

The unstoppable

FOUNDER/EDITOR
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Unabated encroachment of the Turag

Act immediately to save it

TWO photographs published in this newspaper on Monday show the rampant encroachment of the river Turag that is going on with impunity for some time. We are shocked at the extent the width of the river has shrunk in the last two years, which speaks of neglect and indifference with which we are treating the rivers that once were the country's lifeline.

Seven long years have passed since a landmark ruling was handed down by the High Court where it had directed the government to demarcate boundaries of major rivers that included the Turag and stop illegal encroachment of these rivers. But what we witness now is a total disregard for the directive, and an environment of impunity that surrounds the illegal grabbing of these rivers, of which the Turag is one. Devouring rivers is reportedly being done by a nefarious syndicate in connivance with some local public servants whose job is to prevent exactly that. Eviction drives are rarely carried out; and that too without the adequate manpower, equipment or the necessary planning. As a result, hot on the heels of the drives, encroachers return with renewed vigour to carry out their sordid business, unabated.

Big cities thrive on the banks of great rivers. The authorities cannot stand in the sidelines as silent spectators while unbridled encroachment, fuelled by sheer greed, is devouring our river with disastrous consequences. We urge the government to take strong action against the grabbers and give back the Turag and the other rivers to the people. Also, shouldn't the government hold the agencies accountable whose job it is to prevent illegal grabbing and prosecute those responsible for it?

USD 1 billion for railway

Significant boost to connectivity

THE Asian Development Bank has approved the highest loan for a single project, i.e. a railway line extending 102 km from Dohazari in Chittagong to Cox's Bazar. Bangladesh for its part will have to upgrade the 47 km rail line from Chittagong city to Dohazari and construct a rail bridge on the Karnaphuli River. This project along with the already approved 129 km rail track from Dohazari to Gundam near the Myanmar border via Cox's Bazar, estimated at USD 2.28 billion (of which ADB will provide USD 1.66 billion) will, if implemented on time, put Bangladesh squarely into the Trans-Asian Railway network. The project also envisions room for future growth which could extend railway connectivity.

Besides the obvious economic benefits, such extension of railway network to hook up with existing railway networks in Myanmar would go a very long way in boosting transnational tourism. Railway connectivity would help cut down on travel time and greenhouse emissions. The influx of foreign tourists from Myanmar and beyond would usher in much needed foreign exchange that would transform the tourism infrastructure in the southeast of the country. Domestic tourism would also see significant growth.

Given that the whole expansion is based on dual-gauge tracks, there would be standardisation with neighbouring countries that will open up possibilities for seamless transportation of passengers and freight. However, for any of this to happen we will have to go back to the drawing board in simplifying bureaucratic procedures to keep the projects on track. The main impediment to project implementation is no longer financial, it is administrative capacity.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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We don't want electricity at such great costs

The State Minister for Power, Energy and Mineral resources said on September 25, 2016 that the government will respond to UNESCO's concern over the Rampal project.

What about the concern of the whole nation from the start? We have been protesting and urging the government to drop it as it will destroy the world's largest mangrove forest, and also have disastrous long term effects for the country.

We hope the government will pay heed to our voices and prevent harmful repercussions.

Nur Jahan

Chittagong

We need better airports

The Shahjalal International Airport has gloomy surroundings with inadequate lighting. Why should the country's capital have such a bleak airport?

International airports around the world sparkle under bright lighting and cleanliness is the topmost priority, maintained 24 hours a day. In our case, airport washrooms are almost as unhygienic as those in railway stations; the multistoried parking lot is slippery with dirt and rainwater, and reeks of pungent odor. The parking areas' lighting isn't sufficient to identify waiting vehicles.

The small pathway connecting the parking lot to the building could easily be covered with corrugated tin/asbestos to allow people to board vehicles safely.

I hope this attracts the attention of airport authorities. They must inspect and improve the hygiene and environment of our airports so as not to soil our country's prestige in front of visitors from abroad. It's not about the money, but the sincerity in discharging duty by the entrusted respective departments.

Sirajul Islam

Retd. Resident Manager, Padma Oil Co Ltd.



KNOT SO TRUE

RUBANA HUQ

WATCHING Trump comment on his bankruptcy was shocking. He proudly admitted: "I just took advantage of laws and did what was best for my business and my family." That's what most businesses do: take advantage. But things are changing fast. Most companies in the west are accountable to shareholders, consumers, activists

et.al. Therefore, one just can't do business with one's eyes closed. That's why every breaking news of a factory fire impacts the overall image of the country. In fact, when Tampaco was burning, one of the most reputed artists in this country tweeted, "Another garment factory burning. Am on my way." The gentleman with many thousands of followers along with Channel 4 and other media outlets alluding to the factory as a garment factory. Comments on those links poured in and Bangladesh, once again,

Bangladesh has not become the second largest exporter of apparel because of media spotlight. Bad press affects us, but does not kill us, as we know how to rise from the ashes. Negative publicity may dampen, but does not annihilate us as we are far stronger than expected.

made it to the global centre stage.

Post 2013, the country absorbed the national shock of 1,134 lives being crushed to death and turned around. In the last three years, a total of 3,746 factories have been inspected, out of which 1,368 were under Accord, 829 under Alliance and 1,549 under the National Action Plan. Out of all these, only 39 were declared vulnerable. We ourselves have shifted three factories in one year to two locations where there is no electricity, no gas and shortage of workers. We have had to give buses for all, increased wages and incentives and have had to re-evaluate their skills and set up production lines in places where there are almost no training centres. It's not easy. It's not easy to relocate. And it takes time.

Majority of our workers are women. They are women with young children, who breastfeed and can't afford to take one-hour bus rides to work, no matter how much they are paid. It was only yesterday that I had to sit and talk to ten women who wouldn't budge from their position and refused to relocate to a new location. In

spite of me trying to offer their husbands jobs, in spite of me trying to arrange their housing in the new place, they refused. These were ten very skilled operators, crucial for critical processes and without whom we will surely face critical challenges in output. But, we moved on, accepted resignations and hoped to recruit "helpers" and train them.

Relocation isn't easy. Restarting isn't a piece of cake. But, truth be known: Bangladesh still continues to make it there.

Therefore, the constant reports on Bangladesh not doing enough totally kill the spirit. But what helps are the occasional seminars and conferences, which wrap up with headlines encouraging the industry. One of the conferences that talk about the readymade garment sector happens to be on Friday, where BGMEA and the Dutch government bring companies, academics, activists together and address a few crucial issues. The issues embrace many key words like "collaboration" and "finance." My point is, who are we collaborating with and who is financing the sector? For decades, the RMG sector has gone on alone and without mentionable support and the sector has made it on its own.

Brands and retailers bought from us as we were good. Brands and retailers still buy from us as we continue to be better.

Within the last one year, Bangladesh's growth rate in the export to the world has been 10.21 percent compared to a nominal figure of 4.08 percent in 2013-2014. This is one country where RMG's contribution to total exports went up from 3.89 percent in 1983-84 to 82.01 percent in 2015-2016. Progress doesn't happen overnight. In spite of the United States refusing to give us duty free or refusing to restore GSP for our products other than RMG, the exports have gotten to USD 28 billion. But this does not mean that Bangladesh should not pursue economic diplomacy and continue to explore new markets and new potential. Markets, of course, have changed. Once a major exporter to the US, Bangladesh today exports its 61.06 percent to the EU and only 20 percent to the US. Markets once totally unfamiliar to Bangladesh are now attractive export destinations. Exports to Australia (USD 636 million), and Japan (USD 774 million) have been on the rise. In fact, exports to non-traditional markets have gone up by 15.37 percent in the last one year.

None of this has happened because of any external help, apart from buyers. It has happened because of the workers and the owners. However, does Bangladesh need help? And if so, in what areas?

- 1 The leap for value addition: The brands need to hold our hands and place value added products in Bangladesh. The reason is simple. There is no other country in the world, except China, which can claim excellence in production lines as much as we can. This country can basically produce anything. That is why, even with little or no support, our export basket can now boast of more value added products than earlier. Back in 1993-1994, we used to export about USD 80 million worth of trousers and USD 127 million worth of jackets. Today, Bangladesh exports trousers worth USD 6.3 billion and jackets worth USD 3.7 billion. That is a clear indication of product upgradation.
- 2 The leap for commitment: A decade ago, World Bank Investment Climate Assessment argued that South Asian countries under-perform comparators on many areas, including employee skills and corruption. These are challenges that Bangladesh needs to overcome at

lightning speed. One of the solutions is for brands to invest in long term buying commitment in Bangladesh. For example, if a supplier knows that his production lines are taken and will be filled with products year long, then there will be a leap in productivity. Product efficiency in Bangladesh runs at less than 50 percent. This can easily be addressed by consistency in buying patterns from the brands' ends.

3 The leap for compliance: A few minutes ago, I learnt that 40 workers are resigning from one of our new factories where we have relocated. What is mind boggling is the fact that we have failed to negotiate on our deadlines. The expectation of remediating Bangladesh 100 percent within three years was a utopia that no one really believed in. But the magic was to just exert pressure and initiate the remediation. And if the factories did not comply, there would be no business. Under such circumstances, what else could we do but work in a rush and in spite of insufficient infrastructure, lack of new and skilled workers, we still carried on and built factories, carried our workers to the new sites, paid them more, got less productivity, encountered more labour related hiccups, but were finally able to tell the regulatory bodies: "Relocation complete." Therefore, the expectation from the brands and the retailers are not unrealistic. Financing support would help, but not at the cost of time consuming bureaucratic procedural complications. But if you can't do anything, just pay us a little more for our workers. Just a few cents. The plea is not a Younusean one for 50 cents, the plea is just to give us 15-20 cents more per piece, so that we can make ends meet.

4 The plea for design and technology: Overall public and private investment in R&D runs low and is increasingly falling behind East Asia. The tendency to under-invest in knowledge is also rampant in this part of the world. Therefore, in most cases, investments in creating skills in the workforce is seldom a priority. Design and technology in Bangladesh need to have more international exposure. Therefore, there needs to be more fashion and design schools and departments set up on joint venture basis, without which we will be scrambling at the bottom rung of the fashion and technological ladder and not be able to contribute much at all.

Very often there are sustainability seminars and discussion on the RMG sector. The first flow of the conferences covers challenges, a reference to Rana Plaza, the slow pace of remediation, the "lack" of trade unions, the need to be "more" competitive. Then the conversation steers somewhat towards the four million workers whose lives have changed because of the industry and eventually ends up with a pledge of the brands and retailers staying in Bangladesh. Let's just get one thing straight. Bangladesh has not become the second largest exporter of apparel because of media spotlight. Bad press affects us, but does not kill us, as we know how to rise from the ashes. Negative publicity may dampen, but does not annihilate us as we are far stronger than expected. Therefore, in a world of resurgence of protectionism, climate change, decaying infrastructure, cyber attacks and human rights abuses, insufficient land, and rising costs, we don't need prescriptions, guidelines, or counselling, we just need a few extra cents. Just pay us more and we will be perfectly fine.

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HILLARY TRUMPS DONALD IN THE DEBATE

But does it matter?

ASHFAQUE SWAPAN

THE jury is still out on who won the debate here, but the punditocracy in the United States seems fairly unanimous. Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton crushed Donald J. Trump, the Republican candidate.

It's really late into the night in Atlanta here [when the writer penned the article], so we can't really know what American voters think yet. In a few days, polls will give us a better sense of that. If past experience is any guide, we could be in for a shock. This certainly won't be the first time US media pundits have had egg all over their face.

I am going to stick my neck out and say it aloud: I think Hillary won hands down, and Trump was quite appalling. Full disclosure is in order here: I am a proud left-liberal supporter of the Democratic Party, but I also like to believe that I can step back and judge people and issues on its merits.

After living in the US for over two decades, I have never seen a presidential candidate quite like Trump. Politicians are often economical with the truth, but Trump's brazen mendacity has made US media do something unprecedented. – they are calling a presidential candidate a liar. The New York Times has done it, The Los Angeles Times has done it, so has The Washington Post.

Trump has brought political dishonesty to a new low. His style is the bright, shining lie. In the debate, for instance, he flatly denied a fact well established by the media – the fact that he had supported the US war against Iraq.

There are so many other ways in which he comes up short. It's hard to think of a presidential candidate who is as clueless as Trump. Not only is he clueless, but he is also clueless about the fact that he is clueless!

In the debate, Trump held his own initially, particularly when he was able to articulate his vision of economic populism.

But as the debate progressed, and particularly when it turned to national security and foreign policy, Trump completely lost it. Frequently



The first of four US presidential debates of 2016.

PHOTO: AFP

spouting nonsense, often irascible and ill-tempered, he said things that must have made Republican policy experts wince. Hillary, in contrast, was what she always is – poised, unflappable, with a formidable command of policy.

Towards the end of the debate, Trump made a claim so ludicrous that the audience couldn't help laughing with Hillary. Trump said – honestly, can a person be so detached from reality? – that he believed his temperament was a huge positive. Then he went on to demonstrate just how wrong he was by behaving like a schoolyard bully rather than a seasoned statesman.

Sadly, none of this may matter. Trump as a candidate is bad enough, but in my opinion, the far greater disgrace is how close this election is. In the most recent polls, the race is too close to call.

You have to wonder. What's wrong with the American people?

Several factors are at work here. The mean-spirited rightwing media, led by Fox News, has created an ugly culture of demonising Democrats. Take the case of US President Barack Obama. This thoughtful, unfailingly dignified left-of-centre president with a gentle, cerebral demeanour has been reviled as a Kenyan, closet communist, America hater, you name it. The Clintons have been getting the same treatment for many decades.

Which is not to say that the Clintons are purer than the driven snow. There is indeed something sleazy about their foundation. But if you judge a presidential candidate by knowledge, gravitas, and command of policy, Hillary Clinton will be spectacular as the first woman president of the US, just as Obama is as the first African American president.

Unfortunately, the US electorate has become so polarised that competence no longer matters. Political scholar Norman

Ornstein says that the Republican Party has gone off the deep end, with intolerant radicals taking over the party. They see any kind of compromise as a betrayal – a sure recipe for permanent gridlock in a country that's divided into Democrats and Republicans.

One mustn't overrate the impact of debates. In the last election, Obama faltered against Republican candidate Mitt Romney in the first debate, but recovered and went on to win the re-election comfortably.

My gut feeling remains unchanged. This race is Hillary's to lose. I'll even go out on a limb and say that although it will be a close race, Hillary will win. But hold on to your seats, because it's going to be one heck of a ride.

The writer is a contributing editor for Silliconeer, a monthly periodical for South Asians in the United States. He has been writing for US-based South Asian media for over 25 years.