



Vindication

Thank you China Leather Industry Association, thank you APLF for demanding from non-leather exhibitors at ACLE that they delete the word 'leather' from their products and their company names. This is a great step forward and will at last bring some justice and credibility to our products, to the real thing. Maybe the organisers will be willing to inform the trade if this demand was acknowledged and whether it was implemented by the exhibitors, particularly the Chinese exhibitors who were the main abusers of the word leather.

In June, *Addis Fortune* magazine published a devastating article about the state of the Ethiopian leather industry.

For years, I have been denouncing the reasons for the problems of the Ethiopian leather industry, just as I have written about most of the African leather industry's problems. I have blamed United Nations organisations, NGOs and various institutions, such as ALLPI, for doing only their own bidding without any regard for the actual requirements of the industry that they say they are supporting. The Fortune article confirms my thesis and directly mentions the UN and LIDI, the Leather Industry Development Institute, into which, thanks to Italian cooperation, millions of euros have been poured without result, as is now confirmed by Fortune. These organisations, therefore, share the blame for the debacle of the Ethiopian leather industry. Some officials have travelled the world over the years to repeatedly visit sites and fairs in Asia and Europe for their awareness building, as they call it so nicely, all indirectly paid for by the Italian taxpayers. Nice luxury holidays with the excuse of learning about new technologies, none of which have ever been applied or implemented. On the contrary, as we now see, the Ethiopian leather industry has taken huge steps backwards.

The only tanneries really thriving in Ethiopia are the foreign-owned tanneries, but that is, acknowledging also their savvy to make things work, because they have so many advantages that are unavailable to the locally owned tanneries. Direct foreign investment, which is heralded by many economists, has not worked for the Ethiopian tanning industry. It works for the foreigners, but not for the locals.

The once flourishing Ethiopian leather industry is not the only one that has shot itself in the foot. As reported on more than one occasion, the Bangladeshi leather industry is also suffering. Tanners have invested huge amounts of money moving from the old Hazaribagh tanning area to the new Savar tanning zone, but losing clients due to their non-functional common effluent treatment plant (CETP). Everybody knows that the Savar CETP is non-functional, contrary to claims in some local media. I believe it will never function, considering the way it has been conceived. The Bangladesh Small and Cottage Industries Corporation (BSCIC) has suggested that the CETP can be fully automated and that the government has imported the necessary equipment to operate the CETP adequately, adding that three dumping yards will be constructed soon for waste management. Fully automated. Mmmmm. Like how? You push a button and the design will change from non-functional to functional? The dumping of heavily

polluted water stops and the Daleshwari River just stops being polluted? The dumping sites? Well, they are spread out throughout Savar and mainly in the open air behind the sludge compression plant of the CETP, stinking from here to the moon.

A professor from Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology and also a consultant for the Savar Tannery Zone project, Delwar Hossain, has told local media that chemicals and equipment imported from China have been blocked by customs authorities for months. Some have suggested a lack of coordination among the government agencies concerned. The project was ill conceived and, as it stands now, does not justify the money that was spent on it.

Designed for 25,000m³, overflowing by 40,000m³

Savar's CETP is meant to process 25,000 cubic-metres of wastewater every day. Some reports suggest it overflows with a daily waste discharge estimated at more than 40,000 cubic metres. Is this possible when Bangladeshi tanneries complain that they are down to 30% of their production capacity? Another convenient culprit is the arrival of all the raw material from the Eid al-Adha festival, which this year fell in August. But why has the government allowed traders to export raw hides? I think it was because the tanneries said they had no sales and were financially unable and commercially unwilling to buy the hides and skins from the festival. They still had crust and finished leathers in stock that they were unable to sell. Plus, Eid al-Adha did not happen this year for the first time. It has been a recurring event from more than 1,000 years.

The BSCIC have been installing water meters in the tanneries "to prevent the misuse of water". Installing water meters does not stop pollution. It simply monitors the use of water and the use of water is in proportion to the quantity of leather that is being processed. But then, BSCIC admits "in the long run, another CETP is a must", an official told local media. And that, my dear readers, is the only way to go: convert and expand the CETP.

There are some suggestions that tanners have not received adequate training in waste management. That is not true. UNIDO and several tannery chemical and machine producers have held seminars over the years in Dhaka. The problem is that the mentality in the tannery industry in Bangladesh is such that pollution is a necessary evil and that proper social and safety standards are an unnecessary luxury. For example, there are tanneries that after two years in Savar have not yet provided a minimum of decent housing for their workers. Instead, they shuttle workers each day from Hazaribagh on a two-hour trip, one way. It is therefore no surprise that the International Labour Organisation, based in Geneva, uses the Bangladeshi leather industry in its PowerPoint presentations as a bad example of labour and ecological conditions.

So, what is the conclusion? The Bangladeshi tanners must comply with international standards, not their own fantasies and fabrications. Unless they do this, the industry there will shrink. ☹