

## Transport workers' strike

*They are in contempt of court*

**T**HE indefinite strike launched by transport workers in 10 southern districts following a rare verdict by a Manikganj court sentencing Jamir Hossain to life imprisonment speaks volumes about the general disregard for law. Hossain was behind the steering wheel of a bus that hit a microbus carrying Tareque Masud, Mishuk Munier and three others resulting in their death in 2011 on the Dhaka-Aricha highway. He was found to be sleep deprived and driving without a valid driver's license at the time of the crash.

What is disturbing is that the decision of enforcing the strike was a deliberate, collective one made by Bangladesh Road Transport Workers' Federation's regional office in Jessore. The Federation may disagree with the verdict but how can it question the sentence awarded by the court and hold commuters to ransom on that ground?

Although penalising one driver cannot bring back the many lives lost on the roads and highways, the judgment of the court brings some degree of vindication for the years of suffering the victims' families have endured. The factors contributing to the unusually high number of deaths on the roads, at least 64 people die from road crash-related injuries every day, are all too well known. And in the last sixteen days, as many as 172 people have been killed in road crashes.

The protesting transport workers must respect the ruling of the court. The strike is not only irrational, the demand for a 'proper' trial citing the sentence 'excessive' is also outrageous and is in clear contempt of court.

## High prevalence of depression and anxiety disorders

*All-round support needed to prevent*

**A** new study by the World Health Organisation (WHO) has revealed that in Bangladesh about 64 lakh people suffer from depressive disorder and 69 lakh from anxiety disorders, a staggering 4.1 and 4.4 percent respectively of the total population. And among the WHO's South East Asia Region, Bangladesh ranks highest in anxiety disorders.

Given our cultural and social attitude towards mental health, the numbers, though worrying, are not surprising. A lack of mental health education coupled with an ambivalence bordering on negligence when it comes to depression, the institutional care and support needed to combat mental health problems is virtually nil in the country.

The study should be a wake-up call; we must realise that mental health is as important as physical health when it comes to an individual's well-being. The misery, guilt, low self-worth, lack of sleep, anxiety, fear, panic disorder, phobias, to name just a few, which characterise these conditions are detrimental to a normal life.

While we may not be able to do much when it comes to genetic hereditary causes, we must remember that socio-economic conditions are catalysts for these conditions. To cite one example, our huge youth population and the lack of employment opportunities has been cited as a major cause.

First of all, as a nation, it is imperative that we learn more about these conditions. The importance of social awareness, school curriculum, and open conversations about mental health engaging the youth cannot be stressed enough. Government policies to bridge income gaps, generate employment and general improvement of socio-economic factors are also needed. And most of all, easy access to institutional help must be created, so that the conditions can be ameliorated for those suffering.

# Transforming our apparel industry

MACRO MIRROR



FAHMIDA KHATUN

**J**UST at the time when a major conference on the apparel sector of Bangladesh was held on February 25 in Dhaka with the promise to work together for a better tomorrow, disappointing news on labour rights in the readymade garments sector has surfaced. Eleven members of the US Congress have expressed their concerns regarding arrests and harassment of labour leaders and dismissal of workers from jobs. Their letter was sent to the Prime Minister of Bangladesh and to eleven buyers of Bangladesh's RMG. Global concern over Bangladesh's RMG sector is not new as global buyers and consumers are part of the industry. This has always taken the centre stage of discussion on the RMG sector. During the post-Rana Plaza period it has become all the more important.

Since the Rana Plaza tragedy on April 24, 2013 buying companies have started working with suppliers to improve compliance. A number of measures have been undertaken through collaboration with Bangladeshi entrepreneurs, e.g. Accord on Fire and Building Safety, Alliance of Bangladesh Worker Safety and Partnership for Cleaner Textile. Major compliance measures have been undertaken to ensure safety of factories and workers. The labour law of the country has been amended and the right to form trade unions in factories including in the special economic zones has been approved. The minimum wage of RMG workers has been raised to USD 69 in November 2013, in an attempt to make it comparable to other competing countries. These initiatives helped to develop standards and ensure transparency and compliances. As a result, RMG exports continued to increase and reached USD 28.09 billion in FY2015-16, despite some periodic fluctuations.

While compliance measures have helped to bring more credibility of the RMG sector, this is not a one off initiative. This is an ongoing process and has to be pursued continuously for sustainable growth of the sector. It is encouraging to note that RMG entrepreneurs have accepted compliance as an integral part of their business to survive. Many are taking self-motivated initiatives to remain ahead of the curve and to achieve and maintain competitiveness. This is also useful since

with the planned departure of Accord and Alliance in June 2018, monitoring the safety issues in factories will have to be continued with similar rigour by the entrepreneurs themselves. The role of the government, Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA), buyers and development partners will be critical in following up compliance measures.

But the road ahead is quite challenging. Good things do not come cheap. With higher compliance related expenditures, the cost of doing business goes up. This gives stiff price competition to the entrepreneurs. In such a situation some may opt for reduced production capacity to make up

Wages and labour rights related issues have to be taken into cognizance seriously and resolved immediately. If the sector can invest so much for safety and technological upgradation, it can also increase labour wages. In the short run, increase in labour costs does lead to higher production costs. But the increase is not significant, as many global studies reveal. Moreover, in the long-run these costs are internalised by higher productivity.

RMG manufacturers have to meet the increased cost of production through higher productivity and moving to high value products and high end markets. Higher productivity will require state of the art technology and skill

technological transformation.

Buyers, another major stakeholder, have to collaborate with suppliers in improving productivity. Ironically, in a fiercely competitive market, brands and retailers look for the lowest price. Buyers source from Bangladesh to maximise their profits through cheap clothes. Ethical buying and fair price are not under the purview of profit-making brands. If that was so then some other competing countries would have been dropped from their sourcing list. Some companies are seeking to reduce costs further by sourcing from low-cost countries. Southeast Asia and Sub-Saharan regions are under their consideration. This emphasises the need



PHOTO: STAR

for additional expenditures on compliance requirements. But as the industry aims for apparel exports of USD 50 billion by 2021, production capacity has to increase further and faster.

Fulfillment of such objectives will rely on collaborative efforts of multi-stakeholders. Indeed, sustainable growth of the industry is a shared responsibility of all parties including manufacturers, buyers, workers, government, civil society and media. Entrepreneurs should continue to maintain higher compliance in a sustainable manner. The Ashulia incident and the global reaction in its aftermath are not helpful for the sector.

Hardworking Bangladeshi workers are ready to put extra labour to learn technical skills. However, the issue of technology and its impact on the employment has to be thought of seriously. In the wake of the fourth industrial revolution which is going to rely heavily on technology, robots will take away many human jobs. Modern sectors will fall prey to such innovation first. Of course, this is an issue for the policymakers who have to generate employment and engage the excess labour force in other sectors. RMG entrepreneurs have to think of training workers in order to adapt to

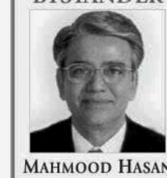
higher productivity and stricter compliance. The government can provide some relief on the cost of production through better infrastructural facilities and energy, competitive interest rate and better exchange rate. Civil society and media can help create awareness among consumers about ethical buying and act as a watchdog for compliance. Finally, trust gap among various stakeholders has to be minimised through better understanding and more transparency.

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## PALESTINE-ISRAEL CONFLICT

# Trump has muddled the peace process

FROM A BYSTANDER



MAHMOOD HASAN

**I**T was a comical press conference between maverick Donald Trump and hard-nosed Benjamin Netanyahu on February 15, 2017 at the White House. What was most unusual was for the two men to talk to journalists before they sat down to share their ideas about the Middle East. Clearly, the two men wanted to avoid being pinned down to specifics.

Watching the joint press conference was indeed amusing. The body-language of the two men was surely farcical giving the impression that they were trying their best to show — that they were bosom friends. A poorly written statement was drizzled out by Trump. "The state of Israel is a symbol to the world of resilience in the face of oppression", Trump wobbled. It was pathetic to see Netanyahu falling all over eulogising Trump and glorifying American friendship declaring, "Israel has no better ally than the United States. And I assure you, the United States has no better ally than Israel".

Interaction of the two men with journalists showed how absurd their thinking was and ideas about the Palestinian-Israeli peace process. When asked about the two-state solution Trump muttered "I'm looking at two-state and one-state and I like the one that both parties like. I can live with either one". Clearly, Trump not only departed from the bipartisan bedrock US policy of two-state solution that it pushed since the 1967 Arab-Israel war, but also undermined US role as

an objective arbiter. It starkly revealed how little Trump knew about Palestine.

On illegal Israeli settlements Trump half-heartedly asked Netanyahu to "hold back ...for little bit" — till he gets a deal done. Though it sounded bitter, unperturbed Netanyahu kept smiling — meaning that he didn't give two hoots to such a request.

Trump went on to say that he would make a "bigger deal" involving very high level players of the region and asked Netanyahu to show "flexibility" and "play with the bigger canvas". He ducked direct answer on whether the US Embassy would be moved to Jerusalem. On Iran, Trump belligerently stated it was "One of the worst deals" he has ever seen and would prevent Iran from ever developing a nuclear weapon.

Netanyahu also derided the two-state solution and kept talking about "substance" rather than "labels". For making a deal with Palestinians, Netanyahu laid out two prerequisites — Palestine must recognise Israel as a Jewish state; and Israel shall retain the security control over the entire area west of Jordan River i.e. occupied West Bank, the future Palestinian state.

The problem with Netanyahu is that he does not agree to two states and interestingly does not agree to one-state solution either. Two-states mean lesser land for Israel and a hostile Muslim Palestinian neighbour. Netanyahu abhors the idea of demographic imbalance in a one-state solution — 11 million Palestinian Muslims (4.5 million in occupied territories and 6.5 million Diaspora) against 8.65 million Jews in Israel.

Actually, Netanyahu is pursuing Zionism — expand Jewish settlements to occupy as much land as he can; and simultaneously resort to ethnic cleansing of

Palestinians from the occupied territories. The passing of the "Regularisation Bill" on February 6, 2017 by the Israeli Knesset clearly upholds Netanyahu's strategy. The law allows Israeli government to retroactively recognise Jewish settlements built without official permission on privately-owned Palestinian land. Furthermore, Israel has announced construction of 6,000 new housing units in the occupied territories. Israel does not accept that Jewish settlements in occupied territories are illegal under international law. Clearly, Netanyahu wants one-state without any Palestinians.

According to a recent poll, two-thirds of Palestinians now agree that the two-state solution is unattainable and is an illusion. Many Palestinians would probably accept the one-state solution but not the apartheid policies that Netanyahu intends to pursue. Judaism has official status in Israel, meaning Jewish people enjoy all rights as citizens in Israel. Since Netanyahu wants Israel to be recognised as a Jewish state there will be no place for Islam in Israel. This means that Palestinian Muslims will be treated as second class citizens if the one-state solution eventually comes into being. No theocratic state can be democratic, ensuring equal rights to citizens of different faiths. It gives in to apartheid and racism.

Trump's answers to journalists appeared incoherent and un-presidential. He did not exude the feeling that he genuinely cared for Jews. When asked about the anti-Semitic attacks in US, he bragged about his election victory and promised more "love" for all Americans. One wonders whether Jared Kushner (Orthodox Jew) — Trump's son-in-law appointed to cut out a peace deal — can really come up with a formula, when many top diplomats have failed. Amazingly, there was no mention of the Palestinian leadership by either leader.

Ever since the Palestinian-Israeli conflict arose in 1948, with the creation of Israel, all American administrations have treated the issue with chicanery. Every US President since that time has promised to do justice to the victims (Palestinians) of the unjust wars. Nothing has happened in the past eight decades, except loss of thousands of Palestinian lives. While paying lip service to the Palestinian cause, America went about arming and financing Israel and giving unstinted support at the United Nations. One talks a lot about the strained relationship between President Obama and Netanyahu over the past eight years. Why then did Obama sign in September 2016, the USD 38 billion military assistance to Israel? Washington kept pushing for the two-state solution, knowing full well that it was not going to happen. If Washington wanted it could have pressured Israel to the negotiating table and produced a solution.

By going against world opinion and burying the two-state solution Trump has muddled an already complicated situation.

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President Donald Trump and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu walk into the White House in Washington on February 15, 2017.

PHOTO: SAUL LOEB/AFP

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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PHOTO: STAR

### Proposed price hike of gas

The government has announced the decision to increase the price of gas from March and again in June 2017.

It is natural for commodity prices to go up, but a jump from TK 600 to TK 900 is too high a raise in one go. The government has argued that the price increase has been calculated so as to cushion the infrastructure development cost. However, the gas sector has adequate accumulation of reserve fund kept idle.

Consumers would happily agree to a bearable increase of 10 to 15 percent in gas prices, instead of the proposed 50 percent increase. We have also heard that they might raise the unit prices of electricity as well. These proposed price hikes will heavily hit pensioners and middle-income households. The waste of gas in domestic use can be prevented by installing gas meters, as has already been done in some parts of the city.

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