

A welcome move by UNHCR

Bhashan Char comes under the purview of UN assistance

WE welcome the signing of an MOU between the government of Bangladesh and the UNHCR that paves the way for the world body to provide all kinds of assistance to the Rohingyas relocated to Bhashan Char, in the same manner that it has been assisting the Rohingyas living in Cox's Bazar. The support covers key areas such as protection, education, skills training, livelihoods, and health, which will help the refugees lead a decent life and prepare better for their eventual return to Myanmar.

The signing of the agreement signals the removal of all reservations the UN might have had about the government's decision to relocate around 100,000 refugees to the island. Hopefully, this has also laid to rest any misgivings about Bhashan Char.

While we understand the reason for the resistance of some international organisations and aid agencies to the relocation—particularly because of the area's supposed vulnerability to storm and tidal surge—we, nonetheless, hope that the international community appreciates our position and, indeed, the compulsions that necessitated shifting a portion of the refugees from Cox's Bazar.

As of December 2020, there are nearly 900,000 Rohingya refugees living in 34 camps in the district of Cox's Bazar. The presence of such a large population of refugees has had the most devastating impact on the ecology of that area, apart from creating social unrest there. One should not also overlook the serious security implications that the addition of such a large number of people entails. Although only about 20 percent of the projected 100,000 Rohingyas have been transferred to Bhashan Char, the transfer of the rest, in phases, will hopefully be completed soon.

While the rearrangement is appreciated, we would hope that Bhashan Char does not send the wrong signal to the international community or the military junta in Myanmar. The relocation, we must emphasise, is a temporary expedient—to reduce the inordinate pressure on Cox's Bazar. The ultimate objective is the repatriation of the refugees to the land of their birth, their homeland, with full dignity and honour and their rights as citizens of Myanmar restored. The UN and the major nations must intensify their efforts to ensure that the Myanmar government takes back their citizens. We hope that this happens soon. But till such time as the refugees return home, there should be no let-up in the efforts of the international community to ensure that the refugees enjoy a humane existence in the camps.

Where is the justice for Kanchon Mia?

Police and factory authorities must be held accountable for the RMG worker's plight

WHAT are the consequences of workers' protests in Bangladesh? In any developed society, one would expect protests to be a tool to hold higher powers to account, rather than an excuse to punish the protesters. However, for RMG worker Kanchon Mia, who has been fighting for his life for the past five months, the cost of his protest has been his health and his income, as he potentially faces a lifetime of disability.

On May 10 this year, workers of an RMG factory owned by the conglomerate Ha-Meem Group took to the streets to demand Eid holidays. Instead of meeting their perfectly legitimate demands, law enforcement was called in, and it is now evident that the police used disproportionate force. Kanchon—one of 12 workers who were injured that day—was shot with pellet guns at point blank range. Later, some 101 pellets were removed from his intestines. A large part of his intestines and lower abdomen had to be removed. Now he needs gut reconstruction surgery, but doctors are hesitant to operate due to his severely malnourished condition. The only breadwinner of his seven-member family, Kanchon will not be able to do any strenuous work for the rest of his life.

The culpability of the police and Kanchon's employers cannot be swept under the rug here. The commissioner of Gazipur Metropolitan Police commented that they "never fire shots without provocation," adding that the provocation in question was "blocking the highway." In a just and democratic society, does it sound fair that the act of blocking a road should cost a worker his intestines, his lower abdomen, his ability to work, and the quality of his life? And why would one of the largest clothing manufacturers in the country deny their workers Eid holidays, and call in law enforcement to take such heavy-handed actions against them?

Kanchon and his family allege that the Ha-Meem Group only paid around half the costs of his initial surgery and treatment, and then began to ignore their calls. When contacted by *The Daily Star*, the business group blamed it on miscommunication, and promised to pay for his treatment and provide his salary until he was fit to return to work (or arrange compensation if he was not).

While this sounds good on paper, it does not explain why Kanchon's wife has had to sell their last belongings to support his treatment, and is now struggling to pay for their children's education. Labour rights activists have argued that Kanchon should receive at least Tk 50 lakh to Tk 1 crore as compensation, given that he has been incapacitated for the rest of his life. We call on the authorities concerned to not only ensure that Kanchon receives fair compensation for the irreparable losses he has suffered, but that he also receives justice for the crimes committed against him. If our law enforcement agencies are not held accountable for their actions—especially when using disproportionate force—it will only enhance their impunity and lead to further violations of set practices, and of the law itself.

A Nobel boost for fearless and independent journalism



KAMAL AHMED

MARIA Ressa of the Philippines and Dmitry Muratov of Russia have won the Nobel Peace Prize for their relentless struggle to protect freedom of expression.

Announcing the award, Norwegian Nobel Committee Chair Berit Reiss-Andersen said the duo were receiving the prize for their courageous fight for freedom of expression in the Philippines and Russia. "The committee considered Ressa and Muratov to be representatives of all journalists who stand up for this ideal in a world in which democracy and freedom of the press face increasingly adverse conditions," she added. The recognition of the struggle for freedom of expression and independent journalism in Andersen's speech is also a source of joy and inspiration for us, because we, too, are part of that long struggle.

The Nobel Committee, in its announcement, noted that "free, independent and fact-based journalism serves to protect against abuse of power, lies and war propaganda." Justifying its awarding decision, it said, "The committee is convinced that freedom of expression and freedom of information help to ensure an informed public. These rights are crucial prerequisites for democracy and protect against war and conflict."

In addition to independent journalism, the issues that have inevitably surfaced with the awards of Maria Ressa and Dmitry Muratov are no less important. First, both the countries of the award-winning duo have been under authoritarian rule for quite some time, and there have been reports of serious violations of basic human rights—including violence, illegal detentions, enforced disappearances, and killings. In the case of the Philippines, the committee cited the unusually high death toll of President Rodrigo Duterte's anti-drug campaign as "the equivalent of a war against the country's own people," and called Maria Ressa a "fearless defender" of the freedom of expression. Ressa and the investigative online portal she co-founded, the Rappler, have also documented how social media is being used to spread fake news, harass opponents, and manipulate public discourse.

Similarly, in Russia, Dmitry Muratov, in his newspaper *Novaya Gazeta*, highlighted corruption, police violence, illegal arrests, electoral fraud, and the Russian military's troll factories for harassing and intimidating opponents via social media. Due to these works, the newspaper has been subjected to various forms of harassment, threats, and violence. Since the newspaper's inception, six of its journalists have been killed, including Anna Politkovskaya, who was killed for writing about the Chechen war. Despite all the violence and threats, Dmitry Muratov has allowed his journalists to practise independent and objective journalism.

A few hours after the winners were named, I heard Muratov's friend Mikhail

rise of Nazism. And the awarding speech given by the then Nobel Committee Chairman Frederik Stang showed greater emphasis on his pacifist role than on his journalism. The German journalist was a former soldier, and war transformed him into a pacifist who became the secretary of the German Peace Society. In that sense, Maria Ressa and Dmitry Muratov have won the award for the first time for fighting for press freedom, and through that strengthening democracy and building peace.

There is no doubt that there are transnational organisations working for the protection and promotion of journalism, and journalists are feeling enormous pride for this award

award came at a time when journalists are facing unprecedented attacks, digital surveillance, and a decline of public trust in journalism. CPJ Executive Director Joel Simon said Ressa and Muratov symbolised the freedom of the press and why it was needed. They have continued to defy censorship and harassment in the face of personal threats, and have led others to do the same. And their reactions following the awards certainly indicate that they will continue to lead the struggle for press freedom beyond borders by setting examples.

The Philippines and Russia are at the forefront of countries where journalists have been killed with impunity. Statistics compiled by the CPJ shows that since 1992, a total of 87 journalists have been killed in the Philippines, and 58 in Russia. During the same period, the number of journalists killed worldwide was 1,416. The same CPJ statistics named 23 journalists killed in Bangladesh during the same period. However, our ranking in the World Press Freedom Index, prepared by RSF in conjunction with Unesco, is lower than that of the Philippines and Russia: out of 180 countries, our position is 152, while Russia stands at 150 and the Philippines at 138. The global think tanks (including Freedom House) that survey the state of democracy and human rights regrettably portray us poorly, too.

In 2018, the Time Magazine named a few journalists in "The Guardians and the War on Truth" as part of its annual naming of the Person of the Year. Among them were the murdered Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi, Maria Ressa of the Philippines, Wa Lone and Kyaw Soe of Myanmar, and Shahidul Alam of Bangladesh. There are many more like Shahidul Alam who have been victims of harassment, intimidation, and torture. Enforced disappearances for some period, arbitrary detentions, and harassment of journalists under the Digital Security Act (DSA) are on the rise. There is an unending struggle to defy invisible and unofficial prohibitions and censors, ignoring the fear of threats and harassment.

Maria Ressa received the Nobel Peace Prize with Dmitry Muratov for persistent defiance of all forms of censorship as editors. It remains to be seen how much our editors and news rooms are inspired and enlivened by the recognition of the courage in journalism.

Kamal Ahmed is an independent journalist. His Twitter handle is @ahmedka1



Maria Ressa and Dmitry Muratov's Nobel Prize win is a vindication for all journalists who are pursuing objective journalism in the face of growing adversities.



PHOTO: REUTERS

Zygar, editor of the only independent TV channel in Russia, TV Rain, telling BBC Radio 4 that his friend had told him that the Nobel Peace Prize had actually been won by six of his slain colleagues. On Saturday, journalist-novelist Mashiul Alam shared a picture of Muratov's quote printed in the *Novaya Gazeta*, which reads, "Igor Domnikov, Yuri Shchekochikhin, Anna Politkovskaya, Stanislav Markelov, Anastasia Baburova, Natasha Estemirova—are the people who won (the) Nobel prize."

In the history of the Nobel Peace Prize, the only other journalist who received this award was Carl von Ossietzky, and it was 86 years ago. That, too, was amid the

due to professional fraternity. It also rejuvenates all of us who are working in the news media, as reflected in the statement issued by the International Press Institute (IPI), which said the award was a source of encouragement to journalism. Another organisation named Reporters Without Borders (RSF) said, "They represent all those who work with courage and determination for news and information that is reliable, and freely and independently reported, in a world in which democracy and press freedom are increasingly undermined by the spread of fake news and hate speech." The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), a New York-based organisation, said the

A case for green transition in our apparel sector



FAHMIDA KHATUN

IN today's world, business is not only about profit, employment, income, and growth. Hence, it is not only about economic sustainability—it is also about social and environmental sustainability.

In the run-up to the 26th session of the Conference of Parties (COP26) of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the green transition of all economic activities has gained more momentum. Several global leaders have reiterated their commitment to reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, and set ambitious targets to reach net-zero levels of emissions in an attempt to keep the global temperature rise within 1.5 degree Celsius. The private sector, including large businesses, has also made a commitment to reduce carbon emissions and set timelines to become carbon neutral.

One may refer to the findings of a McKinsey report in 2018, which indicated that the global fashion industry emitted about 2.1 billion metric tonnes of GHG—which is equivalent to about four percent of total global GHG emission. The fashion industry has to reduce its GHG emissions by 1.1 billion metric tonnes of carbon equivalent by 2030. Unfortunately, at the current trajectory of its GHG emission, the targets of 2030 will not be met.

Bangladesh is a small player in the global fashion industry. In fact, Bangladesh's national contribution to global GHG emission is 0.45 percent. However, despite its negligible GHG emission, Bangladesh has to play its part and make efforts towards the green transition of its economy, including the ready-made garment (RMG) sector. Producers, buyers and consumers worldwide are more aware of climate and environmental issues than ever before. Hence, sustainability has become a core agenda among brands. Many high-end brands have also started using recycled fabrics. Over 40 brands have committed to cut their GHG emission by 30 percent within 2030.

The RMG sector is not only human resource-intensive, but also natural resource-intensive, at every stage of the life cycle. The sector generates large

amounts of waste—it requires volumes of clean freshwater for washing, dyeing, and finishing (WDF) of textiles. The textile sector is also energy-intensive. For WDF-related activities, hot water and steam have to be generated, which contributes to GHG emission. Besides, a number of harmful chemicals—including nitrous oxides, sulphur dioxides, carbon monoxide, and chlorine dioxide—are also released from factories through various activities. Therefore, the environmentally

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sustainable production process in the RMG sector involves waste management, water conservation, and energy efficiency.

The government of Bangladesh is committed to achieving higher economic growth in an environment-friendly manner, and will work to reduce the impacts of climate change. Its medium- and long-term plans, such as the eighth five-year plan and the Bangladesh Delta Plan 2100, have spelt out strategies and action plans in that direction. Among others, monitoring and controlling pollution, higher investment in industrial effluent treatment plants, and the adoption of cleaner technologies for economic activities are among the few important promises of the government.

In the recent past, Bangladesh's RMG sector took a number of initiatives towards a green and sustainable industry. The Bangladesh Garments Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) signed the United Nations Fashion Industry Charter for Climate Action in 2019 with the UNFCCC for reducing GHG emissions by 30 percent by 2030. It also entered into partnership with a number of international organisations to

promote environmental sustainability. One of its pledges to be a part of the "Green Button Initiative" of the government of Germany is a state-owned seal on environmental sustainability.

Bangladesh has 148 Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) green garment factories, certified by the US Green Building Council. Nine out of the world's top 10 green RMG factories are located in Bangladesh. Also, 40 out of the top 100 green industrial projects in the world are situated in Bangladesh. More than 500 factories are in the pipeline to achieve the green factory status. It must be noted that in a highly cost-competitive environment, it is a challenge to be LEED-certified companies that are designed and built in a way to use less energy and water, have good indoor air quality, and improve the quality of life. These standards are much above the national requirements and are also expensive. Also, RMG factories have entered the Partnership for Cleaner Textile (PaCT) programme of the International Finance Corporation (IFC), which aims to lower environmental impact and resource consumption in the sector. Factories under PaCT have adopted cleaner production practices, which have helped reduce their GHG emissions.

The RMG sector is one of the major driving forces of the Bangladesh economy. It is the source of employment and income for about four million workers, the majority of whom are women. It is a key source of foreign exchange income. Currently, about 81 percent of export income comes from this sector. Bangladesh is the second largest exporter of apparels in the world, following China. During the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, the sector faced challenges in terms of reduced exports due to the nationwide lockdown in an attempt to contain the spread of the coronavirus, and also cancellation and postponement of orders by a number of international buyers. However, as soon as the global markets started to open up, RMG exports started to pick up too. In recent months, the growth of RMG exports has been significant. In September 2021, RMG exports grew by 41.7 percent compared to the previous month.

During the last decade or so, the sector has worked towards improving various compliances in partnership with brands. As the country is going to graduate from the Least Developed Country (LDC) status by 2026, the compliance requirements on Bangladeshi exports will become more stringent. With higher commitments

of governments and private sectors and higher awareness of consumers around the world, social and environmental issues are taking the centre stage of production and consumption.

However, green economic transition also involves costs. To remain competitive in the global market, productivity enhancement and cost minimisation are needed. Some of the LEED factory owners are not happy, since they have not seen returns on their green investments in terms of higher revenues. There is a demand on buyers for higher prices of apparels for the supply chains to be climate neutral. Also, it will be difficult for many factories to be climate-positive through energy-efficient technologies because of the additional costs involved.

Therefore, technology transfer and finance are two major requirements for the green transition of the RMG sector in Bangladesh. Higher productivity and lesser wastage of resources through better technology can reduce cost. However, technological upgradation has to be associated with capacity development of workers as it may lead to displacement of unskilled workers—particularly female workers. Indeed, environmental compliance has to be coupled with social compliance. It has to ensure a decent living for its workers.

Catalysing green finance is crucial for green transformation of the RMG industry through environment-friendly technologies. Global sources such as the Green Climate Fund have been less effective as the disbursement process is slow. However, given the scale of requirements for a green path, green financing will have to be mobilised from multiple sources. Public resources can never fulfil the demand; private investment is more crucial. A blended finance package comprising grants, green loan guarantees, subsidised loans, and also support from buyers can de-risk environmental investment and catalyse private funds. Higher green investment in the RMG sector will not only make the RMG sector sustainable, but will also help achieve Bangladesh's commitments towards implementing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including two important SDGs: SDG 12 on responsible consumption and production, and SDG 13 on climate action. Hence, commitments for a green RMG sector are also commitments for intergenerational equity.

Fahmida Khatun is executive director at the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD).