

Global rights groups, retailers urge govt to free union leaders

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Some 22 global human and labour rights organisations called on upwards of 60 apparel brands to put pressure on the Bangladesh government for release of imprisoned union leaders and reinstatement of 1,500 suspended workers.

The major signatories are: Human Rights Watch, Clean Clothes Campaign (CCC), International Labour Rights Forum, Solidarity Centre, Work Research Foundation, Maquila Solidarity Network and Sacom.

"The Bangladeshi government and garment factory owners appear to be using the wage strike as a pretext to crack down on the labour movement," CCC said in the joint statement.

Last month, more than 1,500 workers from a number of factories in Ashulia, known as a hub of about 350 of the most compliant garment units, were suspended for their alleged involvement in demonstrations over pay hike.

The workers demanded that the minimum salary be increased to Tk 15,000 a month from Tk 5,300 now.

Since December 21, 2016, the Bangladeshi authorities have arrested at least 12 union leaders and worker rights advocates and two workers, according to the statement.

All those detained have been denied bail and are still in custody. At least two of the detained labour leaders have reportedly been badly beaten while in custody, and another one threatened with death, CCC said.

KEY POINTS

- 22 rights groups want reinstatement of **1,500** suspended workers
- 1,500 workers in Ashulia were suspended for protest over a pay hike in Dec
- The workers demanded the minimum salary be **Tk 15,000** a month, up from **Tk 5,300**
- Since December 21, 2016, **12** union leaders, worker rights advocates and two workers have been arrested

"Prolonged detention of labour leaders and striking workers will cause further reputational damage of Bangladesh and companies sourcing from the country," it added.

In a separate move, the American Apparel & Footwear Association (AAFA), which represents more than 1,000 brands in the US, wrote to the prime minister over the same matter on January 23.

"We believe in the rights of workers to freely associate, including associated legal protections from harassment, intimidation and termination for exercising their right to freely associate," said Rick Helfenbein, president and chief executive of AAFA.

Conversely, the association does not condone illegal activities by workers, labour groups or factory owners and has respect for the autonomy of the Bangladesh judicial process and the institutions that administer it.

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Asia-Pacific business forum on Feb 8-9

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

Government high-ups of Asia-Pacific countries, including Bangladesh, UN agencies, global private sector leaders and experts will gather here in Dhaka on February 8-9 to explore ways to achieve the sustainable development goals by 2030.

They will be brainstorming at the 13th edition of the Asia-Pacific Business Forum or APBF, the flagship regional business event of the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, at Sonargaon Hotel.

This is the first time Bangladesh is hosting the event, which will be jointly organised by the International Chamber of Commerce Bangladesh or ICCB and the ESCAP under the patronage of the commerce ministry.

The theme of this year's forum is 'regional integration to achieve sustainable development', as envisaged by the United Nation's sustainable development goals or SDGs, said ICCB President Mahbubur Rahman.

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ICT sector calls for incentives to become a star exporter

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

Bangladesh Association of Software and Information Services yesterday called for a 20 percent cash incentive on exports -- a plea that has been straight away shot down by the finance division.

The plea was made at a meeting with Finance Minister AMA Muhith at his office, where State Minister for ICT Zunaid Ahmed Palak batted for BASIS.

BASIS President Mustafa Jabbar said the industry is capable of earning \$1 billion from exports this year.

The industry's annual exports have already crossed the \$700 million mark. "We can achieve the \$5 billion target before 2021," he added.

Palak said the incentive would boost exports significantly.

In response, Mahbub Ahmed, senior secretary of the finance division, said: "I have strong reservation about cash incentive. It would not be right to make the industry dependent on the government."

Instead, he recommended extending policy support to help the industry stand on its own feet.

When it was pointed out that the garment sector was given incentive in its teething years, Ahmed said: "It was necessary 30 years ago. The government is still unable to come out of the cycle."

Palak said if the industry gets only 20 percent cash incentive for five years it will perform as well as, if not

better, than the garments sector and create millions of new jobs.

ICT is a 100 percent value addition sector but the garment sector is not.

"After five years if the ICT sector fails to yield the expected returns, you can withdraw the incentives, we will not object," the state minister told the finance minister.

Muhith, however, said he will have to discuss the issue further with the commerce minister.

Jabbar also urged the government to incorporate e-commerce into the tax holiday facilities.

Replying to a question, Muhith said the government is investigating the tax benefits obtained by Muhammad Yunus in favour of various companies bearing the Grameen name.

LNG prices for industrial use to be announced soon

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

The government may announce the prices of liquefied natural gas for industrial use in the next 15-20 days after discussing with the business community.

Once a price is decided, the government will start allocating gas and provide the gas distribution time so that industrialists can make their business plans accordingly, said Nazimuddin Chowdhury, energy and mineral resources secretary.

LNG import will start by the end of this year or early next year, Chowdhury said while addressing a

tripartite agreement signing ceremony between Bangladesh Economic Zones Authority, Titas Gas Transmission and Distribution Company and seven private economic zones.

Under the deal, Titas will provide gas connections to seven economic zones: Aman, Akij, Arisha, Bay, Meghna, Sonargaon and Meghna Industrial.

The representatives of the economic zones cited unavailability of gas connections as the major barrier.

In response, Chowdhury said: "The gas crisis will not remain like now after one or one and a half

years."

Presently, there is a daily deficit of 50-55 crore cubic feet gas. But 100 crore cubic feet LNG will be imported daily, so there will be no gas crisis, he said.

However, the price may be increased. "Both of us will be in problem if you [businessmen] think negatively about the price hike."

So far, 97 wells have been drilled, of which 23-25 were successful. "There is also a possibility of getting gas from these wells," he said, adding that another 108 wells will be drilled in the next three to four years.

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