Experts for establishing good governance in migration process

Staff Correspondent

GOOD governance and accountability should be established in the formal migration process to introduce fair and ethical recruitment of workers seeking overseas jobs, observed migrant rights activists, lawyers and journalists on Sunday.

They said that the rights of the migrant workers would not be protected unless fair and ethical recruitment were ensured in the country.

Speaking at a consultation workshop on fair and ethical overseas recruitment service providers' perspective, organised by Orissi Karni Unnayan Programme (OKUP) at the National Press Club in Dhaka, they also said that strong political will of the government would require streamlining the overseas migration and placing fair recruitment process.

They called for discouraging individual visas to stop visa trading in the destination countries.

OKUP executive director Omar Faruque Chowdhury said that proper utilisation of upgraded database of the migrant workers could cut involvement of middlemen from recruitment process.

"Due to lack of good governance and accountability, the migrant workers are being harassed by the middlemen and recruitment agencies," he said.

National Legal Aid Services Organisation's deputy director Shalehuzzaman, who is also a joint district judge, said that people should be made aware about safe migration.

The recruitment agencies should open their branches to people's doorsteps to extend manpower recruitment services, he said.

Dhaka Reporters' Unity former general secretary and chief reporter of GTV Raju Ahmed said that involvement of the middlemen in the recruitment process had become a regular phenomenon and a mechanism should be developed to bring them under legal framework.

In his presentation on the recruitment policy and practice, OKUP chair Shakirul Islam said that the fair and ethical recruitment could ensure reduction of migration cost and protection of their rights.

In light of the Global Compact on Migration, he said that migrant workers would be sent to destinations at zero cost, job contracts should be prepared in languages known to both employers and employees, and inspection and monitoring should be strengthened by the concerned government agencies.

New Age journalist Md Owaisim Uddin Bhuyan, Financial Express journalist Arafat Ara, panel lawyer of the Bangladesh Society for Enforcement of Human Rights Firoz Mahmud, Wichrow International programme officer Zahidul Islam and aspirant migrant Sonia Begum, among others, also spoke at the workshop.

Govt now moves to make changes in labour rules

Monira Munni

The government has initiated a move to bring about necessary changes in the existing labour rules aiming to make them time-befitting in line with the amended labour law, officials said.

Changes were made in 50 sections of the amended labour law last year, they added.

To this end, the labour ministry has recently formed a 10-member committee, headed by its additional secretary, comprising representatives from apex bodies -- Bangladesh Carpenters Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) and Bangladesh Knitwear Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BKMEA) and representatives from rights groups.

The committee was asked to prepare the draft of amendments to the labour law within six months, the officials said.

The first meeting of the committee held on Sunday discussed major amendments to the labour law that included reduction in workers' representation threshold in formation of a trade union in a factory, eradication of child labour and provisions of SOPs (Standard Operating Procedures) related to anti-trade union discrimination, a commit-

tee member said.

The workers' representation for trade union registration has been brought down to 20 per cent from 30 per cent and SOPs have been formulated, he said.

In the amended law, 16-week maternity leave has been announced as benefit which earlier was cut by employers from workers' earned leave.

Festival allowance has also been incorporated in the law to ensure that all workers receive the allowance, he added.

The other amended issues included an increasing amount of compensation for workers, legal measures if maternity welfare is not ensured and labour court judgment duration determination, he added.

"But the law does not explain the details of their procedures. It is the rules that would detail how to implement them," he told the FE on Sunday.

The meeting also asked the committee members to submit their proposals on amendment within one month, another member said.

The committee will propose changes in some other areas, if needed, to make the laws time-befitting, he added.
Non-RMG industries demand same tax benefits as garment sector

Staff Correspondent

NON-GARMENT export-oriented industries on Monday demanded tax benefits, including corporate income tax at reduced rate, similar to readymade garment sector.

At a pre-budget discussion with National Board of Revenue, representatives from different export-oriented sectors said that NBR should not discriminate among the sectors in giving tax facilities.

Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association president Md Siddiqur Rahman, who was also present at the meeting, echoed with the demand of the non-RMG sector.

"NBR should provide similar tax benefits to all exporters and the benefits should be given for long term," he said.

Bangladesh Textile Mills Association president Mohammed Ali Khokon said that corporate tax rate for textile sector should be lowered to the level of apparel sector.

Currently, textile sector enjoys corporate tax at reduced rate of 15 per cent and tenure of the facility is set to expire June, 2019.

Khokon demanded extension of the benefit up to 2029.

Bangladesh Plastic Goods Manufacturers and Exporters Association president Md Jashim Uddin said that NBR should provide tax benefits to small and potential exporters similar to apparel sector to help the sector's growth.

Bangladesh Jute Mills Association demanded reduction of source tax on export proceeds to 0.25 per cent for jute exporters from current 0.68 per cent.

Bangladesh Garment Accessories and Packaging Manufactures and Exporters Association president Abdur Kader Khan demanded for setting the 0.25 per cent source tax on export proceeds for five years.

For apparel exporters, BGMEA president Siddiq demanded reduction of corporate income tax rate to 10 per cent from existing 12 per cent.

NBR should take steps to lower the interest rate on bank loans, Siddiq said, adding that nothing could be achieved without lowering interest rate and realising bad loans.

BGMEA, in its written proposal, demanded that NBR withdraw the existing 0.25 per cent source tax on export earnings, or alternatively, consider the source tax as final settlement.

It also demanded complete value-added tax exemption for export-oriented sectors and waived them from submission of VAT returns.

The association also sought removal of a provision of Income Tax Ordinance-1984 which says that employers should provide information related to tax compliance of their employees.

Responding to the demands, NBR chairman Md Mosharraf Hossain said that they would scrutinise the proposals during the budget preparation.

He, however, urged the businesses to play a role in prevention of leakage of goods imported duty-free under bonded warehouse licences.

No one will be spared for misuse of bond licences, he said, adding that in future only exporters would be provided bond licences.

He also requested employers to provide actual information related to number of foreign employees and their salary so that NBR could collect proper amount of income tax from them.

Bangladesh is the fifth largest source of remittance earnings of India, but NBR doesn't get so much tax from foreigners, he said.

NBR member (income tax) Kanon Kumar Roy, Bangladesh Terri Towel Manufactures and Exporters association president Shahadat Hossain, among others, spoke at the programme.
Hawkers' woes need to be addressed at any cost

HUNDREDS of hawkers at a sit-in on Sunday demanded rehabilitation before evicting them from footpath and the framing of a hawkers' rehabilitation policy. They also urged the government to have a national policy on hawkers’ management. Leaders and activists of hawkers, as New Age reported on Monday, blocked the road in front of the National Press Club in Dhaka to push for their demands. It is true that inadequate footpaths, that took illegally occupied by hawkers, often create problems for pedestrians. It is also pertinent to note that because of footpaths being occupied by them, pedestrians on most occasions need to walk down the roads at the risk of being hit or run over by vehicles. Around 58 per cent of traffic accidents that take place in Dhaka involve pedestrians. One, however, must not forget that, according to the statistics of the Bangladesh Chinnamul Hawkers’ Samiti, Dhaka alone is home to about 2,69,000 hawkers. But who are these hawkers? Where have they come from? They are the landless people; many of whom are victims of river erosion and flooding in rural areas. The destruction of the rural economy forced them to move to the capital and other cities in search of a living although the attitude of successive governments towards them has been, at best, indifferent and, at worst, disdainful.

They live in a constant fear of being removed or evicted. They are under a constant threat of being evicted or removed, from where they work, by law enforcers as there is no policy to defend or protect them. Many of them are victims of extortion by the police; and those who fail to oblige the police by handing over money are harassed and removed from their places. While Dhaka city expands, urbanisation moves space and metropolitan appurtenances are added, these developments have never encompassed these hawkers. There is no place for these hapless people in the midst of the skyscrapers, dazzling shopping malls and flashing cars. They keep floating on the margin of city life clinging to the brink of survival. The woes of the permanent city dwellers will look attenuated when compared with those of these hawkers. Although marginalised in developmental perspectives, their contribution to urban economy is far from being marginal. They are not parasites and keep the economy roiling in their own way if left undisturbed.

In view of this reality, the government needs to work out a national policy and make a law for hawkers which would protect them from being persecuted by law enforcers. It also needs to take expeditious steps to make a list of all hawkers and provide them with identity cards in recognition of their profession and some space to pursue their profession without any hassle. The government, in other words, need to address hawkers' woes and rehabilitate them in the greater interest in no time.
Jute mill workers on 72-hour strike

Commuters suffer as roads, railways blockaded

Staff Correspondent

State-owned jute mill workers and employees began a 72-hour strike and four-hour blockade of roads and railways for three days across the country Tuesday morning for nine-point demands, pay hike and payment of due wages.

The road blockade caused sufferings to commuters and Higher Secondary Certificate examinees at places in the morning.

The demands include adequate allocation for jute sector, payment of due provident fund and gratuity to retired workers and insurance benefit to the families of deceased workers, implementation of the recommendations of the National Wage and Productivity Commission 2015, appointment of workers, regularisation of temporary workers, reappointment of sacked workers and the balancing, modernisation, rehabilitation and expansion of the jute mills for better productivity.

Thousands of workers of 26 state-owned jute mills as well as their families rallied at their respective jute mill gates and marched towards nearby roads and railways and blocked those at places, including Demra in Dhaka, Chattogram, Khulna, Rajshahi and Jessore.

Reports received from districts said that passengers, including the Higher Secondary Certificate examinees, had to suffer a lot. The protesting workers, however, allowed the examinees to go using their vehicles after checking their admit cards.

Reports received from the districts said that the commuters, including the Higher Secondary Certificate examinees, had to face obstacles from the protesters.

Workers of state-owned jute mills blockade Dhaka-Sylhet Highway for demands, including wage hike,...
Inspection authority fails to eliminate safety hazards in garment factories

Monira Muni

The inspection authority concerned in Bangladesh has failed to eliminate the high-risk safety hazards in the garment factories it inspected three to five years back, according to a latest research report.

The inspection agency is not ready to take over the responsibility of the ongoing safety activities in the factories listed with the Accord, a platform of Western buyers, claimed the report launched on Monday.

Four global labour rights groups -- Clean Clothes Campaign, International Labour Rights Forum, Maquila Solidarity Network, and Worker Rights Consortium -- conducted the research based on the data on factory safety available with the government.

Four of these groups are also signatories to the Accord.

The Accord, the platform of EU-based global apparel brands, retailers and trade unions, was formed after the Rana Plaza building collapse that killed more than 1,100 garment workers to improve workplace safety in the country's ready-made garment industry for five years that ended in May last year.

Accord research report reveals

Pressure is mounting on the government to allow the platform for three more years in Bangladesh, as its extended tenure ended in November 2018. The issue now remained under judicial consideration.

The government's justification for trying to end the Accord’s work is entirely on its claim that the government is ready to assume responsibility for the 1,688 factories under the Accord’s purview, but the research shows a shocking level of unreadiness, the report said.

"Each of the 745 factories under the government's inspection programme has yet to eliminate high-risk safety hazards, all of which were identified between three and five years ago,” it said.

The high-risk hazards included lockable exit ways which, in the event of a fire, could leave workers trapped inside.

Citing DIFE’s (Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishments) statistics, the report said that as of October 2018, some 220 factories had remediated more than 50 per cent of the non-compliance items identified in corrective action plans (CAPs) and only 198 factories had submitted Detailed Engineering Assessments, of which 156 had been checked by the task force of the inspection authority.

The remediation rate of non-compliance items in all covered CAPs is 36 per cent for structural safety, 37 per cent for electrical safety and 31 per cent for fire safety, it said.

The government-run databases intended to provide information on the remediation of garment factories were inconsistent and fail to provide information on follow-up inspections, the report said.

The Accord had identified 114 critically unsafe factories, which it subsequently terminated from its inspection programme, but half of these facilities remained open under the government's inspection programme, it added.

"There is no indication in the government's own records that any safety improvements have been made to these factories," the research report said.

The labour rights groups also said that the government's complaint mechanism did not guarantee workers' anonymity when they file complaints, as it received only 18 complaints since 2013 while some 1,152 complaints were lodged with the Accord during the same period.

Citing recent fire incidents in Dhaka, the report suggested: "Rather than putting energy into attempts to gain control over the 1,688 Accord-covered factories, the DIFE should focus on the nearly 30,000 industrial facilities that need its attention much more urgently."

The Accord’s planned work through 2021 could free up direly needed government capacity to improve the safety situation in chemical factories, non-Accord garment factories, and other sectors, it noted.

It is critical that the government of Bangladesh works with the Accord signatories to create a transition plan that puts worker safety first, with handover of factories being conditional on readiness, said the report.

This would provide real solutions by incorporating the vital elements of the Accord’s model towards improving workplace safety, not just its inspections, but also the complaint mechanism and worker trainings, it noted.

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Workers pay as mismanagement rules jute mills

THE jute sector, which had been a major contributor to the economy for many decades, now fights a losing battle for survival. Lack of proper planning, mismanagement and persistent labour unrest are largely responsible for the situation. Irregular payment of workers monthly wages and non-payment of retirement benefits have become common. The Bangladesh Jute Mills Corporation, as a 2017 report says, owes Tk 387 crore to workers and officials who have retired or died in service since July 2013. The government announced a pay structure in June 2015, but it has not yet been implemented. Despite repeated assurances from authorities, due wages and retirement benefits remained unpaid. It is in this context state-owned jute mill workers and staff went on strike and held blockade on Tuesday to push for their demands, including adequate allocation for the sector, payment of dues to retired workers and expansion of jute mills. The road blockade caused immense suffering to people, particularly HSC examinees, a situation that the government could have avoided with timely action.

The corporation’s response to the issues of non-payment of due wage and retirement benefits remains that the mill owners are reeling from heavy losses because of high production cost. In the 2016–17 financial year, the total loss reached Tk 482 crore. Experts, however, blamed financial mismanagement, declining production and politicisation of the sector for this. These mills, established in the 1950s–1960s, have seen no investment in infrastructure and machinery, which eventually almost halved the production. Some corporation officials along with members of collective bargaining agents have bought raw jute in late season, when price is higher, putting production in trouble. In addition, there are reports of corruption in the purchase of spare parts and other materials. There are allegations that pervasive corruption is the reason for the high production cost. Timely allocation of money for raw jute purchase could improve the situation. Researchers agree and argue that in a stressed financial situation, mill owners often use the provident funds to meet daily expenses such as salary and wages. The situation at hand in which thousands of workers and their family struggle to survive because of the non-payment of wages and benefits is the result of corruption and mismanagement that successive governments have allowed. Meanwhile, jute mill workers are now paying the price for the sector's corruption as their dues have been withheld for months.

The government, under the circumstances, must resolve the issue of non-payment of wages and dues under a concrete plan. It must immediately implement the recommendations of the National Wage and Productivity Commission 2015 for the jute sector. It must, however, attend to unaddressed issues of pervasive corruption to revive the jute industry.

Jute mill workers want their dues

Early intervention could have avoided the violence

We are worried about the escalation of violence during a three-day country-wide work abstention of different state-owned jute mills that left 16 people injured when clashes ensued between workers and police. Most of the demands of the workers seem to be reasonable. They include clearing all arrears, implementing the National Wage Scale-2015, clearing payments related to gratuities and insurance claims of retired and deceased workers and reinstating those workers who lost jobs during previous demonstrations. If the demands are legitimate and it seems they are, why did the workers have to resort to such desperate measures?

While we cannot condone the attacks on police, blocking of roads and train routes, stopping trains from going to their destination, we cannot help but ask why the authorities, especially the BJMC (Bangladesh Jute Mills Corporation) did not meet with the workers' representatives earlier and resolve the issues amicably. According to news reports the BJMC has invited the protesting workers for a meeting on their demands on Saturday. After reaching a decision the Collective Bargaining Agent (CBA) and non-CBA Oliya Parishad, both of which represent the protesting workers, will meet with CBA leaders of 26 state-owned jute mills. Why couldn't all this have happened before things got out of hand?

It is no secret that the state-owned jute mills are not running very efficiently and little has been done to remove the bottlenecks which have resulted in these mills not paying the workers their dues. But this does not absolve the authorities from addressing the woes of the workers. There is no reason why workers have to take such extreme measures for extracting what is due to them. The filing of around 250 cases against protesting workers will rather aggravate the situation than defusing it. The government must come up with a sustainable solution to avoid further spiralling of this crisis.
Making sugar mills viable

RESCUING the state-owned sugar mills from what many think inevitable collapse has, so far, remained a matter of discussion only. Loss making sugar mills have been a burden for the government for long. Attempts to bolster them for increased productivity and profitability have not produced any worthwhile result till now. In fact, government efforts in this direction smacked of tokenism because whatever stray moves were taken did not actually promise to bring any noticeable improvement in the overall performance of the sugar mills. Like most other state-run entities burdened with loss, wastefulness and inefficiency, the sugar mills have also earned the white elephant tag, requiring hefty funds from the state coffer every year to pay for their mounting losses.

Lately, it has been learnt that the government is stepping up efforts to diversify production in the state-owned sugar mills by tapping the existing potential in order to make them profitable. The Bangladesh Sugar and Food Industries Corporation (BSFIC) has, reportedly, been asked to carry out feasibility study on possible areas where diversification could be made. The diversification project the government is mulling may not necessarily be limited to sugar-related products, in that the move is basically to utilise the land and resources of the sugar mills. Some of the products likely to figure in the diversification project may include paper and food products, according to official sources.

Of the 16 state-owned sugar mills, 15 produce only sugar, and none makes any money. The remaining one that runs profitably produces besides sugar, alcohol from sugarcane. That the mills producing only sugar run at a loss explains the fact that there should have been attempts to include more allied products to render the mills self-sustaining and also profitable. One of the key issues that should have been looked into long back is that with only three-four months of productive operation, the sugar mills cannot be expected to avoid loss. Another issue that goes with this is that increasing the productivity of the mills is dependent on sugarcane harvest. Experts hold that in the context of Bangladesh, only sugar production cannot make a mill viable. It is unfortunate that this realisation came rather late, although there is no reason why it did not make itself felt long ago. So, proper utilisation of by-products of sugar as well as exploration of the prospect of producing newer, preferably allied, products should receive urgent attention of the authorities.

Running these mills profitably is very crucial, perhaps even going beyond domestic market intervention, as around half a million sugarcane farmers depend solely on these mills for their livelihood. Thus sustaining these mills is equally important to ensure wellbeing of a large number of people dependent on them; and this can only be expected to be achieved by running these mills efficiently and innovatively, also taking into account the inherent lacunas not addressed for decades.
Bangladeshi workers pursue Dubai employer over unpaid wages

Hundreds of Indian and Bangladeshi construction workers are pursuing their employer for unpaid wages stretching back 10 months, consular officials said, according to a report by www.thenational.ae.

About 900 men living in company accommodation in Dubai and Ras Al Khaimah appealed to officials to help after downing tools last year.

The Indian consulate and the Bangladesh embassy have been working with labour ministry officials to convince the company to make the payments so the workers can return home.

Electricity was cut off to their camp in Dubai for a few days in December after workers stopped working.

It was restored when consular officials intervened.

Calls and emails to the company, a general contractor based in Garhoud, went unanswered. The firm claims it does not have the money to pay, Indian consular officials said.

The government has warned companies it will cancel work permits, effectively shutting off operations, if they fail to pay and encourage workers to report late wages to the authorities.

A senior labour department official at Dubai Courts told The National that several options are being looked at, including that the Dh3,000 security deposit that businesses pay when they hire an employee be handed over to each worker.

But the dues of some labourers - who say they are owed between 3 and 10 months' wages - amount to more than Dh10,000 and they remain in the country hoping the case is resolved.

Muhammed Imran, Bangladesh's ambassador to the UAE, said officials were in contact with about 300 of their citizens who have not been paid.

"The company has assured us they will take some remedial measure on the non-payment," he said.

The Indian consulate asked community organisations and volunteers to supply food such as rice, lentils, potatoes and toiletries such as soaps, toothbrushes and toothpaste to the workers, who have run out of funds. Volunteer workers said the response from the community to donate essentials to the workers has been strong.

"We just have to ask for supplies and people immediately come forward to help," said Kusum Dutta, who has organised food for workers in the Dubai camp.

"We are just doing our best to help because these men need basic supplies and have no money left."

Rubana Huq says members cast their votes in a jovial mood.

"We will work for branding both the industry and the country, ensure accountability and restore members' confidence in the trade body," she told The Financial Express.

The panel will also work to create awareness among the entrepreneurs in negotiation with buyers about fair prices for locally-made apparel products, she added.

The panel's other pledges included move to expand existing markets and explore new ones, measures to reduce high tax in potential countries and increase trade benefits and enhance workers' productivity, creating worker-friendly environment, ensuring workplace safety irrespective of factory size and investment in technology, research and creating employment.

Zahangir Alam, convenor of Swadhinata Parishad panel, however, alleged, "Two of his agents could not come as they were threatened."

"We wanted to make agents from two of our candidates, but the election commission did not allow it," he noted.

Sammita Parishad and Forum jointly formed the panel Sammita Parishad and Forum today, as Swadhinata Parishad, a new platform, was formed just last year.

The incumbent board under Siddiqur Rahman's leadership took over for a two-year term on September 22, 2015 through negotiations between Sammita Parishad and Forum. Sammita Parishad holds 19 posts of directorship, including the presidency, and the Forum 16 posts.

Despite its two-year tenure, the existing board still remains in office for more than three years and a half as the government extended its tenure thrice. As per the negotiations, the Forum was supposed to take the BGMEA's leadership for the next term.

A total of 44 candidates contested election for 26 posts as BGMEA's election board announced on March 06 nine of the trade body's directors in Chattogram elected unopposed.

Candidates from Sammita Parish are Rubana Huq, SM Mannan Kochi, Faisal Samad, Mohammad Azizul, Shabidul Haque Mukul, Shamsul Azam Sajal, Mominul Haq Khan (Baba), Masud Kader (Momo), Iqbal Hamid Quaisi, Shafiul Islam, MD Nasir Uddin, MD Kamal Uddin, Mosharraf Hossain, Mominul Haque, Anis Ali, Mohammad Abdul Momen, Mosharraf Hossain, MD Shahidul Islam, Siddiqui Hossain, Ubaidur Rehman, Shafiul Islam, Mohsinul Islam, Anis Ali, Mohammad Atique, Mohammed Abdul Salum, Mohammed Enamul Mostafa, Enamul Aziz Chowdhury, Mohammad Musa and Khondaker Belayer Hossain.

The BGMEA is being run by a 35-member board of directors, including seven vice-presidents.

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PM seeks Italy's support for leather sector development

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina sought on Sunday cooperation from Italy to develop Bangladesh's leather sector, reports UNB. "We need your cooperation in leather sector. Italian leather goods are good, Italians are very much concerned about their leather goods," she said when the newly appointed Italian Ambassador in Bangladesh Enrico Nunziata called on her at her office.

PM's press secretary Ishanul Karim briefed the reporters after the meeting. He said the Prime Minister put emphasis on increasing the trade relations with Italy. She welcomed the newly appointed ambassador and assured government's all out cooperation in discharging his duties.

Italian Ambassador in Bangladesh Enrico Nunziata said he has chosen Bangladesh for his work and he will work for promoting further the bilateral relations as well enhancing economic cooperation.

"Bangladesh has huge potential, we have to increase our trade relations," he said.

He put emphasis on increasing the relations between the chambers of commerce of the two countries. "We have to explore areas of cooperation," he added.

He also mentioned that Italy has formed a parliamentary group to promote relations.

Continued from page 8 col. 1

worse further during the monsoon. In this connection she said the government is preparing an island to relocate the Rohingyas temporarily for their better living.

Mentioned the relation between the UK and Bangladesh wonderful she recalled the support of the UK government and its people for their support during the Liberation War of Bangladesh.

The Prime Minister invited the UK entrepreneurs to come to Bangladesh with their investment.

Regarding the climate change issue she appreciated the UK for supporting Bangladesh. In this connection she said the government has already constituted a Climate Fund with its own resource and is constructing various infrastructures in the coastal belt areas keeping in mind the climate change issues.

She has struggled all through her life for restoration of democracy in the country, Hasina said adding media is enjoying total freedom in Bangladesh.

Mark Field congratulated Sheikh Hasina for her re-election last year. He said Bangladesh has a very good potential and the relations between Bangladesh and the UK is growing fast.

Mark Field said the UK government would work with Bangladesh on climate change issue. He also mentioned that his country would cooperate Bangladesh in education sector.

Regarding the Rohingya issue he said that over one million Rohingyas are a big burden for Bangladesh.

Principal Secretary M Nojibur Rahman and British High Commissioner in Bangladesh Robert Chatterton Dickson were present during the call-on.
RMG factories start using 'jhut' to run boilers

Monira Munnii

The country's ready-made garment (RMG) factories have started using cutting wastes, popularly known as jhut, to run boilers amid short supply of natural gas—presently the main energy source for the boilers.

This new technology is being used, though in a limited scale, also to cut the cost of fuel, industry insiders said.

They said a good number of such boilers are imported from China and Korea while there are few local companies too started supplying such boilers to the local RMG factories.

Bright Star Engineers and Traders, a local manufacturer, has already supplied jhut-run boilers to a dozen factories.

"The efficiency level of the less dust dischargeable and smoke-free jhut fired boilers is more than 80 per cent," Md Moshiur Rahman, managing director of Bright Star, told the FE on the sidelines of the recently-ended National Industrial Fair at Bangabandhu International Conference Centre in the city.

His company provided jhut-run boilers to some six RMG factories and one food processing company.

In garment factories, the boilers are mainly used in the laundries to provide steam to dry or iron the clothes; industry people said, adding that the boiler can also be used to produce hot water for heating purposes.

A couple of green garment factories in the country, certified by US Green Building Council (USGBC) and LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design), have also opted for such technology mainly to face the energy shortage, they noted.

"Jhut is a byproduct of garment fabrics and there is also gas shortage in the country. Considering the two aspects, we have started using this byproduct to generate heat energy as a viable solution to the problem," said Abdullah Al Mamun, deputy general manager at Crossline Factory Pvt Ltd.

The 30-line knitwear factory started using jhut-based boiler six months back mainly to reduce dependency on natural gas and reduce their expenditure, he said.

Before using jhut, the factory had to pay Tk 0.7 million as monthly gas bill while the cost significantly fell to Tk 0.1 million per month after using the fabric waste, Mr Mamun noted.

Moreover, he said, use of such boiler is free of hassles and risks whereas jhut burning can be controlled easily, he said.

FGS Denim Wear Ltd is another factory that converted its gas-based boiler to jhut-based one as they found it cheaper and risk free, said Md Salim Miah, general manager (maintenance) at the FGS.

Industry people said that waste to energy is an emerging area to explore in the context of industrial environmental management system.

It is encouraging to note that the factories are gradually shifting from waste disposal practice to adopting waste utilisation technologies, they said, adding that the environmental hazard, if there is any, should be taken into consideration at the same time.

Sheikh Hasina said scientists and researchers have huge responsibilities towards the nation. "You'll discharge your duties [properly] ... so that future generations can take the country forward. Let no evil force play ducks and drakes with the fate of the people of Bangladesh," she said.

The Prime Minister mentioned that the government is formulating National ICT policy 2018 to ensure the use of science and technology in every sphere of life. Research works are being emphasised for that reason.

"She said Bangladesh has gained a huge maritime area and research is essential to explore the potentials from this maritime boundary.

"We've already set up an institute in Cocos' Bazaar while studies are being conducted at Dhaka and Chittagong universities. We need large-scale research," she said.

The Prime Minister said the country needs more scientists, technologists and researchers.

She mentioned that the government is...
Consolidation of small RMG units to be top priority

Newly elected BGMEA president Rubana Huq tells FE

Monira Munnii

Ms Huq, who did her PhD from Jadavpur University in 2018, has been in garment trade for the last 23 years. She was the wife of late Aminul Huq, a former BGMEA president and former Dhaka North City Corporation mayor.

Explaining her vision for the readymade garment (RMG) industry, Ms Huq said she would work for the welfare of all RMG entrepreneurs, irrespective of size, workers and their representatives, collectively so that no factory faces closure in the future.

Many garment factories have closed down while a good number of small and medium-sized factories are struggling to survive, as buyers don't want to give work orders to factories located in buildings that accommodate several other factories or establishments, she said.

"For example, if there are four small factories in a building, we will encourage them to consolidate to form a single company, which will increase their combined capacity and give them an edge to negotiate with the buyers effectively," she added.

Consolidation of small RMG units

Continued from page 8 col. 7

Buyers will also feel confident to source from them and this has already been proven through one such initiative in the last ten years, said the BGMEA president-elect.

When asked, Rubana Huq said they have a plan to launch a pilot programme in this regard at Mirpur.

"In our country, there are so many boutique and fashion houses presenting rich designs, trend, embroidery and so on. So, why don't we integrate those designers with the export-oriented garment industry," she asked.

"We want to bridge small business with middle and large ones to boost the export potentials and turn local business ideas into international ones," she said.

The new leadership of BGMEA will open a number of cells, including price negotiation cell, to help entrepreneurs bargain with buyers, and promote good practices and innovations, Ms Huq added.

She said they would also focus on vital issues such as branding the image of the sector and the trade body, product pricing, wage and productivity, market expansion and exploration of emerging markets and policies.

When asked, Ms Huq said her goal would be to set the target bar high with better visions. "As a woman, I will accept challenges with fullest courage and conviction, because a woman has more empathy and is probably more transparent." Terming the BGMEA leadership a 'responsibility', she said any victory should be a humble experience and should not be about being overwhelmed with bouquets and celebrations.

Regarding the Accord activities, Ms Huq said re-negotiation should start with physical presence of BGMEA representatives in the Accord for its transition process which is now in limbo.

"Transition has to head towards handover," she noted.
Bangladesh 3rd in South Asia, 11th globally: WB

Global remittances, which include flows to high-income countries, reached $689 billion in 2018, up from $633 billion in 2017.

The WB says the global average cost of sending $200 remained high, at around 7 percent in the first quarter of 2019.

Reducing remittance costs to 3 percent by 2030 is a global target under Sustainable Development Goal 10.7. Remittance costs across many African corridors and small islands in the Pacific remain above 10 percent.

On ways to lower remittance costs, Dilip Ratha, lead author of the brief, says remittances are on track to become the largest source of external financing in developing countries. He, however, says the high costs of money transfers reduce the benefits of migration.

“Renegotiating exclusive partnerships and letting new players operate through national post offices, banks, and telecommunications companies will increase competition and lower remittance prices,” Michal Rutkowski, senior director of the social protection and jobs global practice at the WB, says millions of low-skilled migrant workers are vulnerable to recruitment malpractices, including exorbitant recruitment costs.

“We need to boost efforts to create jobs in developing countries and to monitor and reduce recruitment costs paid by these workers. The WB and the International Labour Organization are collaborating to develop indicators for worker-paid recruitment costs, to support the SDG of promoting safe, orderly, and regular migration, according to Rutkowski.”

The report says the increase was driven by stronger economic conditions in the US and a pick-up in oil prices, which had a positive impact on outward remittances from some Gulf Cooperation Council countries. The GCC consists of Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

Remittances grew by more than 14 percent in India and 7 percent in Pakistan.

In 2019, remittances flows to low and middle-income countries are expected to reach $550 billion, to become their largest source of external financing, said the report.

Among the countries, the top remittance recipients after India were China ($67b), Mexico ($36b), the Philippines ($34b), Egypt ($29b), France ($26b), Nigeria ($24b), Pakistan ($21b), Germany ($17b), and Vietnam ($16b), according to the brief.
34pc farmers want to switch to other professions: Study

FE Report

Only 24.11 per cent of respondents said they would leave farming profession if they get better alternative jobs, according to a recent study.

On the other hand, 65.89 per cent of the farmers said they would continue their occupation even after they avail better opportunities, it added.

The study was conducted jointly by non-governmental organisation (NGO) ActionAid, Bangladesh and Food Security Network (KHANID).

The scoping study titled 'Family farming in Bangladesh: challenges and prospects' was launched at a seminar held at a conference centre of Krishibid Institute Bangladesh in the capital on Tuesday.

Agriculture Secretary Md Nasiruzzaman attended the seminar as the chief guest with president of KHANI Bangladesh Dr Joynul Abedin in the chair. Moderated by ActionAid director Asgar Ali Sahri, the seminar was also attended by Dr Arif Kumar Das, a consultant of Food and Agriculture Organisation, and Md Abdul Bari, project director of Soil Resource Development Institute.

Two researchers Nurul Afara Masud and Pavel Parthia presented the key findings of the study.

The survey was conducted among 899 farmers living in 86 villages of 11 districts for preparing the study.

According to it, 80.54 per cent of small farmers believe that the scope to sell their goods and access to market is easier.

Among the respondents, 746 farmers believe that agriculture is a familial work in general while 91 considers it a combination of both personal and familial work and the remaining ones believe that it is fully personal work.

The study made 10-point recommendation including creating a congenial environment, ensuring farmers' access to land, ascertaining youths' participation and empowering the farmers' organisation to bolster family farming in the country.

Speaking on the occasion, the agriculture secretary said the country's economic development largely depends on the protection of farmers' and family farming.

Mr Nasir also said agricultural contribution to the country's gross domestic product (GDP) is still huge, though it has apparently been on the wane in recent years.

"Actually, the contribution of the industrial sector is rising which leads to an apparent declining trend in the figures of agriculture's contribution," he added.

Mr Nasir also said the bureaucratic said Bangladesh's success in ensuring food security mostly from own sources amid several global recessions in the last one decade is testimonial of the success.

He would convey the study recommendations to the authorities concerned to take necessary actions, he added.

Bangladesh second fastest growing economy: IMF

Projects less inflationary pressure ahead

Rejaul Karim Byron

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The economy will grow at 7.3 percent this year, which will be second highest in the world, as per the IMF report 'World Economic Outlook, April 2019: Growth Slowdown, Precarious Recovery' revealed on Tuesday.

Neighbouring India will also grow at the same pace as Bangladesh but Rwanda will grow the fastest at 7.8 percent.

The three countries would be the only ones in the world to log in more than 7 percent growth this year.

The IMF's projection comes on the heels of the World Bank's and the Asian Development Bank's.

The World Bank, which does not use calendar year in its projections like its counterpart IMF, said Bangladesh would be among the five fastest growing economies in the world this fiscal year with its 7.3 percent growth.

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Coordinated movement needed for realising workers' rights: seminar

ECONOMISTS and political analysts at a seminar on Wednesday stressed the need for coordinated movement by workers' associations for realising minimum wage amid skewed economic growth favouring handful super rich people.

They noted that other longstanding demands like accommodation, education and healthcare of the working class people would remain unfulfilled if the present weakness of the workers' associations persisted.

They made the observations while commenting on a keynote paper on ‘Upcoming Budget: Expectation of Workers, Employees and People’ by Dhaka University economic teacher MM Akash at the seminar organised by Bangladesh Trade Union Centre at National Press Club.

Economist Rehman Sobhan said there was weakness in workers' movements to earn their rights.

There were even 50 trade unions, he said.

He noted the movement by the workers' associations should be organised in a way so that the government must fulfill their legitimate demands.

He lamented that the government only listened to demands by the businessmen and industrialists who could not be made without labours.

Sobhan also lamented that he never expected so much inequality in the country during his lifetime.

Sobhan said the business establishments were becoming powerful day by day.

The presence of businessmen in parliament was so high and it almost wiped out the division between businessmen and politicians, he said.

He said there would be no political democracy if the economic democracy was hampered.

MM Akash in his keynote paper highlighted the emptiness of the national budget in addressing the demand of the working class people and criticised measures like expansion of indirect tax and reducing corporate tax.

He also criticised the government for halting the scam hit banks with the public fund.

He said demand for establishing a commission on alliling banking sector was not materialised.

He noted that there was economic growth in the country but the benefit was not distributed evenly.

He also noted that dangerous inequality hovering around 0.48 per cent could not be checked unless the 'triangular coalition of dishonest politicians, businessmen and bureaucrats' was broken.

Commenting on the keynote paper, Centre for Policy Dialogue distinguished fellow Mustafizur Rahman said this was worrying that most of the country's economic growth was concentrated within top five per cent households.

He said budget could be a tool to address the widening inequality.

But he noted sadly that no such measure was seen in the budget although the nation had seen many budgets.

Among others TOC president Sahidullah Chowdhury and general secretary Wajedul Islam Khan were present at the seminar.
Workers get $0.54 of an $18.25 polo shirt
Still buyers unwilling to hike prices to ensure better wage: rights group

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

Bangladeshi garment workers get only 2.96 percent, or just $0.54, of the $18.25 retail value of a polo shirt in the Western world, said the Fair Wear Foundation (FWF), an Amsterdam-based rights group, yesterday.

The FWF's research showed many buyers were not willing to pay more after the minimum wage was increased in Bangladesh in 2013, said its expert Klaus Hohenegger.

Brands agree to increase prices when the fabric cost goes up or currency fluctuates, but start bargaining when the minimum wage goes up, making the argument that factories simply need to increase their efficiency.

"This must be seen within the context of Bangladesh where the prices of garments have been steadily going down year by year despite the rising cost of production," Hohenegger said at a workshop yesterday.

The FWF and the Bangladesh Knitwear Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BKMEA) organised the workshop styled "labour minute costing and price negotiation with buyers" at the capital's Lakeshore Hotel.

"Our view is that it is the buyer's responsibility to comply with the legal wage requirements," Hohenegger said, while calling for transparency in the 'Free on Board' (FOB) pricing.

FOB is the point at which the ownership of the goods is transferred to the buyer such that the seller is no longer responsible for damages.

Making the cost of labour transparent is important as it shows that it is entirely possible to increase wages without affecting the 'marketability' of the garments concerned since the cost of labour is just a fraction of the retail price, said FWF's Country Manager Koen Oosterom.

The total manufacturing cost of the $18.25 polo shirt in a factory in Bangladesh is $3.50. The manufacturers sell the item to the wholesalers at $3.85, which includes a 10 percent profit margin.

The manufacturers have to spend $1.75 for embroidery and $0.10 for packaging.

The manufacturers' direct labour cost (salary) is $0.33, indirect labour cost (different allowances) is $0.21, management cost $0.17 and factory running cost $0.29.

The wholesalers and retailers also spend certain percentage of money for insurance, transportation and duty.

The FWF labour minute calculator shows how much the price of a garment item would need to go up in order to give factories the required financial room to ensure payment of at least the legal minimum wage. All other things being equal, Oosterom said.
Financial Express  
Saturday | April 13, 2019

Tracing child labour in light engineering sector

HABIB, an eight-year-old boy, was cleaning machinery parts. His little hands were coated with chemicals and the T-shirt which was probably white once, looked unwashed and dirty, and hung loose on his thin frame.

The boy was working at a small unit at the Tipu Sultan Road in Old Dhaka, one of the main hubs of light engineering industries in the country. The workshop repairs mainly air compressors of garments factories as well as spare parts of textiles and spinning mills.

Habib works nine hours a day for Tk 250 a week. About 3000 factories are operating in this area with more than 20,000 workers. Locals have said almost every factory has one or two child labourers aged between 8 and 14.

Light engineering is the mother sector for other industries. Over 90 per cent units meet domestic needs and its market size is Tk 600 billion. Nearly 40,000 factories are under the industry while some 1.0 million workers are engaged across the country, according to Bangladesh Engineering Industry Owners’ Association (BEIOA).

Bangladesh government identified 38 activities as hazardous for children in 2013. Of them, working with lethargy, welding and metal substance is directly linked to light engineering industries.

The existing labour law of Bangladesh prohibits employment of children less than 14 years of age. It also makes illegal hazardous forms of child labour for persons aged below 18.

Yet, a visit to different workshops and factories in Old Dhaka showed that not a single factor or factory protection measures for their workers including children.

At one factory, a 25-year-old worker, who wished anonymity, said no factory in this area cared about workers’ security. It seems that there is no culture of maintaining occupational safety. “It is obviously harmful for every worker. Especially children are more vulnerable,” he told this FE correspondent.

During the conversation, he was welding some things, and a 14-year-old boy was helping him. But both were without any eye protector and gloves. “These children come here because of poverty, otherwise they might have gone to school,” the man said.

Abdulla Al Mamun, director of Child Rights Governance and Child Protection of Save the Children in Bangladesh, said as per definition, children working at light engineering factories are doing hazardous jobs.

But the child labourers in some units are treated like slave workers as some of them cannot move from the factories for months, he said. They are forced to take heavy workload with minimum or no wages on many occasions. They also face different types of sexual violence, especially children who stay overnight in the workplaces, he mentioned.

Because of poverty and lack of care by families, children come from villages and outskirts of the capital to work in light engineering industries in Old Dhaka. Parents or relatives drop them off there.

When asked, Habib’s employer Md Afroz said, “I was not willing to recruit such a small boy. But his mother had died and father was not caring about him. So his aunt left him here.

“Actually, the boy doesn’t do hard work. He only cleans machinery,” he added.

The last child labour survey of Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) in 2013 showed that there were some 1.7 million child labourers in the country. Of them, 1.2 million were doing hazardous jobs.

WHY CHILD LABOUR IS PREFERRED BY OWNERS. The main target of hiring child labour is the profit making. Employers can easily control and exploit them. Many times children do work more than 10 hours a day without any wages, said Abdu Shahid Mahmood, director, Shishu Adhikar Forum, a network of child rights NGOs (non-government organisations).

He said the beneficiaries of cheap labour are mainly buyers as they get the products at much lower prices than those of import.

Abdur Razzaque, president of the BEIOA, said buyers get machinery and parts from the local market at five times less prices than those of imported ones.

So, many companies including mills, factories and pharmaceutical units are taking machinery from these industries, he said.

However, Mr Razzaque claimed that this sector is almost child labour-free. “Recently, I did not see any child in this sector,” he added.

Shahin Khan, a factory owner, said adult workers switch jobs frequently due to lower wages. They have no ability to provide high wages. So they depend on child labour.

Due to lack of available opportunities for skill training, poor parents also prefer sometimes to employ their children in this sector so that they can have technical knowledge and get good jobs in future, he also said.

INITIATIVES TO STOP CHILD LABOUR

Bangladesh government has set a target to eliminate child labour by 2021. So they have taken a project worth Tk 2.84 billion to withdraw 100,000 children from hazardous jobs by 2020. The project is being implemented by the Ministry of Labour and Employment (MoLE).

Syed Ahmed, additional secretary of MoLE, said they were working focusing on an objective of Sustainable Development Goals to eliminate child labour by 2025.

“We will take another mega project soon to withdraw at least 500,000-700,000 children from hazardous job within 2025,” he said.

Parents will get allowance and children skill training under these projects to discourage their employment for doing risky jobs, he added.

WHAT CHILD RIGHTS ACTIVISTS ARE SAYING? Rafeea Shaheen, coordinator of a programme at Manusher Jonno Foundation (MJF), who works on child labour issues, has said apart from 38 hazardous sectors, many new areas remain unexplored and light engineering industry is one of them.

Child labour could be eliminated easily, if all children were brought under primary education. “So, at first the government has to acknowledge that all children cannot go to school; despite their announcement,” she said.

Ms Rafeea also suggested the enhancing social safety net programme for poor families to continue education of their children.

Save the Children’s Abdullah Al Mamun said it would be almost difficult to eliminate child labour within the timeframe, set by the government, if monitoring and coordinated actions are not taken.

Generally formal industries are inspected by the Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishments (DIFE). Informal sectors remain ignored. But child labour is used mainly by small and unplanned factories, he added.

Contacted, Dr Nazmun Nahar, assistant inspector general (Health) of DIFE, said they were facing acute shortage of manpower. So they were going for inspection on a priority basis.

“As a community we are also not sensitive about child labour. We care about our child, not for all children. We are not inclusive and non-discriminatory to the children. So an awareness campaign is also very necessary to help eliminate child labour,” Mr Mamun observed.

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RMG value addition rises slightly

Staff Correspondent

GROSS value addition from country’s readymade garment sector in the first half of current financial year 2018-19 (July-December) increased slightly from that of the financial year 2017-18. According to the quarterly review of Bangladesh Bank, the gross value addition from the readymade garment sector stood 63.23 per cent in the first half of the current financial year 2018-19. The value addition in FY 19 was 60.94 per cent, the data showed.

Bangladesh Bank calculated the value addition considering the import price of raw materials including cotton, synthetic/viscose fibre, synthetic/mixed yarn, cotton yarn and textile fabrics and accessories. It showed that import price of raw materials in the July-December period of FY 19 stood at $6.28 billion which is 36.77 per cent of total export earnings from RMG sector of $17.06 billion in the period. Thus, raw materials prices shared 36.77 per cent of the total value of RMG export. It means local value addition is estimated at 63.23 per cent.

The existing trend of local value addition in RMG sector is satisfactory and we have little scope to increase the value addition more as we have no cotton,’ Policy Research Institute executive director Ahsan H Manur told New Age on Saturday. He said that the local value addition could reach to 70-75 per cent if the textile sector can produce high quality fabrics.

Hawkers submit memo to PM seeking permission to use one-third of footpath

Staff Correspondent

A 13-MEMBER delegation of hawkers on Monday submitted a memorandum to prime minister Sheikh Hasina seeking permission to use one-third of footpath in the city from 12.00pm.

In the memorandum, they also demanded assurance of alternative employment before eviction of the hawkers from footpaths and enactment of a national policy regarding hawkers’ rehabilitation, said a press release issued by Bangladesh Hawkers Union.

Hawkers union president Abdul Hashem Kabir led the delegation to the Prime Minister’s Office while the organisation general secretary Sekander Hayat, executive vice president Mursudul Islam Shimal, vice-president Abul Kalam, joint-general secretary Hazrat Ali, organizing secretary Md Bashir Uddin and office secretary Golap Hossain were present among others.

Earlier on the day, several thousands of hawkers set for the PMO from Baitul Mukarram Link Road at 11.00pm via Gullistan, Paltan and National Press Club. But police intercepted their march in front of High Court, setting a barricade.

The agitated hawkers staged a rally that followed a scuffle between police and the hawkers, said the release.

Hawkers from different parts of Dhaka had been demonstrating to press home their demands as the authorities of the two city corporations carried out an eviction drive in January of this year to free Dhaka footpaths.

Hawkers union leaders also submitted a memorandum to Dhaka South City mayor Sayed Khokan on April 11, which included the 10-point demands.
Safeguarding the textile industry

TEXTILE manufacturers losing domestic market has been a subject of worry for quite some time. Recent reports published in local dailies make it clear that the situation has assumed an alarming proportion due mainly to smuggling and other misdeeds taking too oppressive a toll on the capital-intensive industry. Some of these reports quoted textile manufacturers as complaining that the sector is losing domestic business worth a whopping $6.0 billion a year because of the government's failure to rein in errant practices such as smuggling of yarns and fabrics, misdeclared imports and abuse of bond facility. A spokesperson of the Bangladesh Textile Mills Association (BTTMA) has been quoted as saying that more than 40 per cent of the spinning and weaving mills are now sitting on stockpiles of yarns due to lack of demand.

Domestic market size of textiles, particularly yarns and fabrics, is estimated to be around 8.0 billion meters worth $12 billion annually. According to industry insiders, the share of local textile mills is 3-4 billion meters worth $6 billion, while the rest is met by smuggled fabrics, illegal imports and misuse of bond facility. Given the insignificant volume of commercial imports of textile materials, it is clear that nearly half of the local demand is met by smuggled goods. Misuse of bond as alleged by the industry people has also been echoed recently by none other the Chairman of the National Board of Revenue (NBR). Over and above, alleged illegal import through misdeclaration evading taxes also seriously hurts marketing of local produce.

Undoubtedly, had the foreign products been brought into the country through formal import channel, these could not compete with the local products in the mainstream marketplace because of high import duties, particularly supplementary duties meant to protect local textile mills. It has also been alleged that the border haats established to facilitate small-scale trading in the border belts of Bangladesh and India have turned out to be a source of smuggled textile products which, among others, include readymade apparels, especially women's wear, during festival seasons. Misuse of the border haats, as alleged, calls for urgent attention of the authorities concerned.

Textile, being a heavily capital-intensive industry, and a relatively new phenomenon in the country taking off since the nineties in a big way with composite mills coming into operation, deserves to get utmost protection. But repeated alarm bells not just from the industry people but from other quarters as well have done little to underscore the dire consequences of neglect. Given that Bangladesh is a new entrant in textile manufacturing - that too with its total reliance on imported cotton, the industry is vulnerable to shocks of untoward market behaviour. And if the shocks are manmade and orchestrated to squarely harm the industry, no amount of efficiency or marketing drive is going to bring it good news. It all now rests with the government and all the relevant agencies to ensure that the industry built at high cost keeps going, for the greater benefit of the economy.
96-hour strike stops wheels at jute mills

Workers press for arrears

Workers of state-owned jute mills across the country withdrew their 96-hours strike last night after the Bangladesh Jute Mill Corporation (BJMC) agreed to some of their demands.

The decision came after a meeting between worker leaders and top BJMC officials at its office in the capital last night, following the first day of the second phase of work abstention.

"We withdrew our strike as BJMC officials assured that arrears will be cleared by April 25 and the National Wage Scale-2015 would be implemented by May 28," said Kamal Uddin, office secretary of CBA at Amin Jute Mills.

Press release issued by the Ministry of Labour and Employment last night, however, only confirmed fixing workers' wages by May 17 and made no mention of implementing a new wage scale.

The release said the decisions were taken during a seven-hour meeting between State Minister for Labour and Employment Begum Munnarujj Sufian and top BJMC and worker leaders.

The decisions taken are: fixation of workers' wages by May 17 and issuance of wage slips by the very next day, clearing of all arrears by April 25; one-week's wages marking the occasion of Shah-e-barat and another round of talks between BJMC and workers' leaders on May 8.

Workers of state-owned jute mills in different districts earlier yesterday enforced a 96-hour work abstention from 8:00am to press home their nine-point demand, which included payment of outstanding wages.

Demonstrators yesterday blocked roads and railways, and staged protests at several points in Khulna, Jashore and Chattogram, threatening to wage tougher movements if their demands were not met by April 18.

The workers' demands were: payment of gratuities and insurance claims of retired and deceased workers, reinstatement of terminated or suspended workers, payment of arrears and other financial benefits to current workers, implementation of the National Wage Scale-2015, appointment of workers and making their jobs permanent as per the law, allocating funds for buying jute during jute season, undertaking BMRE (balancing modernisation, rehabilitation and expansion) scheme to increase the productivity of factories and removal of corrupt factory officials.

This was the second phase of work abstention by workers this month. Earlier on April 2, they observed a 72-hour work abstention.

Workers said they took to the streets as BJMC authorities had not pay heed to their demands despite repeated appeals.

In Khulna, agitating workers blocked roads in Notunrasta intersection, Kobirbattala, Daulatpur BL college gate and Atra Industrial area on the Dhaka-Khulna highway for four hours from 8:00am.

Under the banner of the Collective Bargaining Agent (CBA) and Non-CBA Oikya Parishad, several thousand workers of nine state-owned jute mills of Khulna and Jashore joined the demonstration.


Demonstrators set fire to tyres and chanted slogans that their demands be met. Commuters suffered as vehicular movement was halted during the demonstration.

Three trains -- Chitra Express, Rocket Express and Mohananda Express -- did not leave the Khulna Railway Station yesterday morning due to the blockade, said Manik Chandra Sarker, master of the station.

Over 33,087 workers have been working at nine state-owned jute mills on the Khulna-Jashore industrial belt.

Talking to The Daily Star, Mijanur Rahman, Platinum Jute Mills worker, said: "I didn't get wages for 11 weeks. I owe Tk 13,000 to the grocery shop owner."

Elsewhere in Chattogram, jute mill workers blocked streets halting vehicular movement.

The workers of Amin Jute Mills brought out a rally at 8:00am and blockaded Muradpur to Oxygen intersection road in the city. They burnt tyres and logs on the street, and chanted slogans.

The workers also halted a Chittagong University bound shuttle train, confirmed Md Ataur Rahman, officer-in-charge of Bayezid Police Station.

The demonstration continued till noon.

Meanwhile, the workers of Hafiz Jute Mills at Sitakunda upazila staged a demonstration at the mill premises. Other jute mills workers abstained from work to express solidarity with the movement, said Anisur Rahman, a CBA leader at Amin Jute Mills.

(Our Chattogram and Khulna correspondents contributed to this report.)
Deplorable govt failure in migrant worker rights

BANGLADESH was the third highest recipient of remittances in South Asia in 2018 and the 11th highest globally. In 2018, it received $15.5 billion in remittances as a major contribution of migrant workers to the national economy. However, they work abroad in an unsafe condition with barely any legal protection. They are exploited as undocumented labourers and often land in jail. Migrant workers often return home wounded and economically broken because of an unfavourable condition. The circumstances are as such that at least eight workers committed suicide in Bahrain in January-February. According to the Wage Earners’ Welfare Board, Bangladesh received the highest number of bodies of migrant workers from abroad in 14 years. A large number of workers are deported. A relevant parliamentary committee says that about 7,000 undocumented Bangladeshis in Malaysia await deportation. Five thousand workers are reported to be in jail in different countries. The reality shows how the government has failed to ensure a safe migration for workers who toil to run the wheel of the national economy.

The situation for women migrant workers is even worse. They are subjected to severe sexual violence in addition to an exploitative working condition. According to various sources, in the face of economic exploitation and sexual abuse, around 4,500 domestic workers returned home from Saudi Arabia in three years. Migrant worker rights advocates blame such a situation to the government’s lack of systematic support for migrant labourers. As the process of recruitment is still dominated by unscrupulous middlemen, workers pay a high recruitment cost, often being sent abroad on false promises of jobs that do not exist. The high number of undocumented labourers in Malaysia is a direct consequence of this corrupt system. Labour rights monitoring cells in Bangladeshi consulates are found unwilling and ill-equipped to help workers in a stressful situation. Rights activists also allege that the government is insincere about negotiating bilateral agreements with destination countries. They are also reluctant to raise issues of worker rights violation. Considering the inhuman treatment of domestic workers in Saudi Arabia, of Indonesia and the Philippines in 2015 stopped sending their citizens there. The Bangladesh mission in Saudi Arabia also similarly recommended that Bangladesh should stop sending workers until issues of sexual violence are resolved. The recommendations, however, fell on deaf ears as policy-makers refused to leave the large labour market.

It is, therefore, time that the government took steps to protect the rights of migrant labourers. It must eliminate the unscrupulous middlemen from the recruitment process and negotiate bilateral agreements with destination countries before sending citizens as migrant workers. More importantly, it must raise the issue of gross violation of labour rights in Middle Eastern countries at international forums, including Colombo Process, Bali Process and Abu Dhabi dialogue.

Speakers for creating skilled manpower to attain SDGs

Bangladesh Sangsad Sangstha - Rangpur

JATIYA Sangsad speaker Shirin Sharmin Chaudhury on Monday laid importance on creating skilled manpower, particularly competent youth force to attain sustainable development goals.

‘Attaining sustainable development goals (SDGs) is possible only through producing skilled workforce and competent youths as young generation represents a major portion of country’s population,’ she said.

Shirin Sharmin said grassroots people of Bangladesh were reaping the benefits of development initiatives of the present government. The speaker also distributed driving licenses to 40 professional drivers on successful completion of their four-month training.

Deputy commissioner of Rangpur Enamul Haq presided over the function while principal of Rangpur TTC Md Lutfar Rahman delivered welcome speech.

Director of the BMET Atiqur Rahman and joint secretary Naiman Chandra Baman also addressed the function.

Later, the speaker at a function at Pirgani Upazila Parishad auditorium distributed cheques among the people of ethnic community affected by recent hailstorm, scholarship and education materials among meritorious students and wheelchairs and aid-inputs among disabled people.

Pirgani Pourashaw mayor Abu Saleh Md Tajmul Islam Shamim, Pirgani Upazila chairman Noor Mohammad Mandal, vice-chairman Shafiqur Rahman Mandal Milan and local political leaders were present.
Govt, FAO to work together to develop fishermen’s life, fisheries sector

Staff Correspondent

THE government and UN’s Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) agreed on implementing two projects to help fishing communities adapt to climate change impacts and better regulate the fisheries sector in the country.

The agreements were signed at the Economics Relations Division’s conference room in Dhaka on Tuesday, said a press release sent by the ERD.

The first project, titled ‘Community-based Climate Resilient Fisheries and Aquaculture Development in Bangladesh’, would be implemented in six districts in the north-eastern hilly region and south-western coastal areas four years at the cost of $5.425 million from March, 2019, said the release.

The Global Environment Facility will provide the fund for the 1st project as a grant from the Least Developed Countries Fund.

The 1st project aims at making it easier for vulnerable fishing communities to tackle climate change impacts through the development of their skills and capacities by introducing climate resilient fisheries and aquaculture technologies, the release said.

The 2nd project, titled ‘Support to countries to address illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing’, would be implemented, spending $320,000 in one year, said the release.

It aims at helping the Department of Fisheries to reduce illegal unreported and unregulated fishing.

Additional Secretary Sultana Afroz signed the agreements on behalf of the government while FAO representative in Bangladesh Robert Dogus Simpson signed for his organisation, the press release added.

Power looms hasten decline in number of handlooms

BBS launches survey report.

FE Report

The number of handlooms in the country has continued to decline over the years mainly due to the growing use of power looms, a census has revealed.

According to the census data, the number of handlooms declined 36.79 per cent to 116,006 units in 2018 from 183,512 units in 2003 and 212,421 units in 1990.

In tandem with this trend, the number of workers associated with the sector also dropped by 66 per cent to 301,757 in the last year from 888,115 in 2003, according to the survey report of Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS).

The report on ‘Handloom Census 2018’ was launched at a programme organised by the BBS at its headquarter in the city on Tuesday afternoon.

Planning Minister MA Mannan attended the programme as the chief guest.

Statistics and Informatics Division (SID) secretary Saurendra Nath Chakrabarty was present on the occasion as the special guest with BBS Director General (DG) Dr Krishna Gayen in the chair.

Director of the handloom census project Mohiduddin Ahmed presented the key findings of the survey.

According to the report, handlooms are getting replaced by power looms across the country.

Other reasons for the decline in the number of handlooms include limited earnings from handlooms, capital shortage, scarcity of workers, and limited marketing scope.

The report also said the number of handloom-based factories drastically fell to 581 in 2018 from 12,889 units in 2003.

Region-wise, Chattogram division hosts the highest 56.20 per cent of the total handlooms thanks to the use of traditional devices by indigenous communities in Chittagong hill tracts.
EDITORIAL
The Financial Express
Wednesday | April 17, 2019

Decent jobs for youths

Skills matter hugely, and of course digital skills— the very foundation of doing works efficiently. But skill development is only a part of the whole chain of decent employment. Skills have to be set in motion by knowledge in the area of activity in which one aspires to be employed, writes Wasi Ahmed

It is heartening to know that Bangladesh is the first Asia-Pacific country to commit to the global initiative on Decent Jobs for Youths. It happened with the pledge to train 250,000 youths on digital skills and deliver 340,200 apprenticeships by 2023. At the Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development in Bangkok last month, Bangladesh announced its commitment through the ‘a2i-Innovate for All’, a flagship programme of the government.

‘a2i-Innovate for All’ works with a ‘whole-of-government’ approach by leveraging rapid expansion of technologies to create the right environment for demand-driven skills development in the country. Following the training on multiple digital skills, the link to employment opportunities for trained youths would be facilitated by the government, the private sector, development partners and the NGOs. The a2i programme’s commitments to Decent Jobs for Youth build on a multi-sectoral partnership, with a2i as the main implementing partner, and support and investment coming from the private sector and other development partners.

Decent Jobs for Youth is the global initiative to scale up action and impact on youth employment in support of the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This platform is a hub for catalysing partnerships, collaboration and coordinated action grounded in evidence-based strategies. The SDGs envisage decent work for sustainable economic growth, aiming to increase labour productivity, reduce unemployment rate, and improve access to financial services and benefits. Encouraging entrepreneurship and job creation are instrumental to this, as effective measures to eradicate forced labour, slavery and human trafficking. With these targets in mind, the objective is to achieve full and productive employment, and decent work, for all women and men by 2030.

The focus on demand-driven skills is critical to meet the needs of local and international job markets, and to equip young people with the right skills for 21st century employment opportunities. According to the International Labour Organisation (ILO), decent work involves opportunities for work that are productive and deliver a fair income, security in the workplace and social protection for families, better prospects for personal development and social integration, freedom of employees to express concerns, organise and participate in the decisions that affect their lives and equality of opportunity and healthcare for all women and men. “Each year, more than two million young Bangladeshi men and women enter the labour market, in desperate need of decent jobs and livelihoods”, said ILO’s Bangladesh country director Tuomo Poutiainen. He said their experience showed that supporting youths in their school-to-work transition, using industry-led apprenticeships and offering the latest digital skills training would help Bangladesh’s young people better prepare for the jobs of the 21st century.

The ILO Decent Work Agenda is a balanced and integrated approach to pursue the objectives of full and productive employment and decent work for all at global, regional, national, sectoral and local levels. It has four pillars: standards and rights at work, employment creation and enterprise development, social protection and social dialogue.

The Decent Work Agenda requires national and international actors to commit to the objective of creating quality jobs globally and to pursue cooperative solutions to this challenge. However, governments struggle to convince the people that development and job creation abroad are imperative to prosperity and employment at home. Some governments also face the temptation to close markets and lower labour standards to remain competitive in a world economy that is blaming for depressing wages and working conditions.

As regards Bangladesh’s pledge to train 250,000 youths on digital skills and deliver 340,200 apprenticeships by 2023, it does not seem convincing that digital skill development alone will take care of decent jobs. This is obviously because skills development is only a part of the whole chain of decent employment, because at its best, it can empower the incumbents but not necessarily ensure good salary and other perks along with good work environment. Skills matter hugely, and of course digital skills—the very foundation of doing works efficiently. But these skills have to be set in motion and reinforced by knowledge in the area of activity in which one aspires to be employed.

It is not clear from the pledge made at the Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development whether skills training under the ‘a2i-Innovate for All’ programme will include a wide range of knowledge-based skill development. The programme cannot be expected to deliver in isolation unless it matches its training tools with the knowledge base in the country’s educational institutions. Otherwise, the programme might turn out to be no more than a technical aid having little to do with combining knowledge and skills to benefit the youths in seeking the right jobs at home or abroad. Equally important, if not more, is the need for opportunities in the job markets for applying knowledge-based skills. So, it is also about making adjustments between demand and supply.

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One-fifth of Rana Plaza survivors getting weaker
ActionAid survey finds

The condition of one-fifth of the Rana Plaza survivors is getting worse six years after the disaster revealed a study of ActionAid Bangladesh yesterday. Almost half of the survivors are more or less stable and around one-third are completely stable. In terms of psychological health, 10.5 per cent are still in trauma.

Nuzhat Jabin, manager of ActionAid Bangladesh, presented the survey report at a programme styled “Commemorating the 6th anniversary of Rana Plaza Building Collapse” at the capital’s Brac Centre Inn. The organisation used the database of 1,400 survivors of the industrial disaster on April 24, 2013 that claimed 1,135 lives and followed up with 20 per cent of the survivors over telephone.

The survey found some 51 per cent of the survivors of Rana Plaza disaster are still unemployed due to physical and mental challenges.

Farah Kabir, country director of ActionAid Bangladesh, speaks at a programme titled “Commemorating the 6th anniversary of Rana Plaza building collapse” in the capital’s Brac Centre Inn yesterday.

Of them, 74 per cent cited physical weakness and 27 per cent mental weakness as the main reasons for their unemployment.

ActionAid said they have found in previous surveys that the nature of unemployment is temporary. They tend to change work frequently as their physical conditions do not allow them to work for long periods at a time.

Factory safety has improved after the incident but the process has been slowed down recently, said Khondaker Golam Moazzem, research director of the Centre for Policy Dialogue.

There was a discussion to form a trust fund like the Rana Plaza one in all factories to be used in case of accidents, but nothing has been done yet.

The call for establishing specialised hospitals for injured labourers has also remained unheard, he added.

Moazzem stressed raising the quality of life and wages of labourers.

The Rana Plaza disaster was a wake-up call for garment manufacturers but not for the buyers.

"Still, the buyers margin is higher than the suppliers, which has remained almost the same. Buyers don’t want to pay more and some of them don’t follow the international procurement standards," Moazzem added.

Razequzzaman Ratan, general secretary of the Socialist Labour Front, echoed the same, saying none of buyers wants to pay more for apparel, so their profit is growing.

"But this is profit by exploitation," he said, while calling for ethical labour market practices.

The production cost of a T-shirt is about $4 in Bangladesh, whereas its selling price in Europe is about $40, said Nazneen Ahmed, senior research fellow of the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies.

"So the value chain should be transparent, so that people can understand who are the most gainers and who the losers are." On paper, workers’ minimum wage has increased, but in reality it has not once inflation is taken into account.

So, buyers should pay more so that the manufacturers can pay their workers more. The garment makers should intensify their negotiations with buyers, said Farah Kabir, country director of ActionAid Bangladesh.

Ration and healthcare for labourers will increase their productivity, so the government and the private sector should work on it too, he added.

The government has the responsibility to ensure workplace safety, said Tuomo Poutiainen, country director of the International Labour Organisation.

"So, the government should increase investment in it along with the private sector.”

There should also be a system that enforces the proceeds from one T-shirt be set aside for insurance for one labourer in a year, so that they can get compensation if any accident happens, Poutiainen also said.

Shamsunnahar Bhuian, member of the parliamentary standing committee on the ministry of labour and employment, also spoke at the event.
Production resumes at govt jute mills as workers call off strike

Staff Correspondent

The production at the country’s state-owned jute mills resumed on Tuesday morning as the mill workers withdrew their fresh four-day nationwide strike after the authorities assured that their nine-point demands would be fulfilled.

“We have called off the strike as the tripartite meeting of the labour directorate, the Bangladesh Jute Mills Corporation and the labour leaders in presence of the State Minister for Labour Affairs Begum Monirjaman Sufian on Monday night was successful,” Bangladesh Patkol Sramik League president Sardar Motahar Uddin told New Age on Tuesday morning.

He said that the production had resumed in all the 26 public-sector mills on Tuesday morning as the workers went back to their work.

The authorities have assured us, he said, of paying 10 weeks’ arrear wages in the coming week and of implementing the National Wage and Productivity Commission Award 2015 within a month.

Financial Express
Thursday | April 18, 2019

Savar Leather Park
Tanners decide to form company to run CETP

FE Report

Tanners have agreed on setting up of a company to operate the central effluent treatment plant (CETP) at Savar Leather Industrial Park.

They will complete all the formalities necessary for forming the company by the end of this month.

The decision came at a view-exchange meeting between Industries Minister Nurul Majid Mahmud Humayun and tannery industry owners held at the industries ministry on Wednesday at 6:00am to press for their demands.

The other demands are: adequate budgetary allocation for the sector, payment of the due provident fund and gratuity to the retired workers and insurance benefits to the families of deceased workers, appointment of new workers, regularisation of temporary workers, reappointment of sacked workers and the balancing, modernisation, rehabilitation and expansion of the jute mills for better productivity.

The decision to begin the fresh agitation was taken on April 7 as their demands were not accepted after their meeting with the BJMC chairman on April 6 following a three-day strike along with a road and railway blockade from April 2.

and investment adviser Salman F Rahman, state minister for industries Kamal Ahmed Majumdar, industries secretary Abdul Halim, chairman of Bangladesh Small and Cottage Industries Corporation (BSCIC) Mostaquee Hassan, renowned industrialist and Apex Tannery chairman Syed Manzur Elahi and Bangladesh Tanners Association (BTA) chairman Saheen Ahmed, among others, were present at the meeting.

As per the reports of the auditor of Leather Working Group (LWG) and the Italian consultant, overall works regarding setting up of CETP at Savar Leather Park are satisfactory, the meeting said.

It also stressed the need for taking necessary steps for management of solid and liquid waste of tanneries and imparting training to the workers on how to check misuse of water. To this effect, special programmes will be taken by BSCIC.

Salman F Rahman said leather can be the second largest sector after apparel to achieve the target of higher growth of Gross Domestic Product (GDP).

There is a huge opportunity for product diversification in leather industries, he also said.

He suggested boosting the export of leather goods through obtaining certification of LWG.

The industries minister said it is a great success in relocating the tanneries from Hazaribagh to Savar.

He also asked the BSCIC officials to train the workers of the leather park.

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Offshore apparel manufacturing may move back home as automation takes over

OFFSHORING of apparel manufacturing has been a blessing for many developing countries. The readymade garments (RMG) industry, employing 40 million workers, mostly rural women, contributes more than 80 percent to Bangladesh’s export revenue. Low-cost labour has been the primary reason for western retailers to wait for months to get a shipment from offshore destinations. Once technology becomes a cheaper alternative to the least costly manufacturing labour, will apparel manufacturing complete the journey in returning home?

As countries like Bangladesh, Vietnam or Cambodia do not have the technological edge in apparel making, why should economics of automation suggest that they should remain the cheaper alternative? With advances in robotics and automation, reshoring is bound to happen. The challenge is to detect the tipping point so that both premature exit and prolonged stay could be avoided in minimising the loss.

It’s well understood that apparel making is an incredibly labour-intensive process. Starting from design, pattern-making, and cutting through sewing, there appears to be 14 major steps in turning fabrics into ready-made garments. Even in this age of automation, human intervention is quite necessary at every stage of production. But there has been continuous development of technological alternatives that have introduced automation at each step—reducing the need for labour. Automation in the form of computer-aided design and machine-assisted cutting is already in practice. Among all the stages of apparel production, sewing is perceived to be notoriously difficult to automate.

Despite the success in cutting fabric, for instance, and sometimes sewing buttons or pockets, failure to automate the aligning of material correctly to the sewing head, feeding it through and constantly adjusting the fabric to prevent it slipping and buckling, means that there is no automated production line in which fabric goes in at the one end and finished garments, such as jeans and t-shirts, come out on the other. But recent developments indicate that this critical barrier has been overcome. A start-up in Georgia (US) has developed a highly calibrated machine vision innovation to watch and analyse fabric—succeeding in detecting distortions and robotically adjusting the fabric while feeding to sewing head. Such automated sewing technology has successfully demonstrated that a t-shirt making plant working under the guidance of a single human handler, can produce as many shirts per hour as about 17 workers in a similar production line in Bangladesh or Cambodia. This development indicates that we are now not too far from a time when automation will make machine intensive production cheaper than labour.

The next question is, how much automation is enough to take apparel manufacturing to the tipping point of reshoring—taking back production from offshore destinations. Research suggests that within an off-shored manufacturing operation, an increase by one robot per 1,000 workers is associated with a 3.5 percent increase of reshoring activity. On average, a single robot usually takes the job of 6 workers. In apparel manufacturing, the delegation of roles from human to machine takes place in different forms, starting from the deployment of robots for handling packages to micro level automation in feeding fabrics to sewing head. Such diverse forms of automation often make it difficult to develop a prediction model based on robot density.

Another measure could be measuring the effect of automation on the reduction of labour requirement in foreseeing the tipping point of reshoring. Economics of the total cost of production suggests that reaching a completely human free state is not required to justify the relocation of plants from offshore locations. The example of Adidas relocating its manufacturing to high-wage countries such as US and Germany, employing 160 people as opposed to 1,000 workers in a comparable factory in Asian countries like Indonesia or Vietnam, indicates that once automation replaces workers up to a certain level, the tipping point of reshoring can be reached. Other factors such as cluster effects should also be taken into consideration in fine tuning such prediction model influencing business decisions.

Historically, as countries develop and wages rise, the apparel-making trade moves on to the next cheapest location: from western countries to developing ones like China and Bangladesh. Due to technological progression, instead of moving to the next cheapest labour destination, apparel manufacturing is about to return next door to the major retailers. As progress is being made in incorporating an increasing level of robotics and automation, labour cost advantage in apparel manufacturing in the age of the Fourth Industrial Revolution has been continuously eroding. There is no doubt that smart machines will keep progressing in reducing low skilled labour requirement consequentially reshoring apparel manufacturing.

The challenge for existing offshore destinations is to predict such trend and remain in sync—as both premature exit and overshare are harmful.
Record high growth of remittance

If remittances to low- and middle-income countries reached a record high in 2018, Bangladesh has also received its fair share. According to the latest report (April 8 last) prepared on the basis of the World Bank’s Migration and Remittance brief, officially recorded remittance flows to those countries reached $529 billion in 2019, an increase of 9.6 per cent over the previous record high of $483 billion in 2017. To its credit, Bangladesh led the pack in South Asia in the growth rate of remittance last year. If the context of remittance inflow is considered, the achievement is doubly satisfying. Labour market in the Middle East was volatile, and many migrant workers had to return home — some of them after years of stay and others empty-handed. The programme of sending women domestic helps suffered a serious setback on account of physical abuses. If the Middle-east conundrum haunted the country’s labour employment abroad, it was no better with Malaysia where initially the G2G plus initiative showed great prospect of migration from Bangladesh.

So the augmentation of remittance last year should be taken with a grain of salt. Can it be that the expulsion of a large number of migrants from a few Middle-east countries, including the largest employer Saudi Arabia, was the largest contributory factor behind the increased rate of remittance? The World Bank estimates that the country’s remittance growth was as high as 15 per cent followed by India, its closest rival, at 14 per cent. If this is a consequence of the various official measures taken to persuade migrant workers to shun illegal channels of sending money home and adopting formal procedures for the purpose, it surely is a most positive development. In that case, the shrinkage of labour market abroad would not look as alarming as it does otherwise. Still, there is need for exploring fresh labour market for the burgeoning young population.

It is exactly at this point, Bangladesh finds itself in an advantageous position. With more than 30 per cent of such population between the age bracket of 10-24, the country could reap the demographic dividend provided that it got its planning right. On the threshold of the fifth industrial revolution, the global means of production are undergoing a sea-change. Clearly, the country’s education system is ill-equipped to meet the challenge. There is need for reforming education to suit the need of the time.

The future citizens of this country cannot and should not migrate as unlettered and untrained labourers. They must be imparted either advanced education in information and technology and even in artificial intelligence (AI) where possible or at least developed as technicians whose demand may not fade soon. Today, the country’s migrants abroad are mostly employed as labourers and they do not even qualify for supervisory positions largely because of their poor educational background and lack of training. These are areas to which attention has to be paid right now and the education system made compatible with the need of the time. Only then migrants will get better employment, including managerial jobs abroad and send hefty amounts of remittance.
Rubana-led new BGMEA office bearers take charge

**Staff Correspondent**

The newly appointed office bearers of Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association led by the first female president of the association, Rubana Huq, on Saturday took charge of the trade body for a two-year term.

At the 36th annual general meeting of BGMEA, the immediate past president of the trade body, Md. Siddiquur Rahman, handed over the responsibility to the new committee at the new headquarters of the association at Uttara in capital Dhaka.

"Victory is a humbling experience. Along with victory comes a huge responsibility of steering the sector forward. The current board and I look forward to working with transparency and commitment in order to provide maximum service to the stakeholders," Rubana told New Age on Saturday.

After taking office, the new BGMEA president promised that she and her board would work with honesty and integrity to serve all the stakeholders of the country's ready-made garment sector.

"BGMEA is a service providing organisation and any division in the trade body is not expected," she said.

Rubana said that the RMG sector was now struggling and small and medium factories were being shut every day.

"I will request the media not to write biased news. There are a good number of small and medium factories in the sector which are facing trouble to pay workers. Media should also focus on their problems from humanitarian perspectives," she said.

Regarding Accord and Alliance, the new BGMEA president said that time had come for Bangladesh to rebound and to enforce its own monitoring in the industry.

"We will not accept any prescription from others. If any initiative wants to stay in Bangladesh, it would have to comply with our terms and conditions," Rubana said.

"We want to face the challenge of the fourth industrial revolution and to generate employment through adopting technology," the new chief of BGMEA said.

On April 6, Rubana Huq led a Sammilita Forum panel to discuss the growth of Bangladesh RMG sector. She also attended the 36th annual general meeting of BGMEA at its new headquarters in Uttara on Saturday.

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Newly elected president of Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association Rubana Huq accompanied by other newly elected office bearers of the trade body receives a flower bouquet from the immediate past president of the trade body, Md. Siddiquur Rahman, at the 36th annual general meeting of BGMEA held at its new headquarters at Uttara in Dhaka on Saturday.

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New Age photo
Growth at cost of environment

Says ActionAid Bangladesh

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

Bangladesh’s industrial sectors, especially garment, are growing at the cost of environment, said ActionAid Bangladesh, a non-governmental organisation, yesterday.

“Although the garment industry in Bangladesh contributes significantly to the economy, it raises a number of environmental concerns,” said Farah Kabir, country director of ActionAid.

All aspects of the industry — be it spinning, weaving, knitting, wet processing and apparel manufacturing — process pollute air, water and soil.

Textile and garment sectors and their entire supply chain make 1.40 crore tonnes of carbon dioxide emission annually and consume 60,000 crore litres of water.

“So, time has come to go through a massive technological upgradation to keep the industrial development sustainable,” she said at a seminar styled ‘Voices and solutions: Achieving growth through sustainable production and consumption in the fashion industry’.

ActionAid Bangladesh and Fashion Revolution jointly organised the event at the capital’s Ibrac Centre Inn.

The garment sector has ensured the wellbeing, dignity and safety of workers, said Atiqul Islam, mayor of Dhaka North City Corporation.

The sector has installed state-of-the-art environment-friendly machines in factories but a lot more needs to be done to reduce environmental contamination, said Islam, also a former president of the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association.

“Please don’t blame us only — we are trying hard,” he said.

Most of the factories in Bangladesh are located along the river banks, so waste is dumped into the rivers, ActionAid said.

Asif Ibrahim, a former president of the Dhaka Chamber of Commerce and Industry, hopes that the BCMEA will continue to work to reduce environmental pollution through introducing modern facilities.

Hazardous chemicals are being discharged into the water bodies affecting the marine ecosystem, reducing fish population and resulting in unsuitable land for cultivation. Many rice paddies are now inundated with toxic wastewater.

Nawshin Khair, country coordinator of Fashion Revolution, and Imran Rahman, dean of the UIAB School of Business, also spoke.

FASHION INDUSTRY: A BIG POLLUTER

Value of global industry: $3 trillion

2nd biggest polluter in the world

2nd highest user of water

Accounts for 20% of total wastewater

Emits 10% of carbon dioxide

Only 15% of textile waste is recycled, rest is sent to landfill

Chemical dyes contaminate surface and groundwater

ALARMING FORECAST FASHION INDUSTRY’S GREENHOUSE GAS EMISSIONS AND WASTE TO RISE 60% BY 2030

Furthermore, only 15 percent of the textile waste is recycled, whereas the remaining 85 percent is sent to landfill, thus negatively impacting the environment.

The wastes, as they decompose, release methane, which is a significant contributor to global warming.

Chemical dyes used in the process leach into the soil, contaminating surface and groundwater, it added.

The garment sector is working to reduce environmental pollution, but huge investment and efficiency of workers are needed,” said Faruque Hassan, a former vice-president of the BCMEA.
Garment exports rise sevenfold in a decade

BGMEA says; Fashionology Summit on May 2

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

Garment exports to new destinations grew sevenfold to $5 billion in the last one decade buoyed by market diversification drives and the government's stimulus package set aside for exploring opportunities in emerging markets, exporters said.

The country's garment shipment to the emerging markets was $700 million in 2009, according to Faruque Hassan, vice-president of Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA).

Except for three traditional markets, namely the US, the EU and Canada, all other markets are considered as the emerging or new export destinations for Bangladesh, India, China, Russia, Japan, South Africa, Turkey and Brazil are among the major non-traditional markets for the garment sector.

Exporters started exploring the new destinations as part of market diversification efforts in 2009. In the same year, the government introduced a stimulus package to help exporters weather the fallout from the global financial crisis.

Currently, the government gives 4 per cent export incentive against garment shipments to new destinations.

"We are on the right track. We need to do more. However, we need to get proper prices from buyers," Hassan said at a press conference in Sonargaon hotel in Dhaka.

Bangladesh Apparel Exchange (BAE) organised the briefing to announce the schedule of the second Bangladesh Fashionology Summit, which will be held at the International Convention City Bashundhara in Dhaka on May 2.

Speakers from 15 countries will take part in different sessions at the summit, said Mostafizuddin, the founder of the BAE.

He also said the market size of the global smart clothing items would be $130 billion by 2025. "We need to explore this market."

Thrust on eco-friendly RMG production process

FE Report

Speakers at a seminar on Saturday put stress on an environment-friendly production process in the country's growing garment and textile industry which is adversely affecting the environment by excessive use of resources and producing waste.

"Terming the environmental pollution 'concerning', they also pressed for the need for transformation in the production process and consumption to reduce such negative impact and sustain global fashion industry. The observations were made at a seminar titled 'Voices and Solutions: Achieving Growth through Sustainable Production and Consumption in the Fashion Industry' jointly organised by ActionAid and Fashion Revolution at Brac Centre in the city.

Dhaka North City Corporation Mayor Md Atiquil Islam attended the seminar as the chief guest. Former president of Dhaka Chamber of Commerce and Industry Asif Ibrahim, former vice president of Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association Faruque Hassan, managing director of Ananta Group Sharif Zahari, and country coordinator of Fashion Revolution Nawshin Khair, among others, were present.

"Though the garment industry in Bangladesh contributes significantly to the economy, it raises a number of environmental concerns," ActionAid Bangladesh country director Farah Kabir said while presenting a keynote paper.

All aspects of the industry namely spinning, weaving, knitting, wet processing and readymade garment manufacturing pollute air, water and soil, she said.

Every year, 1,500 billion litres of water are used to dye and wash cotton and apparel for the garment industry, she said citing a study conducted by the International Finance Corporation.

Most of the factories are located along the river, banks and hence waste is dumped into the rivers, she explained adding that hazardous chemicals are being discharged into the water bodies affecting the marine ecosystem, reducing fish population and resulting in unsuitable land for cultivation.

The global fashion industry is a US$3 trillion sector and considered to be the second biggest polluter in the world, Ms Kabir said in her presentation adding that globally, the textile sector is the second highest user of water contributing to water waste by 20 per cent, and the apparel industry emits 10 per cent of carbon dioxide alone.

She called for collective move to overcome the situation.

The paper also showed that almost 82 per cent of the supply of water in Dhaka is dependent on groundwater and to fulfil this huge demand for water, ground water level is declining by 2-3 metres each year.

Considering the existing depletion rate, it predicted that groundwater level will go down to about 110 to 115 metres by 2050 if any preventive measure is not undertaken.

The paper suggested an extensive and transparent study on the overall environmental impact as well as on sustainable process within the apparel industry in Bangladesh.

"Though remarkable changes have taken place in the readymade garment industry, we need to change our mindset and behaviour of shouldering responsibility," Mr Islam said suggesting research and inclusion of sustainable production process in the education system.

Speakers suggested effective use of raw materials to produce less wastage, use of modern technology and coordination among all the measures taken by different stakeholders.
Apparel should have minimum price
Rubana Huq says as she takes charge of BGMEA

BANGLADESH needs to set a base price for garment items to ensure proper rates from international retailers and brands for all manufacturers and bring an end to unhealthy competition locally, said the new BGMEA president.

"Ensuring proper prices for garment items is my top priority," said Rubana Huq in an interview with The Daily Star at her Banani residence in Dhaka on Friday.

Huq is the first female president of the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA). She took charge for 2019-2021 yesterday, following her election victory on April 6.

She plans to set up a price negotiation cell at the BGMEA where factory owners will be trained on how to negotiate with buyers.

One of the major reasons for lower prices of garment items in Bangladesh is that much of the businesses are negotiated by buying houses.

She gave the example of Sri Lanka which has set the base price for export-oriented garment items. “If all of us remain united, buyers cannot go to other markets overnight.”

Huq targets to bring an end to the unhealthy competition in the market.

“Each one of us is undercutting the other. My target is to stop the undue and hostile undercutting because this never helps us. This is pulling the whole market down.”

According to Huq, one of the handicaps of the garment sector is overcapacity. Many factories have expanded to such an extent that they take orders only to keep their factories running.

Huq says she would assist small and medium enterprises as they are facing troubles even to pay workers’ salaries every month. Some 1,500 small and medium-sized factories are facing such challenges.

"There are many buyers who do not buy in bulk quantity. Maybe, the SMEs can cater to them. We will counsel the SMEs."

Another priority of Huq will be potential there.

The new BGMEA chief is aware of the challenges the fourth industrial revolution will pose to the garment industry. "The low-end manufacturing will suffer due to automation."

"Many industrial machines are already eliminating the positions of helpers. There has already been a step towards semi-automation in the industry."

Sweater companies have

Rubana Huq

already installed jacquard machines that replaced manual operations of workers.

"We will have to train them to make them skilled. Innovations like 3D printing can create a lot of jobs in the era of automation. So, automation itself can be an opportunity for Bangladesh to create jobs."

On the issue of the Accord, an inspection agency, she says it is actually in transition at the moment.

Huq says the BGMEA and the Accord will work mutually.

"I do not want the industry and the Accord to be involved in a legal battle."

"I think enough remediation has been done or rather sufficient remediation has been done. If you go to the Accord website, you will see that more than 90 percent job has been done. If that is the case, then what is stopping us from 100 percent remediation? We have to target to set up our own monitoring agency."

"Rather, we can probably certify the Accord saying that you are very good and you have executed and fulfilled your duty with passion and integrity. You have done a huge favour, but it is time for you to move to the next country."

Huq said consumption of garment items would go up globally, but not for the basic garment items. "So, we will have to get ready for more complicated and embellished styles and for more value-added items."

She said the garment sector will continue to contribute because Bangladeshi entrepreneurs are very resilient.

She said T-shirts worth $5 billion were exported from Bangladesh last year, but it was less than $100 million for female jackets.

"Why are we lagging behind in some special items? We need factories with more targeted and more value addition, not just mass production."

Huq said the garment sector is moving in the right direction.

"There is a room for further improvement. Our export is increasing, but the question is whether we are adding enough value."
Govt to bring back Bangladeshi workers stranded in Libya

Md Owaisim Uddin Bhuyan

The government is taking the preparations to repatriate Bangladeshi workers from Libya. Expatriates Welfare and Overseas Employment ministry officials said Monday.

EWOE ministry secretary Rownaq Jahan said at an inter-ministry meeting that the government was keen to ensure security of Bangladeshi workers stranded in Libya. If necessary, they would be safely repatriated and rehabilitated in Bangladesh, she said while chairing the meeting at Probashi Kalyan Bhaban said that since the last week, 'we evacuated 500 Bangladeshis to safe zones in Tripoli.' Bangladeshi workers interested to return home had been requested to get themselves registered with the Bangladesh mission online.

A senior EWOE ministry official told New Age that officially about 5,000 Bangladeshis would be repatriated if they desire.

Another official said that the International Organization for Migration offered its cooperation to Bangladeshi government in repatriating Bangladeshis from Libya.

Senior officials of the ministries of foreign affairs and home and the IOM took part in the meeting.

Al Jazeera reported on Sunday that heavy clashes broke out in the southwestern districts of the Libyan capital, Tripoli, as forces loyal to the country's UN-recognized government launched a counterattack to repel fighters allied to renegade General Khalifa Haftar.

Residents of the city said they could hear sustained rocket and artillery fire in several districts of Tripoli on Saturday, after several days of stalemate on the ground, said Al Jazeera.

In recent weeks, several hundred Bangladeshis were stranded across Libya amidst fighting between the UN-backed Libyan government and the Libyan National Army. The BMET banned migration of Bangladeshi workers to Libya since 2014.

Many survivors' conjugal life shattered

Rashad Ahamad

CONJUGAL lives of many injured survivors of Rana Plaza collapse have been shattered in last six years since the world's worst industrial disaster occurred at Savar on April 24, 2013.

Several injured survivors told New Age that since losing limbs in the disaster they could not return to active life.

Most of them are worried about their future as the government took no initiative to provide their treatment or rehabilitate them.

They said that their life became burdens on them with no support coming from anywhere.

Rana Plaza collapse killed at least 1,138 apparel workers, mostly young girls and 2,500 others were crippled. The Rana Plaza collapse victims and their families light candles in front of the memorial set up on the accident ground during a commemoration ceremony of the fatal event at Savar in Dhaka on Tuesday.

Rana Plaza collapse victims and their families light candles in front of the memorial set up on the accident ground during a commemoration ceremony of the fatal event at Savar in Dhaka on Tuesday.

A recent study by the ActionAid Bangladesh reveals that 51 per cent of the survivors remained jobless over the last six years as their physical and mental conditions don’t permit them to work.

The study also shows that some 49 per cent of the survivors became self-employed or some of them got jobs.

New Wave Style Ltd’s quality inspector Shirina Khatun was one of the lucky ones to survive losing both her legs. Being paralyzed, Shirina now lives at her village home, Kapalianga, Dumuria, Khulna following long treatment at different hospitals.

Her husband Mizrul Islam was with her for some time but he divorced her in Continued on page 11 Col. 2
No justice yet

Rashad Ahammad and Robid Islam

NO TRIAL of collapsed Rana Plaza owner Sohel Rana took place in six years since the disaster killed 1,136 people, mostly female apparel workers, and injured over 2,400 at Savar on April 24, 2013.

The families of the deceased, injured people and workers who suffered from the worst industrial accident of the world were still waiting for justice as hardly any progress was made in the trial of 14 cases filed in this connection.

A file photo shows Rana Plaza building following its collapse on April 24, 2013.

Workplace safety improves

Moinul Haque

WORKPLACE safety in Bangladesh readymade garment sector has improved in six years after the Rana Plaza building collapse, but the pace of the development might not be sustainable due to lack of institutional capacity, experts and labour rights activists have said.

Talking to New Age, they urged the government, development partners, brands and buyers and factory owners to work together to build institutional capacity to ensure workplace safety and workers’ rights to ensure the sustainability of the sector.

Factory owners said that following Rana Plaza collapse on April 24, 2013, which killed 1,136 people mostly female garment workers, they made the workplace safe by putting highest emphasis on workplace safety and investing millions of dollars in it.

Since Rana Plaza tragedy, Bangladesh has made remarkable progress in terms of workplace safety and workers’ rights. Following the disaster, national and international stakeholders prepared a guideline for a safe workplace, but there is a lack of institutional initiative to implement the guidelines, said Centre for Policy Dialogue research director Kondokker Golam Mouzumder.

He said that a number of initiatives were taken following the incident and Bangladesh successfully met most of the requirements of Sustainability Compact, 16-point action plan given by the US government on safe working condition and workers’ rights.

The immediate response from the government and global stakeholders was appropriate as European buyers formed Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh while North American brands and retailers formed Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety to assess and ensure factory safety in garment sector, Golam Mouzumder said.

The government initiative to amend labour laws, review wages and develop institutions was positive for the country, he said.

He, however, said that the immediate response from the government and factory owners was appropriate but the institutional capacity needed to achieve long term objectives is yet to be built.

He urged the government to strengthen Remediation Coordination Cell for the proper monitoring of apparel factory remediation.

He also emphasised on the establishment of Industrial Safety Unit to ensure industrial safety in the country.

The economist urged the government to make a legal framework for compensation and establish a specialized hospital for workers.

Following the Rana Plaza collapse, two buyers’ platforms form Accord and Alliance conducted structural, fire and electrical safety inspection in more than 2,300 apparel factories.

At the same time, the government in association with the International Labour Organisation launched an inspection programme for the rest of the apparel factories which were not on the lists of the Alliance and the Accord.

The government-ILO initiative conducted its initial safety inspection in 1,549 export-oriented garment factories.

Accord-listed factories completed 90 per cent of remediation work by January 2019 while alliance-listed factories completed 93 per cent of remediation by December 2018.

The factories under national initiative, however, made poor progress in fixing safety faults in the past six years, according to government statistics.

Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishments data showed that the factories inspected under the government-ILO initiative made 29 per cent progress in remediation.

The factory standard in Bangladesh is no doubt better than any other RMG exporter country. More than 150 green factories have been established in Bangladesh in the past six years,’ said Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association immediate past vice-president Mahmud Hassan Khan.

Responding to the wake-up call, factory owners invested Tk 3-10 crore in their factories to ensure workplace safety and the sector made tremendous development in structural and fire safety, he said.

Now, the safety standard of Bangladesh’s readymade garment sector is higher than any other country and we have to strengthen our monitoring to make this achievement sustainable,’ Mahmud said.

It is true that the workplace safety improved a lot in the RMG sector in the past six years, but we took the initiative under the pressure of international community and now time came to take safety monitoring initiative by our own,’ Combined Garment Workers Federation president Naazma Akter said.

She also said that without ensuring workers’ rights the safety initiative could not be sustained.
Nilufar Begum, 35, a survivor of Rana Plaza tragedy, worked on the fifth floor of the building. Her right leg was severely injured in the incident. Six years have passed since the building collapsed, but she is still living in trauma.

She received long-term treatment at several hospitals of the country, but says her health has not improved. “Not only was my right leg broken, I also sustained injuries in my head and back. The pain still hasn’t receded,” she said, adding that she was stuck for nine hours before being rescued.

Nilufar received Tk 3 lakh from several organisations after the tragedy, which was spent on initial treatment. “I am barely surviving now,” she said. “Doctors have advised me to amputate my right leg. They said it will ease my suffering but I am already spending over Tk 5,000 on medicine every month. I have sold all of my property, including my house, for medical treatment.”

Nilufar cannot work outside anymore, and requires assistance for all types of movement.

Many survivors of Rana Plaza tragedy are living in despair. This correspondent spoke to ten survivors, all of whom echoed Nilufar’s sentiments.

Nilufa Yamin, 40, another survivor who worked on the fourth floor of the building, said, “I was rescued after two days. My head, legs, and backbone were heavily injured. Despite treatment at different hospitals with aid from several organisations, I am still suffering from chronic back pain and headache.”

“I don’t know how to support my six-member family. My husband is a rickshaw-puller and sole-earner. It is difficult for us to bear my treatment cost. Moreover, I have two school-going daughters,” she said, adding that it would be helpful if the government arranged financial aid for survivors.

VIC T I M F A M I L I E S D E M A N D CAPITAL PUNISHMENT
Talking to The Daily Star, Rahela Khatoon, 70, mother of Foizzle Rabbi, who lost his life in the accident, said, “I lost my son but I am unsure if I will ever get justice.”

Abdul Aziz, 65, who lost his son and daughter-in-law in the tragedy, now runs a tea stall at Savar’s Arapara area. “If my son was alive, he would look after me. But he is no more, and justice has not been served,” he said, “I would find peace of mind if the accused was handed capital punishment.”

Khairul Mamun Mintu, organising secretary of Garment Worker Trade Union Centre, said the government should take steps to ensure quick trial and appropriate punishment for culprits. “The authorities concerned should also arrange lifetime treatment for injured survivors,” he added.

Rana Plaza collapse was the deadliest garments factory accident in Bangladesh’s history, in which 1,129 workers lost their lives and thousands were injured.
Post-Rana Plaza, what we have achieved and what we haven't

The Rana Plaza collapse, the deadliest garment factory accident in history, carries a moral and political significance. It laid bare the deeply unequal globalised supply chain, introduced by the new manufacturing and trade order of the 1990s. The incident was an eye-opener that exposed how workers of poorer nations were often forced to make fashion items for western consumers in unsafe circumstances earning a pittance. But, have we learned from this disaster and brought real changes to ensure workplace safety and a sustainable industry?

On April 24, 2013, the eight-storied Rana Plaza building in Savar collapsed killing at least 1,134 people, mostly women, and injuring thousands of others. Frightened workers had been forced to work inside a building with large cracks, as they had to fulfill delivery deadlines from major Western apparel companies, including Benetton, Children's Place, and Mango. Brands like Zara, Walmart, C&A, Carrefour, and Joe Fresh were also producing in the factories located in Rana Plaza. But the retailers and brands did not acknowledge responsibility for the absence of safe working conditions in their supply chains.

The disaster has raised some unresolved questions: to what extent should multinational corporations be held accountable for labour rights violations in their supply chains and what is the extent of their obligations towards working conditions of their suppliers? Is it possible to establish a model for supply chain responsibility that is fair to the workers?

To understand how we got to the point where an avoidable disaster like Rana Plaza occurred, it is important to examine how the garments sector in Bangladesh emerged as an industry.

During the last three decades, structural changes in the national economy and accelerating globalisation led to diverse labour practices, and Bangladesh has undergone a massive socio-economic transformation, driven mostly by garments workers and migrant workers in overseas employment. Since the early 1980s, the garment factories have been developed as foreign market-oriented free enterprises, supported by liberalised trade policies and development strategies. These policies created obstacles to forming trade unions at every turn. In the beginning, the garment factories, mostly based in Dhaka, had a narrow client base, dominated by small European retailers. But in the 1990s, the big Western garment manufacturers were gradually moving away from investing in factories as they turned to subcontractors, offering them very narrow margins for profit and thereby forcing them to run their factories like prison-houses of labour (Vijay Prashad, Counterpunch). Bangladesh became an attractive destination for such companies due to its cheap labour as the country had a huge supply of young women workers from the villages who were willing to accept whatever amount they were offered. The local manufacturers took it as a huge short-term money-making opportunity. Thus, they showed little interest in improving the working conditions in their factories.

The cheap price of labour implies that the price of lives here was also cheap. Between 2006 and 2012, more than 500 Bangladeshi garment workers died in factory fires (New York Times). But no meaningful step was taken to improve conditions in the factories. The lives lost in the fires were simply ignored and forgotten. Five months after the Tajureen Fashions fire in Ashulia, which killed at least 117 workers, the Rana Plaza collapse happened. The death toll was even greater for anyone to be able to wish the disaster away into an amnesia.

The garment sector which employs the largest number of workers in the country had no trade unions for almost three decades. Bangladesh labour laws did not prohibit forming trade unions at garment factories, but the government and the factory owners were reluctant to see it materialise. Early attempts at forming unions were met with heavy-handed approaches from factory owners (such as firing workers who submitted their names to the company to form a union and thus making them ineligible) with tacit support from the government. Following deadly incidents in several factories, labour activists argued that the incidents were due to negligence, which could have been avoided if there were a functioning formal channel and effective labour representation within the factory.

In the present day, the Rana Plaza disaster continues to unfold for its survivors. According to an ActionAid study, 51 percent of the survivors are still unemployed due to physical and mental challenges, while the condition of one-fifth of the survivors is getting worse (The Daily Star, April 17, 2019). On top of it all the survivors have to deal with everyday struggles of depression and trauma, in the absence of adequate healthcare for issues related to their injuries.

The Rana Plaza disaster created global headlines and drew attention to the horrific working conditions. Western brands and retailers obviously did not want any large-scale workplace deaths in the garment factories, as they do care about the impact of public outrage on their profit margins. The fact is that as long as there is no "large-scale" disaster, their customers will not be curious about the unsafe conditions that workers are employed in. Understandably, their main focus post-Rana Plaza was to ensure safety standards. But they also have a responsibility to play their part in ensuring that a fair and decent living wage is paid to the workers. And that is not too much to ask for.

The collective efforts of the government, factory owners, Western brands and retailers, trade unions, and two inspection bodies—the Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh and the Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety—have made considerable progress in fire, electrical and structural safety in the garment factories over the past six years. Undoubtedly, garment factories are now safer workplaces than they were six years ago. But safety is a continuous journey, not a final destination. Also, significant problems remain as garment workers are still struggling to earn a fair living wage, the right to form unions that genuinely represent their interests, and the right to access affordable healthcare, housing, and transportation. The garment workers have very little economic security as Bangladesh has one of the lowest minimum wages in the world.

About four-fifths of the total garment workers are women. It is important to look at the challenges they face. The insecurity of women workers is largely related to sexual harassment at the workplace. All factories must institutionalise a complaint process so that women can report sexual harassment without fear.
From Triangle to Rana Plaza: Workers must be the priority

OVER four million people’s lives are closely intertwined with the ready-made garments (RMG) industry in Bangladesh—as are the deaths of over a thousand workers of Rana Plaza, which collapsed on this day six years ago. I remember it was a day of scorching sunshine. The Bengali New Year had begun only ten days earlier. This is usually a time of joy and celebration when people take a fresh look at their life and make plans that would change their future. What was it like for those ill-fated workers?

On April 24, 2013, their day began, like workers in 59 districts across the country, with the familiar drone of machines. The nine-storey Rana Plaza had five clothing factories located in different floors of the building. News of cracks in the building had reached the workers but they were told to come anyway, and there was nothing they could do about it. Everything, however, changed when generators on the top floor kicked in after a power outage and the whole structure imploded. In a matter of minutes, it came tumbling down, floor by floor, like a house of cards. The rest is history.

Most of those who died in the collapse were aged between 15 and 30, with 58 percent of them between 18 and 25, and they were paid somewhere around Tk 3,000 per month. These figures make you shudder, and you wonder if there could be a more meaningless death. Six years on, those whose greed and corruption led to these tragic deaths couldn’t yet be brought to justice.

When we look at the circumstances surrounding the Rana Plaza collapse, we are reminded of another incident that took place over a hundred years ago: the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire. It happened in New York City on March 25, 1911. Like the owners of the factories in Rana Plaza, the owners of this factory, located in the Aseh Building which is currently part of New York University, also exploited its workers. Most of these workers were immigrants who came to the US from Italy and some Eastern European countries for a better future. They worked on a contractual basis, over 12 hours each day, and were paid a weekly wage of USD 7-12.

At that time, there was a movement going on which demanded increased wage, shorter working hours and better work environment for the workers. The movement, launched by the International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union (ILGWU), boasted about twenty thousand members spread in various factories, including the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory. But the factory owners stubbornly pushed back against demands for reforms. It was against this backdrop that the fire incident took place, causing the deaths of 146 workers, 123 of them women and 23 men. Of the 146, 62 victims jumped to their deaths while the rest died from fire and smoke inhalation. The exits and stairwells of the building were locked from outside which made it impossible for many to escape from fire.

The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire had a huge impact on the labour movement in the US. It moved the legislators and common folk alike and provided the rallying cry for improved factory safety standards. In a demonstration organised by the labour unions ten days later, 80,000 people turned up to express their solidarity with the demands of the workers. Over 300,000 people joined a rally organised to pay tribute to the fire victims. Two years after the Triangle incident, the daily working hours were reduced to 9. It also led to the formation of a Safety Code as well as 36 new laws on safety, factory inspection and other issues made within the first year of the incident.

The Rana Plaza collapse and the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire have several things in common. The victims in both cases had to endure hardship and exploitation as part of their daily lives. Both incidents were set in backgrounds hostile to the interests of workers. The Rana Plaza disaster seems like a replay of the Triangle tragedy. Some hundred years apart, and both triggered universal calls for change in how workers are treated. In our case, however, the pace of change has been frustrating. The labour movement in Bangladesh couldn’t yet gather enough momentum as workers have to face a myriad of threats including arrest, attacks and lawsuits if they try to speak up about the need for decent wage, workplace safety or job security. There is a climate of fear across the factories. This is really unfortunate because a stronger labour movement and a motivated workforce actually helps in the production process which can contribute to better outputs.

After Rana Plaza, several cases were filed, and in only two of them, charge sheets were submitted to the court. Police have filed a murder case in which 41 people were made accused. Of them, 32 are out on bail, two decreed, and six are absconding. Only Sohel Rana (who owned Rana Plaza) is in jail. The excruciatingly slow process of trial, while a judicial issue, doesn’t at all help the grievances long nursed by workers about the continued disregard for their rights. If anything, it further aggravates them. Who will they turn to for their problems? In the last six years, there has been no substantial movement in the RMG industry that could make the whole supply chain responsible for the change that is being desired.

The BGMEA is moving ahead with a vision: turn the industry into a USD 50-billion one by 2021, when the country celebrates its golden jubilee. It’s an ambitious goal, and it will be a big achievement if we can fulfil that goal, but what about the workers? Can an industry expect sustainable growth without a properly motivated workforce? Can the image of the industry or the country remain untarnished if the voices of its workers are silenced and their rights denied? History has shown that only a proper labour movement can bring real change in the industry.
Safe workplace for women must
Speakers say on achieving middle income status

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Unsafe environment for women at workplace and other institutions is a major barrier to Bangladesh's aspiration of becoming a middle income country, speakers at a discussion said yesterday.

Women, in general, will be benefited if victims and people from all walks of life raise their voices, they said at a programme at Bangladesh National Museum in Dhaka.

CARE Bangladesh, a US-based development organisation, held the programme titled "Sketching Women's World of Work".

Some 62 works of 36 photographers -- predominantly female -- were also displayed at an exhibition as part of the event, while a photobook was also unveiled.

The exhibition and the discussion highlighted the contribution of female workers in various formal and informal sectors, their challenges, and the necessity of ensuring their safety at work.

Speaking as chief guest, Monjuwan Sufian, state minister for labor and employment, said, "Sexual harassment at work is happening in Bangladesh as well as all over the world. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina [and her government] is positively aware of the ILO convention."

From June 10 to 21 this year, a new convention to ensure harassment and violence-free workplace, particularly for women workers, is expected to be adopted at ILO's 108th conference in its Geneva headquarters.

Speaking as special guest, Shoko Ishikawa, country representative of UN Women in Bangladesh, spoke of recent incidents of violence against women and stressed on ensuring women-friendly institutional setting. "There is a lack of legal and institutional responses to violence against women in Bangladesh."

Tuomo Poutiainen, ILO country director, said, "Empowering women requires a structural and attitudinal change." He stressed vocational and technical training for young girls. The discussion was presided over by Zia Choudhury, country representative of CARE. Noted artists Monirul Islam and photographer Mohammad Rahibul Haq also spoke at the discussion.

Murder trial stalled for stay order

COURT CORRESPONDENT

Six years have passed, but the trial of the murder case filed over the Rana Plaza collapse is yet to begin due to High Court stay orders.

Charges have been framed against 41 accused, including building owner Sohel Rana, in the case.

At least 1,136 people, mostly garment workers, were killed and over 2,500 others injured as the nine-storey building came crashing down in Savar on April 24, 2013, raising questions about labour and human rights standards in Bangladesh.

Talking to The Daily Star yesterday, Additional Public Prosecutor Md Mizanur Rahman said they had produced five prosecution witnesses, including complainant of the case, on different dates. But the court could not record their statements due to HC stay orders issued in 2016.

He added that as the charges were framed against all the accused, including Rana, on July 18, 2016, the Dhaka District and Sessions Judge's Court asked the complainant and several other witnesses to appear before it to testify.

But after the indictment order on July 18 that year, eight accused, including then Savar municipality mayor Refayet Ullah and councillor Mohammad Ali Khan, filed writ petitions with the HC.

After hearings, the HC stayed all the proceedings of the case that year. Later, Dhaka District Public Prosecutor Khondaker Abdul Mannan wrote to the Attorney General's office to have the stay orders vacated. The HC vacated the orders for six of the accused.

But the stay orders for Refayet and Mohammad Ali imposed on May 9 and December 12 last year were yet to
Labour wings abroad need to perform better

Staff Correspondent

SENIOR officials and migrant rights campaigners on Wednesday stressed the need for improving capacity of the labour wings of Bangladesh missions abroad to deliver better services to the migrant workers in the destination countries.

They came up with remarks while speaking at a policy discussion on 'Improving Services in Bangladesh High Commissions and Missions' organized by Institute of Labor Studies and Development (ILS&D), in partnership with PROKAS programme of British Council at Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training office in Dhaka.

Speaking as chief guest, BMET director general Salim Rana said that Bangladesh labour officials were trying their best to provide services to the migrant workers seeking help in destination countries.

He said that labour welfare works could be decentralized in big destination countries, especially the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, by involving the Bangladeshi community people.

Expatriate welfare and overseas employment ministry's joint secretary Sarwar Alam, who worked as labour councillor at Bangladesh embassy in Riyadh, said that they extended the welfare services to six major locations in the KSA for the Bangladeshi workers.

In the KSA, the embassies of the India and the Philippines engaged some representatives of their communities to maintain liaison between their workers and embassies to facilitate services to their workers, he said, adding that those representatives were accredited by their embassies.

Sarwar suggested that both manpower and budget allocations should be increased for the labour wings to enhance their capacities.

BMET director Nurul Islam, who presented a keynote paper, said that there are 60 embassies and high commissions of Bangladesh abroad and 31 of them have labour wings.

The labour wings dedicated to provide welfare services to the migrant workers, he said.

Ovibashi Karmi Unnayan Program chairman Shakerul Islam said that Bangladeshi workers were sending huge remittances to the country and a certain allocation from their remittances should be spent for welfare of the migrant workers.

Referring to deportation of female workers from the KSA, he said that legal steps should be taken in destination countries to bring the employers to book.

FWO's deputy director Masud Rana, Bangladesh-Korea TTC principal Sakawat Hossain, ILO chief executive SayedAhamed also spoke at the discussion.

SIX YEARS OF RANA PLAZA TRAGEDY

RMG notably safer now: ILO

Refaet Ullah Mirza

Bangladesh has made impressive strides in making workplace safe in the garment sector in recent years as factory owners strengthened safety as per proposals of international brands and retailers, said union leaders, analysts and ILO and entrepreneurs.

After the Rana Plaza building collapse, the Accord, a platform of Europe-based retailers and brands, and the Alliance, the North America-based retailers and brands' forum, were formed to fix the fire, electrical and structural loopholes in the garment factories in Bangladesh.

"The garment industry in Bangladesh has become notably safer since the Rana Plaza collapse six years ago," said Tuomo Poutiainen, country director of the International Labour Organization (ILO).

Within months of the tragedy, the Bangladesh Labour Act 2006 was amended with revisions on occupational health and safety and provisions to provide workers with a greater voice, through freedom of association and collective bargaining rights.

"We are now speaking from a different level," he said. "With the Alliance and Accord, we have gained a voice which we have not had in the past."

While more is needed, workers are more aware of their rights and responsibilities and can increasingly raise alarm on health and safety concerns in their place of work.

According to Poutiainen, since 2015, several thousand export-orientated factories have been inspected and many thousands of factory workers were educated on fire and building safety. The critical importance of early detection, working fire alarms, and safe exit routes have been emphasised.

"Accord engineers have verified that approximately 225 Accord-covered factories have completed safety remediation of fire, electrical, and structural safety hazards from Accords initial inspections," Rob Wynn, executive director of the Accord for Bangladesh operations, said in a mail on March 31.

"Fire, electrical, and structural safety has improved very substantially at the Accord-covered factories since the start of the inspections, remediation, and workplace safety programmes of the Accord in November 2013."
Garment workers are getting 26 percent less in basic pay than what they should have under the new salary structure, according to the Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB).

This happened as the minimum wage board that recommended the new salary structure for the garment workers did not take into consideration the 5 percent annual automatic increment while fixing the pay.

As a result, the garment workers in all seven grades are earning 26 percent less despite the hike, the TIB found.

The wage board was supposed to consider the 5 percent annual increment of last the five years since 2013.

The TIB also found that factory owners have raised the production target by 30 percent to 36 percent with the hike of the wage, which came into effect in December last year.

"As a result, the workers are under pressure to fulfill the time-bound production target," Dr. Iftekharuzzaman said.

Iftekaruzzaman, executive director of the TIB, said a press conference at his office in Dhaka yesterday.
Rana Plaza victims must have justice on all fronts

AUTHORITIES appear to be unmoved even on the sixth anniversary of the Rana Plaza collapse when labour organisations, victims and affected families still cry for justice. After the collapse, reports revealed the nature of systemic negligence and disregard for worker safety in the five factories housed in the nine-storey building at Savar. Building code violations were detected which implied complicity of the local administration in the approval of the building on marshy land. Workers on the day were forced to enter the building already known to be risky, yet there has been no progress in ensuring justice for the victims six years later. Fourteen cases filed, including 11 with the labour court, have all been stalled in various stages of trial. All the accused but the building owner is in custody. In one case, charges were framed in July 2016, but no deposition could be recorded in about three years as the government officials indicted had a stay on the trial process and the public prosecutors did not feel the urgency to appeal against the stay order. The government appears to have resorted to the habitual deployment of legal bureaucracy to defer and interrupt the process of ensuring justice.

Survivors, meanwhile, are in need of justice on a few fronts. They not only talked about justice in the form of conviction but also of rightful compensation, rehabilitation of the injured and an amendment to compensation clauses in the labour law. According to an ActionAid report, more than 74 per cent of the injured still suffering from physical ailments are in need of psychosocial support. A lack of context-specific institutional structure of trauma and disaster management for survivors to seek help left the workers suffering without long-term support. The government has so far been dependent on project-based, short-term initiatives of non-governmental organisations which proved inadequate, ill-equipped and unsustainable. It is, however, true that as far as structural safety in the apparel industry, stakeholders, including global buyers, local factory owners and rights organisations, have achieved much progress. Two buyers’ platform, Accord and Alliance, conducted structural, fire and electrical safety inspection in more than 2,300 factories. The government with International Labour Organisation support launched an inspection of the rest of the factories that were not on Alliance and Accord lists. As all these programmes are time-bound, dependent on hired expertise and they ignored the issue of building local institutional capacity to systematically monitor the remedial process, rights activists are concerned whether these initiatives will leave any long-lasting impact on the sector.

For a continued growth of the apparel industry, the ultimate goal should be to prevent any such occurrences but there still should be a system within the government, involving stakeholders mandated to resolve compensation issues and monitor rehabilitation. The government must amend the compensation clause keeping to the ILO’s workplace compensation matrix. Without further delay, the prosecution must also look for ways to undo the legal deadlock to begin deposition. Justice in all forms must be ensured for the victims.

Higher wages should not be conditional

RMG sector must prioritise the workers’ interest

Despite the massive overhaul that the ready-made garments (RMG) industry in Bangladesh has undergone since the Rana Plaza collapse six years ago, there remain important concerns about the adequacy of efforts with regard to the workers. One of them, as reported by this newspaper based on findings by the Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB), is that workers are getting 26 percent less in basic pay than what they should have under the new salary structure, which came into effect in December last year. It happened because, while fixing their pay, the minimum wage board that recommended the salary structure did not consider the five percent annual automatic increment owed to the workers in the previous five years. This is really unfortunate, to say the least. It bespeaks the underlying pro-owner bias of those who usually sit on the wage board.

The TIB also found that the factory owners have raised their production target by 30-36 percent considering the new wage hike. Workers are under pressure to fulfill the time-bound target. But even though the salary that is now being offered is an improvement on the previous wage structure, it doesn’t justify the abuse, additional work, on-the-job stress and uncompensated overtime that the workers are being reportedly subjected to. These issues need to be addressed keeping the workers’ rights and interests in mind. It’s worth recalling that the Rana Plaza tragedy had brought about a costly overhaul of building and fire safety standards for which the owners had to pay. But nearly four lakh workers also lost their jobs as a result, with only 6,676 of them having received compensation. In these changing times, the onus is on the factory owners and the government to come up with innovative business plans that will pay for the increased cost of production and the welfare of the workers. The workers cannot suffer for their failure to do so.
Financial Express
Thursday | April 25, 2019

40m poor people suffer from food insecurity: Experts

FE Report

Around 40 million poor people could not have sufficient food despite the fact that there are several safety net programmes in the country, experts said at a seminar on Wednesday.

Besides, the ultra-poor, mostly the victims of river erosion and natural calamities, who live in slums in urban areas, char lands and haor areas lead an inhuman life, they said.

They called upon the government to enact the ‘Right to Food Act’ immediately to ensure food for all.

About 20 million ultra-poor and 20 million poor could only manage to have little or a meager amount of food, they said.

The Right to Food Bangladesh (RFB) and ICCO Cooperation jointly organised the seminar titled Development Goals of Bangladesh: Right to get Food and Nutrition issues’ at CIRDAP auditorium in the city, with Food Minister Sadhan Chandra Majumder as the chief guest.

The food minister said the right to food is a fundamental right of the people and it is the responsibility of the state to ensure food for each and every citizen of the country.

"The country has now achieved self-sufficiency in food and the food security has been ensured," he said.

"Now, we want to ensure people's right to safe and nutritious food," the minister said.

He also said that he will discuss the issue of enacting the Right to Food Act with the high-ups of the government.

Chairman of RFB and Palli Karma Sahayak Foundation (PKSF) Dr Qazi Kholiquzzaman Ahmed, who presided over the seminar, said Bangladesh is now on the right track to achieve Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

So, it is important for the country to ensure food security for all, he said.

He stressed the need for generating more employment opportunities for the poor, as it has an important link with the income of a family and food requirement.

He hoped that the government would enact the Right to Food Act for the betterment of all.

The Right to Food Bangladesh put forward some recommendations to the government, including allocating sufficient fund in the upcoming budget to ensure food for the poor and ultra-poor in poverty-prone areas and increasing financial allowances and the number of beneficiaries.

It also requested the food ministry to form a committee for drafting the proposed Right to Food Act.

Director General of Bangladesh National Nutrition Council Dr Md Shah Nawaz, senior research fellow of Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS) Dr Nazmin Ahmed and Prof Khaleda Islam of the Institute of Nutrition and Food Science of Dhaka University attended the seminar.

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The Daily Star

DHAKA THURSDAY APRIL 25, 2019

Injury insurance for workers on cards

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

The International Labour Organisation and the government are set to launch an employment injury insurance (EII) scheme on a pilot basis with the aim of protecting the rights of workers.

The scheme can be launched very promptly and it might be less than one year," Tuomo Poutinen, country director of the ILO, at a discussion styled "Improvements in Factory Safety Measures Post Rana Plaza Tragedy" at the EMK Centre in Dhaka.

The EMK Centre in partnership with the Dhaka Tribune organised the discussion on the occasion of the sixth anniversary of the Rana Plaza building collapse, the nation’s deadliest industrial accident that killed 1,136 workers and injured more than 2,500.

The EII can be started from the garment sector and later expanded to other industries as well.

Normally, the EII premium is co-shared by owners and the government, according to Poutinen.

The workers would benefit from the EII in three ways: protection from injuries, compensation based on future earnings loss, and if the workers want they can rejoin their job, Poutinen said.

"Works should be respected. The purchasing practices should also be changed. Workers are resources. We also need to talk about the working conditions," said Nazma Akter, president of the Sammilto Garment Sramik Federation, a garment sector rights group.

There has to be a way to better monitor the progress made by the garment sector since the Rana Plaza building collapse, said Mousumi M Khan, chief executive director of Nirapon, a safety provider in the garment sector.

The huge gap between the factory owners and workers should be reduced, she said, while calling for training of workers and security guards.

In case of accidents, the security guards tend to protect the assets of factories but not the workers.

"It is because the security guards have been trained to protect the assets not the lives of workers," she added.

The living standards of garment workers did not improve much after the Rana Plaza tragedy, said Sirajul Islam Rony, a former member of the minimum wage board in the garment sector.

Zafar Sobhan, editor of the Dhaka Tribune, moderated the discussion, which was attended by union leaders, garment exporters, journalists, rights activists, diplomats, and ILO higher ups.
No end to poverty without financial inclusion: WB

James Politi
FT Syndication Service

WASHINGTON: Two things come to mind for Ceyla Pazarbasioglu when she thinks of financial inclusion. First is the core mission of the World Bank, where she has been vice-president for equitable growth, finance and institutions since October of last year.

"You step in the main entrance here and it says, 'Our dream is a world free of poverty.' That's the first thing that hits you. And I really think we're not going to eradicate poverty unless we have financial inclusion," she says.

Yet Ms Pazarbasioglu also warns that unless finance is expanded in the right way, it has the potential to backfire dangerously -- a cautionary note that is informed in part by her previous roles at the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and as a government official in her native Turkey.

"You have good finance, bad finance, and ugly finance... You need to make sure it serves citizens, the SMEs [small and medium-sized enterprises], and not just the banker, or the wealthy, or the chosen few," she adds.

Ms Pazarbasioglu is on the front line of a key battleground in global development. In 2017 there were still 1.7bn adults in the world without an account at a financial institution or a mobile money provider, according to the latest Global Findex database published by the World Bank. While this has improved since 2014, when 2bn people were classified as "unbanked", it still represents a huge mountain to climb.

The Findex report identifies China, India, Indonesia and Pakistan as the countries with the biggest shares of financially excluded individuals -- but it remains a pervasive problem across other parts of Asia, the Middle East and Africa.

In Egypt, for example, the share of people aged 15 and over with an account at a financial institution rose from 13.7 per cent in 2014 to 33 per cent in 2017. That compares with well above 90 per cent in advanced economies.

Margaret Miller, global lead for responsible financial access at the World Bank, explains that these groups share several traits:

- **poverty without financial inclusion: WB**

  individuals have lower incomes; they are geographically isolated, usually in rural areas; they have lower levels of education; and they are predominantly female -- 56 per cent of the unbanked globally are women, according to Findex.

  But the growth of technology including fintech is now offering a promising new avenue to accelerate the efforts already under way to narrow these gaps.

  "It reduces costs, it's much more efficient, it can be scaled up," Ms Pazarbasioglu says. "It does come with risks as well because, you know, you really don't want to hurt those that are most vulnerable," she adds, referring to threats such as cyber security and people borrowing excessively. "So we have to be careful. But I think it is really remarkable."

  Last year, the World Bank locked arms with the IMF to present a joint fintech agenda at their annual meetings in Bali, Indonesia, which included a specific call for countries to "enable new technologies to enhance financial service provision" around the world.

  "The number of institutions and people talking about financial inclusion and the need for it have really, I think, grown very sharply in the last decade," Ms Pazarbasioglu says. "You also see a lot of the private sector now talking about it and being engaged."

  Crucially, too, national regulators and central bankers, which might have resisted pushes for financial inclusion in the past for fear that they could destabilise their financial systems, have become much less sceptical. "I think it's much more clear now that unless you have an inclusive system, it's not a sustainable or stable system," Ms Pazarbasioglu says. "There is much more awareness and much more understanding."

  In the Middle East and Africa, she says, fintech's role in financial inclusion is seen as a way to help foster entrepreneurship and lower unemployment among the regions' burgeoning youth populations.

  There are specific cases that have given Ms Pazarbasioglu hope, including a recent visit to Ethiopia to see the World Bank's women's entrepreneurship development programme in action -- an initiative that gives female owners of small businesses better access to loans and credit.

  The case of M-Pesa, a mobile phone money transfer system launched in Kenya in 2007, is also often cited as a pioneering financial inclusion instrument. And Kristalina Georgieva, the World Bank's chief executive officer, has led what is known as the African "digital moonshot" - a $25bn investment in digital transformation between now and 2030 -- with the potential to add $25bn more from the private sector.

  There are undoubtedly some potential pitfalls in this growing field, from saddling individuals with risky levels of debt to allowing data breaches. But on balance, Ms Pazarbasioglu believes the gains could be large across the developing world.

  "What I like about technology is that it starts by asking a question, and is trying to find a solution to a problem," she says. "How can I solve it with limited costs, and then see if it can be scaled up?"
Gender inequality a major bar to middle-income status

FE Report

Speakers at a programme in the city on Thursday termed gender inequality a major hindrance to achieving middle-income status and overall development of the country.

Gender inequality that becomes visible in a society and even in a country’s policies may hinder progress in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals by the year 2030, the speakers observed.

They were speaking at a policy dialogue titled “Women’s Economic Empowerment in Bangladesh: Issues and Challenges at the local level” held at the Bangabandhu International Conference Center.

Although women in Bangladesh have made significant strides across major spheres, their participation in economic activities is still very low, they viewed. According to them, only 20 per cent of the country’s female workers receive wages.

As women are still subjected to different forms of gender-based violence, their economic empowerment is a must to achieve gender equality and ensure poverty reduction and inclusive economic growth, leading up to SDG attainment.

The event was organised jointly by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and Bangladesh Women Chamber of Commerce and Industry (BWCCI) in association with UNCDF and UN Women.

This was a part of ‘Inclusive and Equitable Local Development (IELD)’ project, a global initiative by UNDP, UNCDF and UN Women to unlock the barriers to women’s economic empowerment.

Speaking as the chief guest, Speaker Dr Shirin Sharmeen Chaudhury said, “The government has already enacted women-friendly laws and policies and is keen to continue the efforts in empowering women in the fields of politics and economy. Although women have played an important role in Bangladesh’s economic development, their participation in the formal economic sector is still very poor, she commented and said women should not be kept confined only to the small-cottage industries like sewing, embroidery and so on.

The Speaker called for increasing women’s business literacy with a view to promoting their stake in the economy.

Sudipta Mukherjee, Resident Representative of UNDP Bangladesh, said, “Women’s economic empowerment is not simply about labour force participation: it must also encompass and consider the choice to work, choice of sector, location and working hours.”

“While working for women’s economic empowerment, social figures, politicians and development workers need to make sure that women’s economic empowerment does not come at the cost of leisure and rest, which are important for development.”

He further said, “To achieve the SDGs, we need to make sure there is no one left behind.”

Citing the recent incident of Nusrat, Selma Ahmad MP, president of BWCCI, said, “Fighting violence against women should be prioritised in empowering women. When a woman is raped by someone who is supposed to protect her, all our hopes about women’s political and economic empowerment are shattered.”

Among others, Waseqa Ayesha Khan, member of parliament, Md Arfan Ali, managing director of Bank Asia, Taslima Sultan Khanom, president of Women Development Forum, Brahmanbaria, and Rokeya Kabir, founder and executive director of Bangladesh Nari Progati Sangstha spoke.

Earlier, Ferdousi Sultana Begum, eminent gender expert, presented the keynote paper on ‘Women’s Economic Empowerment in Bangladesh’ and Sharmain Islam, UNDP’s women’s economic empowerment specialist, made a presentation on the challenges and issues faced at the local level.

Lack of data barrier to attaining SDGs

Says planning minister

Planning Minister MA Mannan yesterday said the government has been working relentlessly to further alleviate poverty and also to make the ongoing development efforts sustainable.

“Our main task is to unleash development, ensure modernisation and poverty alleviation. Out of these three, I’ll put poverty alleviation in the first slot. Poverty is behind all problems like lack of healthcare facilities, lack of food and education,” he said.

The minister was addressing the inaugural session of a programme titled ‘Citizens Conclave: Four years of SDGs in Bangladesh: Citizen’s Platform for SDGs in Bangladesh’ at the Bangabandhu International Conference Center.

Mannan said for attaining the SDGs, the government has undertaken a number of steps as well as continuing field work in this regard. “We’ll require a huge fund to attain the SDGs, but we have confidence that we’ll be able to mobilise the resources.”

The planning minister also said apart from resource constraints, lack of data is also a barrier towards attaining the SDGs.

UN Resident Coordinator and Representative of UNDP Bangladesh Mia Seppo spoke on the occasion as guest of honour, where she underscored the need for addressing lack of data towards attaining the SDGs, reaching the benefits of development to every nook and corner and associating more the civil society towards attaining the SDGs.

Speakers tell policy dialogue in city

The Daily Star

Dhaka Sunday April 28, 2019

Ferdousi Sultana Begum, eminent gender expert, presented the keynote paper on ‘Women’s Economic Empowerment in Bangladesh’ and Sharmain Islam, UNDP’s women’s economic empowerment specialist, made a presentation on the challenges and issues faced at the local level.
IDRA finalises ins policy for migrant workers

Syrul Islam

The insurance regulator has finalised a policy, which will provide migrant workers with benefits in cases of their death and accidental disability, officials said.

Intended migrant workers can buy any of the two life insurance policies—one having the coverage of Tk 0.2 million and another Tk 0.5 million, they added.

For the first option, a policy holder will have to pay Tk 1,000 and for the other Tk 2,925 each month as insurance premium.

In case of the second option, the workers will pay a portion of the premium while the rest will be borne by the government.

Officials said the provision for making compulsory the insurance coverage for overseas workers came into focus as death and abuse of Bangladeshi nationals working abroad hit the headlines.

The insurance policy will be considered mandatory for intended migrant workers to cover death and accidental risks while they are abroad.

At the initial stage, the jobseekers will buy the insurance policy for two years, which can be extended for two more years if job contract is extended.

Overseas job seekers aged between 18 and 58 will be eligible for the insurance policy ‘to be administered by state-run Jiban Bima Corporation.

The Insurance Development and Regulatory Authority (IDRA) last week sent the final version of ‘Migrant Workers Insurance Policy’ to the finance ministry for taking steps to make it official by issuing notification.

A 13-member body led by Dr Mohammad Sobhabuddin finalised the policy after several consultations with stakeholders and experts.

According to the finalised policy, the nominees of workers will get 100 per cent of insurance benefit if the policy buyers die during the coverage period.

However, in case of accidental disability the workers will get between 10 per cent and 100 per cent benefit depending on the degree of wounds.

A senior financial institutions division official said ministry officials will now examine the policy before issuing a notification.

Please Turn Over
Bangladesh not on track to achieve 3 SDGs

Citizen's Platform finds

Rising inequality, increasing effects of natural disasters and high level of bribery and crimes are pushing SDG indicators in the wrong direction and will obstruct Bangladesh from achieving at least three sustainable development goals by 2030.

The goals are SDG 10, 13 and 16, which aim at reducing inequality, combating climate change and ensuring peace and justice in society respectively.

The observations came in the "Overview report on four years of SDGs in Bangladesh" unveiled by the Citizen’s Platform for SDGs, Bangladesh, a forum of civil society, NGOs and the private sector.

The platform organised the day-long conclave to discuss and track Bangladesh’s progress in six SDGs since 2015, at Bangabandhu International Conference Center in Dhaka yesterday.

The discussed SDGs are: Goal 4 (Quality education), Goal 8 (Decent work and economic growth), Goal 10 (reduced inequality), Goal 13 (Climate action), Goal 16 (Peace, justice and strong institutions), and Goal 17 (Partnerships).

The indicators for SDG 4, 8 and 17 are moving in the right direction but require some policy interventions to steer them towards achievement by 2030, Fahmida Khatun, executive director of the Centre for Policy Dialogue, said while presenting the report.

"On the other hand, the SDGs 10, 13 and 16 are not moving in the right direction and require radical policy changes and significant efforts from all stakeholders in order to reverse their trajectories," she said at the opening of the conclave.

The meet took place ahead of the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) on sustainable development to be held from July 9-18 in New York. Inputs gathered from the conclave would be forwarded to the HLPF, the organisers said.

This year, the HLPF will review progress of the six SDGs.

According to the overview report, the prospect of achieving the target on reducing inequality under the Goal 10 appears bleak.

READ MORE ON B3

Citizens Conclave on Four Years of SDGs in Bangladesh

Planning Minister MA Mannan, centre, attends a programme on the Sustainable Development Goals at the Bangabandhu International Conference Center in Dhaka yesterday.
Steel industry booming on mega projects

JAGARAN CHAKMA

Bangladesh’s steel industry is going from strength to strength thanks to a construction boom and implementation of mega infrastructure projects, said experts and a study report.

A decade ago consumption of steel, which includes mild steel rod, prefabricated steel and corrugated iron sheet, was 1.6 million tonnes and last year it stood at about 7.5 million tonnes, according to industry players.

“The steel industry passed a stellar 2018,” said United Securities in a recent report on the sector.

Tapan Sengupta, executive director of BSRM, one of the leading steel manufacturers in Bangladesh, gave the credit to the government’s mega infrastructure projects.

Government projects account for 35 percent to 40 percent of the total steel consumed in Bangladesh, up from 15 percent a decade ago. And last year seven mega projects picked up steam, according to the report.

“Rapid urbanisation along with faster economic development is also contributing to the growth,” Sengupta said, adding that BSRM’s growth was 12 percent last year in terms of sales.

Today, steel is almost a Tk 50,000 crore industry, according to sector people.

In the past few years a good number of steel and rolling mills were set up that use state-of-the-art technologies and churn out world-class products, said Md Shahidullah, secretary general of Bangladesh Steel Manufacturers Association.

“So much that the Rooppur nuclear power plant and Padma bridge are being constructed solely with steel manufactured locally,” he said, adding that steel products are also being exported.

There are about 40 active manufacturers, who altogether have the capacity to manufacture nine million tonnes a year. Of them, Abul Khair Steel, BSRM and KSRM meet more than half the demand.

And yet the industry has plenty of room to grow more.

At present, Bangladesh’s steel consumption is significantly lower than the global average, according to the World Steel Association, the international trade body for the iron and steel industry.

Currently, the per capita consumption in Bangladesh is 45kg whereas the global average is 208kg. In India, the average is 65.2kg and in Pakistan 42kg.

Per capita steel consumption is much higher in developed countries—400 kg in South Korea, 660 kg in the USA and 1,000 kg in Japan.

It is this potential that has perhaps convinced Chinese steel giant Kuning Iron & Steel Holding Company to fork out $2.4 billion to set up a steel manufacturing plant in Bangladesh.

Meanwhile, there are some mega projects like the Rampal power plant, Kanchpur-Meghna-Gumti bridge and Karnaphuli tunnel that are being made with imported steel — brought in duty-free to the country.

On one hand, the government is losing out on revenue; and on the other, it is giving out the signal that the local manufacturers are lagging behind their foreign counterparts, said Shahidullah, also the managing director of Metrocem Ispat.

“This is depressing, discouraging and degrading,” he added.
Female apparel workers silent about sexual harassment: study

Staff Correspondent

The lack of trade unions in the readymade garment sector leaves female apparel workers vulnerable in their fight against sexual and other harassment at the workplace, revealed a new research sponsored by Karmoibis Nari, a non-governmental organisation.

The research, conducted between September last year and February this year in 300 RMG factories in Dhaka, Gazipur and Narayanganj, revealed that only 6 per cent of the factories had trade unions.

Only 14 per cent of the 3,014 female workers interviewed in the study spoke about sexual harassment of their colleagues and none of the respondents complained about being sexually harassed, said Profesor Jakhir Hossain of the Institute of Bangladesh Studies, who conducted the research.

This is unbelievable, he said while presenting the study findings at the National Press Club in the afternoon.

However, 72 per cent of the female workers interviewed complained about their being verbally harassed and 62 per cent about psychologically by their employers.

He believes that the female workers would have opened up about sexual harassment had there been a mechanism for them to fight against it together.

It is very difficult to open up about sexual harassment in a male-dominated society where the victims become an easy target of stigmatisation, the researcher said.

He said that about 20 per cent of the women told the researcher that they would have accepted it if their lot had they been sexually harassed.

Sexual harassment is held to be one of the major reasons for the rising trend of women workers leaving the apparel industry.

The ratio of women participation in the readymade garment industry fell to nearly 60 per cent lately from more than 80 per cent in the 1990s.

Only 4 per cent of the factories studied had a committee against sexual harassment, which was stipulated to exist at every one of them as per a High Court order, said Jakhir.

The researcher, however, did not collect data on the performance of the committees and serious doubt about their effective functioning.

Only 17 per cent of the factories under the study arranged for transportation for their female workers only when they returned home late in the night after doing overtime, revealed the study.

The way to and from the readymade garment factories in Bangladesh is the most likely place for sexual harassments to prey on female workers and apparel workers regularly fall victims to rape on their way to and from the work.

More than a third of the female readymade garment workers worked more than 10 hours a day, though it was not legally permitted, the research, adding that 96 per cent of the workers preferred overtime work.

The average monthly income for the studied female workers was Tk 9,972, which was far less than their monthly expenditure of Tk 17,639, according to the study.

The wage and overtime payments of 14 per cent of the workers were regularly kept pending, while nearly half of the women did not get the entitled and timely festival bonus, said the research.

About 30 per cent of the women were denied maternity leave and many among those receiving sick leave complained about not being paid during the leave.

It said that 91 per cent of the female garment workers were below 35.

Govt must spend at least 2pc of total remittance

Rights body says on migrant workers' welfare

Staff Correspondent

Obhishish Karmi Unnayan Program has called on the government to bring vulnerable migrant workers, particularly women, under the National Social Security Strategy in the upcoming national budget.

In a discussion titled 'Migrants' Budget' at the Biman Auditorium yesterday, the rights body said remittance sent by the migrants every year is about $15 billion, which is seven times the foreign direct assistance and the driving force of the country's economy.

However, due to lack of transparency in the labour migration process, migrants face various forms of fraudulence and exploitation in the recruitment process, at workplace and even after returning home. They are not well taken care of by the government, said Obhishish Karmi Unnayan Program (OKUP) Chairman Shakerul Islam.

According to a review of 2018-19 budget by OKUP, the allocation for the Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment Ministry is third lowest, ministry wise. The welfare-related initiatives taken by the government are basically funded by Wage Earners' Welfare Fund — made up of contribution of the migrants, it said.

In his presentation, Shakerul said every year thousands of migrants return home empty-handed after enduring abuse. An estimated 5,000 female migrants returned home last year. Many of them do not receive proper treatment due to financial challenges. At times even their families do not accept them, he added.

If these returnees are not rehabilitated and reintegrated into society, they may turn into social and economic burden for the country, he said.

Government must spend at least two per cent of total remittance for the welfare of migrant workers, he added.

Addressing the discussion, Deputy Speaker of the Parliament Advocate Fazle Rabbi Mia said the government will increase budgetary allocation for migrant workers in the upcoming budget, according to a press statement.

Minister Kanti Das, member of the parliamentary standing committee on the expatriates' welfare ministry, said he would recommend arranging special queues for migrant workers at the airports as well as increase manpower at the Bangladesh embassies to ensure their protection.
Preparing for fourth industrial revolution

With the fourth industrial revolution knocking at the door, nations the world over are either worried about its impact or getting prepared to welcome it. Some may still wonder what it will mean to them. How does Bangladesh want to respond to the challenges posed by this latest digitised, robotic and AI (artificial intelligence)-driven industrial revolution? During the presentation of a keynote paper at the second International Conference on Business and Management (ICBM)-2019 at a city hotel on Friday, the chairman of an industrial group, ACI did not exactly pose this question. But he made an oblique reference to this by asking how leaders of various fields of today want to be remembered by the future generations will depend on the ground the former would have prepared. Indeed, the ACI chairman has reminded today's leadership of the enormous responsibility of creating an enabling environment for the nation's transition to the highly sophisticated and automated industrial age.

According to the World Economic Forum (WEF), around 800 million people worldwide are likely to lose their jobs by 2030. During the same period, jobs abroad and at home of approximately 5.7 million unskilled workers from Bangladesh would be terminated. This is quite a frightening employment scenario for the country. Clearly, this country is yet to take enough preparation for the fast-changing manufacturing mode courtesy of the advent of a completely different phase of human civilisation dependent more on advanced digitisation and AI.

With an oversize population Bangladesh is at a disadvantage, no doubt. But at the same time, its plus point is its high proportion of young population. As high as 34 per cent of its population is aged 15 or below, whereas in the Western countries and Japan, the aged are outnumbering the young by a wide margin. The trend in the West is in favour of a decreasing young population.

Now the demographic pattern here in Bangladesh can be made either an asset or a huge burden. If properly planned, the young generation can be raised as most competent people who will be able to face any challenge from the upcoming industrial age. Clearly, education comes first in order of merit. The existing education system will not be able to prepare today's children for the industrial transformation. It has to be reformed according to the need of the time. There is no alternative to massive investment in education. The other day Education Minister Dipu Moni was lamenting that budget allocation for education still hovers around 2.0 per cent of the gross domestic product (GDP).

To meet the challenge, a change in the mindset is well in order. It must be admitted that the present system of academic pursuit has lost touch with the emerging reality. Producing technicians rather than general graduates is a better option. To be conversant with advanced technology and AI, the young generation will have to learn more than just technical skills. That the young people here are resourceful in terms of technological know-how is well proved. What they need is enough facility and patronage. If those are in place, the young generation will get prepared for deriving benefits from the fourth industrial revolution.
Legal framework for workplace safety

TAHSEEN LIOBARA

Workplace health and safety conditions in Bangladesh has seen steady improvements since the disastrous Rana Plaza incident which claimed 1,136 lives six years ago. According to the 2015 report of Bangladesh Occupational Safety, Health, and Environment Foundation (OSHE), the number of work-related deaths and injuries were 898 and 341 respectively. While this is still a substantial number, it is definitely lower than that of the preceding two years. Experts have consistently pointed to the lack of implementation of labour laws as the reason behind the persisting cases of work-related deaths and injuries.

The Bangladesh Labour Act (BLA) was promulgated in 2006, consolidating over 25 pre-existing laws on various labour-related issues. BLA contains multiple chapters dedicated to the issue of occupational safety, health and hygiene.

Chapter V of the Act has laid out the hygiene measures to be undertaken in establishments with painstaking details, ranging from the manner in which the interiors must be cleaned to the water that should be used in case of artificial humidification. Many health concerns including inhalation of harmful particles, ventilation, temperature, adequate toilet facilities and proper lighting are addressed within this Chapter. On the other hand, Chapter VI of the Act addresses safety concerns such as fire, machineries and other hazardous work conditions.

Section 61 gives the Inspector discretion to determine whether the safety and precautions of an establishment is satisfactory and act accordingly, through a written order to the employer to either take necessary measures or to halt the use of such establishment. As per the Labour Rules 2015, inspection must be made before the granting or renewal of license.

BLA places a great amount of reliance on the Inspector’s judgment in determining most of the safety concerns in the workplace. For such reliance to be effective, significant professional and technical expertise of inspectors must be ensured.

Unfortunately, this creates a punitive rather than a preventive approach and thus, curbs its effectiveness.

Furthermore, it could be construed that BLA 2006 addresses the concerns regarding sexual harassment in Section 332. But the wording of the Section is too vague and the provision does not mention any consequence for its violation. Another inadequacy of the Act is its provisions regarding compensation for work-related death or injury. According to the Act, the maximum amount that can be paid in cases of death and permanent disability are 1 lac and 1.25 lac respectively. Alternative remedies exist in the Fatal Accidents Act 1855, but the process under the BLA is speedier and therefore, preferable.

Therefore, it is apparent from a reading of the Labour Act 2006 that while many of its safety provisions are very ambitious, there are many clear deficiencies. Lack of implementation, dearth of skilled inspectors and delays in Labour Courts altogether mean that occupational health and safety remains as one of the significant concerns for the workforce in Bangladesh. The Government must address them in order to sustain the economic growth it prides itself on.

Protecting the workers of the informal sector

SARWAR SABRY SIBAM

International Labor Organization has demonstrated in its recent report that there are 2 billion workers across the world working in the informal economy. This constitutes 61 percent of the world’s employed population. These workers mostly work in developing countries and do not have any social protection, decent working condition and different rights at work. Men (63%) and women (58%) almost equally contribute to the informal economy.

ILO has passed a recommendation named ‘Transition from the Informal Economy to Formal Economy Recommendation 2015 (No. 204)’ to tackle the informal economy and transition it to formal economy. ILO Director General Guy Ryder urged the different party states to enact laws and regulations protecting the informal laborers. Bangladesh is a party state to the Recommendation-2015. According to Bangladesh Labor Force Survey, it has about 90 percent informal sector, the rest constitutes of cleaners, waiters, rickshaw pullers etc. in Bangladesh. None of them get pension-cum-insurance, sick leave or bonus. They work under ‘no work, no pay’ policy.

Article 34(1) of the Constitution of Bangladesh prohibits ‘forced labor’ irrespective of formal and informal sectors. Also, Article 14 enumerates that, the state shall have the fundamental responsibility to protect the peasants, toil masses and workers from any exploitation in the work places. And article 15 further propagates the fundamental responsibility of providing the workers with basic necessities of life, right to guaranteed employment, quality working conditions with rest/recreation and reasonable wage irrespective of any sector. Article 20 directs the State to fulfill the demand of equitable wage according to the workers’ abilities and skills. In spite of these Constitutional provisions, Bangladesh has failed to define, recognise and protect the workers of the informal sector. Since they occupy such a crucial portion of the country’s workforce, they deserve recognition and protection under the Labor Act-2006.

Hence, the incumbent government may address the situation by making necessary amendments in the existing Labour Act-2006. Alongside the Labour Act, the saving scheme of Labour and Employment Ministry must also be enforced and properly regulated. The ‘Sixth Five Year Plan (SFYP) (2011-2015)’ may be re-transplanted into SFYP (2019-2024) with a view to transforming informal jobs to higher productivity jobs. Under this plan, the informal workers may be registered with a specific identity number regulated by Labour and Employment Ministry. A feasible wage structure may be settled by the government like other formal sectors. Pension-cum-insurance for old age and sickness may be integrated in the saving scheme. A union of informal workers may also be formed to communicate them more easily for facilitating planned economic growth while ensuring income and job security.

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FACTORY SAFETY

Nirapon comes in place of Alliance

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

A new self-regulating platform has emerged to oversee building inspection and certification of listed apparel factories in Bangladesh in place of Alliance, which had been providing safety monitoring, oversight and reporting services for the North American brands and buyers.

Nirapon was created as a common platform by global RwG brands for whom Bangladesh is an important sourcing destination to sustain and build on the past six years’ remarkable safety achievements, said its CEO, Moushumi M. Khan. As of today, there are 21 member brands and over 600 factories under Nirapon, she told a press conference of Nirapon at the Westin Dhaka yesterday.

All of these Nirapon-member brand factories are required to continue to meet the National Action Plan-harmonised standards for physical safety of structural, fire and electrical components. *“Nirapon builds on the achievements of the Alliance’s successful remediation efforts and our goal of worker safety remains the same,”* she said.

However, the Nirapon model is fundamentally different,” she said.

Alliance worked directly with factories to drive remediation and training programmes while Nirapon’s role is of oversight and independent verification of safety and training compliance and to report these results to members.

“It cannot and will not suspend factories nor share factory information other than to its members. Rather, factories will now work directly with third party service providers with guidance from their Nirapon member brands and oversight from Nirapon,” Khan also said.

The unprecedented partnership, that it Nirapon, will help build capacity towards a locally sustainable culture of factory safety,” Jamilur Reza Choudhury, chairman of the board of Nirapon, said at the event.