

## Flood situation in Sylhet division dire

### Gear up flood relief and rescue operations

THE flood situation in Sylhet region has been deteriorating over the last 10 days with water levels rising in all major rivers; the incessant rain has caused overflowing of major water bodies. There is serious danger of landslides in the hilly regions and more than 100,000 people have been marooned across several upazilas. We are informed that flooding of haor areas will cause another round of loss in production of Aus paddy planted across 3,000 acres, which have already been inundated and farmers will bear the brunt of crop loss. Besides disrupting day-to-day life, thousands of people are now facing problems with cooking as more areas go under water. Although we are informed that emergency relief is being distributed, the relief and rescue operations must be geared up even more. And it would be best to prepare now for post-flood relief and rehabilitation operations which will bring diseases as flood waters recede.

As with every major flood, people in the affected areas are likely to face problems with safe drinking water and hence we hope authorities are already mapping flooded areas to make these available. What we do not want is the supply of expired medication, instances of which happened during the floods last August. Hundreds of thousands of people will require access to essential drugs and survival food kits. Farmers will require financial assistance to defray the costs of lost crops, and all this requires detailed planning and execution. We hope that, given our significant experience and expertise in handling natural disasters, the administration is ensuring that the contingency plans are in place so that the flood-affected people can return home and be rehabilitated as soon as the flood waters recede.

## Child abuse continues

### Awareness needed to tackle the menace

IT'S unfortunate that for all the legal measures and awareness campaigns undertaken to combat abuse, children continue to suffer. Disturbing reports of children being tortured by their relatives, employers and local thugs keep pouring in, as the country's institutional failure in child protection becomes more and more evident.

This week, news of at least three children tortured in different parts of Bangladesh surfaced in the news media. *The Daily Star* on Tuesday reported two of the incidents, the first, involving a domestic help, taking place right in the heart of the capital. Eleven-year-old Sabina Akhter endured unspeakable horrors in the hands of her employer who reportedly inflicted severe punishment on her. Her fault? She couldn't fry an egg.

Nine-year-old Raju in the Rajapur upazila of Jhalokati was beaten up by three local drug addicts because they thought he had stolen their money, a charge that Raju denied. But he was tortured nonetheless, and his fingers were burnt as he was nailed to a wooden pole – a throwback to the sensational Rajon killing just two years ago. However, seventh-grader Shoikat Hawlader in Barisal was not as 'fortunate' as he died in hospital on Sunday, about two months after he was brutally tortured by local thugs on charges of stealing money.

These incidents show the increasing vulnerability of our children and futility of the laws and institutions that are there to protect them. We think, as important as the implementation of these laws is the general awareness of our responsibility to create an environment conducive to the protection of children and their rights. No amount of law would help as long as that doesn't happen.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedadlystar.net

### Unfair treatment of Hindu rituals

The Constitution of Bangladesh, Article 2(A) indicates that, "The state religion of the Republic is Islam, but State shall ensure equal status and equal right in the practice of Hindu, Buddhist, Christian and other religions."

The *Rath Jatra Utsab* in Dhamrai has been suspended by the local police citing security concerns. This is an important festival for Hindus worldwide. It is believed that drawing the row of *Rath* fills Hindus with hope. How could the mayor break down all the shops situated in the place? Is our country really democratic?

Every citizen has the right to observe their religion in our country. The main religion may be Islam, but that should not pose restrictions on the holy practices of other religions.

The government must look into this case carefully and bring about justice for the Hindus living in this country.

Sumon Kumar Paul  
Patuakhali Science & Technology University



The local mayor and his men took down the stalls at the historical Rath Mela in Dhamrai.

PHOTO: PALASH KHAN

# A platform of trust

### KNOT SO TRUE



RUBANA HUQ

WHEN I hear hardened words from trade union leaders, instead of critiquing, I try and reason, and pose a critical question to myself and most of my more self-aware colleagues: Do they sound the way they sound because of their years of dissatisfaction or disappointment? Perhaps.

Second question: Have we, the manufacturers, contributed to their dissatisfaction? Perhaps.

Final question: And now...have times changed? Yes, they have.

Post-Rana Plaza shaming put all the manufacturers in Bangladesh in a remediation mode. At the business level, brands and unions together, through forming Accord, set clear rules for factories to be remediated, and so we listened. At the national level, after revision of minimum wage, labour law and an altered trade scene, exports still managed to grow. At an international level, Bangladesh made the headlines on a routine basis.

Post-Special Paragraph ILO phase put the manufacturers on their toes again. Bangladesh, in International Labour Conference (ILC) in June 2016, received a warning from ILO specifying four observations relating to changes to Bangladesh Labour Act (BLA) 2013 and the draft EPZ policy, dipping numbers of trade union registration and workers' harassment. As luck would have it, Ashulia unrest happened in December 2016 and fears escalated within the European Union (EU) and others that the labour scene in Bangladesh continued to be unchanged. Therefore, based on the Special Paragraph, the EU took the position of warning the stakeholders that with another issuance of Special Paragraph in June 2017, ILC and the EU would put in place a special monitoring process on the Everything But Arms advantage granted to Bangladesh, which allows us to export our goods without any duties to Europe. To this, we reacted and set our hearts to change the scene. BGMEA invested in deep discussions with the EU, the rest of the Compact partners, and the government and finally negotiated the following:

- Recall of the EPZ draft back from the Parliament with a view to amend;

- Continued to stress to the government to amend BLA 2013 to comply with ILO obligations;

- Addressed Ashulia unrest through a tripartite agreement being signed between BGMEA, Ministry of Labour and the trade unions indicating that unsubstantiated cases would be closed and rest pursued as per national law. Moreover, a Tripartite Consultative Committee on readymade garment sector was formed by the government with a view to address labour disputes and any other concerns;

- Put in place Standard Operating Procedures and shared that the number of trade unions continued to grow in

2017.

All parties concerned acknowledged their obligations and after a successful signing of a joint declaration with Compact Partners, actively backed by the Hon'ble Commerce Minister and the successful deliberation by our Hon'ble Law Minister during the ILC, ILC refrained from issuing Special Paragraph and demanded updates by November. With active support of all parties, manufacturers thought that they were entering better times.

But then came the announcement of Accord's extension beyond 2018. Let's be honest. This was not news to any of us as it is natural to assume that Bangladesh would need to continue with its structural, fire and electrical safety checks and updates. But to most of us, the launch of Accord version 2 on June 29, almost a year earlier than its tenure expiration, without the inclusion or reference of any local stakeholder was surprising. Moreover, the document has two major changes: Accord version 2, unlike its first version, is not solely based on "building on" National Action Plan and it has extended its agenda to "freedom of association".

As a member of the manufacturing

countries which have been in discussion for the last six months, on account of labour rights violations.

Cambodia has faced criticism for three garment workers' death in Phnom Penh's Veng Sreng Boulevard three years ago, along with hundreds of strikes, petitions to PM's cabinet over unpaid wages, anger at scrapping maternity benefits involving breastfeeding hours, mass fainting in Sihanoukville garment factory, workers seeking government intervention with regard to compensation and unlawful termination of trade union leaders, footwear factory workers' protest, police excesses on May Day and the final one being minimum wage talks (to begin in July) which have already been stated as an agreement which reportedly "guts" basic freedom. Yet garment exports from Cambodia have surged to EU in the last 10 years, as they have become the fifth largest exporter to EU from being the tenth largest while growing by 14 percent in 2016 to reach USD 3.8 billion, putting it ahead of Vietnam and is now all set to surpass India.

Myanmar has had more than 50 stories on strikes over unpaid wages,

foreign-owned "sweatshops" in Haiti, Vietnamese footwear workers striking for better conditions, etc., have all been read over the last six months.

Last but not the least, even Europe faces exploitation accusations. A study showed Romanian workers' monthly take-home being only 178 euro after taxes, which with overtime, could go up to 222 euro. On top of that, the tale of thousands of Syrian refugees working long hours in unhealthy conditions in Turkey continued to be a focal point for many of us for days after it was reported.

But even more damning is Bangladesh popping up in every survey as topping the worst possible index. We are ranked as one of the ten worst offenders in labour rights. We are being put in the same league as countries which disallow freedom of association to migrant workers, with countries like Egypt, where trade unionists continue to suffer severe discrimination, detention (Alexandria Shipyard case) and state repression; the Philippines, where union leaders are particularly at risk of violence, intimidation and murder (two leaders murdered within the space of one week in September 2016); Colombia, which, even after initiation of peace process, remains one of the worst violators of trade union rights with a horrendous record for impunity regarding the murders of trade unionists; Kazakhstan, where trade unions are facing an orchestrated state policy to weaken solidarity, which includes arrest of leaders; Turkey, where trade unions and their members have been made public enemies and where over 100,000 public sector workers have lost their jobs in systematic purges by the government; and Guatemala, where the country retains its notorious reputation for violence against workers, intimidation, kidnapping and death threats, which severely undermine freedom.

With all that listed, my humble submission to all parties is to simply consider one approach of collaboration. We are proud Bangladeshis, who believe in freedom, readily admit failures and learn lessons from past mistakes. If there's a trust deficit within our circle, let's bridge it with respect; if there's a disconnect in communications and coordination, let's address it today; if there's doubt, then let's discuss it out in the open and not spring unexpected surprises along the route.

While manufacturers in Bangladesh continue to be astonished by the sudden "launch" of Accord version 2, we also deeply appreciate what Accord has done to the industry in helping us remediate and get better. If we are to improve our mark, the journey cannot be undertaken by only the brands and the unions alone. We, the local stakeholders, must have a part to play.

In Pakistan, Khaadi, one of the largest brands in the country's apparel industry, is at the centre of a campaign against ill treatment of workers, and the company's alleged layoff of 32 workers ahead of Ramadan has caused quite a stir. We also wonder why the families of those affected by the 2012 Baldia Town factory fire that killed 257 workers are yet to be compensated after four years.

The recent stories on Sri Lanka hosting sweatshops with workers getting paid for 54 cents an hour to produce Beyoncé's clothing line, workers protesting against

unfair dismissals, garment workers being terminated because of attempted unionisation and there have even been reports of more than 1.3 million child labourers.

News of Indian workers dying of asphyxia in Hisar shoe factory fire, powerloom workers' strikes, Tamil Nadu spinning mills being accused of modern day slavery, Bengaluru factory being accused of sexual harassment, hundreds of child workers being rescued from leather units in Hyderabad, women shoemakers earning just over USD 40 per month, etc., compel us to pause and reflect.

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The writer is Managing Director, Mohammad Group.

## Lessons from the South

### POLITICS OF CLIMATE CHANGE



SALEEMUL HUQ

I have just returned from Kampala, Uganda, where I attended the 11th International Conference on Community Based Adaptation (CBA11), where around 300 participants from over fifty countries came together for a week of discussions and knowledge-sharing on how the most vulnerable communities around the world are already taking action to tackle climate change at the local level.

This conference series started in Bangladesh over a decade ago and has been held in Vietnam, Tanzania, Nepal and Kenya in previous years. The 10th CBA conference was held in Dhaka last year on the theme of enhancing resilience of urban communities.

The focus of the annual conferences has been on the most vulnerable communities, in the most vulnerable countries, namely, the Least Developed Countries (LDCs). The focus of CBA11 in Uganda was on finding synergies between Ecosystem Based Adaptation (EBA) and CBA.

Over the last decade, many lessons have been learnt and shared amongst the participants which have enabled us to take a new initiative at CBA11 to consolidate that knowledge and share it on a much more systematic basis going forward.

Hence, on June 26, in Kampala, we launched the LDC Universities Consortium on Climate Change (LUCCC) with the Chair of the LDC Group and the Vice Chancellor of Makerere University who hosted CBA11 along with the Government of Uganda.

This new LUCCC initiative is a South-South, LDC-specific, adaptation-focused, capacity-development programme which will be jointly managed by the International Centre for Climate Change and Development (ICCCAD) at the Independent University, Bangladesh (IUB) and the Makerere University Centre for Climate Change Research and Innovation (MUCCRI), along with other partner universities in ten LDCs, who will in turn engage with other universities in their respective sub-regions in Africa and Asia. Thus, by using a hub-and-spoke approach all 48 LDCs will be covered over the

next few years.

The objectives of the LUCCC are to implement Article 11 of the Paris Agreement on Climate Change which focuses on the need to develop in-country capacity-building systems in each and every country to enable them all to tackle climate change by 2030.

The LUCCC initiative aims to enable exchange of faculty, researchers and students across the LDCs to start with, but also with other universities in non-LDC developing countries as well as developed countries over time.

The student-to-student exchange of knowledge and activities has already been started by the students of Makerere University who held a separate Youth Conference on Climate Change in parallel with CBA11 in Kampala with cooperation and participation from youth from Bangladesh and other countries. Each of the LUCCC universities has agreed to hold an annual national youth conference in each of their countries where they will share knowledge on innovative

practices to tackle climate change from the youth of other LDCs.

Another activity will be a LUCCC Fellowship Programme where young researchers and faculty from each LUCCC partner will be able to visit and collaborate with other partners in the consortium.

The overall objective is to no longer focus on the vulnerability of the communities and LDCs, but rather on the many innovations and solutions that they have developed and share that experiential knowledge with each other in a South-South and also South-North direction with other countries. Thus the LDCs, led by Bangladesh and Uganda, will be able to share their considerable experiential knowledge with the rest of the world and help the collective global efforts to tackle the adverse impacts of climate change.

The writer is Director, International Centre for Climate Change and Development at the Independent University, Bangladesh. E-mail: Saleemul.huq@iub.edu.bd



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