

Dreams turned to ashes

Fire claims lives of nine Bangladeshi workers in Saudi factory

We are deeply disturbed by the news of a devastating fire at a furniture factory in Saudi Arabia that resulted in the deaths of nine Bangladeshi workers. The incident occurred on Friday, about 350 kilometres off the Saudi capital Riyadh. According to survivors, there were 14 Bangladeshi workers in the factory. Most were sleeping in the upper floor of the factory building after lunch when the fire broke out, quickly engulfing the surrounding area. One of the victims was Mohammad Obaidul, 34, hailing from Natore, who went to Saudi Arabia in 2019 to support his family back home. While talking to this daily, his grieving mother described how he talked to her earlier in the day, and discussed plans of marriage after returning home, a dream that will remain unfulfilled.

The stories of all the victims are similar in that they all had migrated with the hope of building a better life. Workers like them, doing mostly menial jobs, are the engines that drive many industries in the Middle East. You see them in construction, hotels and restaurants, agriculture, healthcare, cleaning, caregiving, etc. Their economic aspirations, however, are often met with risks and challenges on the ground, especially in industries where they are exposed to hazardous conditions with little regard for their safety. As well as physical harm, they are also exposed to risks of abuse and exploitations because of the nature of their contracts.

But incidents like the factory fire in Al Hofuf are a reminder that a tragedy is never far away in such a climate. We don't know yet what caused the fire. Hopefully, the Saudi authorities will thoroughly investigate it and hold factory owners accountable for their negligence, if any. It is crucial to ensure that all such factories and workplaces adhere to stringent safety standards. Additionally, measures must be taken to expedite the repatriation of the deceased workers' bodies. The responsibility for Bangladesh goes beyond paying compensations to the families of the victims, which we hope will be done promptly through the Wage Earners' Welfare Fund. The government, however, must do more to prevent such tragedies as well as ensure the welfare of migrants.

There is a lot that remains to be done, but a crucial aspect of it is to ensure that workers are aware of their rights and enabled to seek speedy redressal in case of any problem. For that, there must be proper grievance mechanisms that allow workers to voice their concerns without jeopardising their livelihoods. To that end, the government must collaborate closely with the governments of all recruiting countries. They must try harder to ensure proper implementation of their labour laws and regulations.

How high up does the depravity go?

Corruption plaguing the Department of Youth

Corruption, like an insidious parasite, has spread across government institutions of Bangladesh, eroding their very foundations and hindering crucial progress on various fronts. Take the Department of Youth (DYD), for instance, where corruption seems to have become a run-of-the-mill affair. According to a report by this daily, an investigation has revealed an embezzlement of Tk 13.96 crore by 10 officials and employees of the department and the accounts office in Zakiganj, Sylhet. With a DYD deputy director at the helm, the officials allocated funds for a skills training programme for the youth in Zakiganj in 2020-21 and 2021-22 – even though the programme ended in 2019 – which they then misappropriated, as per the probe report. What makes the situation more alarming is that this was the seventh such blatant act of dishonesty to be reported in the past two years.

While it is commendable that the DYD is conducting investigations into incidents of corruption, we are horrified to learn that those found guilty of misappropriating funds in the past have not only been insufficiently penalised but, in fact, rewarded. For instance, five separate investigations found that five assistant upazila youth development officers had misappropriated over Tk 26 lakh meant to provide youths with loans. But the DYD proceeded to promote four of them to the position of upazila youth development officer, after deciding to recover the embezzled funds from their pension benefits. A probe report by the ministry last year highlighted that dishonest and inefficient individuals had been picked over competent and honest officers in exchange of large sums of money.

Mokhesur Rahman, a deputy director of the DYD at the time, found to be involved in the process, told a probe committee that he had only executed the directives of the director (administration) and the DG of DYD. However, not only was no investigation launched against them (as recommended by the probe committee), but Mokhesur too was subsequently acquitted by Majbah Uddin, who was the secretary of the ministry at the time, and transferred to a different post. It is distressing that the authorities are taking allegations of corruption at the highest levels so lightly, which, in effect, is emboldening dishonest officials to siphon off public funds with impunity.

We urge the ACC and all ministries concerned to launch an immediate investigation into the matter and follow it up with stern actions against the perpetrators.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

Control vegetable prices

It is clear that the prices of fresh produce are being intentionally hiked in kitchen markets. We have already cut back our food consumption due to the ever-worsening inflation. But is there no one to rein in these profit-mongers?

Munmun Begum
Mirpur 1, Dhaka

The endgame begins

THE STREET VIEW

Mohammad Al Masum Molla
is chief reporter at The Daily Star.

MOHAMMAD AL-MASUM MOLLA

On December 10 last year, the BNP was denied permission to hold its rally in front of its Nayapaltan headquarters at the heart of the capital. The rally in Dhaka – which was a culmination of similar gatherings in divisional headquarters that drew increasingly larger and noisier crowds – was expected to rise to a crescendo. The Dhaka Metropolitan Police told the party that it could not hold a rally on the streets but only on “open grounds”. Miffed, the BNP leaders held a number of meetings with police but still could not get the permission. In the process, however, several leaders landed in jail and BNP had to settle for the Golapbag field, which had been suggested to begin with.

About seven months on, the same BNP was allowed to hold a rally, almost as big, in front of its office, at the very same spot. Last year, it was a Saturday. But this time, it was a weekday. Not only BNP, but the ruling Awami League also held a rally blocking the streets in the Baitul Mukarram area, about a 10-minute walk from where the BNP had gathered. So, what prompted police to allow both parties to hold rallies on the streets this time? Many political commentators would point to the new US visa policy for paving the way for the opposition to take to the streets.

Guessing aside, why did the BNP choose to hold this rally now? The party announced on July 9 that it would hold a sizeable rally in front of its party office to formally announce its one-point demand. It was widely reported in the media that the main opposition camp's decision coincided with the visits of the US and EU delegations. The party wanted to display its strength on the streets, as well as its popularity, through a mammoth gathering, which would presumably justify the demand for a non-partisan, election-time government. And BNP was actually successful in showing it had the numbers on the streets, despite some obstruction for activists on the way to the venue and suspended or limited internet access in the area. The opposition used this in its favour, too, saying that this move only demonstrated the attitude of the



ILLUSTRATION: BIPLOB CHAKRABORTY

ruling party and further justified the BNP's demand. The party believes that this gathering will help them regain the momentum they had supposedly built up leading to, but lost after, December 10.

Now, looking at the ruling party's rally, it is quite in line with its practice of announcing a counter programme close to – if not at the same spot – where its arch-rival BNP is looking to gather. The practice has been in place since last year, when the BNP gatherings started to attract more and more people, supposedly to convince themselves and voters that Awami League is not leaving the field entirely free as a walkover for BNP. But this time, there was the added motivation of making it clear to the visiting foreign delegations that Awami League also boasted substantial support and had numbers on the streets to prove it. And that, they did.

Although both parties are typically

umpteenth time that it would not take part in elections under the current government, the Awami League retorted, once again, that elections could only be held under it. Both parties claimed to be representing the will of the people – which were completely contradictory to each other – just as the din of their supporters was drowning out such pronouncements. Surely, the people (as one population) could not desire opposite things at the same time, which only suggests that the two parties were, for the umpteenth time, passing off their partisan interests and agenda as the “people's will”. The people, for their part, must have deduced that if the parties remained rigid in their respective stances, the upcoming days will be challenging.

While both the parties said they had never “complained” to the foreigners and blamed each other for tarnishing the image of the country, it was

ability to come together to a sensible agreement.

Political commentators observe that, shedding their usual role, BNP appears to have successfully morphed into a typical opposition party that takes initiatives, while the Awami League has adopted a more reactive role, which is also uncharacteristic. It appears that the movement on the streets is decided upon by the BNP, while the Awami League is trying to devise a plan to counter BNP and is perhaps finding it a rather difficult process.

It is quite curious that the ruling party, having entirely decimated the BNP as an opposition, is still feeling threatened by it. It may seem for now that BNP has the momentum and the streets. But the party should avoid being complacent, because the Awami League's prowess on the streets is of no match. BNP's spirit and resolve will be put to the test in the months to come. The endgame is only getting started.

Automation’s role in RMG production remains uncertain

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

The spectre of automation has hung over Bangladesh's garment industry for as long as I have been a factory owner. Now and then, we hear talk that automation will soon become mainstream within the industry, and that the lack of automation is holding our industry back and preventing it from fulfilling its potential. There are also those who argue that automation could help to increase our (historically low) productivity levels.

There is no doubt that automation can be both a threat and an opportunity for our garment industry and its workers, depending on how it is implemented and managed. There are several points to consider in this context.

First is the issue of job displacement. Most commentators agree that automation has the potential to replace certain tasks and jobs traditionally performed by garment workers. Machines and robots can handle repetitive and labour-intensive tasks more efficiently and at a lower cost than garment workers – in theory anyway. This could lead to a decrease in the demand for human labour in some areas of garment production, although I have not seen such occurrences of this yet in Bangladesh's garment sector.

Skill requirements are another issue. As automation advances, the demand for higher-skilled workers may increase. While some low-skilled jobs could be lost to automation, there may be a growing need for workers with technical skills to operate and maintain

automated systems in garment factories.

Some people believe this shift could create a divide between workers with relevant skills and those without, potentially exacerbating income inequality. While I am not so sure this would be the case, the issue of skills does highlight that, with greater automation, we need to see more investment in skills and training. Are our universities and technical colleges geared up to offer these skills? Is this something they need to be planning for?

Working conditions will also potentially be impacted by automation. Automation can help improve working conditions for garment workers but, as always, there are caveats to this. Dangerous and physically demanding tasks could be automated, reducing the risk of workplace injuries and health issues. This could lead to safer and more comfortable working environments.

As mentioned previously, automation can enhance the efficiency and productivity of garment manufacture. Automated machines could work faster and more accurately, resulting in higher output levels and shorter production cycles. This can potentially lead to increased profitability for businesses, which could, in turn, benefit workers through higher wages and better job security. Again, however, none of this is guaranteed. The best route to profitability as I see it remains higher-value, niche products. Would automation facilitate this?

What about the case of Bangladesh, which is still a developing country? We have to remember that garment production is a significant source of employment in Bangladesh, like in many developing countries. Many are concerned that automation may lead to job losses in Bangladesh's garment sector. These are concerns I myself

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share. Yet others argue that automation could lead to increased competitiveness and technological advancement. Developing countries that adapt and invest in automation technology could attract higher-value production and attain a competitive edge in the global market.

To a certain extent, we have seen this story play out in other industrial sectors, although not so much in garment production. China has become a global leader in automation, particularly in technology sectors. This has enabled the country to gain huge competitive advantages in dozens of

industry sectors, helping to raise wages and living standards across the board.

At the same time, it has become clear that automation in garment manufacturing has not taken off to the degree that many were once anticipating. There was lots of talk of “sewbots” for a while in our industry, and at global conferences I attended. But such discussion has since died down. Could it be that handling fabrics and the like is simply too intricate a task for robots? Have we already reached the limits of automation for garment production in terms of technical possibilities? Are financial constraints the issue? Or are closed minds and an unwillingness to embrace new ideas and technologies holding us back?

My hunch is that it is a little of all of the above. However, the significant factor to consider is wages. Bangladesh is a low-wage economy and garment manufacturing is a very low-wage industry. But if wages were eating more significantly into businesses' cost bases, could it be that there would be a greater sense of urgency to introduce automation?

It could be fruitful to observe automation take off in higher-wage garment production countries in Europe as well as China and Vietnam in Asia. These countries could act as a testbed for what is or is not possible with automated garment production and give us a glimpse into the limits of new technologies. That might be a positive for Bangladesh at present, when job insecurity is already high due to the global economic slowdown.

Lastly, the financial payback on automation is around five years in Bangladesh (in comparison to around 1.5 years in China), and this is likely one of the reasons why Bangladeshi factory owners have been slow to adopt. But if automation is definitely coming at some point, why not be an early adopter to gain an edge over competitors besides China?