

## Govt should firmly implement transport act

### Such wildcat strikes are unacceptable

IT is most unfortunate that the transport workers in nine districts of the country have called a strike demanding amendments in some sections of the Road Transport Act-2018. Although the new transport act came into effect on November 1, it could not be enforced because of lack of preparation from the government side and also because the owners and workers had wanted some time to obtain the legal papers for their vehicles. Now that the law finally has become effective, from November 18, more than 13 months after it was passed in the parliament, the workers in a few districts have again called a strike, causing immense sufferings to the people.

What we do not understand is why the transport workers have had to call a strike in the first place when the new law was finalised keeping in consideration the demands of the workers and the owners. The current law has been watered down quite a bit because of opposition from them. Even so, the transport workers have been going on with their unrealistic strike, demanding that all offences be made "bailable." In the new law, only one offence has been made non-bailable: the "offence" of killing someone deliberately through reckless driving. The transport workers' demand to make this offence bailable only goes to show their disregard for the rule of law.

Apparently, calling a strike at the drop of a hat has become a regular practice for the transport workers. Whenever there was any initiative from the government to implement the new act, transport workers went on strike holding the public hostage; whenever the court gave any verdict over any case filed in connection with road accidents, they have gone on strike. Does this mean that the transport workers are above the law? Does this mean that the new transport act cannot be implemented?

The Road Transport and Bridges Minister, Obaidul Quader, said: "We have to enforce the law ignoring the pressure we face, because the act was passed by parliament." Therefore, we expect that no amount of pressure from the workers and owners will stop the government from implementing the law aimed at making roads safer. Although the strike was called only in a few districts, it has caused huge sufferings to the commuters. The government must be firm and not tolerate such strikes that severely disrupt public life.

## Sanitation workers lead lives of misery

### No protection for high-risk job

SANITATION workers in Bangladesh do a job no one else wants yet one that is essential for public health. They are ostracised by society and work under extremely hazardous conditions that can end in death all too often. A report published last week by the World Health Organisation (WHO) titled "Health, Safety and Dignity of Sanitation Workers – An Initial Assessment" tells us that local sanitation workers are lacking in job skills, basic education, and more often than not, inherit the profession from their parents. While significant progress has been made in the overall sanitation situation in Bangladesh, these workers are looked at with disdain by other people, and yet, they fulfil an essential function in keeping our sewage lines functioning.

They are employed by subcontractors and work as sewer cleaners, where they dive into the pools of human waste without any protective gear. The buildup of methane gas and other poisonous fumes often end in loss of consciousness in the best-case scenario and death in the worst. Though sanitation work is touted as a formal job, the reality is that these sanitation workers do not enjoy any legal protection whatsoever as they are mostly employed on a contractual basis and hence are not secured by labour laws. So, in case of any injury resulting from the work they do, they are not eligible for any compensation.

Prolonged exposure to toxic fumes results in physical and medical issues. These include from the mild—headaches, dizziness, fever—to the more serious conditions like, cholera, gastroenteritis, hepatitis, polio, etc. Seldom do we wonder how our garbage and liquid waste are taken care of. The workers keeping the city clean deserve to be recognised. Without them, no urban centre would be liveable and it is time to take cognizance of their service to the city by giving them due credit and formalising their services as city corporation workers with proper benefits.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### Commodity prices keep rising

For more than a month, high onion price has caused all sorts of problems for the people. Government officials, instead of doing their jobs, have been making all sorts of excuses, taking failed initiatives and joking that people should just make do without onions.

Now they say price will finally go down. But meanwhile, rice price is now rising. In some places, the price of a sack of rice has gone up by hundreds of takas.

Right after the huge debacle with the onion price, the fact that rice prices are now soaring out of control shows how badly the government has failed to ensure price stability in the market that is so essential for all citizens, the ordinary people in particular.

Without taking the blame away from unscrupulous traders, one cannot help but blame the government for its lack of market monitoring. How are fixed income families supposed to cope with the rise of one commodity after another? Do government officials even bother to ask themselves that question?

It is time for government officials to stop making insensitive comments about the suffering of consumers and actively do their jobs.

Abul Hamid, Badda



**A CLOSER LOOK**  
TASNEEM TAYER

MOSQUITOS have become our closest companions, staying by us every hour of the day, waking us up with their love bites and lulling us to sleep with the ever-familiar hum of their buzzing wings. And now that the dengue season is past us and our pesky friends are no longer disease vectors, there would seem to be no malice to this companionship, nothing worse than an itch at least. Or is there?

As it turns out, a mosquito bite—of the *Aedes Aegypti* or the *Aedes Albopictus*—can infect one with the viral disease even in the deep of winter. There is no longer a dengue season and a non-dengue season; there are just peak and off-peak dengue seasons.

Dengue is no longer an epidemic. It is now an endemic: ever present, throughout the year.

Curiously, the anti-mosquito drive over the country has seemed to have slowed down. With the onset of winter and departure of the peak dengue season, it seems complacency has crept in, allowing for mosquitos to breed again freely. This has resulted in people still getting admitted to hospitals and some succumbing to the disease. Between November 1 and 17 this year, 2,683 people have been infected with the dengue virus, as mentioned in an update by the Institute of Epidemiology Disease Control and Research (IEDCR). According to a press release by the Health Emergency Operation Centre and Control Room at the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS) issued on November 18, 608 dengue virus infected patients were receiving treatment in various government and private hospitals in the country.

"Given the right conditions, *Aedes* mosquitoes can breed even in winter, as late as January or even February," said Professor Mahmudur Rahman, former director of IEDCR. And they can breed in any fresh-water storage sites, including in water containers. "It is essential to clean our water storage containers in order to make sure that mosquitoes do not breed there," Professor Rahman further added. So, while the concerned authorities need to persistently continue the drive against mosquitoes round the year, we as responsible citizens must also work all

through the year to keep our houses and surroundings clean.

Another factor that is affecting the increase in the number of mosquitoes is the return of the *Culex* mosquitoes. *Culex* are a common mosquito type that emerge in winter and pester us all though the cold months. The problem is the difference in the breeding nature of the *Aedes* and *Culex*. While the former breeds in fresh water, the latter breeds in polluted, stagnated water.

Drains, polluted lakes and ponds, and other dirty water bodies are the ideal breeding grounds for *Culex*, which means the authorities have to fight mosquitoes at two different fronts: cover both fresh and polluted water bodies in their anti-mosquito drives.



To combat *Culex*, while the authorities concerned can apply larvicide agents to the breeding grounds, they also need to make sure that the drains are running and dirty water is not stagnated unnecessarily, recommends Kabirul Bashar, a professor of entomology at Jahangirnagar University.

And while *Culex* is a menace, they are less of a threat than the *Aedes*. While only one single bite of an infected *Aedes* can infect a person with the dengue virus, it will take almost 10,000 bites of infected *Culex* mosquitoes to infect a person with filaria, for instance.

What is even more alarming is that having sexual intercourse with a dengue

virus infected person can also transmit the disease. Yes, you have read it right, dengue is also potentially a sexually transmitted disease (STD). How come? Dengue belongs to the group of a virus called the Flavivirus, which can be transmitted through sexual contact. Another mosquito borne disease, Zika, which is known to be transmitted sexually as well, also belongs to the same Flavivirus family that causes Hepatitis.

One case of sexually transmitted dengue has been confirmed in Spain; while another likely case in North Korea has been reported. But not a single case of sexually transmitted dengue has been identified in Bangladesh. Does this mean that in Bangladesh the disease is not transmitted sexually? This is one tricky

importance of conducting research on the STD dimension of dengue, in order to be able to explore the depth of the problem.

Dengue might also be transmitted through breastmilk of infected mothers to nursing babies. Since that possibility remains, it is essential to study these aspects of dengue transmission further for better understanding of the scenario. Apart from these, dengue virus can also be transmitted through blood and organ transfusion.

Professor Bashar suggests that usually doctors make patients aware that dengue virus can be transmitted through sexual contact and advises caution. However, it is important to raise public awareness about this issue. The government can come up with awareness campaigns through which it will inform people that dengue virus transmission is not confined to mosquito bites alone, that dengue can be transmitted through sexual intercourse, passed through breastmilk and transmitted through blood and organ transfusion.

The concerned authorities can also consider including these aspects of dengue in their dengue clinical management guideline. Generating awareness and addressing these issues directly will only lead to better management of the disease and stricter control of its spread.

With regard to anti-mosquito drives, Professor Rahman suggests exploring newer ways of controlling them, including using *Wolbachia*—a natural bacteria present in almost 60 percent of insects, including certain breeds of mosquito. World Mosquito Programme's research suggests that introducing *Wolbachia* to *Aedes Aegypti* mosquitoes can reduce the transmission of the viruses they carry. Why this method has not been tried yet remains a mystery though.

It is high time the concerned authorities rolled up their sleeves to expedite the anti-mosquito drives across the country and looked for more effective ways of fighting these menacing mosquitoes. Inaction and tragic myopia by the concerned authorities had already plunged the country into a dengue-induced chaos earlier this year. A repetition of this would not only be highly undesirable, but would also expose our inability to learn from past mistakes.

An inability in which we will all be culpable.

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# Are educational institutions failing the RMG industry?

SHAHIDUR RAHMAN

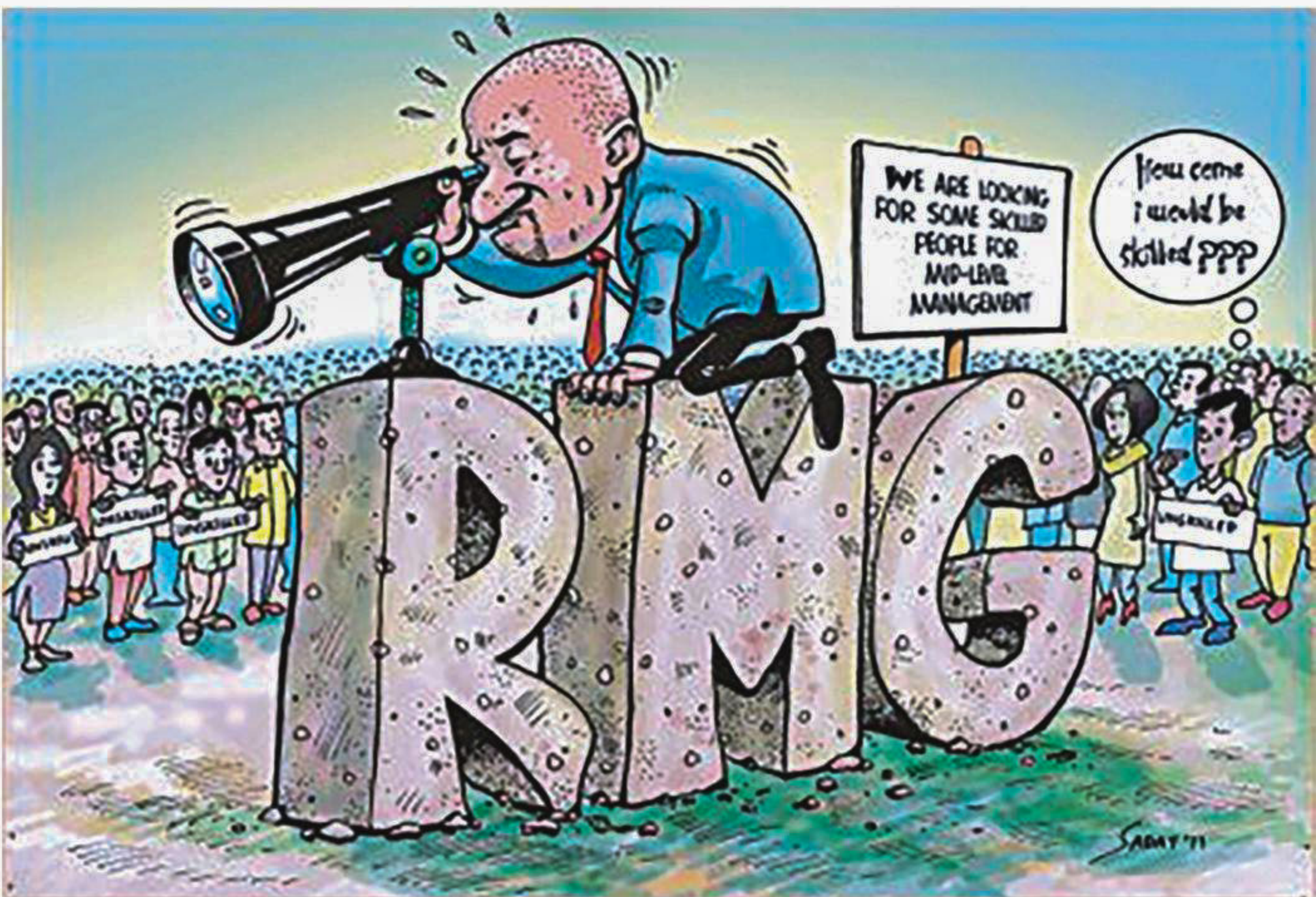
THE Bangladesh ready-made garment (RMG) industry started its journey in 1978 and 41 years later, we are still heavily dependent on imported skills at the management level. The whole education sector has failed for not taking this problem seriously. It seems foreigners are keener to study our garments sector than us.

In one of my research projects, students of Kennesaw State University in the US do Skype classes with my students to understand the Bangladesh garment industry. They have designed the course in light of our garments industry; but we don't offer any courses on our own garments industry in most of the universities. Our educational institutions are not creating enough skilled management level people for the RMG sector.

Out of 126 universities (46 public and 80 private) there are two universities in the country—BGMEA University of Fashion and Technology (BUFT) and Bangladesh University of Textiles (BUTEX)—that have been established for the garments and textiles industry specifically. Among private universities, BUFT is ranked 25th and BUTEX 9th among public universities. Although they are not the leading universities in the country, so far, they have been doing a commendable job of producing graduates who have the skills necessary for the industry. For example, Ms Shwapna Bhowmick graduated from BUFT, and is now the Country Manager of Marks & Spencer in Bangladesh. But obviously it is insufficient considering the volume and growth of the industry in the country.

In other universities, there are some degrees such as textile and industrial engineering that also fulfil the demands of the sector. Although there are close to a hundred private universities in the country, only a handful of them offer industrial engineering. Most universities do not offer courses like industrial relations, labour management, occupational health and safety. Even leading private universities do not have a centre on Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR).

The grooming of students to become smart merchandisers who can negotiate with buyers is also missing in our curriculum. Courses should be designed in a way that connects classrooms with industries. To ensure the structural safety of factory buildings, we have an adequate number of civil engineers, but the contribution of private universities in this field is minimal. The era of complacency is over, RMG is about to face challenges from automation and competition, and



the industry is not ready.

Different organisations are currently working closely with entrepreneurs to fill this knowledge gap. Here are some examples of how the capacity building programme of garments and textiles have been connected with the factory management. The IFC's (International Finance Corporation) PaCT (Partnership for Cleaner Textile) to address high water, energy, and chemical use; ILO's Better Work programme emphasising on working conditions; Palladium International's Sudokkho to produce skilled workers; BSR's (Business for Social Responsibility) health project; Alborg University's Master's degree in Risk and Safety Management. The list of examples could be longer, but the point is that there should be more courses offered in leading private universities that are directly linked with the garments industry. Doing research on this field is not enough, we need to generate a good number of quality graduates with expertise on the garments and textiles industry.

Producing high skilled workers for the RMG industry will also contribute to the economy by reducing the amount of foreign remittance that leaves the country.

Around 13 percent of the country's garments factories have employed foreign experts in the top posts who remit over USD 5 billion from Bangladesh every year (CPD 2018). In the absence of a skilled workforce, particularly in merchandising, design and marketing, as well as in operation of sophisticated machines, the factory owners have hired experts from China, Taiwan, Japan, India and Pakistan to fill the gap. There is no harm in embracing the knowledge of foreign workers. But it is also a matter of frustration that we have failed to supply the domestic resources to occupy these positions.

It's not that we have a dearth of talent. For the first time, H&M, purchasing about Tk 25,500 crore worth of garments from Bangladesh every year, has appointed a Bangladeshi citizen as the Regional Head of Bangladesh, Pakistan and Ethiopia (November 9, *Prothom Alo*). According to him, foreign workers are mainly required in product development carried out in the R&D (Research and Development) department. That indicates that the other job positions would be occupied by the domestic workforce if they were nurtured well by different universities focusing on

the demand of the garments industry.

The BGMEA and BKMEA also should extend their hands to showcase the skills they are expecting from the education industry. BRAC University organised a National Career Fair recently creating an opportunity to bridge the gap between the leading companies and the graduates. I was saddened to find the presence of garments companies in this fair to be unimpressive.

According to the Mckinsey Report 2019, Bangladesh is still seen as the most attractive destination country for buyers, but the gap it has with Vietnam is closing. It is not an exaggeration to say that the garments entrepreneurs have single-handedly placed the garments and textiles industry on the global map. How high are the expectations that our entrepreneurs have from the education industry, and how badly are we failing? We believe that if we stay afloat, business will follow—I am afraid those days are gone. It is time to address the issue at earnest. "Business-as-usual" won't take the industry much further from here on.

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