

New Saudi labour law makes life easier for expats

PTI, Dubai

Saudi Arabia has brought in a new labour law with a host of mandatory obligations for employers, including signing a written contract, a move widely hailed by expatriate workers as towards ending their exploitation. The new law, which came into effect on Sunday, replaces a 37-year-old legislation. It, however, does not contain any provision to prevent abuse of housemaids.

The law obliges the employer to bear all expenses from the time of recruitment through the worker's tenure for payment of residence and work permit fees and their renewal. In case of death of an employee, the employer is also liable to pay for repatriation of the body, Saudi Labour Minister Gazi Al Gosaibi said in a press statement in Dubai. He said more categories of employees, including domestic

workers, would be covered under the new law, which regulates the relationship between the employer and employee in a transparent manner.

Under the new legislation it is mandatory for an employer to sign a written contract with a foreign worker with period of the contract mentioned. The employees are entitled to sick leave upto 30 days with full pay, followed by 60 days of leave with three-quarter pay.

The new law also raises the annual leave from 15 to 21 days, which could be increased up to 30 days for those who have remained with the same employer for five years.

The retirement age is 60 for men and 55 for women workers and those above this age can continue service if both parties agreed, he said.

Nepal opposition

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The opposition also announced plans to declare a government ceasefire against the Maoists, who were loose allies of the opposition in the pro-democracy campaign, and called on the rebels to match it.

The capital appeared to be slowly returning to normal life with shops opening, mobile telephone networks restored and no curfew was imposed for the first time in nearly a week. Dozens of political detainees were also released.

"I'm so happy but I feel a very serious responsibility," Sunil Kumar Bhandari, a political activist who spent three weeks in detention, said as he was released Tuesday garlanded in flowers.

The crowds, numbering in their tens of thousands according to AFP estimates, flooded on to the city's ring-road, the edge of a curfew zone that was the scene of some of the heaviest battles between police and protesters since April 6 in which at least 14 people died across the country.

The opposition will investigate and punish anyone responsible for human rights abuses once the interim government is up and running, a senior politician said.

But the excited crowds also headed to the centre of the city to areas ruled off-limits after the king's power grab 14 months ago.

Feelings continued to run high against the king with a heavy security presence around the royal palace. Protesters defaced the king's name on hoardings before pulling them down within a few hundred metres of the pink-hued palace.

"This feels great," said Bedram Kandel, 26, as he joined thousands in Kathmandu on a road banned from use by protesters.

"I want parliament to be established and for there to be a peaceful monarchy," he said. "But we don't want King Gyanendra -- he's corrupt."

The king made his second televised statement in four days to try to quell the protests and halt a general strike that left the capital

2 more TV channels

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jointly launching SNTV. Major (Retd) Sayeed Eskandar, BNP lawmaker from Feni-1 constituency who is also younger brother of Prime Minister Khaleda Zia, has been learnt to be launching the other channel, ITV.

Talking to The Daily Star yesterday, Salahuddin Ahmed said SNTV will be a joint venture of him and Nasiruddin Pintu.

He said they have already received permission from the government. "We're currently busy buying our equipment and it will take at least three months for it."

Asked about the possible date for launching their TV channel, he said: "We hope to launch by August this year; we'll complete our preparation by that time."

Sources said Salahuddin Ahmed initiated the process of launching the satellite TV channel after his failed attempt to run a vernacular daily 'Desh Janata'.

Meanwhile, it could not be learnt whether Sayeed Eskandar is going to launch his satellite TV channel merely to broadcast Islamic ideology or for business purposes.

Former Dhaka City Corporation Mayor Mohammad Hanif earlier had initiated a process to launch a satellite TV channel for broadcasting Islamic ideology.

Programmers of Islamic functions who were involved with that process will be in key roles in Sayeed Eskandar's channel, according to sources.

When this correspondent

phoned Eskandar last night for his comments, he declined to make any comment over the phone. He, however, did not deny the authenticity of the news.

Media experts believe permission for SNTV and I TV have been granted to get political benefit during the next general election, putting aside over 50 other applications.

Alliance ministers, MPs and their close associates are involved behind previously permitted Channel 1, Banglavision, Baishakhi and RTV, said the sources.

Giasuddin Al Mamoon, friend and business partner of the PM's son and BNP's senior joint secretary general Tareque Rahman, owns Channel 1. Some ministers and AHM Selim MP are also involved with it directly.

Dhaka City Corporation Mayor Sadek Hossain Khoka, State Minister for Expatriate Welfare Major (Retd) Kamrul Islam, and State Minister for Home Affairs Lutfuzzaman Babar are key men of the channel Banglavision while LGRD Minister and BNP's Secretary General Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan have been learnt to be behind it too.

Housing and Public Works Minister Mirza Abbas and some of his business partners own Baishakhi channel while Mosaddek Ali MP owns two TV channels, NTV and RTV.

2 choppers

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like purchasing fighter planes, and lower taxes on fuel items to mitigate the sufferings of vulnerable groups bearing the brunt of hike in oil prices.

Before purchasing the VIP choppers, the airforce headquarters has enquired through Bangladesh foreign missions whether heads of state and government in different countries use this kind of choppers.

After the government had approved the purchase in fiscal year 2004-05, the director general of defence purchase (DGDP) invited tender for the work. Four bids were sent to the airforce headquarters on January 8, 2005.

A committee formed by the airforce headquarters had examined the offers and awarded the work to the lowest bidder. Finally, an agreement to purchase the helicopters was signed on June 25, 2005.

Defence experts said for the first time the BAF has procured two VIP choppers. But they will hardly be of benefit to the force as the VIPs, particularly the prime minister, will use them. The president can also fly in the choppers when the head of the government is not using them.

Many say Prime Minister Khaleda Zia has already begun touring different districts with an eye to campaigning for the next general elections. The newly purchased choppers will only facilitate her hectic tour schedules in the last year of the coalition government.

Pre-budget dialogue

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Fuel prices may soar further in the international market, so the national economy should be made capable of sustaining that pressure. The public too will have to bear with the situation, the renowned economist said.

At the same time, the government will have to find out how the impact of increased oil prices can be kept tolerable for people of lower income. It should consider if it can provide subsidy on diesel prices in a way so that the poor gets its benefit, he suggested.

Executive Director of the Centre for Policy Dialogue Dr Debapriya Bhattacharya told the press that if the government increases fuel prices in line with the BPC proposal, it may earn an additional Tk 2,300 crore a year. Sixty per cent of this earning will come from diesel as its consumption is the highest. This means in the remaining two months of the current fiscal year, the government may at best earn some Tk 400 crore, he said.

If prices are increased, farmers and people of lower income group will have to bear the burnt. The option seems to be raising diesel prices by the smallest possible margin, while prices of octane and petrol can be raised by a big margin. Since it is usually the well off people

who use petrol and octane, they are better equipped to bear with the increased prices, Bhattacharya noted.

Besides, the government can also lower taxes on oil to bring down the BPC's losses, he thought.

Sources said some economists were against the idea of increase in fuel prices. Prof Rehman Sobhan opposed raising prices, suggesting that the BPC's losses should be covered through budgetary allocation.

Qazi Kholiuzzaman Ahmad, president of Bangladesh Economic Association, also opposed raising fuel prices. If the government has to go for any increase, it can only raise octane price, he said.

Mentioning that this is the first year under the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP), the economists suggested that the budget should be prepared in line with the PRSP.

The next fiscal year will see three governments, so the budget should not be an ambitious one, they observed.

Others who spoke included M Saiduzzaman, former finance minister, Dr Mirza Azizul Islam, chairman of Sonai Bank, Prof Abu Ahmed and Mashiur Rahman, former secretary.

Jabbarer Boli Khela

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conducted by M A Malek and Jawaharil Hazari, Marma or Didar failed to beat the opponent.

Marma Sing, a sub inspector of Motijheel Police Station in the capital, clinched the championships title for the third consecutive time since his first appearance in the competition in 2004.

Didar, a trader from Omkhali under Ramu apazila in Cox's Bazar district, also became champion in the competition for the third time. He won the championship title (jointly with the then defending champion Siddique of Ukhya) in 2003.

He lost the title to Marma Sing in 2004 before regaining it for the next two years, albeit jointly, in 2005 and 2006.

As American citizen Dan Herrlin expressed his desire to take part in the traditional wrestling, the organisers allowed him to meet Alam boli in a friendly fight.

Dan, a mathematics teacher of city's English medium school William Carey Academy, seemed ecstatic as he managed to overcome the challenge from the local

guy. The organisers awarded a T-shirt, one cap and an umbrella to the amateur American wrestler.

Abdul Jobbar Sawdagar, a well-known merchant of the port city's Anderkilla area, introduced the age-old competition in 1909 (Bangla year 1316) with a view to organising the local youths to fight against then British imperial rule.

Fisheries and Livestock Minister Abdullah Al Noman was the chief guest at yesterday's competition while Whip of the Jatiya Sangsad Syed Wahidul Alam MP and Chittagong Metropolitan Police Commissioner M Mazedul Hoque were present as special guests.

On the occasion of the Jobbarer Boli Khela, a three-day 'Baishakhi Mela' also started on Monday where vendors from different parts of the country joined with a wide variety of handicrafts including household essentials and showpiece items.

Dhaka, Paris agree

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Morshed apprised his French counterpart of the 'successful handling' of the banned terrorist group (JMB), who had perpetrated countrywide bomb blasts and suicide bomb attacks on innocent people recently.

He also informed the French foreign minister of the achievements of Bangladesh in poverty alleviation, empowerment of women, micro-credit, elimination of gender discrimination in school enrollment and achieving several Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

On investment, the French foreign minister, while referring to Lafarge's investment in Bangladesh, said the French investors are aware of the investment-friendly environment in Bangladesh and will take the benefit of it.

The two foreign ministers discussed the two-way trade and expressed happiness at the fast-growing trade between the two countries. They agreed that there was tremendous possibility of enhancing the volume of trade.

In FY 2004-05, Bangladesh's export to France stood at \$ 781.00 million, while, during the same period, import from France was less than \$ 100 million.

In order to enhance bilateral trade, they stressed the need for regular and intense contact between the trade bodies of the two countries; increase in the flow of trade-related information and exchange of visits of trade delega-

BCL activist

beaten up by cops dies at hospital

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

A Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL) activist, beaten up by police at Dhamarai during Sunday's hartal, succumbed to his injuries at Dhaka Medical College Hospital (DMCH) yesterday.

Milon Hossain, 20, an HSC student of Dhamrai Government Degree College, took part in a pro-hartal procession in Dhamrai's Islampur Bazar. Police beat him up during chase and counter-chase in the area, his relatives alleged at Dhaka Medical College morgue.

Milon was first admitted to a local hospital from where he was shifted to DMCH at around 7.00am yesterday. But he died within an hour.

Bangla Bhai's wife

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Nongar Bhaban in Akua Haji Bari of Mymensingh town on the night of December 6 in presence of Bangla Bhai and three other JMB Shura members. Police did not reveal their names for the sake of the investigation.

The aim of the blast that took place before the Netrakona Udichi office was to kill people and damage the office completely, she added.

Fahima also confessed that the letter of JMB, which was found at the spot of the blast, was written by her.

She also mentioned the name of the suicide bomber who blasted the bomb, but the IO of the case refused to disclose it.

Satkhira BNP men

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Noor Islam occupied the land and built the club over night after failing to get the toll.

A local seeking anonymity said the BNP cadres use the club as a safe house where they take drugs.

On contact, the schoolteacher said he has informed the Deputy Commissioner (DC) about this and sought his intervention.

On contact, Officer-in-charge (OC) Arzu Mia of Kalaroa Police Station said he heard about the incident but there was no case filed in this regard.

Kanchpur point

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are dying due to natural causes, and not due to encroachments, he claimed.

"But I can assure you of all cooperation in saving the river. I own about 1.75 acres of land by the river, and if it comes to giving up the land for the sake of the country, I shall happily do it," the legislator told the meeting.

BIWTA Secretary Syed Monwar Hussain said the Port Act, 1905, clearly defines the 'sub-soil between the high water mark and the low water mark' of the river. The high water mark is the foreshore of the river.

According to law, 50 yards from the foreshore into the land should remain free of encroachments. A joint survey, conducted in 1960 by the BIWTA and Dhaka district administration, demarcated the foreshore in the area and handed it over to the BIWTA for safeguarding it.

Akbar Hossain said if necessary, the government would initiate moves to acquire land along the rivers.

The deputy commissioner (DC) of Narayanganj said steps must be taken to plant trees on the lands already recovered by the authorities.

The law ministry representative suggested that to save all the rivers in the country, the DCs of all districts should be made accountable.

Minister for Public Works and Housing Mirza Abbas pointed out that the river Turag at Amin Bazaar is narrowing down rapidly. Sand traders are slowly grabbing the river, he said.

The BIWTA was directed to look into this and report back to the task force as soon as possible.

Hunt for bosses

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appointed him to prepare EXPs (Export Related Documents) as he has the expertise. He also said he received payment for carrying out the task.

"He is a hard nut. He certainly knows their names, but providing us with cooked up information. What he is telling today denying the next day," said a member of the investigation team. "It is just the beginning of the investigation, we are hopeful to detect all others involved in the smuggling," the investigator said wishing to remain anonymous.

Replying to a question Ibrahim Fatmi said they have not yet cleared BD Foods from their investigation. "So far we have not found any link between the smuggling and BK Foods. The investigation is at the primary stage, if we find links with BD Foods, certainly we will mention its name in our report," he said.

"Whoever the persons or firms are, we will not let them get away if we find them to be involved in the smuggling."

On Friday, CID filed a case against two food product firms -- Messrs Emdad Trading and Jamil International -- for involvement in smuggling heroin to the UK. BD Foods was not incriminated in the case although it figured in the National Board of Revenue (NBR) probe report.

Earlier, complaints against five companies were received from the UK authorities for heroin smuggling. The companies are Messrs King and Company -- a sister concern of BD Foods, Emdad Trading, MM Enterprise, Jamil International and Green Haven.

The investigators already found Green Haven to be involved in smuggling 54kg of heroin to the UK and submitted a report to the home ministry in this regard.

JMB den

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men carrying a sack on a rickshaw. Looking suspicious, the two were challenged by the crime busters. But as they could not give any satisfactory answer, the Rab men searched through the bag and found the explosives.

CEC vents venom

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election: Role of the Election Commission in conducting a free and fair election.

"Some interested quarter and the media as whole have raised a simulated storm in a tea cup as if heaven will fall if the voter list is prepared. The reason I believe is not far to seek. The voter list prepared in 2000 was flawed," claimed Aziz.

In support of this claim, he cited a report of Washington-based National Democratic Institute (NDI) and another of US Department of State, and a letter of the European Union (EU), which he said pointed out a good number of ghost voters on the existing voter roll.

He quoted the reports and the letter in defence of his unilateral move for preparing a fresh voter roll ignoring the persistent opposition of his colleagues. He said, "To check the epidemic of false and fake voters, we have resorted meticulously to follow the directions of Form No. 2 as provided under the Electoral Rolls Rules, 1982."

"This Form No. 2 [used for listing fresh voters] has created all the uproar and concern of the vested quarters fanned up and fuelled by the media to undermine democratic practice and to destroy the true reflection of the aspirations of the people to be fulfilled," alleged the CEC.

The unilateral move of Aziz has been mired in controversy since the very beginning. There were a number of media reports on various irregularities in the process and procedure of the ongoing fresh voter listing. At one point, the main opposition Awami League challenged the move's legality in a writ petition to the High Court, and the court on January 4 asked the EC to revise the existing electoral roll, instead of preparing a fresh one.

The EC however did not follow the court directives and completed the field-level tasks of preparing the new voter list. Instead, it filed an appeal against the High Court directives with the Appellate Division of the Supreme Court.

After the speech, in response to a question why he blames the media, Aziz said he took the media in confidence at the beginning. "But what I said to them was distorted.

They painted a black picture. Journalists abroad don't paint such negative pictures of their own country. But, I am sorry to say, journalists here always print all the bad news under red banner headlines."

The CEC said an NDI survey in 2005 reported that the voter list of 2000 contained 6.4 million ghost voters. Since then, he reckoned, another .97 million voters have died.

He quoted the EU letter addressed to the previous CEC, MA Syed, to have pointing out the existence of as many as 13 million ghost voters, while the US State Department report this year mentioned of 8 per cent fake voters on the list.

CEC Aziz however admitted that the EC has no mechanism to find out the fake voters.

He said under the ongoing voter enumeration the EC has already made a draft voter list, which will be published inviting claims and objections within 15 days time and allotting adequate time to resolve them. Thereafter, the final list will be printed, "and this process may take about three months," he claimed.

He also assured that no one will be left out of the new list, announcing, "Anyone can register his or her name on the voter list even one day before the polls start."

About the task of the EC regarding publication of the poll results, the CEC said the returning officers after consolidation of the results send a copy to the EC, which then publishes the results. "The Election Commission acts just like a post box."

At the meeting, US Ambassador Patricia A Butenis underscored the need for holding the next parliamentary elections in a free and fair manner and for ensuring a level-playing field for the opposition.

Deputy Chief of US Dhaka Mission Judith A Chammas and AmCham Executive Director A Gafur and Vice President Syed Ershad Ahmed were present, among others.

Iran's oil warning

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throw a cloak of secrecy over its nuclear programme if it was attacked militarily.

"In case of military action against Iran, Iran cannot be expected to act transparently," he told a conference on nuclear issues in Tehran.

He was speaking before the International Atomic Energy Agency reports to the UN Security Council on Friday on whether Iran has complied with their demands that Tehran halt uranium enrichment and answer IAEA queries on its nuclear work.

The US envoy to the IAEA said he expected the agency's chief, Mohamed ElBaradei, to criticize Iran in his report.

"Given the announcement they made two weeks ago (about enriching uranium) and given the apparent failure to cooperate further with the IAEA, we can only expect a negative report," Gregory Schulte told Reuters.

Washington has refused to rule out military options if diplomacy fails to curb the Islamic Republic's atomic ambitions.

The United States accuses Iran of seeking to build nuclear bombs and has been seeking support for UN sanctions if Tehran does not halt enrichment. Russia and China oppose such measures.

"How are you going to prevent our activities by imposing sanctions? If you impose sanctions, Iran will suspend its relations with the agency (IAEA)," Larjani said. "Suspension means we will accelerate our activities."

Iran said this month it had enriched uranium to the level used in nuclear power stations and would pursue industrial-scale production, which it says is its legitimate right.

The UN nuclear watchdog has said it cannot yet confirm Iran's assertion that its atomic activities are purely civilian. But it has found no hard proof of a military programme.

Tehran ended snap inspections of nuclear sites in February after it was referred to the Security Council.

2m suffer in capital

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Shyamoli, Sher-e-Bangla Nagar, Lalmatia, Green Road, Kathalbag, Nilkhet, Panthapath, Shukrabad, a part of Shahbag, a part of Bangla Motor and adjacent areas.

Describing the suffering, Abdul Quddus, a resident of Green Road said, "For example on Saturday I was home all day. I woke up at 8:00am sweating as there was no power. Power came back at 9:00am, then went out at 9:20am. Then returned at 11:00am, it went out at 11:30am. I tried cooling myself when power returned at 1:00pm. Then I could barely turn on the water pump when power went off again at 2:00pm. It returned around 5:00pm. Then it went out again at 6:00pm and returned again at 7:15pm. Believe me, it went off again at 8:00pm and I stayed in dark till 1:30am. Wait, it did not end there power went off again at 2:15am and returned at 3:00am. Then again it failed at 3:30am and came back at 4:15am only to go out at 5:30am. You can imagine I did not sleep normally, I fell asleep amid sweat after that only for a couple of hours."

A resident of Dhanmondi, Aziz Ahmed, was furious when describing the power scenario at his home. "I am quite shocked that till date

Desa has not taken any practical measure to restore normal power supply. Desa people do not even know when we will have some 'normal' load shedding!"

Desa sources said the problem came to Desa's notice on March 19. "We tried detecting the location of the problem. This cable is installed 24 feet below the ground. Our system of locating such a problem is manual. As a result, we failed," said

a high official.

"To detect such a problem from remote locations, developed countries use a scanner which we do not have. Therefore we have initiated the process to bring in a foreign expert along with a scanner. We expect this help to arrive on May 6. Then we assume it will take another month or more to detect the problem and replace the cable," he added.

"By that time the peak of summer will be gone," he pointed out, "So Desa can do nothing but apologise to the people for the suffering."

The Ulan-Dhanmondi grid cable became completely dead by March 21. As a makeshift solution Desa arranged partial power supply by drawing power from nearby 33kv lines.

"The reason for such problems is that the underground 132kv grid cables are 20 to 25 years old. When these were installed, there were fewer houses. Now we have a crowded city and we cannot maintain these cables as we used to. This is why we are considering installation of overhead grid cables in the future. But we don't know how much of that would be possible given the cramped growth of the city," the Desa official added.

Another Desa official pointed out that a similar problem has been plaguing the Moghbazar to Karwan Bazar 33kv line for the last one week. This 7-year old cable is located 10 feet below the ground. Desa technicians manually located the problem after four days of search.