Chattogram EPZ to reopen 11 factories

MOHAMMAD SUMAN, Dhaka

The Bangladesh Export Processing Zones Authority (Bepza) has taken an initiative to reopen 11 factories and create around 10,000 jobs in Chattogram Export Processing Zone within a year.

Of the factories, the ownership of six factories has already been transferred to new hands, one will be reopened by its existing owner and the rest four will be auctioned off very soon, Bepza officials said.

The factories would take a year to go for production after completing development of necessary infrastructure, renovation and staff recruitment, said Khosshed Alam, general manager of the CEZP.

The factories were shut down between 2012 and 2016 due to lack of foreign buyers, losses in production and workers’ protest.

Of the factories, the ownership of Grey Fab (BD) Ltd has been taken over by Pacific Jeans, one of the leading garments manufacturers in the country.

“We hope to start operation very soon,” said Syed M Tanvir, director of Pacific Jeans.

Japanese company Kuroki Chain Ltd was shut down in 2016 after running business at the CEZP for 30 years. The factory was handed over to Korean company Youngone Group.

The ownership of Northpole (BD) Ltd was handed over to Loyal Ten Group and Young International (BD) Ltd to FGI Group.

The move to change the ownership of Peninsula Garments Ltd and Hu Accessories Ltd is at the final stage, Bepza officials said, without disclosing the names of the new owners.

Arrow jeans Private Ltd is reopening its own factory and it will soon add new machinery to the unit.

The CEZP, the first EPZ in Bangladesh, was established in 1983 over a 453-acre land and is located three kilometres away from the Chattogram Port.

A total of 201,798 people are now working in 160 factories inside the economic processing zone.

LABOUR MIGRATION

Govt for round-trip airfare by employers

Md Owaisim Uddin Bhuyan

THE government has taken a step to include a provision in the employer-migrant worker contracts making it obligatory for the employers to pay round-trip airfares.

The provision for bearing round-trip airfare of the workers would be applicable during the labour migration from Bangladesh, said officials.

In case of death, the contracts should have another provision of bringing back the dead bodies by the cost of the employers concerned.

On February 13, an office order signed by Expatriates’ Welfare and Overseas Employment deputy secretary Monir Hossain Chowdhury was issued saying that the EWEO state minister has given two instructions over round-trip airfare and repatriation of bodies of migrant workers.

The state minister asked all labour wings at the Bangladesh missions abroad to implement the government instructions in future contracts from now on, said officials.

Migrant rights activists, however, welcomed the government step.

WARBE Development Foundation chairman Syed Saiful Haque told New Age that it was certainly a positive step.

Saiful, a global migration expert, said this option was introduced and kept in all contracts once in the past, but later the recruiting agencies started dropping this condition.

Ovibashi Kami Unnayan Program chairman Shikirul Islam said that the employer-pay-model should be introduced in the recruitment process to protect the rights of the migrant workers.
Remittances rise by 10pc in 8 months on strong dollar

Staff Correspondent

INFLOW of remittances rose by 9.94 per cent in July-February in the current fiscal year compared with that of the same period of last year amid depreciation of the taka against the dollar, prompting expatriates Bangladeshis to send money home.

Bangladesh Bank data released on Sunday showed remittance inflow rose to $10.40 billion in the first eight months of the fiscal year 2018-19 against $9.46 billion in July-February of FY18.

Monthly remittance inflow posted a healthy growth of 14.88 per cent in February rising to $1.32 billion from $1.15 billion in February a year ago as the taka lost more grounds against the dollar in the month.

Remittance inflow started to pick up pace in recent months due mainly to transfer of fund by the expatriates through the legal banking channel amid rising value of the dollar.

Bank officials said that the exchange rate gap between the illegal channel or hundi and the legal channel had declined in recent months.

According to Bangladesh Bank data, the interbank exchange rate of a US dollar increased to Tk 84.05 on Sunday from Tk 83.95 at the beginning of February.

In the last two years, the taka was devalued by 6.86 per cent against the dollar as the interbank rate of a dollar was Tk 77.72 in January, 2017.

Bank officials also said that the central bank’s move to prevent remittance inflow through the illegal channels, including mobile financial services, was among other reasons for the rise in remittance inflow in recent months. Expatriates’ remittance sending posted 17.39 per cent rise in the fiscal year of 2017-2018.

The Daily Star

Enforce the law on child labour

Penalise brick kiln owners heavily

Despite the law prohibiting the employment of children, many brick kiln owners across Cumilla’s Chauchagram upazila employ minors to do hazardous work. Investigative reporting by this newspaper has found that there are many minors working for the 350 or so brick kilns that operate in Cumilla district. In fact, that is a practice in most of the brick kilns in Bangladesh. The work itself is extremely dangerous and there are often casualties as there is little by way of workers’ safety in the industry. On January 25, we reported the death of 13 workers when a coal-laden truck flipped over on to a makeshift shed at a brick kiln in Cumilla. Nine of the 13 victims were schoolboys from Nipharmari. Children like them work part time at brick kilns to support their families and pay for their education.

While the authorities assure us that steps are being taken to strengthen monitoring around brick kilns so that no underage worker is employed, one must contend with the fact that the socio-economic situation of the families that send their children to work in brick kilns is poor. Poverty drives families to force their children to find work. That said, the local administration has a duty to enforce the law on child labour. Raising awareness among brick kiln owners is simply one side of the coin. It’s up to the local administration to do their part in making it very expensive for brick kiln owners to flout the law. Similarly, it is up to the authorities to address the issue of finding new avenues of income-generating activities for those living in poverty so that they are not compelled to engage their children in hazardous work to support their families.
BGMEA seeks duty cut for US cotton-made RMG export

**FE Report**

Apparel industry leaders have urged the US to extend duty benefits for the export of garment items made with US cotton, saying that such incentives would encourage local spinners to set up textile mills there.

They also demanded restoration of the GSP (generalised system of preferences) facility for Bangladesh and made an appeal to put ready-made garment (RMG) on the list of products getting duty-free access to the US market.

The Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) leaders made the call at a press conference after a meeting with US Ambassador Earl R. Miller at its headquarters in the city on Sunday.

They also dismissed the allegations made by different labour organisations that about 11,000 garment workers were fired from their jobs in the aftermath of recent labour unrest over wage disparity.

The number would be no more than 4,000, they claimed.

The US envoy, citing media reports and different labour organisations' statements, wanted to know about the termination of 11,000 workers over the recent labour unrest, BGMEA President Md Siddiquur Rahman told the press conference.

The leaders had informed the envoy that four procedures had been followed in line with the law of the land while dismissing workers for misconduct and making layoffs, he said.

"Workers have lost their jobs, they were dismissed or terminated on different grounds, but the number is less than 4,000," said Mr Rahman.

Regarding the extension of Accord, a platform of global apparel retailers, the BGMEA president said they are trying to reach a win-win situation before the next court hearing to be held next month.

The issue of Accord's extension was not mentioned until judicial consideration, he added.

"We placed two demands—restoration of GSP facility and duty-free access for RMG products. We also wanted to know whether the US can offer any duty benefit to local exporters if they use US cotton in making garments or set up spinning mills there," he added.

"We wanted to know what kind of benefit the US can offer to Bangladeshi apparel exporters if they shipped finished garment items made with US cotton to the US," he explained.

Though workplace safety and labour and human rights situation have improved much after the Rana Plaza building collapse, no evaluation took place in the last two years in this regard, the BGMEA president quoted Mr Miller as saying.

The envoy suggested starting afresh the process of negotiation for the restoration of GSP for Bangladesh in the US market, said the BGMEA president.

Sound health of pregnant, working mothers stressed

**Bangladesh Sangbad Sangstha Rangpur**

EXPERTS at an introductory meeting stressed on maintaining sound health of pregnant and lactating working mothers for the normal physical and mental growth of babies.

They put special emphasis on comprehensive efforts from all concerned, including local public representatives, to make the government's 'Reform Plan for Maternity Allowance and Lactating Mother Allowance Programmes' successful.

They viewed this at the meeting on implementation of the 'Reform Plan for Maternity Allowance and Lactating Mother Allowance Programmes' organised by the Upazila Women Affairs Office at the Officers Welfare Club at Gangachara upazila of Rangpur on Monday.

Union chairmen and government officials of different departments of Gangachara upazila, beneficiary mothers, and representatives of different non-government organisations, the World Food Programme and the National Development Programme attended the meeting.

District women affairs officer Kawser Pervin attended the meeting as the chief guest.

Gangachara upazila women affairs officer Mahmuda Begum discussed the goals and objectives of the 'Reform Plan for Maternity Allowance and Lactating Mother Allowance Programmes' being run by the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs.

Gangachara upazila livestock officer Nazmul Huda, upazila agriculture officer Agriculturist Shariful Islam, WFP representative Bithika Biewas, NDP representative Sajjad Hossain addressed the event as the special guests.

Representatives of Shahid Begum of WFP and Mizanur Rahman of NDP discussed the different aspects of the Reform Plan for Maternity Allowance and Lactating Mother Allowance Programmes.

The speakers lauded the government for launching various programmes like allowances for pregnant and lactating working mothers to ensure health services for them both in rural and urban areas.

The chief guest called upon grassroots' level public representatives to ensure proper selection of beneficiary pregnant and lactating working mothers for successful implementation of the reform plan.
Low wages affect basic amenities of workers

The economy of Bangladesh is booming due to massive profits the RMG industry is making in Bangladesh. According to the latest figures from the Export Promotion Bureau (EPB), the RMG sector contributed USD 30.61 billion, or 83.49 percent, to Bangladesh’s total exports of USD 36.66 billion, during the last fiscal year of 2017-18. And during July-November of the current fiscal year 2018-19, the growth stood at 20 percent (The Daily Star, 31 December 2018). The ready-made garments sector has also contributed to the unemployment problem. According to a survey titled "Ongoing Upgradation in RMG Enterprise: Preliminary Results from a Survey" conducted by the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD), there are 3,596 active RMG factories in Bangladesh with 3.5 million workers, of which 60.8% are female and 39.2% are male (Dhaka Tribune, 3 March 2018). Despite this positive development, it is frustrating to note that the booming economy is based on entrenched exploitation and the widespread payment of poor wages.

Oxfam, together with the Bangladesh Institute for Labour Studies and the Institute for Workers and Trade Unions in Vietnam, has interviewed more than 470 workers across Bangladesh and Vietnam for this study. All of them were part of Australian clothing supply chains at the time of interview, employed in garment factories that supply at least one of Australia’s biggest clothing brands. This report has recently come out with the title ‘Made in Poverty: The true price of fashion.’

The investigation also included more than 130 interviews with factory owners, managers, union leaders and focus groups to present a clear picture of the way the fashion industry works in Australian garment supply chains. The result is the first full picture of the lives of the people who work to bring fashion to Australian shelves, from Bangladesh and Vietnam.

From amongst the interviewed workers, the report found some strange evidence. They are paid well below a living wage and they also struggle to feed themselves and their families. In consequence, they cannot afford healthcare needs or education of their children. Workers told stories of having to leave school early or getting their children out of school in order to send them to work in the garment sector to bring in more money. This investigation reveals that the problems created by poverty wages in the garment industry are not isolated incidents. They cannot be fixed by action in just one factory or by addressing the hardships of just one worker. Only a strong system-wide commitment from Australian brands with the power to change their practices will turn this around.

Among the many disturbing results, the research has revealed that nine out of ten workers interviewed in Bangladesh cannot afford enough food for themselves and their families, forcing them to regularly skip meals and eat inadequately, or go into debt. 72% of workers interviewed in Bangladesh factories supplying to major brands in Australia cannot afford medical treatment when they get sick or injured. 76% of workers interviewed in Bangladesh factories supplying to major brands in Australia have no running water inside their home.

In Bangladesh, one in three workers interviewed are separated from their children, with nearly 80% of those cases due to a lack of adequate income.

For the first time, this report looks comprehensively at the lives of the women and men who make clothes bound for the Australian market in Bangladesh.

HRW urges govt to probe sacking of RMG workers

Staff Correspondent

NEW York-based rights group Human Rights Watch on Wednesday urged the Bangladeshi government to immediately investigate garment workers and union leaders' allegations of arbitrary dismissals and false criminal cases following the recent wage protest.

In a statement, HRW also urged the global garment brands sourcing from Bangladesh to investigate the allegations and called for an end to all forms of intimidation of workers.

It said that after strikes in mid-January 2019, union leaders had reported sacking of at least 7,500 workers from their jobs, some of those were accused of vandalism and looting, but the allegations appeared broad and vague.

At least 29 criminal cases have been filed naming 551 individuals, as well as over 3,000 unidentified people, leaving workers at risk of being arbitrarily accused in one of these cases at a later date. Over 50 workers have been arrested, 11 of whom were denied bail, the statement read.

HRW made the statement after interviewing eight witnesses to the police violence, 14 dismissed workers, and three union leaders, and also reviewing lists of fired workers and dismissal notices posted on the factories. "Bangladesh has made international pledges to ensure worker safety and protect their rights, but is falling short of its commitments when workers strike to demand a livable wage," said Phil Robertson, deputy Asia director at HRW.
APPAREL INDUSTRY: A long-run short-run cash cow?

by Mohammad Bakhtiar Rana

In the past four decades, we have had success in advancing the apparel industry by focusing on cutting and sewing. However, the industry needs a more comprehensive approach to development. Since 2010, a few companies have been trying to internationalize Bangladesh brands in the United States, Canada, and Asian countries. While large apparel firms, only a few have taken up the challenge, the non-compliance issue is still a major concern.

The idea is to benefit from cheap labour and quote facilities in Ethiopia and to deliver products from a shorter distance to meet fast fashion trends. Buyers can enjoy competitive advantages in price and product marketing. Thus, the internationalization drive is more or less driven by buyer's business policy and supply of global strategic vision and entrepreneurial capability, which are closely held in place. Different kinds of cheap labour and quote facilities in Ethiopia and product marketing help sustain the apparel firms where firms not only expand their upstream (suppliers) and downstream value chains but also globally disperse the downstream value chain (global production and supply).

However, despite success, due to limited access to international markets, the apparel industry suffers from occupational health and safety standards, scientific labour management, design and productivity standards, and high levels of managerial competency that can take the internationalization of this industry "one step" ahead.

The "one step" is the capability of design development, global production network development, own brand development and establishment of retail networks to foreign markets. Although one may argue that the large firms have begun to develop designs, but this is at a low cost, and for low-value-added products. In many cases, companies have hired several foreign designers or set up offices in the United Kingdom, France or Italy and, thereby, have developed designs for buyers in order to add a little more value to a product to raise its price. In some cases, companies have set up units to make designs based on "seasonal fashion trend" manual that their buyers provide. In most cases, this happens because of buyer's policy intervention and motivation.

A few companies, however, tend to have proactive strategies for design development to stay ahead in competition, pricing, and order reception. These companies are super-class companies which are likely to sustain for long. However, they are not more than a fraction of the total companies by the country. These companies have relatively superior internal management system to ensure occupational health and safety standards, implemented lean tools to enhance productivity, and have continuously arranged for training to improve their management capability.

That seems, however, not to be enough in respect of developing and implementing sustainable global strategies, which would help them to build global production networks, own brand and retail networks for brand marketing on the global market. Therefore, there is a need to understand such global strategies. Firms need to have a high level of competency in international management and international marketing, which firms here generally do not have. This is because these functions involve cross-border management competencies, which are not yet taught in Bangladesh's educational institutions.

Another important question that remains unanswered is what will happen with the remaining number of companies that still struggle to improve the occupational, health, labour management standards, suffering from lower productivity and managerial competency. The overall management capability, including entrepreneurial capability, is the root cause that these firms need of address. This is because these firms are run by entrepreneurs and (i) they often do not understand the long-term consequences of non-compliance issues; (ii) they often do not have strategic foresight and vision for sustainable business growth; and (iii) they, instead, focus on immediate cash returns. (v) They often do not have management competency to ensure such standards although they try to (vi) very often, these firms are governed by owners with a centralised decision-making system, and thus, development of managerial competency is less prioritised; buyer-driven initiatives are, instead, well addressed; and (v) some entrepreneurial managers are over-occupied with other businesses and national politics and thus, hamper their focus.

There may be an argument that the local brand on the international market is a long journey, but this is the point at which the highest financial value is created in apparel products, which large Bangladesh firms should aim for. Many firms from China, India, Thailand and Vietnam have successfully internationalised their brands. These are the countries that were once ahead of Bangladesh in apparel export, but now Bangladesh has surpassed them. So, why can we not afford to think of the internationalization of apparel brands from Bangladesh? The retailing of local brands in foreign markets requires high management skills and international marketing competency as well as financial capability, which Bangladesh firms can achieve.

The greatest weakness that might hinder the achievement is rooted in the institutional system. Educational institutions here offer relatively low-quality management and marketing education while they do not have international standards of research, which could complement teaching to improve its quality. As for firms, not all, from emerging markets such as China, India and Thailand that have successfully internationalised brands, the countries have developed higher quality management...
Apparel Industry: A long-or short-run cash cow?

education before upgrading their industry capability for internationalisation. European and US brands are the exceptions where they have, for centuries, been championed in internationalising brands because of high-quality management education and research.

Another concern, as research reveals, which hampers the upgrade of apparel firms from original equipment manufacturer stage to the own brand manufacturer standard is the portfolio investment by apparel factory owners in unrelated sectors.

This, which boost owners' profit through, helps to get large amount of bank loans and provide opportunities for profit reinvestment from one business unit into another and, thereby, gain tax exception. This, however, keeps entrepreneurial managers busy with multiple sectors operation and diverting owner's strategic focus from apparel firm's capability upgrade for sustainability. It may result in high profits in the short run but will affect the sustainability of the apparel business in the long run.

The McKinsey survey report predicted that China would lose its attraction from being the top apparel manufacturing spot while orders from China would begin divert to Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, Pakistan, Cambodia and Vietnam. This has come true. Bangladesh has witnessed increased orders since 2013. However, McKinsey further predicted that Bangladesh would begin to lose its attraction for several reasons, as laid out before, and the sub-Saharan African countries would begin to gain as the next apparel production spot together with Myanmar, which is also proving true.

So, do we have any strategic vision and long-term plan to upgrade the capability of the apparel industry for sustainable internationalisation? Policy-makers and industry actors should think and act accordingly.

Dr Mohammad Bakihtiar-Rana is an associate professor of International business and strategy at the International Business Centre, Aalborg University, Denmark.

56 pvt, 7 state-owned jute mills remain closed: minister tells JS

Staff Correspondent.

TEXTILE and jute minister Golam Dastagir Gazi on Tuesday told the parliament that 56 private jute mills out of a total of 281 and 7 state-owned jute mills out of 33 remained closed in the country.

The minister made the disclosure, replying to a tabled starred question from treasury bench lawmaker Tanveer Imam.

The minister said the number of jute mills under Bangladesh Jute Mills Corporation was 27 in July 2018.

But the number of the mills has recently increased to 33 after the government recently took back the ownership of six other jute mills, he said.

The six jute mills alongside another remained closed due to legal complications, he added.

In reply to another tabled question from treasury bench member Md Abdul Aziz, the textile and jute minister said jute were cultivated in total 6,18,632 hectares of land in the country in the last fiscal year.

Golam Dastagir said the jute and jute goods were exported to Pakistan, India, China, Nepal, Ivory Coast, Djibouti, Vietnam, Brazil, El Salvador, Russia, UK, Tunisia and Germany.

Replying to another tabled question, the minister said the government took joint venture initiative with foreign investors with the hope of massive spread of ‘small bag’ made of jute as an alternative to harmful polythene.

Dastagir said the matter of daily production of one lakh sonali bag under the supervision of the BJMC is under process.

Railways minister Md Nurul Islam Sujan told parliament that the Bangladesh Railways had carried over nine crore passengers in the 2017-18 fiscal.

The Bangladesh Railways carried 7.78 crore passengers in the 2016-17 fiscal year and 9.57 crore passengers in the 2017-18 fiscal year, he said replying to a tabled question from ruling party Awami League lawmaker Nizam Uddin Hazari.
Fight gender discrimination in industrial sector

WOMEN account for 80 per cent of the labour force in the apparel sector that earn the major share of export revenue, but they routinely endure gender discrimination and sexual harassment. On the occasion of International Women's Day, workers while demanding equal and safe workplace environment at protests in Dhaka, said that the labour law and policies failed to protect them. When women in public services are entitled to six months' maternity leave, women apparel workers are allowed only four months' paid leave. In doing so, the government is, as various labour leaders claim, approve a class discrimination among women. Bangladesh has not signed the ILO Convention on Maternity Protection, which allows for at least 18 weeks' maternity leave and an additional compulsory six weeks' leave after childbirth or more, in cases of complications. Although the labour law exempts women who will have a child within 10 weeks or had a child in the past 10 weeks from 'arduous' work, the lack of clarity in the legal instrument has made this provision mere rhetoric. Bangladesh enjoys the fruits of their work but refuses to grant them their equal right and dignity, contradicting the much-celebrated narrative of women's empowerment of successive governments.

Women in the apparel sector encounter all forms of gender discrimination, including proper maternity benefits. However, the maternity provision that is there in the labour law is in practice. Media reports show how pregnant women are compelled to engage in long hours of labour-intensive work to meet the production deadline. Factory management often fire women when they come to know of their pregnancy or asked them to leave and return after the child is born. According to the labour law, all workers employed in a factory are entitled to 14 days' sick leave provided that a registered physician certifies the illness. In practice, factory managers often deny workers their entitled leave, a labour law violation that has proved to be fatal on many occasions. A number of civic organisations in their surveys found that more than 80 per cent of apparel workers face sexual harassment at work with no effective grievance and prevention mechanism to stop this. The management is also known to be treating women's labour unequally as women are hardly promoted to higher positions. More importantly, the gap between a living wage and the existing minimum wage is so sharp that women are forced to take up overtime hours in addition to their household labour in a patriarchal society.

For the government to become a true champion of women's empowerment, it must take up the challenge to fight gender discrimination in the industrial sector. In doing so, it should amend the labour law for a uniform maternity leave provision for all women and penalise factory managements for discriminating along the gender lines.
Issues of digitisation of salary payments in RMG factories

Wages in the garment factories are usually disbursed cash-in-hand, a mechanism that tends to be both cost and time-intensive.

write Farzana Misha and Munshi Sulaiman

CONTRIBUTION of the $30-billion ready-made garments (RMG) sector, employing nearly four million workers, mostly women, to Bangladesh economy is undeniable. The industry has been growing at an average rate of 17 per cent annually since 1980s. The issues of minimum wages for RMG workers have been on front pages of most leading newspapers recently. While an acceptable solution to the wage-related problems is sought, there is another issue that is far more difficult and is related to efficiency in salary payments. It has been shown in research studies that paying salary to the garment workers through mobile money can yield substantial efficiency gain for the factories. However, the current limits on amount of transactions have been identified as a challenge for mobile money to become a norm for the sector. After the increase in minimum wage, there will most likely be a need for revising the current regulations of transaction limits for the sector to benefit the efficiency of digital payments.

Wages in the garment factories are usually disbursed cash-in-hand, a mechanism that tends to be both cost and time-intensive. Most of these workers are financially precariously placed from formal institutions due to systemic biases such as being unable to meet the requisite documentation requirements. Furthermore, low financial literacy results in not being able to take advantage of the various services provided. The money they receive typically follows a few common paths - they are transmitted to their families living in peri-urban or rural areas, invested in assets or informal financial. Very little cash is typically kept in person as it is susceptible to theft or robbery. Also, the patriarchal cultural norms often reduce effective control of women over the money when paid in cash and leaves the women in weaker position to exert full control over their financial assets.

In order for women to take greater control over their earnings, it requires accessing formal financial institutions, adequate financial literacy and accurate and uninterrupted flow of information. From that point of view, digital payments are promising, not only in terms of being faster and scalable, but also offers privacy and control, and encourages financial inclusion of a largely excluded cohort.

Bangladesh initiated mobile banking through Mobile Financial Services (MFS) services in 2011 with a primary goal to financially include those who were unable to access standard banking services and has been growing ever since, exponentially. It provides services like fund transfers between persons (P2P), saving, insurance products, paying utility bills and receiving payments. Since the inception of Mobile financial services, the number of average money transaction has been soaring. The reason behind widespread use of the MFS is that it requires very basic infrastructure - to be more precise, a classic (non-smart) mobile handset that are typically owned by the average garments’ worker. Until now, more than 200 garment factories have, and many are considering adopting digital wage payment. As of September 2018, around Tk 39,860 million in salaries have been disbursed through mobile financial services.

However, due to the recent increase in RMG minimum wage, the maximum cash-out and P2P transfer limit (Tk. 10,000) will be within the range of salaries that RMG workers will be receiving monthly. Now the question that merits attention is whether the RMG factories adopting wage digitisation will be discouraged in terms of adopting further digitalisation. As in addition to the challenges that individual workers may face in accessing their salaries, there is also the possibility that factories will delay digitisation because of worker dissatisfaction and protest related to these issues. If so, then at what cost?

Industry experts have identified the current transaction limit as a barrier for more factories to digitise their payments. The wage increase of garment workers will make it a binding constraint for more factories. Using 12-months of transaction data for 1,963 RMG workers who receive salary through bkash, it was seen that almost all workers cashed out a portion of their salary and/or conducted at least one P2P transfer monthly, and 20 per cent of them made a merchant (P2B) payment. Among these workers, on average 10 per cent reach the daily and more than 80 per cent reach the monthly cash-out limit and six per cent reach the daily P2P transfer limit. According to the newly declared gazette, salary will increase by an average of 43 per cent across the seven paygrades of RMG workers, resulting in workers earning to increase by more than Tk 10,000. A simulation shows that the existing levels of withdrawal (considering the withdrawal rate holds constant) can be maintained if the daily withdrawal limit be increased to Tk 15,000 at least. Increasing this to Tk 20,000 will allow 95 per cent of the workers to extract their funds in a single transaction while increasing it to Tk 25,000 will allow almost all workers to do the same.

In terms of the Industry level effects, earlier evidence suggests that efficiency gain by digitisation of salary payment is approximately US$0.44 per month per worker. Well, in an extreme scenario, all factories may remain un-digitised respectively across a three-year period. Using the efficiency gain (per worker per month) the financial opportunity cost of delay in digitisation for up to three years, calculated in optimistic and pessimistic scenario will be USD 11.6 million and USD35.9 million, respectively.

Going back to the initial cash-out limit from 2011, that is Tk 25,000, adjusting for inflation it means to Tk 36,184. The primary concern for reducing the daily transaction limits was the misuse of MFSs for illegal purposes. But multiple steps have been taken since then by Bangladesh Bank, MFS provider and account-holders to offset the various problems. This includes stricter documentation, one national id (NID)- one account rule, proper training of agents, etc.

Considering the importance of these measures, the withdrawal of daily cash-out and P2P transfer ceiling should be raised to maintain the existing pattern of transactions.

The digitisation of these factories did not happen overnight. Convincing both the owners and workers, given
TUESDAY, MARCH 12, 2019

ILO initiates scheme to raise more female supervisors in RMG sector

Staff Correspondent

The International Labour Organisation and the International Finance Corporation have jointly launched a training scheme to adopt more women in supervisory roles in the country’s garment sector as a pilot programme demonstrated that female supervisors boost factory efficiency by five per cent.

The programme titled ‘Gender Equality and Returns’ was launched at an International Women’s Day reception, hosted by the high commission of Canada on Monday. Women’s day was observed on March 8. Diplomats and representatives from United Nations agencies, development partners, donor agencies, government bodies, civil society, the private sector, employees’ organisations and unions attended the event.

GEAR is a special initiative of Better Work Bangladesh—jointly implemented by IFC and the ILO that rolled out in 2016 and the programme has made significant strides in advancing women’s economic potential and improving access to better jobs and opportunities for women, said a press release issued by ILO.

“This year’s International Women’s Day theme was ‘Think Equal, Build Smart, Innovate for Change.’ GEAR powerfully reflects this theme by openly addressing workplace gender imbalance via its innovative, empowering and inclusive programme,” the release said.

According to the ILO release, the GEAR has so far trained 144 female workers; 58 of whom are now in supervisory roles and an impact assessment shows that lines led by GEAR-trained females experienced an average increase of 5 per cent in efficiency.

After the successful pilot programme, the ILO is going to train 700 female operators and their managers in 70 factories to promote career-progression opportunities for women in the RMG sector under GEAR. More works.

Better Work.

The GEAR-promoted female supervisors also saw an average 30 per cent increase in salary, it said.

‘I would slowly but surely like to be promoted from my current position as a supervisor to a line chief, then an assistant production manager and finally become a production manager,’ said Popy Akter, a GEAR-trained supervisor who works for Sparrow Apparels Ltd in Gazipur.

Despite 80 per cent of line operators in the sewing sections of the garment sector are women, 19 out of 20 line-supervisors are male, ILO said.

This means 90 per cent of the managerial talent in factories comes from just 20 per cent of the workforce, it observed.

Tuomo Poutiainen, country director of ILO Bangladesh, said gender equality and gender empowerment was one of the core founding principles of the ILO in 1919.

‘Through the GEAR programme, we hope to actively work on increasing career-progression opportunities and promotion of women and addressing the gender imbalances in leadership roles in the garment sector,’ Nurjhat Anwar, acting country manager of IFC, said.

FRIDAY, MARCH 15, 2019

Minister urges entrepreneurs to invest in automobile industry

Bangladesh Sangsad Sangsrika Dhaka

Industrial minister Nurul Hassan Mahmud on Thursday urged entrepreneurs to invest in automobile manufacturing industry for accelerating economic progress in the country.

‘The country has huge potentiality of automobile industry. Both public and private sector should work together for maximising the potentiality of automobile industry,’ he told the inaugural function of the 14th Dhaka Motor Show at the International Convention City at Bashundhara, an official release said.


Nurul said, ‘We have to manufacture automobiles for stopping import of vehicles for expansion of transport industry. As expansion of modernised automobile sector, recondition vehicle market will be smaller globally.’

He called for manufacturing automobiles for boosting economic progress in the country.

Over 260 entrepreneurs from 16 countries are taking part in the three-day Dhaka Motor Show. The motor show will remain open from 10am to 6pm.
Creating an unbroken circle: Towards a greener RMG future

A ‘circular RMG economy’ would fit ‘greenification’ perfectly, while also leaving our own RMG owners less unscathed, as they have been with recent reforms that we could remain behind the RMG steering-wheel more dominant than ever before, and for far longer than presently visible, writes Intiaz A Hussain.

Will the circle be unbroken?

Ada Habershon asked that question over a century ago during a funeral. She was simply seeking answers to a more pervasive human question: does the soul of the departed return, in some form, to the family of relatives, for better or worse? Environmentalists have also begun wondering lately, loudly, and similarly about our own consumer society’s own soul: will life return when our ‘linear’, value-added production-consumption addiction come to an end? Colliding with two human instincts has been our fate: greed, which pushes us to want to transform every raw material into precious products for market transactions (and profit greed); and a survival-of-the-fittest proclivity amid fierce competition that translates into wanting to “go one better” on all else. That is how progress has been defined, in terms of our materialistic gains. Strewn in its pathway, we have left waste after waste, every step of the way, so much that survival now demands simply sustaining our neck over and above that waste. It is the clarion call for a “circular economy”, may be our last chance to do so.

The 21st century begins with the human beings at a tipping point: even oceans have filled up with our waste, not just the planet’s space, but also in water, air and soil, and in the food we eat. It is no longer a question of whether the environment will suffer, but how. Plastic has emerged as the key villain. After long choking up the underwater life, it is now beginning to choke us up by making our own food-chain toxic. Even worse is the problem of plastic waste. It is no longer a problem of clean air, clean water, or clean soil. It is emerging as a problem of clean air, clean water, and clean soil.

The cause against the fashion industry, in particular, but the clothing sector in general, is strong, growing, and irrevocable. It may be approaching its own tether-end. Note the increasingly robust evidences of fashion-based damages: 10 per cent of all greenhouse gases originate in this industry alone (just when Bangladesh’s addiction to this industry begins to grow as we climb the middle-income country ladder); producing cotton accounts for 16 per cent of the world’s pesticides, poisoning the land we live upon and farmers toiling to make both ends meet so we can look fashionable enough to imagine being a high society citizen; and there are the textile trucksloads headed for burning sites or burial landfills, every one second of every day.

In the face of these, a growing number of us are thinking of how to make the fashion industry more sustainable, more equitable, and more ethical. We are thinking of how to design products that can last longer, how to make products that can be repaired, and how to make products that can be recycled.

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The Financial Express Friday | March 15, 2019
Creating an unbroken circle: Towards a greener RMG future

35,000 Khulna jute mills workers observe 24hr strike

Our Correspondent, Khulna

Over 35,000 workers of nine state-owned jute mills yesterday began a 24-hour strike and work abstention since 6am, causing production at the factories to be halted.

They called the strike to press home a nine-point demand, including implementation of an already-purposed wage commission, payment of arrears and other financial benefits, allocation of adequate funds needed to purchase raw materials for running jute mills, removal of corrupt officials from the factories, gratuities and provident fund payments for retired workers.

The nine state-owned jute mills in the region are: Platinum, Daulatpur, Khalishtpur, Crescent, Star, Aleeem, Eastern, JFI (Jessore Jute Industry) and Carpeting Jute Mill.

Visiting the industrial belt yesterday, this correspondent found all jute mills shut down. Only a few officials of Bangladesh Jute Mill Corporation (BJMC) were present inside, along with security guards and police personnel at the mill gate.

Jaino Fakir, a worker of Platinum Jute Mill, told The Daily Star that he gets paid only Tk 2,000 a week. “I did not get eight weeks’ payment. How will I feed my seven-member family?” he said.

Moinul Karim, DGM of Platinum Jute Mill told The Daily Star that workers did not come to the mill due to the 24-hour strike.

Over 4,000 workers are now working in Platinum Jute mill, he said. However, he could not provide statistics of what the production target for the day was or how much loss was incurred due to the strike.

Md Khalilur Rahman, joint secretary of central Collective Bargaining Agent (CBA) and non-CBA Olkiya Parishad, told The Daily Star that age-old machines are a major hindrance to production.

“Only 40 percent production is possible by using these old machines. Workers are not being able to reach the targeted production,” he added.

“Government allocates money for raw material purchase but not at the opportune time which is June or July, when jute sells for Tk 1,500 to Tk 1,600 per maund. It generally allocates the money at other times of the year when jute price is Tk 2,000 to 2,200, and there is a scarcity in the market,” he added.

He said the government announced the wage board in June 2015, but it was not implemented.

As part of their protests, the workers will hold a 48-hour strike on March 19, and a meeting in Dhaka on March 24, where they will announce their next course of action.
Commerce minister urges Washington to reinstate GSP

FE Report

Commerce minister Tipu Munshi urged the United States to reinstate GSP benefits for Bangladesh, helping the country restore its image. “We are trying to do whatever required—to win back this GSP (generalised system of preferences),” he said on Thursday.

The minister saw it more as an “image problem” than financial benefit.

He made the remarks while inaugurating the US Trade Show in the city.

While his predecessor Toifail Ahmed was opposed to such trade preferences, Mr Munshi said the government is working on getting the GSP back as its suspension has made it difficult for exporters to access the market of the world’s largest economy.

The 26th trade show began at the Sonargaon Hotel where some 46 exhibitors are showcasing their products and services.

During the three-day show, there will be two seminars on “Education USA” and “Business Vistas.” Organised by the American Chamber of Commerce in Bangladesh (AmCham) and the US Embassy, the inaugural session of the show was addressed by US ambassador Earl R Miller and AmCham president M Nurul Islam.

AmCham has been organising the trade show since 1992 as a flagship event to promote economic cooperation and trade relationship between the US and Bangladesh. It also organises events to exchange information about the two countries’ economic potentials and opportunities.

The US withdrew the GSP facility on June 27, 2013, on the heels of Rana Plaza collapse that killed more than 1,100 workers. Taizeen Fashion fire in 2012 also prompted the US to take such decisions.

While Bangladesh has made considerable progress in improving the safety and environment of the garment industry, the US has yet to restore the GSP facility.

Tipu Munshi said the US-Bangladesh trade is increasing favouring Bangladesh as the United States is the country’s single largest market with exports of apparel averaging $6.0 billion a year.

While US shipments to Bangladesh is also seen on the rise in recent times, the business-minded politician stressed the need for finding more export baskets to the US.

He said the government is investor-friendly and urged the US investors to invest in Bangladesh to help improve the trade and business relationships.

The US ambassador highlighted the US exports to Bangladesh, which surged 41 per cent to $2.1 billion last year compared with a year ago.

The two-way trade, which was $8.2 billion, has doubled over the last 10 years.

“The United States continues to be the largest exporter in Bangladesh, and the single largest export destination,” said the Ambassador added.

This year’s new participants include Diagnostic Automation Inc, Parsaound, the Kellologg Company, and Apple.

Arafat Ara

The number of outbound Bangladesh workers continues to fall over months with a significant number of expatriates returning home from abroad.

According to the official data, the country’s outbound jobs declined by about 23 per cent in the first two months of the current year compared to the corresponding period of the previous year.

Bangladesh sent 109,607 workers during the January-February period this year while the figure was 141,228 during the same period last year, the Bureau of Manpower Employment and Training (BMET) data showed.

Sector insiders attributed such drop in overseas jobs mainly to a downward trend in manpower recruitment by the Middle East (ME) job destination countries.

On the other hand, a good number of Bangladeshis returned home after being jobless in the ME countries especially in Saudi Arabia. Many of them were arrested by the police and sent to deportation camps.

Some 135 Bangladeshis were expected to come back home on Saturday night from the deportation camps in Saudi Arabia, officials and rights campaigners said.

At least 25 people return home from the Arab country every day, they added.

Saudi Arabia, the largest job market for Bangladeshis workers, has recently banned different categories of jobs for foreign workers.

Due to such ban, the Bangladeshi workers who went to that country with individual visas have suffered a lot.

Sector insiders said Bangladesh mainly depends on one or two markets that create risk for a sending country.

Besides, maximum workers go abroad with jobs with individual or so-called free visas. So, a section of manpower exporters take a chance to exploit these workers.

They are selling visas at high prices. As they cannot provide jobs, so many workers are now becoming irregular and coming back home, they said.

About 80 per cent of Bangladesh workers are going to ME countries with free visas, according to manpower recruiters.

Bangladeshis workers are also struggling to manage jobs in other ME countries like Kuwait, Qatar and Oman. Many workers also left these countries after they lost jobs.

Malaysia, another traditional market, stopped hiring workers from Bangladesh in September 2018 due to an allegation of syndication and human trafficking in the recruitment process.

It also put an impact on overall job figure. In the last two months, only 35 workers went to the Southeast Asian country from Bangladesh.

Tasneem Siddiqui, chair at Refugee and Migrant Movements Research Unit (RMMRU), suggested formulating a long-term policy with restructuring the education and training systems that would facilitate improving the workers’ skills to a standard suitable for the job destinations.

She also recommended taking necessary measures to diversify job markets.

Vocational education should be made mandatory to create skilled workers for the overseas market. Otherwise, she said, it would be very difficult to keep the market stable.

Ms Siddiqui also observed that recruiters should create company visas to eliminate exploitations rather than sending workers through individual visas.

“The government of Bangladesh should take immediate measures in this regard,” she said.

The BMET data revealed that Saudi Arabia recruited 54,807 workers in the last two months, followed by Qatar 18,612, Oman 13,720 and Singapore 6,042.

Over 1.2 million workers went abroad since 1976, the data showed.
BD offers India RMG at ‘a very competitive’ price

FE Report

A total of 23 local ready-made garment (RMG) exporters are participating in the Apparel Sourcing Week in Bengaluru to increase apparel export to India.

Apparel Resources at ITC Gardenia, Bengaluru organised the expo from Friday last, with support from Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA), according to a statement.

BGMEA President Md Siddiquur Rahman inaugurated the first edition of the week. Its Vice President Mohamed Nasir and Principal Secretary of Commerce and Industry, Government of Karnataka, Gaurav Gupta were also present at the inaugural function.

Quoting the BGMEA president, the statement said, “India-Bangladesh relationship has grown stronger over the years and India, being a vital destination for garment exports, is already a very important development partner for us.”

Readymade garments account for 84 per cent of Bangladesh’s total exports while India, on the other hand, boasts about upwardly mobile and sizeable middle-class that has significant buying power, he added.

So, Bangladesh’s apparel manufacturing industry, one of the most sustainable ones in every aspect, could offer apparel to India at a very competitive price, he added.

"Being a neighbouring country, we can leverage each other’s strengths and work together towards strengthening bilateral relations and business growth,” Mr Rahman said.

Bengaluru is not only a major centre of technology but also a strong manufacturing hub, including apparel, Mr. Gaurav Gupta was quoted to have told the meeting.

"Retail sector is also very strong here, and I am sure the platform of Apparel Sourcing Week would provide a win-win situation for brands and retailers while also offering new export opportunities for Bangladesh,” he added. Mutual cooperation and strong business relation between India and Bangladesh is the need of the time, he said.

The platform that works for both exhibitors and retailers provided opportunity for business development, said Deepak Mohindra, Editor-in-Chief of Apparel Resources on the occasion.

Resources on the occasion: Seminars, panel discussions, vendor workshops and open house are being held during the expo, touching all the key aspects of the booming Indian fashion retail sector, sourcing strategies, products, pricing and not to mention the core issues of business generation, networking and knowledge sharing, the statement added.

Bangladesh and India share a long border and a number of land customs ports while having geographic advantage as well as a free trade agreement through SAFTA which came into effect in 2016, Mr Nasir said at a panel discussion held on Saturday.

"But despite all these advantages, our trade has not achieved the desired level so far,” he said, adding apparel and textile is a promising sector to strengthen the trade relation between the two neighbouring countries.


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**SUNDAY, MARCH 17, 2019**

**GP employees union pledges to work for employees’ welfare**

**Staff Correspondent**

Leaders of the newly recognised trade union — Gramphone Employees Union — on Saturday said that they would work for the welfare of employees working in the telecommunication sector in the country.

While speaking at a news conference at Dhaka Reporters Unity auditorium in the capital, they extended their commitment to work with all other trade unions across the country.

“We have no intention to create resistance against foreign investments. Rather, we want to contribute to the socio-economic development of the country,” said the union general secretary Mia Md Shafiquar Rahman Masud while reading out a written statement at the conference.

He said that the union would assist the government in implementing all development projects.

He also said that they would work to protect and realise the lawful rights of the employees and workers across the country.

“Around six crore people are working in different sectors across the country. It is regrettable that they are divided in factions,” said GPEU president Fazlul Haque.

He called on all the trade unions across the country to work together for the betterment of the workers.

Bangladesh Employees Union president Golam Mahfuz Sohag, GPEU communication secretary Md Rafiqul Kabir Saikat and US Solidarity Centre deputy country program director Sally M Fay Rodriguez attended the programme, among others.

The union was formed after the Telecommunication authorities sacked some of their employees in 2012 and since then it had been seeking for recognition from the labour department, the statement said.

Later, it got the recognition on March 7 in 2019 through a seven-year legal battle, it mentioned.

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**TUESDAY, MARCH 19, 2019**

**Tipu wants to increase RMG export to India**

**Bangladesh Sangbad Sangstha - Dhaka**

COMMERCE minister Tipu Munshi on Monday said Bangladesh would take initiatives to increase export of ready-made garment (RMG) to Indian market.

"India wants Bangladeshi RMG to its market, but there are some problems... necessary measures will be taken to solve those after identification," he added.

The minister revealed it after a meeting with newly appointed Indian high commissioner to Bangladesh Riva Ganguly Das at his ministry office.

"The UK is a big market, but the commerce minister said it [border haat] had created huge enthusiasm among the people of both countries."

The minister said the process is going on to set up another six border haats along with expansion of purchase limit and periphery of the border haat.

In last fiscal year, Bangladesh exported different products worth $873.27 million to India against the import of $8619.40 million.

The minister said Bangladesh and India have huge scope to boost bilateral trade. Riva Ganguly laid emphasis on utilizing the potentialities.

"Existing barriers to trade between both the countries will be solved through discussion," she said referring to good demand of few Bangladeshi products in Indian market.

"And another factor is the high commissioner also said necessary measures would be taken to ease business between the two neighbouring countries."

Additional secretary (in charge of secretary) SM Rejwan Hossain and additional secretary (FTA) Md Shafiqul Islam were present.
Inequality dampens economic success
Govt report finds

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

Rising inequality, sluggish private investment and lower revenue collection brought down the gains on economic and social fronts during the Sixth Five-Year Plan implementation period.

Between July 2010 and June 2015, Bangladesh pulled off a 6.3 percent average annual economic growth, the highest since 1974, but the growth fell short of the targets set by the government.

The agriculture sector grew slowly while the manufacturing sector posted higher growth. Job creation took place mostly in the first three years of the period and only 14 lakh jobs were created in the last two years, according to a paper styled Implementation Review of the 6th Five Year Plan and Its Attainments.

"We fell behind to some extent in job creation in the last two years. Overall, job creation exceeded the target. This is the comfortable news," said Planning Commission Member Prof Shamsul Alam while presenting the paper at a programme.

General Economics Division of the Planning Commission organised the event to unveil the report at Krishibid Institution Bangladesh in Dhaka. Prof Alam said 79 lakh jobs were created during the period.

He said macroeconomic fundamentals had been good during the period. Public investment increased significantly and the use of resources provided in the annual development programme improved steadily and there had been surpluses in balance of payments.

But private investment remained stagnant at 22 percent of the gross domestic product (GDP).

Dubbed the main source of employment, private investment slipped to 21.1 percent of the GDP in the fiscal year of 2014-15 from 22.2 percent in 2010-11, according to the paper.

The tax-to-GDP ratio, which indicates the financial capacity of a nation to bankroll spending, declined instead of rising during the five-year period.

"It was supposed to grow faster. But we could not raise the tax-to-GDP ratio above 10 percent," said Alam.

The planner said access to electricity was higher than the target in the SYFP period. The country made impressive strides in raising life expectancy and reducing under-5 mortality rate as well as poverty.

"But income inequality widened," said Alam. He, however, added that the level of disparity is yet to reach the danger level.

Economist Prof Wahiduddin Mahmud said private investment had not increased because of problems in business climate and a lack of infrastructure and serviced land.

The recent economic growth was mainly driven by public investment and remittance, he said. "It is expenditure-driven," said Mahmud, warning that infrastructure financing based on foreign loan might create problems in future unless export-oriented private and foreign investment flows in.

He said Bangladesh is the only developing country that registered rising economic growth every five years since the 1980s.

"The biggest failure in the SYFP was that the revenue-to-GDP ratio fell below the base year level.

Mahmud said the government would have to pay attention to create jobs outside the agriculture sector if it wanted to make the most of demographic dividend.

He said a portion of students would drop out from the secondary education level, so the country would have to ensure that the skills of this section of the workforce are in keeping with the requirements of employment-generating sectors.

Mahmud said the real wages of workers were increasing at a slower pace than the growth of per capita GDP. "We have made advancement in social sectors but we could not reduce disparity. It is a matter of concern," said Agriculture Minister Muhammad Abdur Razzak.

He stressed on skill education instead of churning out graduates without skills.

"Political stability, transparency and accountability have become essential to keep the momentum of the economy." Planning Minister MA Mannan warned against complacency about the nation's progress on various fronts.

Talking about inequality, he said: "It is good to confront the reality instead of evading it."

He emphasised proper prioritisation, saying there are some problems with determining priorities.

Md Abdul Kalam Azad, principal coordinator for Sustainable Development Goals Affairs at the Prime Minister's Office, said law and order situation was linked with development.

Migrant workers must be trained first

SATURDAY, MARCH 23, 2019

IT IS disquieting that job opportunities for Bangladeshi workers have begun to shrink in Oman as most of them are unskilled. Expatriates' welfare and overseas employment ministry officials say that about 51,000 Bangladeshiis fled their work in Oman in five years and became illegal. Consequently, Oman has lost its interest in hiring unskilled workers from Bangladesh, saying that workers have developed the habit of becoming undocumented by running away from workplaces. Officials said that Bangladeshi workers' migration to Oman would continue to fail. Around 1,88,000 workers migrated to Oman in 2016, around 89,000 in 2017 and around 72,000 in 2018. About 7.5 lakh Bangladeshi is now work in Oman. Bangladeshi workers who migrate to Oman and other countries with overseas jobs are paid lower wages compared with those of their fellows from other countries as most of them are sent to the host countries without being trained. Officials and rights campaigners said that Bangladeshi housemaids earn in the ranges of $150-200 a month in the Middle East while their fellows from the Philippines and Indonesia earn between $300 and $400 in the same region. The concern of labour migration experts about a decrease in remittance inflow

—Please Turn Over—
Migrant workers must be trained first

and a dent in the labour market because of a large number of unskilled workers going on overseas jobs is not unfounded.

Workers without training have a propensity to show unprofessional attitude towards their employers. As they lack familiarity with the local norms they fail to adjust to the locality. Many of them are found undergoing harrowing experiences, resulting from even job termination. Training is important for migrant workers as skills help them to earn more than unskilled workers do. Many untrained Bangladeshi workers, including female domestic help, are employed in West Asian countries such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Lebanon, etc.

The Accord, a platform of Western retailers, has found defects in all the 35 boilers it inspected during a pilot programme covering the ready-made garment sector.

The Accord signatories launched the pilot programme on boiler safety inspection in September last year and some 35 boilers in 17 Accord-listed factories were inspected in three phases, according to the findings revealed last week.

A complete boiler safety inspection included an internal inspection of the boiler, a hydrostatic pressure test, and an external inspection and assessment of the functionality of the boiler, the Accord said.

During the pilot programme, 19 of the 35 inspected boilers could not undergo all stages of inspection, because the boiler equipment at the factories was inadequate or defective, it revealed.

"These 19 boilers, representing 54 per cent of those inspected, require remediation work and re-inspection and testing. Defects were detected in all 35 inspected boilers and all required remedial work," according to the findings.

The boiler safety inspection found calcium build-up, which reduces the capacity of the boiler; boiler components parts missing such as no or inadequate pressure valves, no or inadequate pressure monitoring systems, faulty electrical wiring and incomplete or non-existent technical data sheets.

The calcium build-up can corrode the boiler wall, reduce efficiency, and lead to leakage and spray of boiling water, said the Accord.

The boilers selected for inspection are a representative sample of the different sizes, fuel supply, types and capacities of boilers used in RMG factories in Bangladesh, it added.

The findings also revealed that five boilers did not have the required Bangladesh Chief Inspector of Boilers (CIOB) certification and they had been produced by an uncertified manufacturer.

"Boilers that have not been produced, installed and maintained to international and Bangladesh CIOB boiler standards constitute a potential life and property threat hazard," said the Accord.

Four factories were required immediate boiler shut-down due to critical safety findings and the Accord informed the factory management, responsible company signatories and CIOB of the findings.

The boilers should only be re-commissioned/returned to operation after the critical safety issues have been fixed, the Accord suggested.

All factories where critical boiler safety hazards were found complied with the engineers' conclusions and the boilers have been repaired and verified as such within a few days of the notification of critical findings, it said.

The Accord also mentioned that it received a good level of cooperation from the 17 supplier factories which had boilers inspected in this pilot programme.

When asked, Accord Executive Director Rob Wayss told the FE via e-mail: "Boiler safety is a concern for the Accord and its signatories given the number of boilers in RMG factories and given concerns related to boiler-related accidents, including the boiler explosion at Multifabs in July 2017."

The Accord has been working closely with the Chief Inspector of Boilers, the ILO, and the tripartite partners in Bangladesh to address boiler safety issues as part of the National Plan of Action, he added.

The Accord and its signatories will continue to support these coordinated efforts and to advance boiler safety at Accord-covered factories, Mr Wayss added.
BD calls for ILO focus on work challenges ahead

FE Report

The International Labour Organisation's (ILO) centenary declaration should give a clear direction about how to address the challenges and opportunities of future work taking the changing trend of world work into consideration.

A labour ministry statement quoted State Minister for Labour and Employment Begum Monirjahan Sufian as saying on Wednesday.

"The Global Commission made many useful recommendations on the future of work in this regard. We firmly believe people and the work they do must be at the centre of policies and practices," she said.

She was speaking at the ILO's 335th governing body meeting taking place at its headquarters in Geneva. ILO's centenary declaration will be made at the 108th International Labour Conference scheduled to be held in June next, the statement added.

An eight-member Bangladesh delegation is in Geneva now led by the minister that also included labour secretary Ummul Hasna and its additional secretary Syed Ahmed.

The Declaration must indicate what skills are needed for the work of the future, how to refine and develop skills required for the future, making it learning for life, she said. Priority must be given to unskilled labourers, female, youth and migrant workers, she added.

"The possible impact of modern and future technology, including automation and artificial intelligence should also be kept in mind," Ms Sufian said.

Opportunities for regular migration should be identified by assessing needs of labour market, she said.

"The declaration must touch upon how access to safe and regular migration channels for men and women migrant workers would be ensured. The adverse impacts of climate change in employment and job market must be recognised in the Declaration," she also said.

Social protection has been one of the four pillars of ILO work and in many developing countries, social protection coverage is still lacking, she said.

"Providing technical assistance would be vital for ensuring quality social protection, she said and called for including the issue in the second part of the Declaration.

Improved governance, legal and technical capacities of both the Office and the constituents will still play a key role in effective service delivery of ILO.

"Supervisory mechanism must be reformed based on proper tripartism, transparency and impartiality to gain full trust and confidence of the constituents. The system must also be applied in terms of national context and priorities," she noted.

Swindling job seekers with 'overseas posts that never existed'

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Tejgaon police yesterday arrested four members of a fraud gang who swindled "hundreds of crores of taka" from around 1,000 job seekers in the last three-four years, promising them lucrative jobs in Qatar.

Biplab Kumar Sarkar, deputy commissioner of Tejgaon division of Dhaka Metropolitan Police (DMP), at a press briefing in his office said the 15-member gang took Tk three-four lakh from each job seeker.

He said the gang, in connivance with some employees of a popular job portal, uploaded fake circulars for posts like "retail store manager" or "commercial manager" in Qatar-based companies.

They issued circulars for jobs in Delta Group, Ali Bin Group, AHA Group or sometimes as "a reputed multinational company" and offered handsome salaries and accommodation facilities.

As eager job seekers contacted them, they would ask for necessary documents. In phases, they would ask for different amounts of money - showing the job seekers fake offer letter, appointment letter, confirmation letter, employment contract, police clearance certificate and even Qatar visa.

The frauds opened mobile banking accounts using SIM cards registered with biometric data belonging to others. Once money was sent, they would promise to provide flight schedule later and stop communicating with the job seeker, Biplab said.

The Tejgaon DC said they started investigation after a victim lodged a complaint with Tejgaon Industrial Area Police Station recently, and arrested four including the gang leader Shahin Haider. Other arrestees are Hasan, Shyamol and Tajul.

They were produced before a Dhaka court yesterday with a seven-day remand prayer for each, but the court granted one-day remand.

Police also revealed that Shahin Haider has purchased a restaurant in London and an apartment in Dharamondi, Dhaka with the money.
BANANI FIRE KILLS

The blaze at FR Tower raged for 6 hours; death toll feared to rise; at least 6 fell to their death; around 100 injured

Nirosh Vignarajah, a Sri Lankan national, who died in Banani fire yesterday.

Of those rescued from the building, seven were admitted to Kurmitola Hospital, 19 to the United Hospital and three to Dhaka Medical College Hospital. The rest were released after primary treatment. Many of them had respiratory problems as they inhaled smoke. The others suffered wounds while trying to escape.

President Abdul Hamid and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina expressed profound shock at the loss of lives and property in the devastating fire.

Narrating his three-hour ordeal on the 12th floor, Badsha Faisal, one of the survivors, said, "My father advised me not to jump from the building and said I should rather take shelter on the rooftop.

"I tried to go up but failed due to thick smoke. I then returned to the 12th floor."

"We broke the glass walls and waved clothes for help. At one stage, we thought we would die," mentioned Faisal, an executive manager of an IT firm.

He said his three-hour ordeal came to an end when firefighters rescued him and five others around 3:30pm.

"It was like I got a new life," he added.

As black smoke engulfed the building, Jahangir Mahmud, an official of the Empire Group, attempted to get down from his office on the 10th floor but failed due to excessive heat.

Later, he along with four others took shelter at a toilet on the 13th floor with the hope of being rescued.

"We drank tap water and soaked our bodies with water to get relief from the scorching heat... We waved pieces of clothes to get noticed by the rescuers," he said.

"It was like a countdown to death," he said, adding that firefighters rescued them around 3:45pm.

FIRE SERVICE DG'S BRIEFING

Sazzad said the eighth, ninth and 10th floors were badly damaged as electronics, carpet and vinyl boards used inside the building allowed the fire to spread quickly.

The victims were either suffocated inside the building or died in their attempts to escape the fire, falling from the upper floors of the high-rise.

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

At least 19 people were killed and around 100 others injured yesterday as a deadly fire tore through 22-storey FR Tower in the capital's Banani area. The death toll may rise, fear officials saying the search operation would continue till today morning.

Brig Gen Sazzad Hossain, director general of the Fire Service and Civil Defence, said they would continue the search operation in the building till 10am today and then hand it over to police.

The blaze was doused around 7:00pm after a six-hour hectic effort. Firefighters were yet to know the cause of the fire that erupted on the 6th floor. It spread quickly to other floors of the building that houses a food court and dozens of offices.

The incident took place a little over a month after a fire killed at least 70 people in Old Dhaka's Chawkbazar area.

At a press briefing at 9:15pm yesterday, the fire service DG said the building did not have adequate fire safety equipment.

"There were only a few equipment, and that too were unusable," he said.

Fire broke out around 12:50pm, trapping several hundred people inside the building. Many of them screamed for help, waving hands and clothes on different floors as hundreds of onlookers crowded the adjacent Kemal Ataturk Avenue.

Scores were spotted on ledges of the building, desperately trying to climb down to safety. A few others grabbed ropes lowered by rescue helicopters, which pulled them out of the blaze. Crowds below cheered and applauded every time someone was rescued.

One of The Daily Star correspondents saw at least six people fall to their death while trying to escape the blaze.

The helicopters sprayed water on the building while firefighters used ladders to climb up different floors.

They smashed windows to create escape routes and rescued people in groups. More than four hours after the blaze, people were still seen trapped on the 13th and 14th floors, waving for help amid clouds of black smoke.

A total of 22 firefighting units backed by the army, the navy and the air force personnel, struggled to tame the blaze.

The fire was brought under control around 4:45pm and doused at 7:00pm, said Rasel Shikder, a duty officer at the headquarters of the Fire Service and Civil Defence.

According to data provided by the Fire Service and Civil Defence's media centre at 8:30pm, 19 people, including a Sri Lankan national, were killed and 70 others suffered injuries. At least 73 people were rescued while six firefighters were injured in the operation.

Eleven of the dead were identified as: Rumik Akther, 30; Musafir Rahman, 32; Nirosh Vignarajah, 30; Abdullah Al Faroque, 32; Mamun, 32; Monir 50; Amir Hossain Rabbi, 29; Sheikh Jabir Tasnim Bristi, 27; Anir Abir Siddiqui, 26; Faizal Rabbi, 27; and Monjurul Hasan, 45.

The identity of the others could not be known.

Nirosh, a Sri Lankan national, reportedly fell to his death while trying to escape the blaze. He was declared dead after he was brought to Kurmitola General Hospital, said Brig Gen Quazi Rashid-UN-Nabi, director of the hospital.
Number of female workers returning from KSA rising

EWOE state minister visits Saudi cities from Saturday

Md Owasim Uddin Bhuyan

The number of female workers of Bangladesh returning from the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia as victims of abuse is rising.

In February, at least 227 female workers came back up from 182 in January, according to BRAC migration programme.

Officials said that a large number of female workers of Bangladesh took shelter at Bangladesh embassy's safe house awaiting repatriation.

They said that many others had been detained by Saudi authorities before their deportation.

A Bangladesh delegation led by state minister of Expatriates Welfare and Overseas Employment Imran Ahmad is scheduled to pay a four-day visit to the KSA beginning today. Imran is scheduled to meet Saudi labour minister and Bangladeshi community in Riyadh and Jeddah.

He will visit safe homes run by Bangladesh missions in Riyadh and Jeddah.

BNSK executive director Sumaiya Islam urged the government to protect our women workers abroad.

OKUP chairman Shakirul Islam demanded justice and compensations for the victims of abuse.

According to Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training, Saudi Arabia recruited over 2.40 lakh female workers from Bangladesh since 2015.

DIFE pays less importance in inspecting non-RMG factories

Staff Correspondent

FACTORY inspectors take less interest in inspecting factories and establishments outside the Ready Made Garment sector in the country, according to a government report.

Officers of the Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishment should develop more interest in inspecting the whole industrial sector, said the report produced by a labour ministry committee.

After the Chawk Bazar fire incident on February 20 that killed at least 70 people, the government formed the five-member committee to find out the causes of fire.

According to the committee, since its formation in 2014, the DIFE has inspected a total of 23,598 factories and establishments in Dhaka district until February this year.

Of them 8,234 are ready-made garment factories, 9,417 are factories outside the RMG sector, 4,181 are shops and 1,766 are other establishments.

During the inspection, DIFE filed a total of 1,719 cases against factories and establishments for violating labour laws and rules.

The report showed that the highest number of inspections was carried out in RMG factories and the highest number of cases, 377 cases, was filed against the factories.

The report said that as per the annual inspection plan, the Dhaka office of DIFE inspected 50 percent of RMG factories of the total establishments.

It also said that the inspections got comparatively less importance in other sectors as 34 inspectors of the department conducted inspection in 340 RMG factories on priority basis.

The fire, electrical and structural safety faults were assessed in the factories by the national initiative.

It is true that we put less emphasis on inspection of factories other than RMG just as our wards were mostly concentrated to the sector due to Rana Plaza building collapse," Shibli Nafez Suroor, inspector general of the DIFE, told New Age on Saturday.

He said that the department had taken an initiative to ensure regular monitoring, he further said.

A file photo shows smoke billowing out from the burning plastic recycling factories and houses stored with plastic rubbishes in the city's Lalbagh area on March 15 in 2017. Factory inspectors take less interest in inspecting factories and establishments outside the Ready Made Garment sector in the country, according to a government report.

— New Age photo
Labour law for ‘knowledge workers’ in the offing

Staff Correspondent

The government has taken an initiative to enact a labour law for ‘knowledge workers’ as the existing laws could not protect the interest of people who work at knowledge-based industry like ICT.

Labour ministry has recently formed a 13-member committee headed by its additional secretary (labour) comprised with the representatives from Information and Communication Technology Division and Bangladesh Association of Software and Information Services to prepare a draft of the new law act for ‘knowledge workers’.

In a gazette notification issued on March 24, the ministry asked the committee to submit the draft of the act to the labour secretary within six months.

The Prime Minister’s Office has instructed ministries concerned to draft a law for the knowledge workers as many provisions of the existing labour laws do not match the people working in different sectors like ICT sector,” ICT minister Mustafa Jabbar told New Age on Saturday.

For example, he said, the traditional labour laws were not applicable for an ICT worker who developed software as his or her work was not physical but knowledge-based and it was related with the intellectual property rights.

“As per the traditional labour laws, physical presence of a worker is mandatory in any establishment but this provision cannot be applicable for an ICT worker as he can work for America from his Dhaka office,” Jabbar explained.

The ICT minister said labour ministry was responsible for enacting labour laws and if it sought cooperation, the ICT ministry would extend support to prepare the draft.

According to the government officials, the decision for drafting labour act for the knowledge workers was taken at the eighth meeting of the executive committee of digital task force, presided over by the prime minister.


The meeting discussed that in the digital era, the physical work and knowledge work were not equal and a single law could not be applicable for all type of workers.

The growth of the ICT sector was being hindered due to lack of proper laws and many enterprises were facing troubles to comply with the existing labour laws, the meeting discussed.

It said that knowledge-based workers were also deprived of their required benefits due to lack of proper laws.

Labour ministry additional secretary Md Rezaul Haque said that the ministry has just formed the committee and it would start its work from next week through a meeting.

BASIS secretary Hashim Ahmed said that formulating a labour act for knowledge workers was a long-standing demand from the ICT sector.

“During the last amendment of labour act, we proposed the government to include a chapter in the act for the knowledge workers and the government assured that it would be enacted separately,” he said.
Bangladesh commits to global initiative on decent works

Bangladesh Sangbad
Sangtha - Dhaka

BANGALadesh's a21 - Innovate for All on Decent Jobs for Youth: Bangkok during a side event to the Global Initiative on Decent Jobs for Youth at the ILO's 104th Session. The ILO media release said: "The programme will support young people in South Asia and the Pacific to develop the digital skills they need to meet the needs of local and international job markets, and to equip them with the right skills for 21st century work."

The commitments by a21 will align with the priority for skills development in Bangladesh. a21 - Innovate for All of the Bangladesh government works with the private sector and other development partners to develop an skills-driven agenda that brings to life the Global Initiative on Decent Jobs for Youth. The programme is designed to develop the digital skills of young people in the South Asia and the Pacific region, with a focus on creating the right environment for young people to participate in the formal economy and to be productive citizens in their home countries.

"These commitments will ensure that the youth of Bangladesh are provided with the skills they need to succeed in the 21st century job market," said ILO Bangladesh Deputy Director. Women and men entering the world of work in Bangladesh will benefit from these initiatives, which will help to create opportunities for them to improve their skills and earn a decent living.

The programme is supported by the ILO in collaboration with other partners, including UNICEF, the World Bank, and the Asia Development Bank, to ensure that young people in Bangladesh and other countries in the region are able to access quality education and training opportunities.

The programme is aimed at helping young people develop the skills they need to succeed in the 21st century job market and to ensure that they are able to earn a living wage and participate fully in the formal economy. The programme will also support young people to access quality education and training opportunities, helping to ensure that they are able to develop the skills they need to succeed in the modern workforce.

The programme is focused on supporting young people to access quality education and training opportunities, helping to ensure that they are able to develop the skills they need to succeed in the modern workforce. The programme will also help to create opportunities for young people to improve their skills and earn a decent living, helping to ensure that they are able to participate fully in the formal economy.

The programme is designed to support young people in the South Asia and the Pacific region to develop the digital skills they need to meet the needs of local and international job markets, and to equip them with the right skills for 21st century work. The programme will help to create opportunities for young people to access quality education and training opportunities, helping to ensure that they are able to develop the skills they need to succeed in the modern workforce.

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