

Employment in RMG factories

All workers must be given appointment letters

A survey carried out by the Mansusher Jonno Foundation has found that more than 72 percent of garment workers do not have any appointment letters. The survey covered 770 workers in Dhaka, Chittagong, Gazipur and Narayanganj, and found that the bulk of these workers could only produce their identity cards as proof of employment. This comes as a surprise as it is mandatory for BGMEA and BKMEA factories to provide appointment letters to workers employed by member companies.

Things have improved in a lot of ways in the sector after the disastrous Rana Plaza incident. The Accord and Alliance initiatives have worked with the sector to improve safety standards and make the RMG sector better in many ways. However, as the latest survey shows, management practices, when dealing with workers' basic rights still need a lot of improvements. Most workers have no idea about the existing provisions of the labour law, and given that there no trade union in these factories the RMG owners have no central bargaining agent. Hence, they cannot present their demands coherently to their employers.

This is an area that policymakers need to look into. While it is an undeniable fact that the garments sector provides the bulk of our exports earnings, it is also true that RMG workers have serious grievances about the threat of sudden termination. The government should form a separate monitoring cell to oversee that workers are given all necessary documents to establish their bona fide as entitled under the law.

Limon's remarkable resilience

Those who wronged him must face justice

WE are delighted to learn that Limon Hossain, whose case brought Rab's gross highhandedness to the spotlight, has defied all odds to become a lawyer. He has set an example of outstanding resilience and determination.

In 2011, a Rab team shot him, "having mistaken" him for a notorious criminal. Limon later lost his leg. As if that was not enough, Rab framed two cases against him, which was clearly a cover-up tactic. However, the government withdrew the cases two years later, having found no merit in them. We thank National Human Rights Commission and Ain O Salish Kendra (ASK) for providing him with consistent legal assistance and support. Currently, there is a trial underway against six Rab personnel. We hope that justice will be done and the perpetrators will be given their due.

Rab's then-chief Mokhlesur Rahman admitted that Limon was a shootout victim. And this beg questions about the functioning of the law enforcing agency and its accountability. We believe that there should be institutional reforms within the force to prevent repetition of similar misconduct. And all those involved in such a scheme should be committed to the law. Members crossing the line or violating the rules of engagement should not be covered up by the institution. Such incidents in which an innocent has to suffer greatly because of acts of some members of the security forces must not be repeated.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Hatred on social media

In this era of the internet, a large number of our citizens use different social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter or Instagram. It's heartening that many of them use these platforms for various purposes, from business to even spreading knowledge and awareness. However, it should also be noted that many users are ill-motivated. They intentionally spread disinformation, hatred and often make derogatory and fanatic remarks. This newspaper has published some articles on this issue.

Facebook has a lot to do in this regard. It should employ more Bengali-proficient operators who could flag the abusive comments.

Mahsab Hossain Rony, By e-mail

Make Dhaka airport mosquito-free

On March 2, I checked in early at the Dhaka airport, hoping for a few relaxing hours at the departure lounge before the takeoff. But the mosquitoes at the airport had other plans. They were so numerous and annoying that a lady got fed up and went up to an airport official to complain. His reply was astounding: "They don't bite us."

Dhaka airport serves as the gateway to the country for foreign visitors and Bangladeshis alike. What impression would visitors have about our country when they are greeted by these blood-thirsty mosquitoes? We boast of many mega projects in our country. I suggest that we launch a mega project to rid Dhaka airport of this mosquito menace.

Engr. ABM Nurul Islam, USA

Mapping out a strategy

This is part four of a series of articles based on the Centre for Policy Dialogue's (CPD) research on Bangladesh's graduation out of the LDC group

MUSTAFAZUR RAHMAN and ESTIAQUE BARI

BANGLADESH has become eligible for LDC graduation at the triennial review of the Committee for Development Policy (CDP) held in March 2018 by meeting the thresholds for graduation: Gross National Income (GNI) per capita, the Human Assets Index (HAI) and the Economic Vulnerability Index (EVI). Bangladesh has been able to satisfy all the three graduation criteria and that also with significant comfort margins.

Consequently, Bangladesh's graduation can claim to be distinct from that of the earlier graduates and the current candidate LDCs. This demonstrates the strength of the economy in making the graduation process a smooth one as the country prepares to finally graduate out of the LDC group in 2024 following two successive triennial reviews in 2021 and in 2024. Against this backdrop, the government of Bangladesh should consider designing an appropriate strategy which will ensure graduation with momentum towards a sustainable graduation.

By 2024, 15 LDCs are expected to become eligible for graduation. In this context, Bangladesh will be observed closely for several reasons. First, its graduation would be an irreversible one because of its population size (more than the 75 million threshold). Second, graduation would have greater implications for Bangladesh's relatively more globally integrated economy compared to most other prospective graduates. Third, Bangladesh stands out among 15 prospective LDCs because of the size of its population and economy.

Fourth, its journey towards graduation is taking place at a time of increasing global uncertainty arising from protectionist threats, stagnation in WTO negotiations, and shifts in global financing modalities. Fifth, graduation would take place at a time when the current highly concessional aid will be gradually substituted by blended and relatively high-cost finance for Bangladesh. Lastly, graduation period will run in parallel with implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Bangladesh. This would require Bangladesh to be more sensitive to environmental concerns and issues of inclusiveness in pursuing its developmental aspirations.

There are about 136 LDC-specific international support measures (ISMs) across the spectrum of trade and market access, development finance, technology transfer and technical assistance. Unless negotiated separately with relevant partners, a large part of these measures would be phased out in 2024. Three implications stand out in this regard.

First, Bangladesh, which accounts for

more than one-fourth of total exports from the 15 prospective graduates, would experience significant erosion of preferences. Estimates by the authors indicate that Bangladesh would face additional tariffs of about 6.7 percent in absence of LDC preferential treatment, resulting in a possible export loss of USD 2.7 billion in view of potential earnings (equivalent to 8.7 percent of Bangladesh's global exports in FY15). Preference erosion would have adverse implications for export competitiveness, industrial production and jobs unless compensatory measures are put in place.

Second, Bangladesh's graduation will parallel its lower middle-income journey. Bangladesh would see a shift from International Development Association (IDA) type of concessional foreign aid to blended and, subsequently, International

momentum requires energetic efforts towards the needed structural transformation of the economy. In view of the above, what follows are core elements which should inform Bangladesh's strategy to ensure sustainable LDC graduation.

Reporting requirements as motivation

Between 2018 and 2024, UNCTAD and UN DESA will prepare vulnerability profile and undertake assessments to identify areas that call for close attention from the perspective of Bangladesh's smooth transition. Bangladesh should take advantage of these reviews, which would help identify vulnerabilities and weaknesses that need to be addressed through its sustainable LDC graduation strategy. The consultative mechanism which would follow LDC graduation should be a good opportunity to seek

Bangladesh needs to renew efforts towards supply-side capacity building, increasing export competitiveness and ensuring product and market diversification to compensate for preference erosion and phasing out of international support measures. These efforts should include targeted investment, trade policies for strengthening global integration, trade facilitation measures and mobilising significant foreign direct investment. During the run-up to the LDC graduation, Bangladesh would need to do its best to take maximum advantage of the preferences it is currently enjoying.

Emerging global trading scenario Bangladesh must pursue strategic trade and industrial policies that will enable it to take advantage of emerging domestic and global opportunities. Proactive partnerships in the context of regional and sub-regional initiatives, including Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor and Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal Motor Vehicles Agreement, sub-regional energy grid, exploration of the blue economy opportunities, etc., will be needed.

New aid environment

Bangladesh will need to address a number of challenges in view of the newly emerging aid regime: the rising costs of finance, associated increase in external debt, negotiation of access to new financing opportunities, including at the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and New Development Bank (NDB), and raising capital through issuing sovereign bonds in the international market. Negotiating bilaterally with development partners for assistance on favourable terms following the graduation will remain a possibility that should be explored.

Learning from graduated LDCs

Drawing from the experiences of earlier LDC graduates, Bangladesh will need to adequately prepare to reduce specific vulnerabilities, undertake targeted initiatives towards structural transformation of the economy and explore windows of opportunities by proactively engaging with international organisations (e.g. the WTO), multilateral institutions (e.g. the World Bank, the ADB and regional financial entities) and development partners, and calibrate policies in view of emerging challenges (e.g. Brexit). The EU has already agreed to extend Everything But Arms (EBA) for an additional three years for all graduated LDCs (in case of Bangladesh, till 2027). Flexibility concerning preferential treatment should also be explored through negotiations with other development partners and organisations.

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Fireworks celebrating Bangladesh's attainment of all three criteria for graduation from the least developed country (LDC) group on March 22, 2018.

PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD) type non-concessional finance (with a higher interest rate and more stringent terms and conditionalities).

Third, the country would no longer be eligible for support measures for the LDCs in the WTO. To recall, Bangladesh enjoys a wide range of support in the form of market access, technical assistance and waivers from obligations, protracted implementation periods for obligations and commitments (e.g. Trade Facilitation Agreement), Aid for Trade initiative and other forms of special and differential treatment (S&DT).

Bangladesh's eligibility for graduation is indicative of its robust record in terms of key macroeconomic and sectoral performance. Crossing the graduation thresholds demonstrates resilience and the underlying strengths of its economy. However, the graduation criteria are only limited to selected indicators, albeit important ones. Graduation with

global support to help the country implement various components of the strategy. Reporting to the CDP and UN ECOSOC should be seen from the perspective of mobilising global support.

Structural transformation

Supply-side diversification and a shift from a factor-driven to productivity-driven economy will continue to be challenging for Bangladesh. The country needs to prioritise policies on technology upgradation, skills endowment, productivity enhancement and increased economic competitiveness. Institutions, incentives and resource allocations will need to be geared towards structural transformation of the economy. In the era of the SDGs, which involve triangulation of economic development, social inclusiveness and environmental sustainability, Bangladesh's transition will have to be tuned to the attendant aspirations.

Strengthening market access

Congress' leftward tilt for the big battle

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA

THERE was more than one reason why the recent plenary session of India's main opposition party Congress stood out as an important political event. First, it was the first plenary after Rahul Gandhi took over as the party's President from his mother Sonia Gandhi marking a generational change in the top leadership of the country's oldest political party. Second, the passing of the baton to a much younger leader was a prelude to the same down-the-party hierarchy if the seating arrangement on the dais at the plenary venue is anything to go by; and third, and the most important is that it brought out the main components of the party's strategy to take on Prime Minister Narendra Modi-led Bharatiya Janata Party in general elections due early next year.

The plenary comes at a time when Congress finds itself in the throes of a crisis. Four years ago, it was reduced to its worst ever performance in general elections with just 44 of the total of 543 Lok Sabha seats. As if this was not enough, the party lost at the legislative assembly elections in the states, including in some of its traditional bastions. The Congress' pan-Indian presence in the corridors of power across India has shrunk badly. Today, the party rules just three of India's 29 states. The impressive show in the assembly elections in Modi's home state Gujarat in December last year and some parliamentary by-elections in Rajasthan

and Madhya Pradesh states earlier this year may have brought some cheers back to Congress, but the party has a long way to go in meeting the challenges in its battle-readiness against BJP.

The speeches of Rahul and Sonia Gandhi and the political and economic resolutions passed at the plenary set the core agenda of the party: to get back to power in 2019. Rahul delivered his most combative political speech, not only through the topics chosen—farm crisis and joblessness, the two issues on which the BJP government finds itself on a sticky wicket—but also with personalised attacks

percent richest Indians for creating a national poverty alleviation fund. The economic resolution's thrust was also on the employment front and spoke about involvement of the private sector for creating "good, productive jobs in large numbers." The party also promised large public investments in the education and healthcare sectors and in social nets. All this combined to give a pronouncedly further Left-ward tilt to the traditional Congress' left-of-the-centre orientation and marked a major outreach to farmers and youth which had drifted away from the party towards BJP in the 2014

But Rahul was far from defensive and showed that he is not hesitant to face the secularism versus Hinduism debate which many old-timers in the party feel could give BJP a handle for polarising the voters.

The political resolution of the Congress plenary also marked a key change in its stance on the issue of coalition politics in vogue in India since late 1990s. While sticking to its 2003 decision to go for coalition when Sonia was the head of the party, Congress under her son was silent on the issue of leadership of that coalition this time. Congress was the undisputed leader of United Progressive Alliance which had ruled India for a decade at a stretch from 2004, winning two successive national elections. There is a recognition in the party now that it is no longer the political force that it was five years ago. Secondly, it does not want to alienate its potential allies in the form of regional parties which are flexing their muscles and trying to build a non-Congress, non-BJP federal front. A number of regional parties like Telugu Desam Party, Telangana Rashtra Party, Samajwadi Party and Bahujan Samaj Party are the main rivals of Congress in their own states. It is precisely to reach out to the regional parties that the Congress plenary session's surprise decision to endorse their demand for reintroducing paper ballots in place of electronic voting machines in elections was taken.

The Congress plenary also witnessed another break from tradition.

Conspicuous was the absence of the older generation leaders on the dais this time. Only the speaker was on the dais at a given point of time. Rahul made it a point to explain the change by saying he wanted to fill the dais with the "talented" youth, a large segment of whom had become disillusioned with the Congress in the run up to the 2014 parliamentary elections. Only time will tell whether this will remain symbolic or can be translated into action. Congress has clearly switched into battle mode.



Congress party President Rahul Gandhi speaking at the All India Congress Committee (AICC) meeting in New Delhi.

PHOTO: REUTERS

on Modi, BJP President Amit Shah and Finance Minister Arun Jaitley. By this, Rahul projected the 2019 national elections as a duel between him and Modi.

The plenary adopted a special resolution on the agrarian distress, which was the main reason for the sharp fall in BJP's tally of seats to 99—its lowest in the last two decades—in Gujarat polls, rolled out a slew of promises for farmers including a new insurance scheme and a new methodology for determining minimum support prices for food grains. The resolution also proposed a five percent cess on the income of the top one

national poll.

Another key change in Congress was evident in Rahul's dour defence of his visit to Hindu shrines in an apparent bid to counter BJP's sustained bid to project his party as appeasing religious minorities. The old guard in the Congress may have quailed and recalled that it was Rahul's father Rajiv Gandhi who as Prime Minister had done the *shilanyas* at the disputed site in Ayodhya in 1985-86. A senior BJP leader had last year took a dig at Rahul's temple visits by saying that when the people have "original Hindutva" party why go for the "clone" (Congress).

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