

Illicit use of firearms before election is deeply alarming

Police must take action against violators of firearm licensing policy

We are alarmed to learn about the illicit use of licensed firearms by some leaders of the ruling Awami League and its affiliated organisations. According to a report by *Prothom Alo*, these firearms, which can only be used in self-defence, are being brandished during political processions to intimidate opposition activists. Moreover, district administrations and police authorities are also turning a blind eye to this serious threat to public safety. The consequence of such activities ahead of the upcoming general election cannot be overstated.

As per data from the Fire Arms Management System (FAMS) of the Special Branch of police, the number of licensed firearms in the country is 50,310. Of them, 45,226 firearms are held by individuals, while 5,084 by various organisations. Among individuals, politicians hold 10,215 firearms, with 7,549—or about 74 percent—of them in the hands of ruling party leaders alone. While some politicians from opposition parties also possess legal firearms, most reported firearm abuses in recent times have been linked to the ruling party.

For example, on Sunday, in Mymensingh's Nandail upazila, the bodyguard of the son-in-law of a former Awami League MP was seen brandishing a firearm while leading a procession. Earlier, on October 31, a Jubo League leader in Dhaka's Pallabi area was seen holding a firearm while trying to counter a protest by RMG workers. Reportedly, he has two firearms registered to his name. Unfortunately, police only take note of such incidents after pictures or videos of culprits-in-the-act go viral, but even then, beyond formulaic check-ups, hardly any punitive action is taken.

The law is very clear on the use of firearms for individuals. According to the Firearms Licensing, Renewal and Use Policy, 2016, individuals can carry licensed weapons strictly for self-defence. Displaying them to create fear or unrest is strictly prohibited, and violators risk immediate licence cancellation. Why, then, are the authorities failing to seize illegally used weapons or revoke their licences? Why has no caution been issued, and no case been filed against the recent violators? Such blatant pandering to ruling party leaders totally contrasts police's eagerness to drown opposition leaders and activists countrywide under an avalanche of arrests, cases, and imprisonments ever since BNP's October 28 rally.

The unchecked use of judicial and extrajudicial methods of political repression points, on the one hand, to a desperate bid to hold onto power and, on the other hand, to a severe deterioration of law and order, both equally disturbing. In the coming days, the streets are likely to heat up further following Wednesday's announcement of polls schedule by the Election Commission. BNP and like-minded parties have already hinted at tougher movements demanding the government's resignation in favour of a neutral election-time government. It's a political boiling pot ready to explode any moment. In such a climate, the use of licensed and unlicensed firearms for political purposes may only increase, leaving the country in further turmoil.

We urge the law enforcement authorities to take this threat seriously and take all steps to prevent it. The EC, on its part, should ensure immediate withdrawal of all licensed firearms—as is the norm before national elections.

RMG PROTESTS

A tale of the Green versus the Red



KNOT SO TRUE

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At times, familiarity causes discomfort. Being too close to an issue blurs one's vision. Enlarging something under a magnifying glass also dismisses the objective scale. It is only under a microscope that the object can best be dissected. But, very often, the reports are rarely available for general consumption. People close to the ready-made garment (RMG) industry—such as yours truly—find it difficult to explain the anatomy of the sector, while people outside get to see the magnified version, readily available for viewing thanks to traditional and non-traditional media.

Around 130 factories continue to remain shut because of the recent unrest; around 300 factories closed down during 2020-21. Post-Covid, 260 factories closed down. Gas prices have soared by around 287 percent and production costs have gone up by 40 percent. Inflation has hit the skies; exports to the EU have dropped by 16 percent, and exports to the US have taken a dive by around 35 percent. Meanwhile, at least 123 factories have been vandalised, 22 cases have been filed, 88 individuals have been arrested, and 12 cases have been filed, with over 3,500 accused.

These statistics have come in over the last two weeks of intense agitation in the country's industrial zones. The deaths of Rasel, Imran, Jalal, and Anjuara during this agitation will also become numbers, soon to be reconciled with compensation and press conferences.

A few of my colleagues in the industry have had their factories burnt, staff and workers beaten, and finally have had to declare their factories shut. Whomever I spoke to had just one concern: for their own people and not for the machines.

Don't get me wrong. I am not over-humanising the owners. But what I am trying to say is that regular owners and good exporters have nothing to do with the perceived insensitivity of the sector. The endless video clips of outsiders entering factory premises, instigating workers, and finally destroying the factory only prove the vulnerability of a mature sector that largely remains unprepared for most externalities. I also want to make it clear that the fate of Bangladesh's RMG sector largely depends on muscle, industrial myopia, and proximity to politics. Very rarely has this industry been guided by innovative thought. It is because of the lack of attention to credible communication that no one has really had a chance to look at the decades-old skeleton of the



Should the RMG sector not take a few steps back and speak about greening the workers' lives?

PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

industry.

While discourses around wages have been an integral part of the industry, truth be known, the stories inside the factories have also rarely been shared. Some are tales of success and some may be of deep disappointment, but the reports related to workers' mistreatment and of mid-level management going rogue are plenty, while most success stories have remained undocumented.

Ever since 2010, members of the Industrial Police have been assisting the sector and helping the industry navigate some major difficulties. Way back in 2019, a WhatsApp group was formed with all the zone teams, and five from the BGMEA board continued to monitor situations on a minute-to-minute basis.

The message was clear: violence was not an option for any party, mainly because it cannot be an instrument to dispel protests. It is mainly because of this trend of violence and negative stories that Bangladesh, till date, continues to occupy centre-stage at the International Labour Organization (ILO). The complaint concerning non-observance by Bangladesh of the Labour Inspection Convention, 1947 (No. 81), the Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organise Convention, 1948 (No. 87), and the Right to Organise and Collective Bargaining Convention, 1949 (No. 98)—made under Article 26 of the ILO Constitution by several delegates to the 108th Session of the International Labour Conference—is still unresolved. And despite our law minister representing the country in

the ILO every year, many trade unions remain unconvinced and some even instigate thorny discourses during the assemblies.

But there has hardly been any real progress or dialogue with real labour in this country. While a tripartite council called RMG Sustainability Council (RSC) has been formed, which has six representatives from brands, trade

just because the entrepreneurs need to have their factories running at any cost. And yet, Bangladesh has 203 LEED-certified green factories, 53 out of the top 100 green garment factories, with 500 awaiting certification. If going green and having endless discourses on sustainability is the focus of the sector, should it not take a few steps back and speak about greening the workers' lives

as well?

In fact, does Green even matter at this point in time? And can the highest number of green factories ever offset the pages of history marked in Red?

A couple of realisations must set in. With ever-dipping prices owing to the market and constant competition of prices dropping within the sector, our RMG industry will never be able to raise the margin, never be able to cope with increased costs, and never be able to raise wages beyond a certain ceiling unless new thinking, newer strategies, and newer stances are introduced. We have truly had enough of over-politicised stances marring the industry. The RMG sector needs to be united in being professional, go forward with value addition and, most of all, opt for strong industrial relations with labour. For an industry in fashion, it's highly unfashionable to have traditional actors calling the shots with zero R&D in the industry's positioning on reputational risk. The answer doesn't lie in simply ticking boxes of compliance, coming out with official statements, or export figures that sit uncomfortably with poor margins and a tainted image. There must be openness to confess fragility and change the course accordingly.

Little do we realise that it is we who allow the outsiders to vandalise our factories, give space to the others to play mean politics with trade, and cannot go beyond the box or admit that we need freshness in vision. The strength of Bangladesh's RMG sector cannot rely on mimicking national politics. That's utterly wrong and immoral.

For sustainable Rohingya repatriation, citizenship and security are must



A CLOSER LOOK

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After multiple failed attempts at repatriation of Rohingya refugees to Myanmar, the recent China-led initiative gave the refugees hope for a dignified return to their homeland. However, this initiative has also stumbled upon a major roadblock over the issue of the refugees' accommodation in Myanmar. Despite Chinese Special Envoy for Asian Affairs Deng Xijun indicating earlier that the refugees would be taken back to their own villages, it has now become obvious that the Rohingya are only being offered a few "model villages" as their destination in Myanmar. A 30-member Myanmar delegation—during their recent visit to Cox's Bazar—failed to make any commitment to the refugees regarding their request for repatriation to their original homes.

Of course, the proposition of Rohingya repatriation to these model villages should not come as a surprise, because their original villages—hundreds of them—have been razed to the ground by the Myanmar military junta to make

room for new installations, including government buildings, police barracks and military bases. In fact, grand economic infrastructures are being set up in Rakhine state using Chinese and Indian investment, leading to speculations that it was the implementation of these so-called bigger economic plans that led to the ethnic cleansing and forced displacement of the Rohingya in the first place.

The Rakhine state has been cited as a lucrative destination for foreign direct investment in Myanmar because of its abundant natural resources and strategic positioning on the coastal belt, with access to the Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean. As early as in November 2017, it was reported that the then Myanmar government, led by Aung San Suu Kyi, had designated 1.27 million hectares of land in Rakhine for "agricultural development; the Chinese port and Special Economic Zone (SEZ) being constructed at Kyaukphyu; and an existing oil and gas pipeline running from Kyaukphyu to China." Over

time, India has also heavily invested in these economic ventures, which can explain its reluctance to push Myanmar to take back the refugees.

However, under mounting pressure from the international community, especially Bangladesh and China, Myanmar has built about 20 model villages for the Rohingya. There were talks of building these model villages for some years, with news website The Irrawaddy reporting as early as in 2018 that the then Myanmar government was building 12 model villages in northern Rakhine's Maungdaw Township. It was also reported that, under the watch of the Union Enterprise for Humanitarian Assistance, Resettlement and Development (UEHRD) in Rakhine, "modest houses" were being built for the refugees, in addition to these villages. What happened to these modest houses, though, remains a mystery.

In May this year, a Rohingya delegation visited two of the model villages built for a pilot repatriation project. According to reports, these villages consist of small homes, each of which can accommodate a family of four to five. Of the two villages, one consists of 215 homes and the other has 99 homes. The Rohingya will have to use common washrooms and the kitchens are also not separate. For the first month, the Myanmar authorities will provide furnaces and firewood, after which the families will have to fend for themselves. Media

reports citing the Bangladesh foreign ministry suggested that the Rohingya would be given farming land—along with seeds and fertilisers—as part of economic opportunities. The children are to get lessons from local schools, and healthcare support can be sought from local medical facilities. After an initial settlement phase, the Rohingya will also be able to purchase residence, it has been suggested.

We need to keep in mind that Rohingya refugees are currently living in either the sprawling, unhealthy camps in Cox's Bazar or on the isolated Bhasan Char (slammed by many quarters—including international rights groups—as resembling prisons due to the stringent regulations and monitoring, and a lack of refugees' access to the mainland).

While the new model villages are not the ideal repatriation destination for the Rohingya—who have already refused to be repatriated there—there are more pressing questions they should raise to better understand what awaits them after repatriation.

First comes the question of citizenship. Without citizenship, the Rohingya run the risk of receiving second-class treatment upon their return to Myanmar. While the refugees have, from the very beginning, rightfully demanded citizenship and voting rights as part of the repatriation deal, the Myanmar junta has only agreed to give them a National Verification Card, with

no clarity on when or if they will be granted citizenship. Without citizenship, how are the Rohingya supposed to identify themselves? For the Rohingya to return without citizenship will be counterproductive, since their statelessness has been a key enabler of their persecution for decades.

Secondly, the Rohingya should be asking what security measures will be put in place to ensure their safe stay in Myanmar, given that the notorious juggernaut—the military junta—is still in power, with accountability to no other but itself. In 2017, Bangladesh pragmatically proposed that UN-monitored safe zones be created in Myanmar, so that the genocidal brutality of the past is not repeated. To add to this, UN peacekeepers—including from Bangladesh—could also be deployed to ensure the security of the Rohingya. Could the model villages be turned into safe zones, monitored and guarded by UN peacekeepers?

At the same time, as suggested earlier, the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees should be provided access to the returnees so that the latter can share their experiences and discuss their concerns, as part of international protocol. This will also minimise the risk of these "model villages" being turned into concentration camps.

The repatriation document should be vetted by the UNHCR, and the Myanmar military junta should be

made accountable for its treatment of the Rohingya post their return to the homeland. Perhaps China, as the key mediator in the repatriation, could take on this responsibility as it also wields significant influence with the ruling Myanmar junta.

In light of the prevailing realities, the emphasis of the Rohingya on returning to their exact land of origin is perhaps misplaced. They should be pragmatic and focus on making the most of the repatriation deal by asking for citizenship and detailed security measures. And these should be enshrined—in black and white—in the repatriation agreement, with a neutral guarantor responsible for upholding the agreement's integrity and transparent execution.

If Myanmar is to take back its people, it should do so by affording the Rohingya their basic human rights, including their right to citizenship, along with the dignity and security they deserve. If the Myanmar junta is not able to offer the Rohingya their original villages upon repatriation, the least it can do is make it a point to give them their due citizenship. This will also boost confidence among all parties regarding the true intentions of the Myanmar junta.

Myanmar, Bangladesh, China, the UN, and other actors involved should make sure the repatriation is in favour of the Rohingya refugees—so that they can live their new lives free of violence and prejudice.