

Bangladeshis trapped in Libya

Government must work towards repatriation

THE fate of Bangladeshi migrant workers, taken to Libya on false promises, is one of gross human rights violations. A report published in this paper yesterday revealed the dire conditions – which include forced labour and inhumane torture – that thousands of Bangladeshis are being subjected to. Take the case of Mohammad Ilias, who was taken to Libya with the promise of work in Sudan. He was confined to a room in Tripoli with many other Bangladeshis. All this, to extort money from these unfortunate workers, who are ready to go to foreign lands in search of a better livelihood.

Ilias's family was able to salvage the lakhs of taka that was demanded. At least he was able to come back to Bangladesh, although heavily indebted. The fate of others still trapped is less certain. According to the labour counsellor of the Bangladesh embassy in Tripoli, an estimated 20,000 Bangladeshis are still in Libya, either waiting to return home or cross the Mediterranean to reach Italy. From the deception used by brokers in Bangladesh to traffic these individuals, to the torture and extortion, every aspect of this gruesome trade is criminal.

What is needed is concerted effort to arrest and prosecute the Bangladeshi and Libyan trafficking nexus that lure the workers with false promises – only by cutting off the base can further deception be stopped. Our government must take strong measures, working with the embassy in Libya and other international organisations, to repatriate those still trapped abroad. Strengthening the state institutions which are supposed to uphold our migrant workers' rights is crucial.

A school for Harijan children?

The discrimination must end now

THE story of a Harijan community setting up its own school for its children in Gaibandha would have been cause for celebration if it didn't highlight a shameful fact. That Harijans are treated as 'untouchables' by the larger society. The accounts of members of this hardworking community in the report in this paper on Friday gives a mere glimpse of the years of discrimination and ostracism these people have had to face and continue to endure.

We are appalled to learn that Harijan children are treated with disdain; they are ignored by their classmates and excluded from games and cultural events. They feel isolated and humiliated; many drop out of school. Needless to say that such abhorrent discrimination perpetuated by school administrations, is unacceptable. It seems that despite the categorical rejection of all forms of discrimination in our Constitution, there are small, helpless communities that continue to bear the brunt of social exclusion.

We strongly protest such blatant racism which has not been adequately addressed by the government. It is the state's responsibility to ensure that all children get equal access to education, regardless of their ethnic or economic background. Most Harijans are too poor to send their children to school; in many cases they are refused jobs because of their ethnicity.

The government must immediately take steps to stop this social isolation by making sure members of this community get equal opportunities to be educated, acquire skills and be employed in better paying jobs. Passing the draft Anti-discrimination Act (applying to all marginalised groups) that has been placed before the Law Ministry, in the next parliamentary session, would be a good start. As a society we must accept Harijans as equal citizens, so that there will be no need for them to set up separate schools for their children.

Call to regain our power as workers



NAZMA AKTER

THIS year on May 1, Sammilito Garments Sramik Federation, along with other labour activists and union leaders, will hold a rally to mark the struggle that workers of our nation face, and the demands we have for living wages, for safe working conditions, for our internationally recognised and ratified labour rights, particularly the right to decent work, freedom of association, and the right to

salaries of USD 68 a month. Those are fortunes built by taking advantage of an exploitative market, an oppressive system that relies on women's compliance and vulnerability.

Time and time again, the government, factory owners, editorial writers of our country argue that we need to keep garments prices down to keep them competitive, so that the demand does not disappear and shift to Cambodia or Myanmar or some other country where working class people are so poor and desperate that they will take any salary, even if it is not a salary that they can survive on with dignity. But when we look at the fortune of these global

of Human Rights, all denied. It took until February to reach an agreement with the government and employers, which we hope to see implemented. Responsibility is shared on all sides to realise solutions.

We learned that garments factory owners can be vindictive when faced with protests, and will cooperate to blacklist workers from finding jobs at other factories ("Bangladesh garment factories sack hundreds after pay protests", *The Guardian*, December 27, 2016). We learned that the anxiety to protect the profits is so great that police forces can be deployed, using teargas and rubber bullets against the very workers

many demand the resolution of the trial process, it is also important to recognise our workers' demands for living wages, the right to organise, and realisation of their freedom of assembly and association.

Having worked in a garments factory from the time I was 11, I along with so many other workers of Bangladesh's industries know what it means to go on strike, to demand our rights. We know that none of our gains were handed to us, but every raise and every right was fought for. None of it came without our sacrifices or struggle. It is because of this history and these memories that we know how necessary it is to protect the right to strike, especially when faced with threats, with accusations that what we are doing is wrong, unpatriotic, selfish, or driven by a desire to destroy the industry.

Time and time again, I have said that it is not our wish to shut down the sector, or to drive away jobs and national income. What we want is to share equally in the gains that we have worked so hard for. That is why I speak of a living wage, not a minimum wage.

This is why, two years ago at the People's General Assembly in New York, I called for global movements (Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development, September 30, 2015) to regain our democracies, our economies, our planet for people, not profit, and to regain our power as workers. I repeat this call and stress that this is not just for garment workers or for Bangladeshi workers – this is for every community that has to live with the damages caused by a neoliberalist economy that exploits workers, indigenous people, migrants, domestic workers, and every marginalised group worldwide.

Without our voice, without our fight, nothing will change. Even a half day work abstention, where we all come together and refuse to give our labour across the world as part of this year's global campaign, will show the corporations, the governments, the wealthy, something they want us to forget: We are the powerful ones. They are not powerful.

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SOURCE: COZMOFUNNEL.COM

strike. We will not be heard by the elite class that pocket the profits from our labour, to whom Labour Day is another convenient public holiday that may ease the traffic in our densely populated capital city.

Since last May, we have learned some things that perhaps we already knew, but are affirmed again.

Some fraction of the world's richest families, who own globally recognised clothing brands, come directly at the cost of Bangladesh's female garments workers who make clothes for their brands at

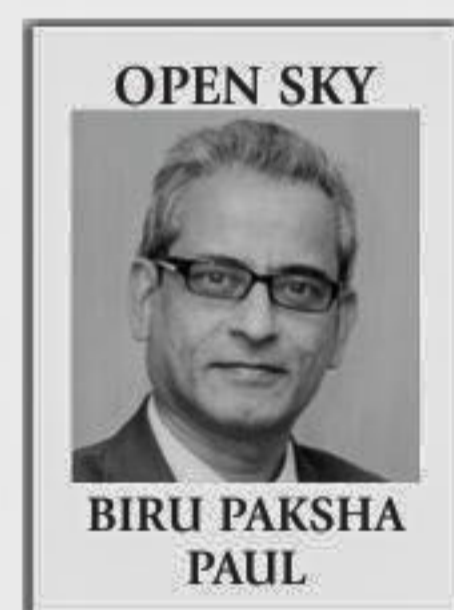
brands, can we really believe that it is not possible to pay our workers living wages?

Last December, worker protests in Ashulia led to the sacking of 1,600 workers, shutdown of trade union offices and arrest of union leaders ("1600 garment workers in Ashulia sacked over unrest", *The Daily Star*, December 28, 2016). Our constitutional protections to open and run unions in local, zonal, and regional levels were all swept aside. Our right to freedom of association, freedom to organise, and the right to collectively bargain under the Universal Declaration

that keep the industry going. It is no exaggeration when the International Labour Organisation country director says there is 'widespread mistrust' (Workers' rights issues remain a challenge, *The Daily Star*, April 24, 2017) between unions and employers.

Last week, labour leaders held a candlelit vigil to mark the fourth anniversary of the Rana Plaza disaster that killed 1,134 workers. Many survivors still have not received sufficient compensation, and the injured lack proper rehabilitation support. While

Becoming a developed country by 2041



BIRU PAKSHA PAUL

IN 1962, US president John F Kennedy declared in his famous moon speech, "We choose to go to the moon." Since then the US increased its budget and efforts to beat the then Soviet Union in the space race and eventually, American astronauts landed on the moon in 1969. A definite target coupled with a strong leadership made the American dream possible. Kennedy also articulated that the mission will be accomplished within the decade – and so it happened, even though the great leader was assassinated in 1963. No country has ever achieved a great dream without an ambitious, definite target.

Similarly, we hear from our Prime Minister and many leaders that Bangladesh will be a developed country by 2041. Only 24 years are left and we need to make per capita income more than USD 12,000, which is an eightfold increase from the current level of around USD 1,500. As history shows, we increased our per capita income in current dollars by around five times over the last 24 years. Not too bad. But this happened during the quarter century of growth acceleration under market economy and liberalisation. That trend of acceleration is no longer in place right now. We needed 42 years to reach the current level marking an eightfold increase in per capita income. If the past is any guide to the future, augmenting per capita income by eightfold will be extremely difficult for the country, given the current infrastructural bottlenecks, knowledge gap, institutional flaws, and judicial backwardness.

Per capita income is not the only qualification for being a developed nation. Other attributes, such as high standard of living, quality education, timely justice dispensation, environmental upgradation, and political stability are essential. Let's say one morning we discover oil under the soil. This gain may make our per capita income skyrocket to reach USD 12,000 dollars, but social standards will not develop overnight. Even if we assume that only a rise in income will solve everything, reaching the developed-country income level by 2041 seems impossible under the current scenario of income and population growth. All we need to focus on is per capita income (PCI) growth, which is approximately equal to GDP growth minus population growth. Three ways can make PCI growth possible: 1) raise GDP growth 2) lower population growth, and 3) do both simultaneously. Bangladesh seems to follow the first line at present.

It is hard to reduce population growth, which was the highest at 3.3 percent in 1967 in this country. It took us fifty years to reduce the growth rate by only 2 percentage points. The government expects that by the end of FY2017, our per capita income will reach USD 1,598, which appears to be an

overestimation. The World Bank's classification requires per capita income to be at least USD 12,476 to qualify as a developed economy. Assuming FY2017 figures such as population growth is at 1.3 percent, GDP growth at 7.2 percent, and thus per capita income growth is 5.9 percent, we need another 36 years to be a developed country, suggesting it would be by 2054 and not by 2041.

We are not sure who did the math for our Prime Minister and who convinced politicians in power to sell the number to the public. The slogan of being a middle-income country by 2021 has delivered much credibility to the government, which, in contrast, is losing its credibility by suggesting that we will become a developed nation by 2041. We require so many ifs and buts to justify the target line of 2041, turning a noble dream into a fantasy. We should instead focus

must be ambitious to radiate aspirations to the public, but these numbers seem impractical even though we assume that there will be a drastic improvement in our infrastructure and institutions. Hence, while the slogan of becoming a developed country should prevail to inspire the nation toward the best, the year should be revised to 2054 or 2051 that marks eighty years of our independence.

Undoubtedly, our GDP growth has been rising marginally in recent years, but the rate of rise in GDP growth shows a slightly declining tendency, demanding immediate attention to address deficiencies in institutions first. Otherwise, even aspiring to become an upper middle-income country by 2031 will be difficult. The most feasible way to realise our dream is to reduce population growth to as close to zero percent as possible. Population control was the most successful

Simple math shows that we need to achieve at least nine percent growth in per capita income if we really want to become a developed country by 2041.



SOURCE: WALLPAPERUP.COM

on when we can be an upper middle-income country. Based on the current numbers and assumptions, reaching that level – with per capita income at USD 4,036 – will require another sixteen years. We can be an upper-middle income country if we can accelerate both GDP growth and birth control even in 2031 – the year that marks the diamond jubilee of our independence. Pledging to become an upper-middle income country by 2031 could be a brilliant campaign instead of pointing to the distant year of 2041 that lacks proper forecasting and credibility.

Simple math shows that we need to achieve at least nine percent growth in per capita income if we really want to become a developed country by 2041. That number will require at least 10 percent GDP growth per year on average for 24 years assuming that population grows by 1 percent. The regime

public policy in Bangladesh's history, followed by universal primary education. The government witnessed tremendous success in birth control in the 1970s and 1980s. We do not know why the campaign kept losing steam since the 1990s. More births are taking place in poorer areas leading to lingering poverty and aggravating income inequality in this heavily populous country.

Bangladesh can become a developed country in 2046, instead of 2053, at the current GDP growth only if population growth can be reduced to zero. No matter how ambitious this sounds, any success in population control could hasten our journey of becoming a developed country.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Unethical policemen must be disciplined

According to a report published on the last page of *The Daily Star* on April 29, a police probe found 11 detectives involved in snatching money and valuables from a Kafrul Club in the capital on April 18. Departmental action and removal from DB and DMP were recommended, as they were found guilty of having "tainted the image of the forces."

This is an infectious practice that will soon encourage other unethical law enforcers to exploit situations to gain personal wealth. The current punishment is too weak to deter such crimes. They committed the crime because they were convinced that they would get away scot-free if caught. It is my suggestion that they be handed out severe punishments to discourage lawmakers from exploiting the very people they are oath-bound to protect.

Md. Mahmoodul Haque, Gulshan

Disadvantages of unfair pricing

The RMG products imported from Bangladesh are sold at prices four or five times higher than the buying price in retail houses in the EU, the USA and Canada. If RMG manufacturers managed to get at least three times the amount of the present price, our export earnings would amount to over USD 80 billion. This additional earning can increase per capita income, upgrade living standards of the RMG workers and have a multiplier effect on our economy. The absence of fair price contributes to the income poverty of workers in the country, and consequently destroys their incentive to form trade unions which the ILO is trying to establish.

Maruf, Khulna