

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

RMG unrest will hurt the industry

Govt must prevent further disruptions, minimise damage

We are concerned about the outcome of recent disruptions in the ready-made garments (RMG) industry. This vital sector—which last year fetched an all-time high of about \$47 billion from exports—could be in for a rude shock this year after being rocked by frequent protests, factory closures, and vandalism over the past month or so. This is already having an impact, with many international buyers who regularly visit Bangladesh to finalise work orders cancelling their trips, affecting their planning for upcoming seasons. Citing a representative of a major European buyer, a report by this daily even said that many requests for value-added garments have already been cancelled or postponed.

In an environment of uncertainty and insecurity, it is natural that buyers would have a Plan B for sourcing apparel from alternative destinations where they can safely place orders. As well as supply-chain disruptions, buyers also have to think about reputational risks arising from placing orders in restive countries. There is already a concern among many buyers that about 5 to 10 percent of their work orders placed in Bangladesh could be affected by the latest unrest and other hurdles. What this means for local producers is that they are having to deal with concerns not just about future orders but also the profitability of existing ones, as they may have to provide discounts and expensive air shipments because of supply delays.

Ironically, the problems in Bangladesh have raised hopes for rival apparel suppliers, including India, who are apparently expecting a boost in their work orders. Even though India's apparel exports remain significantly lower than Bangladesh's, the country's offer of various incentives and policy supports to its garment hubs and manufacturers contrasts the frequent challenges facing our manufacturers. This shows how our position as the world's second-largest garment exporter could be upended if we don't ensure stability and competitiveness fast enough. True, Bangladesh can still turn around. Its competitive pricing, improved safety and environmental compliance, and increased capacity for diversified products are still a potent mix. But to prevent the recent incidents of work orders being shifted elsewhere from becoming a trend, we must expedite our efforts.

A lot has been said about the recent protests by workers. At a recent press conference, the Industrial Bangladesh Council, which represents 18 trader unions, blamed local youth gangs, garment waste traders, and unemployed individuals for instigating the demonstrations in Savar, Ashulia, and Gazipur. Going forward, we must approach these disruptions in a manner that both addresses the genuine grievances of workers—including delayed wage payments and unlawful dismissals—and persistent security issues. The interim government has reportedly set a 12.65 percent export growth target for this fiscal year, but without fixing the problems in our biggest export sector, such targets cannot be reached successfully.

Workers' safety must be prioritised

Explosion at Sitakunda shipbreaking yard calls for actions

Yet again, the workers of a shipbreaking yard have suffered serious injuries in Chattogram's Sitakunda upazila. On Saturday, an explosion took place in SN Corporation's shipbreaking yard leaving 12 workers with severe to moderate burn injuries. Of them, 10 are said to be in critical condition. The incident happened when the victims went to inspect the fuel tank in a scrapped ship's engine room, as per a report by this daily.

Over the last two decades, such incidents have become quite common, taking the lives of 257 workers in total. This shows how precarious this profession has been. Of the 30 to 35 shipbreaking yards currently operating in Sitakunda, only four have green compliance certificates, which are issued based on the criteria of environmental friendliness, workers' safety, and the working environment of yards. While it is not clear yet what caused the latest explosion, the question remains whether responsible government bodies properly carry out inspections at the shipbreaking yards.

As various reports reveal, these yards are notorious for their hazardous work conditions. Workers often lack proper safety gear, handle toxic material unsafely, inhale dangerous fumes on scrapped ships, and work long hours without necessary intermittent breaks. Although the Bangladesh Ship Recycling Act 2018 and the Ship Breaking and Recycling Rules 2011 set out the rights of workers and the required work conditions and training that their employers and yard owners must provide, enforcement of these legal instruments remains a big concern, as evidenced by the frequency of workplace injuries and fatalities.

It has been six years since the Bangladesh Ship Recycling Board was formed per the 2018 Act to ensure overall supervision and evaluation of ship recycling operations, among other things. But to date, this board remains inactive. The imperatives of insurance benefits for workers and punishment for law violators following regulation inspections are also facing the same stagnation. We are told that a three-member committee has been formed to probe Saturday's incident, but we urge the government to take comprehensive measures to prevent such incidents from occurring again. For that, a speedy implementation of the 2018 law to ensure shipbreaking workers' safety and wellbeing is vital.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY



Mao Zedong dies

Marxist revolutionary Mao Zedong emerged as the undisputed Chinese Communist Party leader following the Long March (1934-35) and dominated China in the period after the communist takeover in 1949. He died on this day in 1976.



VISUAL: ANWAR SOHEL

What reforms does the media need in Bangladesh?



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KAMAL AHMED

The insurrection that toppled the autocratic regime of Sheikh Hasina has cost at least 800 deaths, including 92 children. It has also taken the lives of five journalists, according to Voice of America. The extreme brutality employed by the security forces and the supporters of Awami League also maimed thousands of others, and again those injured include journalists, though their exact numbers are yet to be determined.

Though the victims belonging to the media were largely being targeted by police and AL activists, regrettably there were quite a few who were subjected to the protesters' backlash. Several TV channels and newspaper offices have been attacked, disrupting their broadcasts and publications. In Khulna, the press club was set on fire. In Chattogram and several other places, there have been attempts to attack and set fire to press clubs.

It is, therefore, crucial to introspect why democracy-supporting protesters attacked one of the most important institutions of democracy: the media. There is indeed a risk in professional and objective journalism, but that risk comes from the attempt to hold the powerful accountable. Objective and honest journalism should never be a cause of public outrage.

There is no debate that due to the ousted government's repression and intimidation, revealing the truth had become increasingly difficult. The fear was so pervasive that editors openly admitted a few years ago that they couldn't write what they wanted to. But, unfortunately, this is not the full picture.

A significant part of the media became accomplices to the autocracy, encouraging the suppression of dissent and spreading falsehoods and defamation against political opponents to incite harassment. In some cases, the partisan behaviour dipped to such a low that later revelation showed two journalists in Narayanganj using illegal arms on protesters while accompanying local AL activists.

Conversely, they either ignored or failed to adequately report on serious incidents of political repression, human rights violations, corruption among the ruling clique, and illegal steps to consolidate power. The stories of torture in Aynagar of those who were victims of enforced disappearances, or the massive corruption cases that are now making headlines, were not covered by most of the media.

The reasons for this are quite complex. They include factors like the arbitrary granting of TV, radio and newspaper licences to party supporters, using the media by existing owners for their business interests or

to gain advantages, political ambitions of owners and some journalists, compromises made for financial and material benefits, and political loyalty.

The AL government adopted a strategy of issuing licences without considering financial capacity, professional skills or capability. The fallen regime's aim was presenting the abundance of media as evidence of media freedom in the country. This has created a chaotic situation in the media landscape.

There is no hope of escaping this situation as long as the current model of media ownership and management continues. Even if some temporary changes are brought about by some self-initiated enthusiasm, it will not last, and things will return to the way they were. Therefore, a fundamental change in the character of the media is necessary, and urgent reform measures are needed to achieve this.

The media must first and foremost be a mass media, meaning its primary objective should be public interest. No media should operate for personal, corporate, business, group or political interests. Even state-run media should be governed by public interest, not the interests of the government (the ruling party or an authoritative individual). Plurality in the media must be ensured so that all opinions and diverse thoughts are reflected.

What should be the goals of reform?

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Monopolistic practices must be eliminated. Control of multiple media outlets (newspaper, television and radio) by the same individual or organisation, as well as multiple institutions within the same medium (multiple channels), hinders free competition. This obstacle must be removed to create a competitive environment in the media landscape. Competition enriches democracy, while monopolistic centralisation creates adverse conditions for democratic debate and environment.

State-run institutions—Bangladesh Television (BTV), Bangladesh Betar, and Bangladesh Sangbad Sangstha (BSS)—must be kept free from government control or influence, and similarly, corporate or privately-owned TV, radio and newspapers must be kept free from the influence of their owners'

personal and business interests. One major obstacle in this regard is the owners' active participation in the management of these institutions. By giving professional journalists editorial control and professional executives the responsibility of business management, unethical interference and influence from owners can be stopped. Owners must maintain an "arms-length distance" from the operation of media institutions.

Objectivity and truthfulness must be at the core of editorial policy.

In TV, radio or newspapers owned by individuals, political activities or the promotion of associated business products and services must ensure transparency and balance. Unilateral promotion should not be allowed, and there should be a transparency declaration regarding ownership. In the past few elections, we saw that due to ownership, an institution turned into a blatant propaganda tool or exclusive promoter of a candidate, effectively becoming a political leaflet. For example, media owned by bitumen or cement manufacturers don't disclose their conflict of interests when reporting or giving opinions related to their industry, misleading readers who perceive their statements as independent and neutral. Just as it is unimaginable that *The Washington*

influence in their oversight. Editorial institutions also need to develop and align the code of conduct for media professionals with the evolving challenges in the industry.

The mushroom growth witnessed in the country's media industry over the last 15 years meant severe skill shortages resulting in a significant degradation of the quality and standard of journalism and other contents. It is, therefore, crucial to strengthen capacity-building programmes in cooperation with universities and other training institutes.

Possible obstacles to the reform and how to overcome them

Amendments to the existing laws will be required, particularly in the management laws of state institutions and the licensing policies and regulations of private TV and radio.

Owners with multiple media outlets should be encouraged to reorganise their businesses. The government will not shut down any media, but alternatives must be sought to end the concentration of multiple TV channels or multiple media outlets under one business group. It is particularly problematic as none of these owners have kept their business limited only within the media, but have media outlets as subsidiaries of their other interests. The control of multiple TV channels or dual media like TV channels and newspapers under the same company disrupts the balance in the media market, undermining competition. In some cases, these institutions don't make a profit but operate with subsidies from other businesses of the owners, leading to unethical business practices. Those institutions that are not profitable should be given the opportunity to merge or be sold to other interested parties to make them profitable and sustainable.

Institutions that fail to meet the national media policy should be given a set time frame to achieve compliance; creative solutions can be found by providing that opportunity. No media licence renewal should be done solely for personal or corporate interests. All existing institutions should be required to commit to and demonstrate adherence to these policies, with provisions to phase out unprofessional institutions.

The need for media will not diminish anytime soon as it is an essential prerequisite for democracy. In a number of matured democracies, calls for treating media as a public good, like education or health service, are being made as debates on providing public funds to save smaller newspapers kick in. Those who want to consider social media as a substitute for news media have seen and are seeing its failure to curb rumours, fake news and misinformation. The attempts to incite communal tension have certainly not gone unnoticed by anyone.

Chief Adviser Dr Muhammad Yunus mentioned media as one of the areas for reform before the elections. Now, we await practical steps. The media will have to embark on a long struggle to regain the trust of the people, who have shown disappointment and anger towards some of the country's outlets.