

EU threaten GSP suspension!

Bodes ill for RMG sector

THREE European Commission bodies have issued a joint letter to the Bangladesh embassy in Brussels last week stating that the government needs to take further steps to implement the four recommendations made by the ILO last year, a failure to do so would result in suspension of trade privileges enjoyed under the GSP. If the EU goes through with it, Bangladesh stands to lose the zero-duty access to its market and the impact on our principal export – RMG – would be most severe as shipments to the common European market would be subject to 12.5 percent duty.

According to the EU, the caveat of 30 percent workers' signatures before forming a trade union is an impediment. The alleged widespread harassment and violence against trade unions is another issue flagged by it. The government stance is that this is not entirely true, and that much has changed since the Rana Plaza disaster and labour standards have improved considerably with the government working with major stakeholders including the BGMEA and international bodies like the ILO.

At the end of the day, there appears to be serious gap in information between the EU and ILO on one side and the government and BGMEA on the other. While the ILO has expressed concerns over recent allegations of acts of violence and harassment against trade unions in its latest update in February, it is up to BGMEA and the government to communicate effectively to EU, precisely what changes have occurred since last year when an agreement was reached on ILO's recommendations. Sitting back is not really an option here since the EU market represents 65 percent of all RMG exports and Bangladesh earned USD 18.68 billion over the last fiscal to EU which represents 54.57 percent of total exports. There is need for urgent discussion between all the stake holders to resolve the matter.

Deliberate destruction of the environment

Stop before it's too late

WE are sorry to see two reports and adjoining photographs published in this paper this Monday that speak volumes of the way our natural environment has been assaulted. And that too with impunity. The rampant extraction of river stone has made water scarce in Bandarban in the dry season and contributed to the siltation problem in the Sangu River. Another photo-story depicts the sorry state of once-mighty Chaktai canal in Chittagong, which is now reduced to a narrow stream of water during the low tide.

We are perplexed as to why the authorities are allowing assaults on our environment to go on unabated. Be it stone extraction, illegal encroachment of water bodies or cutting hills, we see a disturbing trend that keeps repeating itself, which is that of the involvement of criminals who work in connivance with unscrupulous local officials. This is reportedly the case of the Bandarban stone extraction.

In some cases, environment officials are so ill-equipped and lack manpower to such an extent that it is impossible for them to bring the culprits to book. The drives that they do launch do not deter the local syndicates from returning to the illegal activity. The government needs to be determined to implement its own laws and arm the authorities with the necessary logistics in order to stop the criminals who are causing irreparable damage to the environment. This must be backed up by political will, which can stop the impunity with which our environment is being ravaged.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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My thoughts on the 'City and Region Plan Act-2017'

Recently, the cabinet has given approval for the draft of the 'City and Region Plan Act 2017'. After being passed, this bill will make it mandatory for any kind of construction and development work on rural or urban land to take permission from the relevant authorities.

Bangladesh is an agricultural country. In fact, many people's livelihoods depend on agriculture in Bangladesh – a bad harvest year can even result in deaths from hunger in poor families. Currently, these agricultural products are being hampered not only due to bad weather conditions, but also the erratic use of land. Agricultural land is being used for brick-kiln, prawn culture, and even residential and commercial construction. Trees are being sown in arable land suitable for food grain production. Surveys have revealed that the expanse of arable land, which was 2 Crore and 17 Lakh hectares in 1971, is now below 70 Lakh hectares.

It is therefore a laudable step by the government to pass this bill now, but they must also ensure that people aren't harassed as a result of it. They must ensure that corrupt officials do not extort people for bribes in the name of permission fees.

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It's time to work together

Bangladesh RMG industry can't afford to fail or falter



KNOT SO TRUE

RUBANA HUQ

THE tale of the three million female workers in the readymade garment industry is an unbeatable narrative of toil and survival. As a woman, I have a soft spot for the women who work in the industry. They are far smarter than I ever was. They have more courage than I ever had. They have more persistence than I ever dreamt of. They are the face of the unsung heroes while I sit in my own elite bubble and enjoy a privileged life.

They are who we are proud of; they are the ones who make and unmake us. The RMG sector cannot afford to fail as its collapse will trigger an instant breakdown of the social fabric of the entire society. The industry has laid the ground for millions of women to dream of a better future.

However, this future is now under discussion. Last June, in Geneva, the International Labour Conference (ILC) adopted a 'special paragraph' (a designation given to countries for failing to comply with their obligations under an ILO convention) on Bangladesh on grounds of serious concern over anti-union activities in the country, and the state of freedom of association in the EPZ. The May-June 2016 session of the ILC added the special paragraphs for two countries: Bangladesh and El Salvador.

Our country has been put in the same category as El Salvador, a country where children are engaged in the worst forms of child labour, including in the harvesting of sugarcane and in illicit activities resulting in human trafficking. The government there is yet to enforce child labour laws, and no penalties for child labour violations were issued in 2015. Male child labour there comprises approximately three-fourths of child labourers aged 5 to 17. Approximately 50 percent of sex trafficking victims in El Salvador are girls between ages 13 and 18. A report of Human Rights Watch details hazardous child labour in the sugarcane industry, and it also claims that children use machetes and other sharp knives to cut sugarcane and strip leaves off the stalks for

over nine hours every day in the scorching sun, and often have machete gashes on their hands and legs. Similar abuses are reported in coffee, fireworks and shellfish industries. That we have been put on the same level as El Salvador and that there is a persistent perception of Bangladesh RMG industry abusing rights of labourers, is deeply troubling.

There are many other problematic stories in the world to report. But Bangladesh's RMG industry definitely does not want to join the ranks with countries that falter during the journey. Cambodia, which currently enjoys EU's GSP, namely under the Everything But Arms scheme, exporting garment and textile exports amounting to roughly USD 4.96 billion in 2013 and USD 5.7 billion in 2014, still carries the label of discriminatory and exploitative labour conditions, which include existence of short-term contracts, poor government labour inspection and enforcement, and aggressive tactics against independent unions. Cambodia has also experienced repeated episodes of workers fainting on the job. In January 2014, law enforcing agencies brutally crushed industry-wide protests for a higher minimum wage while authorities introduced more complicated union registration procedures. Women workers there face pregnancy-based discrimination, sexual harassment, and denial of maternity benefits.

Even Myanmar, which continues to enjoy trade advantages with the EU and has exported garments amounting USD 1.46 billion in 2015 with EU imports of clothing from Myanmar totalling worth 432 million euros that year (up 80 percent year on year), has labour issues along with the persecution of Rohingyas, which runs contrary to the EU strategy as adopted by the Council at its 3477th meeting held on June 20, 2016.

Vietnam, too, enjoys trade preferences with the EU under the Generalized Scheme of Preferences. But it also hosts horror stories of having over 30,000 men, women, and children, being held against their will in state-run detention centres, who are forced to work and beaten all in the name of "drug treatment," as victims are apparently drug addicts held for periods of two to four years without ever receiving a hearing or a trial in a court of law. These detainees are mostly forced to work under harsh conditions for

little or no pay for sewing t-shirts or mosquito bed nets, processing cashews, etc. Detainees dare not refuse to work and in case if they do, they are beaten, electrocuted or placed in solitary confinement.

Let's all be clear about this. Bangladesh wants to win the race and not use bad examples of competitors to its advantage. But at this point, it's equally important to mention what goes around the world and how far we have come so far. So the only road left for us is to march forward with courage and grace. If there are corrections to be made, so be it. If the 'special paragraph' from ILO demands looking into correcting a few issues with the EPZ draft policy, so be it. If the upcoming International Labour Conference in June 2017 demands to see progress, we must take it upon our shoulders to perform. If the Compact Review Meeting in May wants to be convinced of good strides in the sector, let us do all that we can do to convince them of our attempts to excel. At the end of it all, labourers, government and industry must be on the same page, continuously engaging in transparent conversation. There is no other alternative. It is on us to collaborate. It is on us to work together, just because we can't afford to lose out on any trade advantage from anyone anymore. The workforce is too precious to give up on. A slight dent on the GSP advantage will damage the industry. So we can't afford to fail or falter.

While we take pride in what we have achieved so far, let us show the world that we can be the best in every sense of the word. And to those who make a difference to the lives of the millions of labourers by giving us trade advantages, a small appeal goes out today: By setting new standards of infrastructural integrity, Bangladesh RMG industry has proven its intent to soar to new heights. Therefore, please believe that we intend to achieve a lot more in terms of social dialogue and contribute to a positive paradigm shift. Neither can the industry afford to deviate from this commitment, nor should you give us up as, in case if you do, three million women will be thrown into a whirlpool of catastrophe and may never see the light of the day again.

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PROJECT ■ SYNDICATE

The EU fighting for life at 60



PHILIPPE LEGRAIN

EUROPEAN Union heads of state just gathered to celebrate the 60th anniversary of the signing of the Treaty of Rome at a time when nativist nationalists are threatening to destroy Europe's open liberal societies. As the recent Dutch election showed, such forces can be defeated. But the capacity to do so will be tested in three more important elections – in France, Germany, and Italy – by next spring, and those who want the EU to survive will need to fight hard, and on many fronts.

The first step is to recognise how grave the populist threat really is. Liberal internationalists cannot afford to be complacent. Most thought it inconceivable that the British would vote to leave the EU, and yet they did. Donald Trump's presidential candidacy in the United States was largely dismissed, until he won.

Yet most Europeans continue to underestimate Russian President Vladimir Putin's cyber and propaganda war against the West – a war that aims to help bring to power far-right populists bent on the EU's destruction. Although Dutch voters flocked to the polls to deny victory to the extreme xenophobe Geert Wilders, the risk of another populist upset remains real.

It could take only one such upset to fatally wound the EU – particularly if that victory brings Marine Le Pen of the far-right National Front to power in France in May. Even if Le Pen fails to win the presidency, the formation of an anti-euro government in Italy after its next election could fracture the currency union.

The situation is all the more delicate, because Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia are already led by quasi-authoritarian nationalist governments that are boring holes in the EU from within. Add to that the destabilising effects of Brexit and a US president who is openly hostile toward the EU (and supportive of Brexit and Le Pen), and the stakes of the upcoming elections become starkly apparent.

Even out of power, populists can do serious damage. Wilders finished a distant second in the Dutch election, but he nonetheless managed to push the winner, Prime Minister Mark Rutte, to adopt a more intolerant stance toward immigrants. The prospect of a broad coalition government that excludes Wilders could enhance his influence, by making him the main opposition.

So those who want a reformed and thriving EU must do more to counter the

populist threat, by dispelling the false perceptions that are fueling it, and providing positive and viable solutions to the real problems that are driving European voters to rebel against the establishment. To be sure, racism motivates some. But that does not explain why, for example, the National Front has surged from 10 percent in opinion polls a decade ago to nearly 30 percent now. There must be other forces at work.

A major one is economic. Most Europeans – like many Americans who voted for Trump – have endured years of stagnant or falling living standards, and

swell with angry and fearful citizens, who feel that the system is rigged against them. Only 36 percent of Europeans now trust the EU, while just 31 percent trust national governments.

Some of these disenchanted citizens, particularly in Greece and Spain, have turned to left-wing parties. But many others have embraced far-right populists, who pledge to fight for "the people" (their supporters) against the "liberal establishment" (their opponents), whom they accuse of selling out their national interest to the EU, immigrants, and foreigners in general.

In this context, simply condemning the

means fresh faces who are viewed as working for society as a whole, not special-interest lobbies. It means proposing radical reforms to create a more dynamic, fairer, and more secure society. And it means, more broadly, setting out a positive vision of shared identity based on openness, tolerance, and diversity that can bring together people of all backgrounds.

The biggest winners of the Dutch election were pro-EU, pro-immigrant parties, particularly the anti-austerity Green Left party, whose leader is just 30 years old, and the social liberal D66 party. In France, the 39-year-old



German Chancellor Angela Merkel's visit to Greece was met with angry protests in 2014.

PHOTO: AFP/GETTY IMAGES

fear an even worse future for themselves and their children.

These voters are understandably angry that politicians and EU technocrats so badly mismanaged the crisis in the eurozone, unjustly bailing out banks while imposing austerity on everyone else. Many Europeans have lost trust in an EU establishment that seems incompetent, self-serving, and out of touch – a perception reinforced by EU leaders' chaotic response to the refugee crisis, which populists have been quick to exploit by linking the newcomers to terrorism.

So the minority of Europeans who never liked the EU have seen their ranks

populists will not be enough. Pandering to them – say, by echoing their Eurosceptic or anti-immigrant rhetoric – is not a solution, either, because it merely reinforces atavistic views. In the Netherlands, support for the Labour Party, which chose an anti-immigrant leader, collapsed in the recent election.

A strictly technocratic fix would also fail. Yes, Europe needs a shift in economic policies to boost growth and wages now. But deeper questions about identity, political legitimacy, and trust in institutions cannot be addressed by tinkering with the Stability and Growth Pact.

What Europe desperately needs are positive political alternatives. That

Emmanuel Macron, who is campaigning on a positive, pro-EU message that aims to bridge the right-left divide, has edged ahead of Le Pen.

If Macron wins – a distinct possibility – he will need to deliver change, as will his counterparts elsewhere in Europe. Otherwise, the populists will be back – and probably stronger than ever.

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