

A dark day in our history

We must never allow a recurrence of the August 21 tragedy

AUGUST 21, 2004 is a day that will live in infamy, for on that day, a most terrible attempt was made not only to kill off the entire top brass of then-opposition Awami League, but also our democracy. And what is most terrifying is that the state itself became accessory to that. Despite the fact that mercenaries were used to throw the grenades, all relevant branches of the state collectively worked to save the criminals and divert attention away from the real culprits, as was later discovered. And this politicisation of the state apparatus, going as far as to turn it into an abettor of terrorist activities, has done immense damage to our democracy from which we have not yet recovered.

The main target of the grenade attack was no doubt the current prime minister, who then led the opposition camp. She herself said, on many occasions, that an attack of this magnitude could not have been carried out in broad daylight without the support of the government of the day. The destruction of evidence, lack of seriousness in investigating the tragedy, followed by political efforts to downplay it all indicate complicity of the then government. Even though Sheikh Hasina managed to survive the assassination attempt, more than 24 people were killed, and scores injured. It is incumbent upon the present government to ensure that they get the justice that has been denied to them for so long. Additionally, some of the details of the incident still remain murky to this day. It is extremely important that the truth is unearthed in its entirety, and for the people of this country to know exactly who were involved in that dreadful plot.

On the political front, the attack demonstrated a total disregard for democracy and constitutional politics. As a result, the two-party system – with power alternating between the AL and BNP – which could have been a blessing for the country was perhaps destroyed for good. The stakes of coming to power became a matter of life and death. And the will of the people started to get pushed further and further back.

It is for these reasons that we should take lessons from that day. Firstly, we must remain vigilant against such political assassinations, which also cost the country dearly in the past. The use of state apparatus to destroy one's political opposition must be shunned. The stakes of coming to power must never become a matter of survival. The institution of democracy should also be safeguarded through the voting of the people, not by politicising and abusing the state administration.

Tea workers deserve better wages

Proposed hike isn't proportional to current high living expenses

WE support the section of tea workers who vowed to continue their movement for a daily minimum wage of Tk 300 after trade unions called off their strike on Saturday afternoon, following government assurance that the daily wage would be raised from Tk 120 to Tk 145. The hike is a win more for tea garden managers than workers, who are justified in thinking that it is insufficient. A strike may be a disruptive practice from an economic point of view. But it remains the only way for the poor workers to get their message across to the authorities, who are seldom persuaded by quieter voices.

Reportedly, workers of about 166 tea estates, including those in Sylhet and Chattogram, enforced the strike since August 13. These people are among the poorest and most marginalised communities in Bangladesh. Yet, for eight days, they chose to abstain from work which, according to the chairperson of Bangladeshi Tea Sangsad (Sylhet), caused “huge losses”. In reality, the workers had to suffer a great deal more. They had to forgo wages for each day they were away from work. Each day spent in protesting made them poorer than the day before. It took enormous courage to still go on, and to still want to continue without the backing of trade unions, because, frankly, they have been pushed to the wall.

The proposed Tk 25 increase is clearly not proportional to the insanely high prices of daily essentials and other living expenses. It follows a historic pattern of exploitation in which workers are forced to serve their “masters” in exchange for a pittance. Although they are given some benefits in the form of housing, food rationing and primary healthcare, these facilities are not enough to complement their poor wages, nor does everyone have access to them. While talking to *The Daily Star*, workers described their miseries including uncertainty over job regularisation, shrinking scope for outside work, generational poverty, etc. As one expert has pointed out, the tea communities are also protectors of the 25 percent of our forest area, and thus merit special consideration.

We think tea workers need fair treatment more than special treatment, and it starts with determining a proper value for their work. And it is the government's responsibility to establish rules of fair trade for them and their employers, who must come out of their colonial mentality to exploit them. They should look at the additional cost of fair wages as part of a move to restructure the industry. Currently, Bangladesh is the 10th largest tea producer in the world, yet in 2020, it ranked 61st in tea exports. The sector clearly needs modernisation and diversification, and it needs motivated workers for that. We urge the authorities to use the present crisis as an opportunity to advance the sector and give workers better incentives to realise that vision.

PM HASINA'S UPCOMING VISIT TO INDIA

Building ties on a foundation of history



SHAMSHER M CHOWDHURY

Shamsheer M Chowdhury, Bir Bikram, is a former foreign secretary of Bangladesh.

BANGLADESH Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's official visit to India, her third visit since her Indian counterpart Narendra Modi assumed office in New Delhi, comes against the backdrop of visibly improved bilateral ties between the two South Asian neighbours, a relationship that is conditioned by irreplaceable geography and irreversible history.

It is safe to assume that the outcome of this visit will contribute to moving the bilateral ties forward on multiple fronts. Over the past few years, there has been tangible – and in some cases, exponential – progress in a number of areas. The most notable of these have been in the realm of multimodal connectivity, including energy connectivity, trade with sharp rise in Bangladeshi exports to India, India-financed infrastructure projects, defence ties, security cooperation, cultural cooperation and general people-to-people contact. These will very likely be reinforced as a follow-up to the visit.

A positive outcome from the minister-level Joint Rivers Commission (JRC) meeting scheduled before the prime minister's visit would provide added substance. Meaningful progress on sharing the waters of cross-boundary rivers, an agreement on which exists on only the Ganges, is an area that deserves special attention. Lack of visible progress on this critical issue has thrown a dark shadow on the state of bilateral ties. It is in this context that the JRC meeting, the first in more than a decade, assumes special significance.

Deaths of Bangladeshis on the border, albeit reduced in recent times, is another issue that warrants due attention. The oft-assured zero death figure continues to remain an unfulfilled promise. Realistically, any discussion on the Rohingya repatriation issue would be more for the sake of form and not so much on substance, primarily because the key to any solution on this does not rest fully on Delhi – it rests somewhere else.

Over the last decade or so, a new phenomenon has appeared on the horizon that has added a new dimension to the Bangladesh-India bilateral relations. Both Dhaka and Delhi have come to recognise the importance of Bangladesh enlarging



FILE PHOTO: REUTERS

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina would be in Delhi at a time when global and regional geopolitics is witnessing unprecedented levels of tension and uncertainty.

its multifarious contacts with the Indian states that neighbour Bangladesh to the north and the east. Of these, ties with Assam, Meghalaya and Tripura have been greatly enhanced, as these three states share common boundaries with Bangladesh. There is also a historical element to this: all three of these states played a major role in supporting the Liberation War of Bangladesh in 1971 and provided shelter to countless refugees fleeing the Pakistani genocide. The multifaceted and historical contacts between Bangladesh and West Bengal are an existing reality; they need no reiteration. However, there is an understandable expectation in Bangladesh that the West Bengal government will do all that it needs to in resolving the long-standing Teesta water-sharing issue. This is a thorn that needs to be removed in the interest of both sides.

Assam, Meghalaya and Tripura offer immense opportunities for connectivity, trade and investment, more so for Bangladesh. The local governments in all three states have great interest in this. During my recent visit to Guwahati as the leader of a 25-member delegation of freedom fighters, youth and journalists, I saw first-hand the willingness of the people and the government of Assam

to deepen contacts with Bangladesh. At our extended meeting with Chief Minister Dr Himanta Biswa Sarma in Guwahati, he made his intentions clear of forging closer connectivity and economic and cultural ties with Bangladesh. On more than one occasion, he expressed his deep gratitude to Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina for ensuring

pandemic and its debilitating health and socioeconomic consequences, the Russia-Ukraine war and the subsequent sanctions on Russia threw up a new and more severe set of challenges. Global supply chains faced serious disruptions, energy supplies became uncertain and costly, and new geopolitical lines were drawn. While the heat in Europe refused to subside, one witnessed political and military sabre rattling in the strategically important Asia-Pacific region, a geographical space that both Bangladesh and India are a part of. This brings security concerns closer to home. Both Bangladesh and India are at close proximity to this increasingly volatile theatre.

In such a scenario, a substantive exchange of views should form an important part of the agenda at the talks in Delhi. The need for calibrated response to the situations as they evolve has assumed heightened urgency. Bangladesh has made it known to all that it stands for peace and security and has counselled the need for restraint, patience and peaceful resolutions to all issues. These are values that both Bangladesh and India adhere to. Bangladesh has also been categorical in stating its intentions of not being part of any military bloc, but is open to any beneficial regional and transregional economic framework. The recently proposed Indo Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF), of which India is a part, is something Bangladesh is willing to look at positively. Detailed discussions on this should form part of the discourse in Delhi.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's September visit to India should, therefore, be an opportunity for Dhaka and Delhi to take their ties beyond the bilateral frame and form part of the larger Asia-Pacific canvass. Working as partners in the larger Asia-Pacific region should be a natural extension of the existing ties.

Any visit between Bangladesh and India at the summit level carries with it its own weight and draws special scrutiny. The upcoming one will be no exception. Notably, this one assumes added significance as both Bangladesh and India head into national elections in 2023 and 2024, respectively. Agreements signed and understandings reached in Delhi could form parts of a roadmap for the long-term future as both sides are expected to reaffirm their commitments to further broadening and deepening the historical and strategic relations, bilaterally as much as in the greater regional context. In this, the twin principles of mutual accommodation and mutual benefits will have to be the overarching element, and has to be seen as such.

We are well-placed to ride out recession

RMG NOTES

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).

MOSTAFIZ UDDIN



UNCERTAINTY is the name of the game in the world right now. One crisis ends and another begins, each one seemingly bigger than the last. We have been dealing with the pandemic, then we witnessed the Russia-Ukraine war break out, which impacted the global energy prices. Now the threat of global recession looms over us.

Where does all of this leave our ready-made garment (RMG) industry? Or, a better question would be: Where will the RMG industry be in six months' time? This question is important, because its answer will greatly impact Bangladeshi apparel makers.

While I always try to take a positive stance on business issues, it is hard to maintain a “glass half full” attitude at present. The current economic headwinds we are seeing don't bode well. A widely agreed definition of recession is two consecutive quarters of falling economic output. By that definition, the US is technically in a recession and the UK is not far behind. Nor is the European Union.

These are all major spending markets for fashion and RMG products, and the constantly poor economic news coming out of them does not provide a great deal of confidence.

One could add that there is at present a “cost of living” crisis across much of the Western world. The Russia-Ukraine war is placing huge upward pressure on international energy prices, and this is impacting households both in terms of how people heat their homes and how they put fuel in their cars. All of this has a net impact on discretionary expenses, such as clothes.

Recessions don't happen overnight, and people don't stop spending from one day to the next. What we generally see is a steady tightening of belts as people adjust to new circumstances and/or the loss of jobs. One thing that will impact spending on clothes hugely over the coming months is whether or not businesses in the West begin to lay people off from jobs. And the timing of that could be critical. If we see a job purge in the run-up to Christmas – September to December, for example – this will obviously hit the Christmas spendings and could spell bad news for RMG factories. If businesses delay redundancies, then spending could hold up for a few months more.

There are a couple more factors to mention. One is that the Western governments are currently wrestling with inflation. The traditional way to reduce inflation is to raise interest

rates (or taxes). Higher interest rates will ultimately hit consumer spendings. Near the end of July, the European Central Bank raised interest rates for the first time in more than a decade. If inflationary fears persist across the Eurozone, interest rates may rise further. Remember, inflation has not been an issue across Europe and the US for many years. We are in

Other fast fashion retailers that are sourcing from Bangladesh may find themselves faring well in a global downturn as consumers move away from well-known, high-end labels and towards more affordable fashion.

relatively new territory here.

Likewise, the UK has raised interest rates in a bid to get a lid on inflation. Once the inflation genie is out of the bottle, it is hard to put it back in, so governments will not concern themselves much about the impact that rising interest rates have on consumer spendings. Governments have often seen jobs as something worth sacrificing to tackle the rising prices.

The second issue around the purchase of fashion is this: people will always need clothing. So, while a recession could lead to people reducing

their spending on fashion, it does not mean they will stop buying clothes altogether. It might be that people purchase fewer items or it could be that they look for better value. Fast fashion as a business model is often criticised. Yet, it could be that we will see a flight away from luxury fashion and a shift towards budget, value fashion if consumers are forced to tighten their purses in the coming months.

This could potentially spell good news for Bangladesh. One of our weaknesses as an RMG exporter has historically been our reliance on low-value staple items. Yet, this weakness could turn into a strength if the threat of an all-out global recession materialises and households are forced to slash their expenses.

We may even be seeing this playing out already, in fact. On August 4, the largest apparel buyer from Bangladesh, H&M, launched a new leisurewear line, the “Move” collection. H&M says it is on a new mission to make sportswear a little more accessible, and the line offers practical and fashionable clothing for those on a budget. Other fashion retailers could take a similar line.

Other fast fashion retailers that are sourcing from Bangladesh may find themselves faring well in a global downturn as consumers move away from well-known, high-end labels and towards more affordable fashion. Bangladesh has made its name in must-have staple items, many of which are almost recession-proof: jeans, T-shirts, jerseys and so on.

Things will be tough in the run-up to 2023, but Bangladesh is as well-placed as any sourcing destination to ride out the challenges that lie ahead.