudanga**



PHOTO: ZAHANGIR SHAH