

# Railway's first strike in forty years

CITY CORRESPONDENT

Kamalapur railway station witnessed an unusual scene last

Wednesday as railway employees enforced their first strike after 1965 paralysing train services from the biggest and busiest railway station of the

country. While the passengers suffered from stoppage of train services, all the platforms were occupied by the railway employees bringing

out processions with slogans against the government plan to restructure Bangladesh Railway. Bangladesh Railway Sramik Karmachari Sangram Parishad enforced the countrywide dawn-to-dusk strike, resulting in cancellation of trains from Kamalapur and other stations leaving hundreds of passengers in immense sufferings.

By 7:30am, three trains were ready to depart Kamalapur for Sylhet, Chittagong and Bahadurabad Ghat but could not leave Dhaka City. The trains had to stop their journey at different stations between Kamalapur and Tongi.

Ashok Kumar, manager of Kamalapur station, told Star City that they returned the price of the tickets to the passengers as the trains were cancelled. But the passengers got aggrieved as they did not know beforehand about the cancellation.

"This is sheer irresponsibility and lack of common sense," shouted Kamal, a Sylhet-bound passenger in front of the ticket counter. "How can they [railway authorities] cancelled trains after passengers boarded the trains."

Kamal said while buying ticket on Monday he had asked the railway staff at the counter if the train would run on the day of strike, but the staff failed to give specific reply.

Kamal's mother is under treatment at Dhaka Medical Collage Hospital and for her treatment he was to go to Sylhet to collect money. "I could have gone to Sylhet by bus. I made a big mistake by buying train ticket."

Ten-year-old Khalil said he had to starve as he could not earn money due to stoppage of train services. He used to carry passengers' luggage to earn Tk 50-60 a day.

Asked about the passengers' sufferings due to the daylong strike, Dewan Mohammad Ali, coordinator of Bangladesh Railway Sramik Karmachari Sangram Parishad, said these sufferings were due to the irresponsibility of the railway authorities.

He said they relaxed the strike before schedule and started operating trains considering sufferings of the passengers.

Claiming that the strike was totally successful, Mohammad Ali said: "What we are demanding is

not for the workers and employees, but for the people of the country."

"The government is turning the railway into a corporation in the name of development funded by the Asian Development Bank (ADB)," he said.

"The World Bank (WB) and ADB are funding the development of railway since 1974 but nothing has happened except for slimming down of the sector," he said.

"All the funds were wasted in unproductive sector which went against the interests of railway workers and employees as well as the common people."

Mohammad Ali said the railway sector has become a den of corrupt officials and none of the corrupt has faced trial.

On avoiding the strike, he said the communications minister had sat with the workers in two meetings which ended without solution.

"We waited till 8:00pm on Tuesday for the response of the ministry but at 8:00pm, director general of Bangladesh Railway informed us that the minister could not be reached. Then no way left for the workers but to go for strike."

## Ramadan brings relief for rural

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physically unfit. These seasonal beggars said they could earn Tk 180 to Tk 250 a day depending on their physical condition and looks.

"The much aged, handicapped or physically challenged you are, the more alms you will receive," said Romena Begum, a seasonal beggar from Fulbaria, Mymensingh.

This is reason why hundreds of handicaps and aged from around the country arrive in Dhaka, as they believe the city dwellers turn compassionate towards beggars during the month of Ramadan.

"The village in Bhola gives me scope to earn a maximum of Tk 20 to 25 a day when it is much more in Dhaka. But I cannot live on the footpaths of Dhaka permanently leaving my ancestral home. So I try to earn as much as possible," said Zakir Hossain, handicap at Farmgate.

The seasonal beggars in the city said beside alms on the Ramadan days they also target *Zakaat* and *Fitra* on the eve of Eid-ul-Fitr.

"We will go back home on Eid day after Eid prayers. The 'ba-zaar of alms' is good up to Eid morning and after that the market becomes dull," said Insaf Uddin, a seasonal beggar, who came from Rangpur, seven days back with a five-member team.

Jamaluddin, a 75-year-old can barely walk. He begs in front of Baitul Mukarram National Mosque during and after prayer times.

More people are Dhaka bound this year because of a famine-like situation in the northern region, and agro

labourers in the region are more or less without work.

Most of these beggars are seen at traffic signals.

"We have not celebrated Eid in the last two or three years. Begging gives us scope for living in the days of crisis," said Ramjan, a seasonal beggar from Nilfamari.

## Precious tickets

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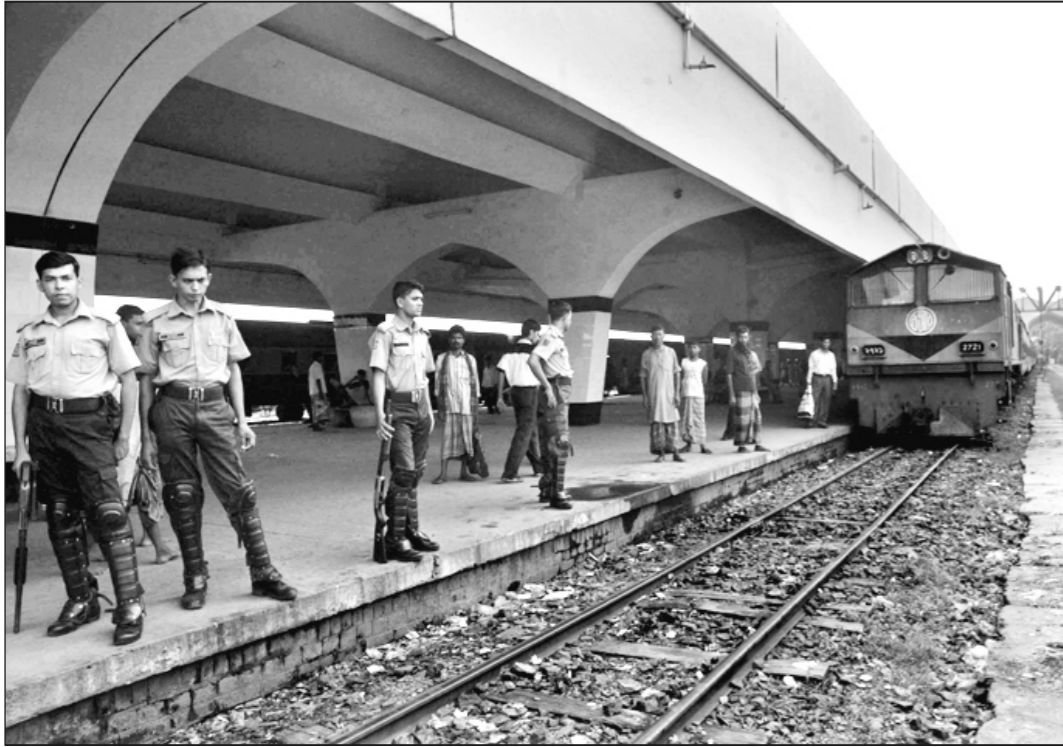
Sardar Sahdat Ali, Dhaka zone commercial manager of Bangladesh Railway said that the railway reserves some tickets for the disabled people, VIP persons, and army use. The authority did not reserve any tickets for influential persons.

Ashok Kumar, general manager of the Kamalapur railway station after a meeting over the management of ticket sales said that they have not reserved any tickets for the influential quarters or the VIPs.

When asked what they would do about the requests from influential people, he said, if any such persons sought tickets before the rush, we arrange them in the super class. He also said that the authority would add extra coaches with every regular and special train.

Railway employees and VIPs would be accommodated in the additional coaches, he said.

The request picture for tickets in the water vessels is no different than rail and road transports. Already all the cabins of the trips before Eid day have been booked. But owners held on to some trump cards to handle special requests.



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