

‘China, India can’t replace our export market to the US, EU’

M Touhid Hossain, former foreign secretary of Bangladesh, discusses the implications and significance of the recent US labour rights policy, and the future of bilateral relations between Bangladesh and the US in an exclusive interview with Naimul Alam Alvi of The Daily Star.

On November 16, the US Secretary of State announced a Presidential Memorandum stating its intention to hold accountable those who threaten, intimidate, and attack union leaders, labour rights defenders, and labour organisations. What do you think is the significance of this announcement for Bangladesh, given the current protests by RMG sector workers?

It's important to note that the policy announcement on labour rights is not specific to Bangladesh. It's a comprehensive stance that applies to all countries. However, the United States specifically cited the case of Kalpona Akter from Bangladesh as an example of labour rights violation and government actions contradicting labour rights principles. While other labour rights activists around the world have faced similar challenges, Kalpona Akter's case was specifically highlighted. I believe this sends a message.

So, is this policy specifically for Bangladesh, and a continuation of the US' interest in our country? Or did it just happen to coincide with the ongoing minimum wage protests?

The likelihood of this being a coincidence is slim. It's not a coincidence that they used the example of a leader from Bangladesh.

You see, the relationship between Bangladesh and the US has been somewhat adversarial for quite some time now. We have either actively pursued an adversarial relationship or have been in a position where we show no concern for such conditions. Our leadership has consistently spoken negatively about the US. There is no doubt that the US is pursuing its own interests in its policies towards us. However, what the US has been saying is actually in line with what the people of Bangladesh want. They desire a free and fair election in Bangladesh. The people of Bangladesh also want this. But that didn't happen in 2014 or in 2018. And there is a possibility that it will not happen in 2024, either.

It is apparent that the Bangladesh government has deliberately taken a confrontational stance against the United States. Time will tell whether this is a wise or unwise decision. Personally, I believe that it would have been in our best interests to have a more cooperative relationship with the US, rather than taking an adversarial stance.

So, what are the options for the United States in this situation? One option would be to simply give up and say, "We can't do anything, let Bangladesh go its own way. Let India do whatever it wants in regards to Bangladesh." The other option would be to keep trying to make Bangladesh align with the US' foreign policy. And it's not at all unusual for a powerful country like the US to pose certain challenges when it tries to achieve a specific goal. I'm afraid we're headed in such a direction.

What is the significance of this policy, especially for our RMG sector and the economy as a whole?

We must not overlook the fact that the US' position regarding labour rights is not theirs alone; it is shared by the European Union, the UK, Australia, and Canada. And we cannot dismiss the possibility of these countries' involvement in this matter. The majority of our export market lies in that part of the world. No matter how friendly China and India are to us, they cannot replace that market. Neither India nor China will offer Bangladesh the opportunity to export clothing to them overnight if we lose access to the US or the European market.

Therefore, the US doesn't need to take any political actions against us. It can inflict a significant blow to our economy with this labour rights policy if it so chooses. In some ways, it seems to me that the US has made it clear that it will take actions if necessary.

The likelihood of a positive outcome for us from a conflict with the United States is extremely low, almost non-existent. Our chances of facing significant losses are much higher. Orders from the US have already declined by three percent. Despite claims



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of our economy's growing resilience, many economists I have spoken to suggest that our economic foundation is quite fragile. It rests on just two industries. Textiles were our top export 30-40 years ago, and they remain our top export today. Vietnam was in a similar situation, but textiles are now its fourth-largest export. We have been unable to make that transition. If our economic foundation experiences even the slightest shock, the situation will deteriorate further. A select few individuals may prosper, but the economic condition of ordinary people is already dire. Additionally, we must make payments for our megaprojects. The financial strain will be severe by 2026. We have already fallen into a dollar crisis even though the time for these repayments is yet to come. Bangladesh's forex reserves have nearly halved.

We have witnessed improvements in working conditions in our garment factories following intense international scrutiny after the Rana Plaza tragedy. Do you believe this US policy could achieve similar results? And should we be concerned about relying on

foreign powers to influence internal development?

Unfortunately, this is a pattern we have repeatedly exhibited. We only take action when prompted by external restrictions. For instance, in the shrimp industry, Western countries demanded that shrimp processing be done on tables instead of ON the ground, and that workers wear gloves and maintain a clean working environment. These were very basic requirements. Yet, our exporters failed to adhere to them until export restrictions were imposed. Such reluctance stems from our unwillingness to sacrifice even the slightest inch of profit margin.

I acknowledge that profit margins in our garment sector are not yet substantial enough to facilitate significant changes. However, we are also to blame for this situation. Why do we accept prices that no other country would even consider? There are allegations of internal competition. If one company declines a price, another company will accept it, cutting their margin even further. This rampant competition is at the root of the RMG sector's current challenges. We pay our garment workers half the salary of their Cambodian counterparts, and around 40 percent less than Indians. This is unacceptable.

Our garment sector is not in its infancy; it's a mature industry. Our factory owners should be able to negotiate with buyers in a manner that allows for fair worker compensation while maintaining market competitiveness. This is their responsibility.

However, as I mentioned earlier, it appears that a solution will not be reached without external pressure. If it is mandated that workers be granted these rights, some small businesses will probably struggle to comply. Nevertheless, I believe that a significant portion of the industry, particularly the major players, will adapt and survive.

Compared to the time of the Rana Plaza collapse, our RMG exports are now even higher. Did the industry not progress after improving the situation? Indeed, our

industry can move forward by improving labour rights conditions.

Do you see this policy being a leverage or a bargaining chip in negotiations with buyers?

Given the prices at which buyers sell in their own markets, there is no fathomable reason for them to purchase at such low prices. If buyers were willing to pay slightly higher prices, significant improvements could be made in Bangladesh's garment industry. I believe that buyers will be willing to do this because they will recognise that Bangladeshi companies cannot sustain such low prices indefinitely if the labour rights condition is to be improved.

In the event of a politically motivated embargo, no other country can fully replace Bangladesh's garment production capacity. However, as it is applied for all the countries, I do not believe that Bangladesh will lose out in terms of pricing. If buyers in the West recognise that other countries cannot offer lower prices, and that Bangladeshi manufacturers will avoid internal competition and work to improve labour rights conditions, they will be compelled to agree to higher prices.

I believe that Bangladesh should raise the issue at the negotiation table. While buyers will always strive for the lowest possible prices to maximise profits, I believe that this issue will undoubtedly be addressed in negotiations, and I am optimistic that progress will be made.

So, what should be the course of action for our government now?

I emphasise the importance of engaging with the United States. Disregarding or antagonising the US will ultimately hinder our economic prospects. While India's support may be politically beneficial, it cannot fully replace the US' economic influence. We must maintain strong ties with the West to safeguard our economic interests.

For peace, freedom, and memorialisation



Sara Zaker is a theatre and television actor, director, and social activist. She is also member secretary at the Liberation War Museum.

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In one month, I attended two conferences in two extremes of the world, and it ended up equaling millions of experiences.

The first conference was in Bangkok from October 12-16. Sponsored by the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience, Asia Justice and Rights (AJAR), and others, this conference was mainly geared towards helping people come to terms with violence not with another spate of violent acts but with reconciliation. Promoting "healing" and ending "hate speech" were in every conversation. Transitional justice and reparation were concerns of all.

The second was a Women of the World (WOW) festival in the third week of November in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. WOW celebrates achievements and challenges faced by women of all backgrounds, races, ethnicities, and religions. The festival is very inclusive, ensuring the representation of the LGBTQ+ community. We talked about our hurdles and wins in every panel, in every performance, in the marketplace, and in the Demonstration of the Arts in Rio.

Before I set foot at the peace-building conference in Bangkok, one of my senior colleagues had told me to find strength and beauty in talking to people coming from all parts of the world. He'd advised me "to relate past brutality and struggle with the reality of today to build a better future; whether it happened 50 or 70 years back," or two weeks back or four years ago—as is the case of Rohingya refugee communities in Bangladesh's Cox's Bazar.

Just as the Rohingya genocide goes largely unrecognised, the genocide of 1971, meted out to Hindus and Bangalis who were considered supporters of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, is yet to be recognised even after more than 50 years. The killing of our intellectuals was indeed a strategy of the Pakistani military. The Liberation War Museum and other organisations, to date, are striving to have the Genocide of '71 be recognised as such by the world, in particular by the UN.

While seeking recognition of the genocide that happened here, we are faced with questions concerning the present. How

are the Rohingya faring in Bangladesh? How are the Bihari doing? And what is the fate of the Indigenous population of our country?

While these questions were swirling in my mind, I was aghast to know from a Cambodian delegate that even a member of the Khmer Rouge, who was directly involved in the politics of hatred and killing way back in 1975 in Cambodia, is seeking justice for his fate! Human beings, even when perpetrators, feel that they have been victims of circumstances. The argument in their favour is drawn from the fact that their criminal acts of killing, looting, and rape were the strategies of the powers that be (or were). They believe they have been the pawns of the more powerful players in a war.

We, as human beings, usually see things in black and white. The notion of a Khmer Rouge perpetrator seeking justice is unthinkable. A Pakistani soldier falling in love with a Bangali girl amid war (such as in the film *Meherjaan*) is inconceivable. In this film, a Birangona (rape survivor of the liberation war) decides to flee to Pakistan pretending to be the wife of the Pashto soldier who had raped her several times—and this is seen as an act of compromise! How could this story feature in the recently produced play *Ami Birangona Bolchhi* and be portrayed as an exemplary story of heroism? I asked my conscience time and again.

Thinking of it now, Meher, the protagonist, is not fighting the Pashto man; she is fighting against the societies of both Pakistan and Bangladesh. Both countries are deeply entrenched in patriarchy. When the Pashto soldier is older, he abandons Meher in Karachi to settle with his wife and children in his village in North-East Frontier Province. In her struggles for economic independence, Meher gets support from another Bangali woman who lives in Karachi. By dint of hard work and perseverance, Meher becomes financially independent. She had gone to Bangladesh for a conference in the early '90s. On the face of it, everything seemed fine, but upon further probing, it all turned out to be a sham. Although she was given a platform to speak, the entrenched

notions that her rape had tainted her body and her character still existed. It is because of this that she visited her brother and his family in the darkness of the night and left shrouded in the same darkness so that she could remain almost invisible. Meher was economically solvent thanks to her tailoring venture. But patriarchal societies such as ours did not seem to be able to excuse someone they considered a "fallen" woman.

I could almost hear Meher's voice being

being a very disturbing session where the Black men of the favela (areas where the downtrodden live) in Rio enacted abuse on women—with several narratives being told and retold. A single male voice placed the counter-narrative: an argument that a Black boy of the favela has faced bullying and threats his entire life, which puts him in a cycle of violence. He is a male facing male toxicity. When the victim pleads guilty and describes what led him to a life of criminality,

a quote by Johan Galtung from his 1969 Violence, Peace and Peace Studies, wherein he rightly remarked, "When one husband beats his wife, there is a clear case of personal violence, but when one million husbands keep one million wives in ignorance, there is structural violence." I would like to add that when a million men put shackles of religious doctrines to make women inactive, depriving them of fundamental human rights, it is structural violence.

Thus, structural and systemic violence is the root of women's suffering. And for every story to end in peace, it must be captured by memorialising these narratives.

I am reminded of the shawl my mother wove, in which she'd repeated a hundred thousand (or more) dua for the return of my lost brother after the victory of Bangladesh in December '71. My brother had set out to join Bangladesh's (then East Pakistan) war against Pakistan (then West Pakistan), never to return. On his way, my brother and Khosru, his friend, were stopped by the East Pakistan Rifles (EPR). They questioned the identity of my brother—who had fair skin, light-hued eyes, and a tall stature. The EPR sepoys claimed that my Chinku bhaiya was faking his identity. They insinuated that he was a West Pakistani. They roped him up, intending to kill him. Khosru bhai forbade them to take my brother, saying something to the effect of "If you think he is not a patriot, then you might as well take me along with him." Later, it transpired that the sepoys had intended to rob them of whatever valuables they had on them. In trying to do this, they captured and killed Chinku bhaiya and, along with him, Khosru bhai. It was an act of robbery of both belongings and of two valiant lives.

It is as if Khosru bhai was reborn as Faraz—in the same linear narrative, some 45 years post '71. In 2016, in the butchering and killing in Holey Artisan, Faraz stood by his friends and was butchered alongside them, willingly giving up his life. A sacrifice of life that gives hope to humanity.

In this all-pervading story of male toxicity, there are stories of heroism in Meher (the lone Birangona) fighting it out in Pakistan and Bangladesh, as well as in the stories of Khosru in '71 and Faraz in 2016.

In the heinous toxicity of hate in the name of religion, there are still the stories of uncompromised heroes. Let us continue the memorialisation of these heroes and she-ros. Let this memorialisation of their narratives speak about humanism, which resides at the centre. Let us bind our societies in peace and harmony into one beautiful universe.



FILE VISUAL: SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR

chorused at WOW Rio. The same toxic masculinity is what we, the feminists, are fighting against—the world over. We, the women of Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, and Nepal, came together and spoke in a common language of shared history of facing male patriarchy and British colonialism.

During one session, the topic of discussion was "What are Men talking about?" I felt drawn to attend the panel, which ended up

it seems that intergenerational trauma is at the helm of the entire problem. The world keeps rolling out the cycle of violence—and so the cycle of violence continues throughout the ages in societies of an uneven world.

What, then, about women who are even more vulnerable victims of such toxicity, that is meted out to them in the name of patriotism and in the name of values upheld by various religions? Indeed, I am drawn to