

BANGLADESH SAYS IT MEETS FACTORY SAFETY CONDITIONS

DHAKA: Bangladesh said it has met the conditions put forward by the United States for better safety and workers' rights in its factories that were essential to regain preferential trade status the impoverished South Asian nation lost in 2013 after two disasters killed 1,500 garment workers.

The preferential trade status does not cover Bangladesh's influential garment industry, which helps the country earn \$25 billion annually and mainly exports to the United States and Europe. But Dhaka has long lobbied for its garment industry to have duty-free access to the United States and the lost status was seen as a big blow to that goal.

The government said in its statement late Tuesday that all of the 16 conditions set by the U.S. have been met. A delegation of the U.S. Trade Representative's office is visiting Bangladesh to review improvements in safety standards at factories and changes to legal documents allowing for wider workers' rights.

The conditions are needed to regain the Generalized System of Preferences benefit under which the US allows imports of some 5,000 goods from 122 of the world's poorest countries with low- or zero-tariff benefits. The trade benefit was withdrawn after the collapse of Rana Plaza, a building complex housing five garment factories outside the capital, Dhaka in 2013. The Rana Plaza disaster and a fire at a Tazreen Fashions factory in November 2012 left about 1,500 workers dead and hundreds injured.

The garment industry is crucial to Bangladesh's economy as it employs about 4 million workers, mostly rural women, and many other sectors including banks are heavily dependent on it. The government of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has been heavily criticized by the opposition for its "failure" to regain the lost trading status.

In 2012, the total value of US imports

from Bangladesh under the GSP benefit was \$34.7 million with tobacco, sports equipment, porcelain china and plastic products topping the list. In August, the United States renewed the trade benefit for 122 countries until 2017, but the trade representative's office said Bangladesh needed to do more.

New rules

A government statement said Bangladeshi officials told the visiting American delegation this week that it has fulfilled the conditions required. The government has so far shut down some 364 apparel units for lack of sufficient safety measures. It has amended labor laws, enacting new rules for allowing workers to form unions, increased the number of factory inspectors and settled many criminal cases against trade union leaders who said the charges were meant to silence them.

Authorities say some 500 factory-based trade unions have now been registered and workers' welfare associations have been formed in special export zones. A leading workers' rights activist says that while Bangladesh has made some improvements, a lot more needs to be done to ensure the safety of the country's factory workers.

"If you talk about safety and structural aspects of the factories, no doubt, there is major improvement, but if you take the issues of freedom of association and workers' right to bargain collectively, we still lag behind," Kalpona Akter, executive director of Bangladesh Center for Workers' Solidarity, told The Associated Press. "The registration of 500 or so unions is a fact, but some mainstream trade union groups are not being allowed to get registration. If you look at numbers, that looks good, but many of those are formed and controlled by the owners," Akter said. "We must see practically how it works," she said. — AP



MUMBAI: In this photograph taken on September 4, 2015, an Indian dabbawallah or lunchbox deliveryman, carries a cart filled with lunch boxes to an assembly point before delivering them to offices. — AFP photos

MUMBAI'S RENOWNED TIFFIN CARRIERS ADAPT TO INDIA'S CHANGING LIFESTYLES

'DABBAWALLAHS' EXPAND MENUS TO CATER TO YOUTH

MUMBAI: Mumbai's world-renowned tiffin service is no longer the preserve of loyal housewives cooking up generations-old family dishes to be delivered to their husbands' offices by the city's famous "dabbawallahs". Now a host of health-conscious young start-ups are using—and sometimes superseding—the dabbawallahs to deliver lunches catering to all diets, with tailored menus offering an array of global cuisines online.

The 5,000 or so lunchbox delivery men, instantly recognizable by their white cotton uniforms and Nehru caps, pedal through Mumbai's congested streets carrying everything from Thai to Mexican, as well as healthy takes on local favorites. "The number of tiffins (meals) being sent by food companies has gone up sharply in the past few years," said Raghunath Medage, president of Mumbai's dabbawallah union.

"The share of homemade food we carry has fallen from 100 percent to around 60 percent, and we expect that number to keep dropping," he said. Dabbawallahs, literally meaning "box carriers", have been plying Mumbai's streets for well over a century. They featured in the hit 2013 Indian film "The Lunchbox" centering on the story of a wife whose home-cooked meals were collected by a dabbawallah and then delivered, incorrectly, to a stranger's office rather than her husband's.

But now many of the meals inside the tin containers that clatter against each other as they hang from the dabbawallahs' rickety bicycles are handpicked on the Internet by busy professionals enjoying a wealth of choice. Yummy Tiffins, which proudly bills itself as "India's first customized online tiffin service", allows users to design their own menus from around 40 dishes for every day of the week up to a month in advance.

'Whatever you want'

"We wanted to fill the gap between a tiffin service, which has the same old pattern of food, and a restaurant, where you can order whatever you want, by providing customers with a choice of options that still have a homely feel," said founder Pratik Jain. "There's a lot of variety in the menu, not just Indian food but international too, and plenty of healthy options as well," the 29-year-old former management student told AFP.

The website, which Jain says has around 300 users a day and is growing at around 70 percent a year, has teamed up with a nutritionist who designs low-calorie meals to attract health-conscious customers. "It's a competitive business with lots of players in the market. It's much more professional now with several tech-savvy start-



MUMBAI: In this photograph taken on September 2, 2015, an Indian worker packs lunch boxes at an online meal delivery firm's kitchen.

ups, and people keep switching from one tiffin service to another," said Jain.

Tina Parikh, an office worker in the south of the city, said she orders from a company called SoulCare because it allows her to focus on her job. "It's purely about convenience. Early in the morning, to cook meals and then come to work gets a little tiring," she told AFP, collecting her tiffin from a handcart.

Her friend Vinayak Azad has stuck to home-cooked food but joked that he may consider switching to one of the many low-calorie alternatives whipped up by professional chefs that are on offer. "There are a lot of good services around and I think I should try them considering my tummy is still out even with home food!"

Yummy Tiffins employs Mumbai's famously efficient dabbawallahs who deliver lunches to around 200,000 people a day via trains, bicycles and handcarts using a complex color-coded alpha-numeric system admired the world over. Their business model has been recognized by Harvard as working to a "six sigma" rating, meaning it is virtually unheard of for a lunch to be delivered to the wrong place.

Dabbawallah competition

But some caterers are moving away from the dabbawallahs in favor of private delivery vans.

Maqsood Patel, co-founder of Foodizm, another online meal delivery firm, said his company was increasingly opting for a concierge service to ferry lunches to their "elite" clientele.

"They deliver the meals right to the customers' desks, whereas the dabbawallahs often drop them at the front gate and you have to go downstairs to look for your meal," Patel told AFP. "Also, since they travel by train there can be a three or four-hour gap from the time a dabbawallah collects the meal to the time it's delivered. "Obviously with the food travelling in the heat something like a salad can go a little bit off," he added. Patel said the drivers' English was often better than that of the dabbawallahs who hail from rural Maharashtra and speak Marathi, making it easier to communicate, while customers can also use a mobile app to track the progress of deliveries.

But Medage, president of the Nutan Mumbai Tiffin Box Suppliers' Association, is unconcerned. "We are still getting fresh recruits from villages because not many opportunities exist there. With hard work they can make at least 10,000 rupees (\$150) a month instead of nothing back home." Suresh Pawar, a dabbawallah for 12 years, said: "The number we deliver goes up and down. When one stops here, another starts somewhere else." — AFP



SAVAR: In this April 25, 2013 file photo, Bangladeshi people gather as rescuers look for survivors and victims at the site of Rana Plaza building that collapsed a day before. — AP

NEPAL PM CANCELS US VISIT FOR TALKS ON CONSTITUTION

KATHMANDU: Nepal's Prime Minister Sushil Koirala yesterday cancelled plans to visit the United States so he can hold talks on a new constitution that has triggered deadly protests in parts of the country. Koirala will meet regional parties opposed to the new charter adopted on Sunday, his foreign adviser told AFP. Plans to divide the country into seven provinces under a federal structure have infuriated some parties. They say the new internal borders will leave some historically marginalized groups under-represented in the national parliament.

More than 40 people have died in weeks of clashes between police and protesters belonging mainly to the Madhesi and Tharu ethnic minorities, who inhabit the southern plains bordering India. "Because of the domestic political situation, Prime Minister Sushil Koirala will not go to the US," said Dinesh Bhattacharai, the adviser. "He will stay home... so he can hold talks with political parties opposed to the constitution."

Koirala was scheduled to address the

United Nations General Assembly next week about the new constitution, the first to be drawn up by elected representatives in the Himalayan nation. The ongoing protests have sparked concern in neighboring India, which has traditionally exerted significant political influence in Nepal.

In a sharply worded statement, New Delhi said it had "repeatedly cautioned the political leadership of Nepal to take urgent steps to defuse the tension in these regions." "We still hope that initiatives will be taken by Nepal's leadership to effectively and credibly address the causes underlying the present state of confrontation." The charter is the final stage in a peace process that began when Maoist fighters laid down their arms in 2006 after a decade-long insurgency aimed at abolishing an autocratic monarchy and creating a more equal society. But rights groups including Amnesty International have criticized the constitution, saying it discriminates against women by making it more difficult for mothers to pass on citizenship to their children compared with fathers. — AFP

INDIA AND US AGREE TO DEEPEN CLOSER STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP

WASHINGTON: The world's largest democracies, India and the United States, agreed measures to deepen their security and economic cooperation on Tuesday, part of an ambitious drive to boost trade between them five-fold. After the talks, US Commerce Secretary Penny Pritzker admitted that the idea of increasing exchanges from \$100 billion to \$500 billion a year was "a big audacious goal," but said the meeting had left her very optimistic.

The "US-Indian Strategic and Commercial Dialog," was launched in January by President Barack Obama and Prime Minister Narendra Modi, and on Tuesday US and Indian economic and diplomatic officials came together in Washington. "The president and the prime minister set out a goal for us ... and I think there's a lot of opportunity," Pritzker said. "What feels new is the amount of energy that the Indian government is putting in to trying to remove the impediments that have been faced by foreign companies trying to do business in India."

Asked how long it would take to increase trade five fold, Pritzker said no deadline had been set but added: "When you set big audacious goals, it helps move bureaucracies, and that's what's happening. "We've got to change the way we do business," she said. The talks came as President Xi Jinping of India's Asian rival China arrived in the United States, two days before Modi was due, but US officials insisted there was no plan to build up India as a counterweight to Beijing.

Instead, they celebrated what Obama has dubbed the "defining relationship of the 21st Century" with agreements to

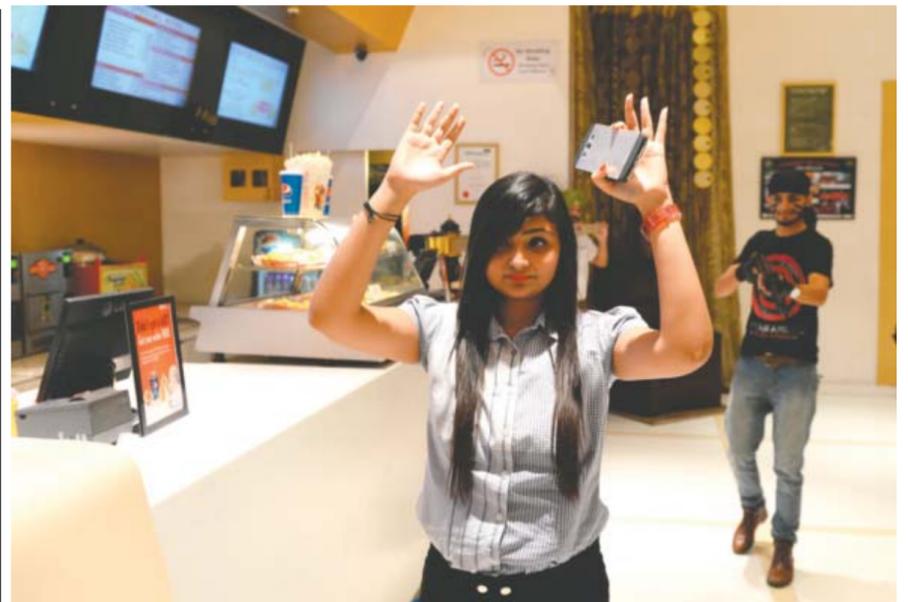
fight terrorism and climate change and to bolster cooperation in energy, hi-tech and defense. US Secretary of State John Kerry said: "The US-India relationship is a bright spot on the international landscape and is one of the most important bilateral relationships in the world. "Our talks today have given us a platform for further progress ... There are so many areas of cooperation. There is so much going on between us."

Commercial ties

Indian officials had said that their priority for the talks was reinforcing commercial ties and securing access to US inward investment and technology, but also hailed a joint determination to fight terrorism. "A main take away from our discussions includes our shared view that we need to keep the big picture, the strategic framework of the relationship in mind," Indian Foreign Minister Sushma Swaraj told reporters.

On Tuesday, India cleared a \$2.5 billion dollar deal to buy 22 Apache helicopter gunships and 15 heavy-lift Chinooks from US planemaker Boeing. The talks set up a meeting in New York next week on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly between Obama and Modi, whose four-day visit begins September 24.

"And then we have a very robust discussion regarding counterterrorism, the Indian Ocean, maritime security, the South China Sea, the South Asian challenges of the moment," Kerry said. Kerry, Swaraj and Pritzker were joined by India's minister of state for commerce and industry Nirmala Sitharaman and US Energy Secretary Ernest Moniz for the talks. — AFP



NEW DELHI: An Indian man posing as a militant aims a weapon near a participant acting as a hostage during a mock terror drill at a cinema hall yesterday. The drill was organized by Delhi Disaster Management Authority. — AFP