

Workers must be paid their dues before Eid

We must find a mechanism to resolve workers' issues systematically

It's quite troubling to see ready-made garment (RMG) workers still protesting over unpaid wages and Eid bonuses. While most people are preparing for celebrations with Eid-ul-Fitr only days away, many workers are being forced to take to the streets. Over the past few days, there have been reports of protests and sit-ins in several areas, including central Dhaka, Gazipur, and Savar. On Tuesday, a clash broke out between police and workers marching from Shram Bhaban towards the Secretariat, leaving dozens injured amid baton charges by police. On Sunday, while staging a sit-in in front of Shram Bhaban, an employee of a factory with 14 months of unpaid wages fell ill and died.

Ideally, under the interim government, one would have expected an end to this almost routine scenario that plays out every Eid. To be fair, this government has done reasonably well compared to previous administrations. The central bank, as per the BGMEA, has already disbursed Tk 2,250 crore in loans to RMG exporters to facilitate payments ahead of Eid. So far, more than 99 percent of factories have reportedly paid February's salaries, while more than 95 percent have paid Eid bonuses. But the fact that some factories have yet to fulfil their financial obligations despite a February 12 decision—that all outstanding wages, bonuses, and dues of workers must be paid by the 20th of Ramadan, along with at least 15 days' salary for March—is a failure as much on their part as on the government's. The issue is not so much its lack of sincerity as its lack of enforcement.

On Tuesday, the government imposed a travel ban on 12 RMG factory owners who defaulted on payments. The ban will be lifted if they can pay owed salaries and bonuses by March 27—a condition that many are unlikely to fulfil. This means many workers of these and other factories will head into the holiday unpaid, deepening their woes. For an industry that generates billions in export revenue, this is unacceptable. After the July uprising, in which a large number of workers participated, many expected that these trends would no longer persist. However, old habits and injustices die hard. Just like before, there is still no institutional mechanism to systematically resolve workers' issues, forcing them to take to the streets repeatedly. And when they do so out of desperation, they are met with assaults and baton charges.

This must change. Factory owners must take responsibility for meeting their obligations on time, and the government must ensure they do so. Factories with a history of frequent wage delays should also be held accountable.

Hold fake freedom fighters accountable

Investigate corruption charges against ministry officials, others involved

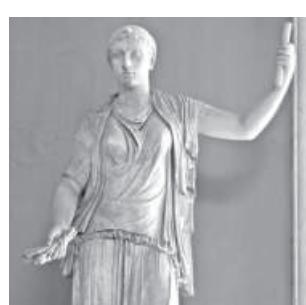
It is truly unfortunate that even over 53 years after our liberation, we have been unable to create a complete and accurate list of freedom fighters, while many individuals have managed to include their names using forged documents. Reportedly, during the last 14 years, around 6,000 individuals falsely gained recognition as freedom fighters through forgery. Among them were around 400 government officials and employees, including a former secretary at the Ministry of Liberation War Affairs. During this time, institutions connected to freedom fighters—such as the Jatiyo Mukti Joddha Council (Jamuka), Bangladesh Freedom Fighter Welfare Trust, and the Mukti Joddha Sangsads—faced numerous accusations of corruption and misconduct. But the Awami League government hardly took any action against such irregularities. Sadly, investigations into these cases remain stalled even under the interim government.

Reportedly, the ministry has taken only departmental actions against some of the accused government officials and employees. While it cancelled the gazette entries of fake freedom fighters after identifying irregularities, it has yet to take appropriate action against those involved. Furthermore, no initiatives have been taken to recover the allowances disbursed to these fake freedom fighters over the years. Meanwhile, several major corruption cases remain unresolved and even uninvestigated. For example, the Tk 74 crore corruption case involving the Mukti Joddha Sangsads and the forgery of honorary crests awarded to foreign friends and organisations for their contributions to the war—exposed in the media in 2014—remain unaddressed. The same thing happened to the irregularities reported at the Bangladesh Freedom Fighter Welfare Trust.

Unfortunately, instead of prioritising the investigation of corruption and irregularities, the ministry has focused on creating a new list of freedom fighters. The fresh list will reportedly recognise only those who directly fought in the war as freedom fighters, while individuals who contributed indirectly or raised global awareness will be classified as associates. A draft ordinance has already been sent to the Cabinet Division for approval.

We think making a fresh list will have little impact unless the widespread corruption and irregularities within organisations related to freedom fighters are thoroughly investigated. Corruption at the ministry and the fraudulent gazette listings of non-freedom fighters have severely damaged the credibility and reputation of our liberation war. This cannot be allowed to persist any longer. Therefore, we strongly urge the government to investigate all cases of corruption and forgery and take appropriate action against those responsible.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY



Cleopatra reinstated as queen of Egypt

On this day in 47 BCE, the legendary Cleopatra VII Thea Philopator, aided by her Roman lover Julius Caesar, was reinstated as co-ruler of Egypt (with her brother Ptolemy XIV).

EDITORIAL

Why must workers always take to the streets for unpaid wages?



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When I reached the Shram Bhaban in Bijoy Nagar, Dhaka on the evening of March 25, workers from Apparel Plus Eco Ltd and TNZ Apparels Ltd were organising iftar on the floor of the building's veranda. Their arrangement was simple, with chhola-muri. They looked exhausted. On the one hand, they had been fasting all day, and on the other, they had been attacked and beaten by police that day while protesting for their unpaid wages and Eid bonuses to be cleared. Several of them were injured and taken to the hospital, with one of them suffering a bone fracture.

Exhaustion could not suppress their anger when they spoke about their long deprivation, however. About 800 workers and employees of Apparel Plus Eco, owned by the TNZ Group, were yet to be paid three months' salaries and other dues, while about 2,600 workers of TNZ Apparels, owned by the same group, were due two months' salaries and other allowances. They first staged their protest in front of the factory in Gazipur and later in front of the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) building in Uttara. On March 11, at a tripartite meeting held at the Shram Bhaban, presided over by an additional secretary of the labour ministry, in the presence of the workers, the owners of Apparel Plus Eco, and the BGMEA representatives, it was decided that the outstanding salary for January would be paid by March 20 and the February salary and Eid-ul-Fitr bonus by March 25.

Then, on March 17, a multi-stakeholder meeting held at the Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishments (DIFE) with workers, factory owners, BGMEA, industrial police, and DIFE representatives, changed the previous decision and decided that the salaries for the first halves of February and March would be paid by March 25, and the salaries for the remaining halves of these two months would be paid by April 20. The production general manager of TNZ Apparels promised, in writing, to clear the workers' holiday

pay by March 20, the February arrears by March 25, and the Eid bonus by March 27.

But the workers were not paid the holiday pay by March 20. Now, due to the pending wage for two/three months, the workers are unable to pay their rent and grocery store dues. They are forced to live a subhuman life of half-starvation. As a result, they were forced to take a stand in front of the Shram Bhaban. But labour department officials did not take any action to implement the decision on the workers' payment made in their presence. Hence, the workers resorted to surrounding the labour ministry to



RMG workers stage a protest in front of Bangladesh Secretariat on March 25, 2025 demanding unpaid wages and Eid bonus. PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

make their voices heard, and ended up getting beaten up by police.

Many other ready-made garment (RMG) factory workers have been forced to take to the streets to demand unpaid wages. Workers and employees of Style Craft Ltd in Gazipur have been protesting in front of the Shram Bhaban since March 18. On March 23, a 40-year-old worker named Ram Prasad Singh fell ill and died during the sit-in protest.

Nearly 250 workers of Roar Fashion Ltd have been protesting in front of the

BGMEA building in Dhaka since March 23, demanding a month's unpaid salary and layoff compensation. Workers of Hagh Knitwears in Gazipur took to the streets on March 25 morning, demanding three months' unpaid wages and Eid bonus. Workers from Thianis Apparels and MS Garments Ltd in the Chattogram Export Processing Zone staged separate protests on March 25 demanding salaries and Eid bonuses.

This issue of not clearing salaries and bonuses on time is not limited to just a few specific factories. According to a *Prothom Alo* report, as of March 24, out of 2,107 operational RMG factories that are members of BGMEA, 344 factories had not yet paid bonuses. Only 84, or four percent, of the RMG factories paid 15 days' salary for the current month. Meanwhile, only 50 percent of the 750 operating knitwear factories have paid bonuses. Earlier on February 12, the Tripartite Consultative Council (TCC) meeting decided that all outstanding salaries and bonuses of the workers would be paid by Ramadan 20 (March 21), along with at least 15 days' salary for the current month. But due to

the lack of government oversight, many factory owners did not implement this decision on time, resulting in increasing protests.

The commerce ministry also warned of potential unrest at about 500 RMG garment factories over the payment of salaries and festival allowances before Eid, of which 36 factories were identified as particularly risky. The question is, did the government properly monitor those risky factories? Were the factory owners contacted and briefed about the situation? Does the government have

any data on which factories are paying the salaries and bonuses, and when?

The issue of RMG workers not getting paid before Eid is not new. Every year during the previous government's tenure, we saw workers in the country's highest foreign exchange earning industry taking to the streets demanding salaries and bonuses to be paid before Eid.

After the mass uprising in July-August last year, in which a large number of working-class people participated, it was expected that these trends would cease to exist; that the interim government that came to power after the uprising would ensure the basic rights of workers with responsibility and compassion. But the government did not take appropriate action in time. In the face of protests, on March 25, it banned the owners of 12 RMG factories from travelling abroad over the non-payment of workers' dues—a much delayed decision.

This ban will not be effective for factories whose owners are already abroad, like the owner of TNZ Group. However, they have assets, including factories, in the country. To force uncooperative owners and their local representatives, strict legal action must be taken, including auctioning their assets. Besides, the government could have forced the BGMEA and BKMEA to form a special fund with contributions from the owners, so that if a factory owner faces a financial crisis, they can take a loan from the fund without interest to pay workers' salaries. For RMG factory owners, whose export earning is more than \$36 billion per annum, forming such a fund should not have been difficult.

Unfortunately, even in the post-July uprising reality, we are still seeing the same old trends. There is no systemic way of resolving the workers' grievances, which is why they are still forced to take to the streets to make their demands heard again and again. And then there are cases of police attacks on the workers who take to the streets. Although the law enforcement agencies have been ineffective in preventing mob violence, they have been often aggressive towards people from different walks of life, including teachers, students and workers coming out on the streets to demand their rights. The police attack on RMG workers marching towards the labour ministry demanding unpaid wages is the latest example of this tendency.

In the post-uprising era, many changes and reforms are being discussed, but the reality of the workers has not changed at all. Will it, ever?

Yunus's China visit can open many doors

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Chief Adviser Prof Muhammad Yunus's tour to China marks a pivotal moment in Bangladesh-China bilateral relations, coinciding with the 50th anniversary of diplomatic ties between the two countries. China is currently Bangladesh's largest trading and defence partner, reflecting the robust and multifaceted nature of their bilateral ties.

According to Chinese Ambassador to Bangladesh Yao Wen, the chief adviser's visit is expected to be "successful" and "productive," with "some announcements" anticipated. While the specifics of these announcements remain unclear, Bangladesh Foreign Affairs Adviser M Touhid Hossain has indicated that the visit is unlikely to result in any formal agreements. However, several memoranda of understanding (MoUs)—non-binding but formal agreements—may be signed. This visit is expected to serve as a foundation for the recalibration of Bangladesh-China relations. Therefore, some areas require focused attention and action to yield tangible outcomes.

Although China is Bangladesh's largest trading partner, Bangladeshi exports to China remain low. In the last fiscal year, the trade deficit marginally increased by over one percent, reaching \$16.45 billion. While China has granted 100 percent duty-free access for Bangladeshi products, this

has not translated into a significant increase in exports due to a limited range of exportable goods, stringent value addition requirements, and a lack of competitiveness in key sectors.

Yunus's visit should prioritise strategies to diversify Bangladesh's exports to China and improve market access for Bangladeshi goods. In this regard, the Bangladesh Embassy to China can play a proactive role by organising exhibitions of Bangladeshi

products in major Chinese cities to attract local consumers and businesses.

Regarding investments, China has made substantial contributions to Bangladesh's infrastructure and energy sectors through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). However, there remains potential to attract more investments, particularly in high-end manufacturing industries. The chief adviser's visit could facilitate discussions on encouraging Chinese companies to relocate their factories

to Bangladesh—particularly the Chinese sunset industries. As China faces increasing trade barriers on the global stage, the sunset companies can bypass restrictions in Bangladesh while creating jobs and fostering industrial growth here.

The interim government of Bangladesh has also been negotiating with China to reduce the interest rates on existing loans from two to three percent to one percent and to extend the repayment period from 20 to 30 years. If successful, these adjustments would provide significant relief to Bangladesh's foreign reserves and alleviate pressure on the economy.

The chief adviser's visit could also provide an opportunity to strengthen cooperation in the defence sector by exploring possibilities for defence technology transfer and the

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establishment of joint manufacturing capabilities. This would boost Bangladesh's domestic defence industry and enhance its military capabilities.

Affordable and high-quality healthcare remains limited in Bangladesh. China can take the opportunity to invest in Bangladesh's healthcare sector by building specialised hospital chains, training

destination for medical treatment by easing visa policies for Bangladeshi patients and reducing flight costs.

Another key area that warrants attention during the visit is the Teesta River Comprehensive Management Project. China remains willing to engage in the project, and this visit provides an opportunity for Bangladesh to further analyse the prospect of China contributing to the management of the river, which may benefit both countries.

The Rohingya refugee crisis continues to be one of Bangladesh's most pressing diplomatic challenges, with more than 1.2 million refugees living at the refugee camps in Cox's Bazar. The international community has largely sidelined the crisis, and humanitarian assistance has been reduced.

Given China's significant influence over Myanmar, it could play a crucial role in mediating the repatriation process. The ongoing control of the Arakan Army in most of Rakhine state presents an opportunity for China to leverage its influence over the group to help resolve the crisis. The chief adviser's China tour could mark a significant step in facilitating a peaceful solution to the Rohingya issue, further consolidating China's position as a key diplomatic player in the region.

However, this visit also brings challenges, and Bangladesh must navigate a delicate balancing act in its foreign policy decisions. While fostering closer ties with China, Bangladesh must retain its strategic autonomy and avoid becoming a pawn in larger geopolitical games by pursuing policies that align with national interests.