

Is the NRC exclusion really India's internal issue?

Our foreign ministry should have a sure footing on the issue

THE news of 1.9 million people being excluded from India's National Register of Citizens (NRC) in Assam is certainly worrisome. It is of concern to us because of statements made previously by Indian politicians that alluded to the fact that many of the individuals who should be excluded were illegal immigrants, who had come from Bangladesh and should not stay in India. Thus, the idea that these excluded people would be deported and pushed into Bangladesh is not farfetched. What is even more perturbing is the vagueness with which our foreign minister has treated this rather important issue. He echoed the Indian external minister S Jaishankar's remark that this was "an internal issue" of India. His reminder to journalists that the Indian external affairs minister had said this to them at a press conference is rather perplexing. What about the discussions he had with Mr Jaishankar? Was it any different? Why can we not be informed of the outcome of the discussions?

The NRC issue has been going on for years, with the list being revised a few times, and the notion of those left out being made to come into Bangladesh has cropped up too. But it seems our foreign ministry is not surefooted on this complex issue, rather vague comments like "I don't think they are Bangladeshis" have been made, which hardly assuages our concerns.

The foreign minister has referred to Mr Jaishankar's assurance that Bangladesh did not have to worry at all about this issue. But we cannot ignore the ground realities. Those who have been left out are considered to be illegal immigrants who have unlawfully stayed in India and are perceived to be from Bangladesh. Although they can all appeal their cases, it is hard to know what the outcome of these proceedings will be. In such a scenario, merely saying there is nothing to be worried about is not enough. While Bangladesh and India enjoy the most cordial of relationships when it comes to national interest, the latter is always the first priority. This is all too clear from India's position on Myanmar regarding the Rohingya crisis.

We, therefore, cannot help but raise the question of how deeply our foreign ministry is engaging in this complex issue of the Indian NRC, a possible crisis in which Bangladesh maybe on the receiving end.

Heroic effort put in by nurses

Reward them for their services

THE dengue outbreak this year has badly exposed some of the undersides of our healthcare sector and has stretched our resources thin. Amidst this terrible crisis, nurses who have been working non-stop, hardly with any breaks and for extra hours to care for the thousands of suffering patients, have been among the few blessings. We commend these brave and caring souls who have put their own physical and mental wellbeing on the line, just so that others could enjoy some respite.

Following the astronomical rise in the number of dengue patients, four hospitals—Dhaka Medical College and Hospital, Mitford Hospital, Mugda Medical College and Hospital, and Shaheed Suhrawardy Medical College and Hospital—requested the Director General of Health Services (DGHS) for additional nurses. The DGHS, in response, deployed around 200 nurses on deputation to meet the needs of the four hospitals on an emergency basis.

The deployment has paid great dividends so far in terms of providing some relief to the hospitals and their patients. However, the nurses themselves have not received any remuneration or overtime bill for the work as there is no established system for those. Moreover, the nurses, since being deployed to these hospitals, have had to face significant difficulty in commuting to their newly designated workstations, away from their homes and regular places of work. Therefore, it is only fair that these nurses are duly rewarded for their great effort.

We understand that the existing rules and regulations do not allow additional payment for these nurses—since they are government employees. However, just as they were willing to make an exception to help people in a moment of national crisis, we believe the government should also make an exception and compensate these nurses for stepping up and serving their fellow citizens the way that they have.

What does the future hold for our apparel industry?



MOSTAFIZ UDDIN

OVER recent weeks, as the world celebrated the achievements of Neil Armstrong and the crew of Apollo 11 50 years ago, and with Armstrong's immortal "one giant leap for mankind" statement—as he descended the steps of the Eagle lunar landing craft—being so widely repeated, my thoughts turned to another momentous event closer to home: the independence of Bangladesh, the fifty-year anniversary of which will be celebrated in 2021, and the changes that had taken place since.

Much has happened in the country since those fateful days in 1971. Free from the tyranny of centuries of colonialism and an oppressive controlling nation, Bangladesh has flourished and a significant contributor to this change in the nation's fortunes has been its ready-made garment (RMG) industry.

Since its inception in the early 1980's, the RMG industry has rapidly grown, accounting for some 83 percent of the nation's exports, contributing in excess of USD 36 billion to the economy and employing in excess of 4.4 million people, with over 65 percent of those being female.

Bangladesh is now one of the Asian region's most remarkable and unexpected success stories (the country was ranked 41st among the world's largest economies in a report published by the UK-based Centre for Economics and Business Research in December 2018)—an achievement that all of us involved in the RMG industry should be justifiably proud of.

Now, however, is not a time for us to rest on our laurels. With the nation gearing up for elevation from the Least Developed Country (LDC) status to that of the Developing Country in its 50th anniversary year, now is the time for us to consider what steps need to be taken to ensure the continuing success and longevity of the RMG sector.

The mass-volume business model that our RMG industry was both based on and thrived on, since its establishment, is slowly becoming a thing of the past. As the "Ten Trends for the Fashion Industry to Watch in 2019"

report, issued by McKinsey & Company in January 2019, noted: "Automation and data analytics have enabled a new breed of start-ups to achieve agile made-to-order production. Mass players will begin to experiment next, responding more rapidly to trends and consumer demands, achieving just-in-time production and reducing overstock and making short, small-batch production cycles the new norm."

This poses an undeniable threat to an industry such as our RMG sector, which is finely tuned to service the needs of the mass volume and the commodity apparel market which, in itself, will soon be unrecognisable from its current format. Retailers and brands in Bangladesh's core

percent of all final goods consumed. With a rapidly expanding middle class with the ability to flex their purchasing muscle and a desire to express their own taste through fashion, the Chinese market is one that Bangladesh can look to develop.

The rise in fortunes of India is another case in point. "The Indian middle class is forecast to expand at 19.4 percent a year" between 2018 and 2022, according to the same McKinsey & Company, with India "set to move from being an increasingly important sourcing hub to being one of the most attractive consumer markets outside the Western world."

Again, the growth of the Indian market and the booming middle classes offer alternative business opportunities for

the resale market, for instance, could be bigger than fast fashion within ten years."

This zeitgeist in consumer attitudes was echoed by an article in the UK's *Guardian* newspaper, which noted that: "Even cleaning and mending services appear to be in vogue. Earlier this month (December 2018), H&M brought its free mending service to the UK, making it a key part of a store revamp in Hammersmith."

Alongside this, garment recycling is also becoming mainstream, with mass market retailer Primark set to launch a clothing take-back scheme in 2019, joining similar efforts by companies including M&S and H&M that have been in operation for several years.

With this changing customer demand in mind, retailers are no longer content with just setting up a few racks of "eco-clothing" within their store but are re-evaluating their entire product offer and investigating ways to make it more sustainable. This is not something that Bangladesh's RMG industry needs to fear; developments in the sector over the last five years have seen the industry grow into one of the safest, compliant and eco-friendly apparel sectors in the world.

Indeed, these changing market conditions can be seen as an opportunity for the sector as, with the decline in China's powers as an apparel resource, Bangladesh along with Ethiopia, Myanmar and Vietnam emerged as the top countries that executive respondents to the McKinsey & Company report expect to increase sourcing from.

The key to taking advantage of this situation will be to embrace the change in customer demands and adapt to the smaller-volume production runs and improved speed to market through investment in the appropriate technology. The apparel value chain seems destined to be moving to a high-tech, fast-moving future and we, as an industry, need to be prepared.

Where do we go from here? What does the future hold? These are questions that we don't have a definitive answer to, but given our resilience as a nation and as an industry, I am convinced that collectively we can find the key to enable the ongoing growth and success of the RMG sector and our nation as a whole.

Mostafiz Uddin is the Managing Director of Denim Expert Limited. He is also the Founder and CEO of Bangladesh Denim Expo and Bangladesh Apparel Exchange (BAE). Email: mostafiz@denimexpert.com.



SOURCE: PERFECTSOURCING.NET

markets of the USA and the EU are facing challenging and changing marketing conditions and the backlash from these will soon be fully felt by any apparel suppliers to those customers, not only in Bangladesh but globally.

Now is the time for Bangladesh's RMG industry to consider emerging markets and, as the nation gains the Developing Country status, to explore the potential for developing the apparel business domestically.

China, for example, once considered "the factory of the world", is now recognised as the world's fastest growing consumer market, accounting for 18

Bangladesh's RMG sector, away from our traditional markets.

The current state of the apparel market in Bangladesh's key export areas of the USA, EU and the United Kingdom is well-documented, but of no less importance is the shift in consumer awareness, demand for sustainable fashion product, the burgeoning growth of the circular fashion economy, and novel ways of accessing fashion product.

As the report from McKinsey & Company states: "The shift to new ownership models is driven by growing consumer desire for variety, sustainability and affordability and sources suggest that

The US is making a historic mistake once again in Afghanistan

HIZBULLAH KHAN

IN the late 1980s, without ending the war, foreign troops withdrew from Afghanistan, which prolonged the conflict for three decades. Similarly, US President Donald Trump is now keen to fulfil a 2016 campaign promise to pull out the remaining 13,000 US troops from Afghanistan before the 2020 election. The current religious militancy in the country is not much different from the 1980s; the consequences of withdrawal would be similar too.

Afghanistan's communist government that came into power in 1978 under the presidency of Nur Muhammad Taraki,

However, Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev decided to end the occupation of Afghanistan when he became General Secretary of its governing Communist Party in March 1985, and later urged Afghan officials to settle the issues with the conflicted groups. Finally, Afghan President Dr Najibullah announced a National Reconciliation Policy in 1987, invited the leadership of the Mujahideen, and offered to make them autonomous rulers and remove Soviet troops from their territories if they made peace. However, the opposition leaders rejected the government's proposal and pledged to continue the jihad till the complete withdrawal of Soviet troops and the end

the Mujahideen's continued war, the government collapsed in 1992. Afghans lost the opportunity of peace.

After that, the various Mujahideen factions fought against one another across Afghanistan for gaining government and key posts; consequently, the insurgency transformed into a civil war.

Around, 10,000 individuals were killed in 1993 alone. Amidst the chaos of civil war, the Taliban emerged in 1994 with the help of regional powers, overthrew the Mujahideen government and captured Kabul, which ultimately prompted the 9/11 attacks.

After the 9/11 incident, hopes of peace increased among Afghans when the

US also failed to change its early military victory into a political victory in the last 18 years and fought the longest war in its history.

The attention of the US diverted from Afghanistan in 2003 when its forces invaded Iraq, which then became the key US concern. In May 2003, Donald Rumsfeld, the US defence secretary, claimed that most of Afghanistan was secure and announced an end to "major combat activity"; he also set a timeline for troop withdrawal: within the next twelve months.

The statement paved the way for the return of the Taliban. After resuming attacks on US bases and government buildings shortly after the Rumsfeld proclamation, the Taliban realised that the US was tired of war.

Last year, the US started peace talks with the Taliban after 17 years of war. Fatalities in Afghanistan, as of October 2018, stood at about 147,000, between 2001 and 2018.

Currently, the Taliban is celebrating their triumph and believe that the Muslims of Afghanistan have defeated three superpowers in the past two centuries: Great Britain in the 1920s, Soviet Union in the 1980s and now the US, which the Taliban thinks is on the verge of defeat.

The Taliban increased attacks immediately after they pledged to the "roadmap for peace" in Afghanistan to avoid threats, and say they will continue fighting against the Afghan government after the deal with the US to seize power. Now, their strategy appears to have convinced the US to accelerate withdrawal of troops, and then attempt to overthrow the government.

In these circumstances, instead of strengthening focus on Afghanistan, Trump looks desperate to fulfil his campaign pledge and has told his five advisers that he wants to pull all US troops out of Afghanistan before the November 2020 presidential election. The withdrawal of troops maybe advantageous for Trump's next election campaign, but it will usher in another phase of civil war, like the one that the Afghans saw after the Soviet Union pulled out its troops decades back.

The US should be cautious about the insurgents' motives behind ending America's longest war. It will be a historical mistake committed by the US if it withdraws troops without a permanent resolution to the problems.

Hizbullah Khan is a Pakistani journalist and political analyst. He writes about South Asian political and security issues.



US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo (left) is greeted by President Ashraf Ghani in Kabul on June 25.

PHOTO: JACQUELYN MARTIN/AFP

had close ties with the Soviet Union and soon after taking the reins of the country introduced social reforms. The reforms incensed the hardline Muslims and anti-communist population and turned them against the government, which finally triggered the Mujahideen insurgency.

In late December 1979, the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan with 30,000 troops to protect the newly-established pro-Soviet government and its interests. The soldiers quickly took control of the major cities and highways. On the other hand, the Mujahideen, which was also supported by certain foreign powers to counter Soviet communism, started fighting against the Soviet forces. Violence escalated manifold, and in the vicious nine-year war, around one million civilians were killed.

of the communist regime.

At last, in 1988 the Geneva Accords were signed by Afghanistan, Pakistan, the United States, and the Soviet Union for the settlement of Afghanistan and the withdrawal of Soviet troops.

The reconciliation plan failed due to the earlier announcement of the withdrawal of troops by the Soviet Union, which gave the Mujahideen no reason to make peace. The fighters realised that they had defeated the superpower, and hoped the Kabul government would fall instantly after the withdrawal of foreign troops.

As the Soviet left Afghanistan, the US also lost its interest in the country without installing its nominee in Kabul and ending the jihad. Owing to

US and its allies invaded Afghanistan, toppling the Taliban with the cooperation of the Northern Alliance within three months. However, a few weeks later, when the Bonn conference was held in Germany in December 2001, for peace and Afghanistan's future, the Taliban was not included. The then US Ambassador to Kabul, Ryan Crocker had previously declared that there was no place for the Taliban in Bonn. Though the "losers" of war, the Taliban were ready for dialogue; but the Bonn Conference brought together just the "winner" of the war.

Underestimating the strength of insurgents and their attachment with the regional powers was a mistake of the US. The Afghans did not only miss the opportunity for peace once again, but the

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

A world without terrorism

Considering what has been happening in many parts of the world in the recent past in terms of terror bombings, there seems to be no end to the scourge of terrorism. Against this backdrop, strong political measures and well-planned strategies are needed to tackle the different terror outfits operating around the world.

In the meanwhile, it has been reported that peace talks have been ongoing between the US and the Taliban. Hopefully this development will bear fruit.

Any attempt at subverting the peace process should be stopped. America has played a good role in this direction and has a big role to play in returning peace to Afghanistan.

P Senthil Saravana Durai, Mumbai



PHOTO: KARIM JAAFAR/AFP

Taliban officials attend peace talks in Doha, Qatar.