

Number of returnees 'not alarming'

Minister tells JS on migrant workers

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment Minister Imran Ahmad yesterday told the parliament that the number of Bangladeshi migrant workers returning from abroad due to the global coronavirus pandemic is "not alarming".

The minister gave the statement under section 300 of the rules of procedure of parliament.

In the statement, Imran Ahmad said, "A small number of our workers, who were in deportation centres due to coronavirus pandemic, have returned as different countries have deported irregular workers."

The minister said, "According to the Expatriate Welfare Desk, a total of 1,11,111 workers have returned to the country from April 1 to September 6. Many of them have returned at the end of their tenure or due to lack of work."

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A group of Dhaka Power Distribution Company staffers were spotted yesterday fixing electrical poles at Kalyanpur, opposite the Khaleque Service Station. Though the task carries risk of fatality from electrocution, none of the workers seem to be wearing any protective gear, an issue persists despite repeated condemnations from activists and coverage in press.

PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON

MEDIA GAG ON GOVT EMPLOYEES 'Wholesale restriction will be constitutional'

LAW DESK

The public administration ministry recently asked all secretaries to instruct their subordinates to make sure that without prior approval of superiors concerned, no public servant writes on or talks to the media.

Shaikh Yusuf Harun, secretary to the ministry, confirmed to The Daily Star that a letter was sent to all secretaries, citing Rule 22 of the Government Servant (Conduct) Rules, 1979.

Rule 22 says a government servant cannot participate in a radio or television broadcast, or write for any newspaper or periodical, except with prior approval of the respective head of the department or in the bona fide discharge of official duties. The same restrictions shall apply if a government servant contributes anonymously, in his own name or in the name of any other person.

This rule makes it virtually subject to satisfaction of the head of the concerned departments, as the terms "bona fide discharge of official duties" are vague and hard to define.

The only exceptions to the general provision shall be when such broadcast, contribution or letter is of a purely literary, artistic, or scientific character or connected with sports; such broadcast or such contribution is required to project government activities on development works to the people by the commissioner of divisions, deputy commissioners and sub-divisional officers.

It is interesting to note that Rule 23 of the 1979 Rules says no government servant shall make any statement, fact or opinion in any document, public utterance or radio/television broadcast, which is capable of embarrassing the relations between the government and the people or any section of the people or the relations between the government and any foreign country.

When asked about the legality and constitutionality of such restrictions, Supreme Court lawyer Manzill Murshid said, "Freedom of expression is a constitutionally

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OTT WEB PLATFORMS

High Court questions inaction in removing 'obscene content'

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The High Court yesterday questioned the inaction and apathy of the authorities concerned to remove obscene and immoral video contents from the OTT (over-the-top) web-based platforms across the country.

In response to a writ petition, the court issued a rule asking respondents to explain in four weeks why their inaction to this effect should not be declared illegal.

In the rule, the HC asked them to show cause why they should not be directed to formulate a guideline to monitor the operations of OTT platforms.

Secretaries to ministries of posts and telecommunications, home and information, inspector general of police, chairman and director concerned of Bangladesh Telecommunication and Regulatory Commission (BTRC), director general of Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy and deputy inspector general of Cyber Police Bureau were made respondents to the rule.

The HC bench of Justice JBM Hassan and Justice Md Khairul Alam came up with the rule after hearing a petition filed by Supreme Court lawyer Tanvir Ahmed, seeking necessary directives to this effect.

The petitioner told The Daily Star following a similar petition, a virtual HC bench of Justice M Enayetur Rahim on July 15 directed the authorities concerned to remove such contents in seven days.

On that day, the bench also asked BTRC to submit a report before it in a month on how the government collects revenue from the platforms. The HC directives were not implemented as those were not communicated to the respondents properly, he said.

The HC yesterday kept the HC's July 15 directives intact, lawyer Tanvir said.

He submitted the petition as a public interest litigation to the HC in July saying that several OTT platforms contain questionable and obscene contents and films from Bangladesh and India. Those contents through internet cause moral degradation of people, particularly the juvenile and young generation.

The lawyer in the petition prayed to the HC to deliver order on the authorities concerned to remove those contents.

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BNP demands lifting of travel restriction on Khaleda Zia

UNB, Dhaka

BNP yesterday demanded withdrawal of the restriction on Khaleda Zia, its ailing chairperson, from going abroad for treatment.

"We think it's inhumane for the government to ban our party chairperson from going abroad for treatment," said Nazrul Islam Khan, the party's standing committee member.

He said, "We think it'll be a humanitarian act to lift such a ban... This is now our demand."

The BNP leader made the demand while talking to reporters, after placing wreaths at party founder Ziaur Rahman's grave, together with leaders of Jatiyatabadi Mohila Dal, marking BNP's 42nd founding anniversary.

As the six-month suspension of her sentences in two graft cases expires on September 24, Khaleda's younger brother Shamir Iskander applied to the government on August 25 for its extension.

On September 3, law ministry gave its positive opinion for extending the suspension for six more months on two conditions -- Khaleda will be treated at her Gulshan residence and not leave the country.

Govt extends HSC admission deadline to Sept 17, sets max enrollment fees

MOHIUDDIN ALAMGIR

The government has extended the deadline of enrolling students to class XI and fixed the highest ceiling of the admission fees.

Inter-education board coordination sub-committee president Prof Ziaul Haque issued two separate directives regarding the issues on Tuesday evening.

Students will be allowed to get admission till September 17, said a directive signed by Ziaul, also Dhaka Education Board chairman.

According to the preliminary decision, the enrollment dates were September 13, 14 and 15.

In another directive, the board authorities said an educational institute under MPO of Dhaka would be allowed to fix the admission fee at maximum Tk 5,000.

Fees would be maximum Tk 7,500 for Bangla version students at educational institutes which get MPO benefits partially and maximum Tk 8,500 for English version in Dhaka metropolitan areas.

For educational institutes under MPO coverage at upazila levels, the highest fee is Tk 1,000, for district headquarters Tk 2,000 and for other metropolitan areas Tk 3,000.

The third phase of online application is now going on. For several years, based on the results of the Secondary School Certificate (SSC) exam, students have been admitted centrally to class XI in government- and private-owned colleges and madrasas through online.

Students can apply to minimum five and maximum 10 colleges. Respective boards then place a student to a college on the basis of their results and choices.

During the three-phase admission process, students can apply to maximum 10 colleges or madrasas, with a fee of Tk 150 for each, said officials.

After the process, a new academic year for HSC and equivalent courses usually begins on July 1. But this year it will be different due to coronavirus situation.

All educational institutions have remained closed since March 17, and the closure was stretched to August 31 to stem Covid-19 transmission.

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Tourism near Dhaka still far from revival

HELEMIUL ALAM

Although the government has permitted reopening of hotels, resorts and amusement parks since August, tour and hotel operators around Dhaka are still struggling to run their businesses due to low number of holidaymakers.

Fear of coronavirus and reduced earnings are the main causes of low turnout in Gazipur and Narayanganj, say those in the hospitality industry.

"Although we restarted our operation just before Eid, we are not getting our main target group -- corporate employee retreats -- for which we are still incurring losses," said Abul Hossain Abeer, head of sales and marketing of Chuti Resort in Gazipur.

He said they have already lost Tk 3-4 crore due to the shutdown and are facing more losses due to maintenance work after resuming operation.

Abeer said they had given leave without pay to 70-80 percent of the 70 staffers during the shutdown, and many of them could not return to work.

"We are only getting around 10 percent of our regular number of visitors. All of them are family guests," he said, adding that they are trying to maintain health guidelines, including using masks and sanitiser, maintaining social distancing and disinfection.

Overall, the tourism sector in Bangladesh could not recover its losses so far and will take a lot of time to return to normalcy, he continued.

"Hopefully, we will be able to earn a good profit if the situation improves before winter," he added.

According to statistics of Bangladesh Tourism Board, about four million people involved in the tourism and hospitality industry were hit hard by the pandemic.

Losses in the travel and tourism sector in only three months, from March to

May, amounted to Tk 1,400 crore, said Mohammad Saiful Hasan, assistant director (planning and research) of Bangladesh Tourism Board.

Md Ismail Hossain, public relation manager of Sara Resort Ltd, said they are getting guests only on weekends, and are also not seeing corporate visitors coming in.

Echoing a similar situation, Dhiman Saha, manager admin of Dream Holiday Park in Narayanganj, said they are getting 10-12 percent of their regular number of visitors since reopening on August 3.

The resort operators said that if Bangladesh Tourism Board increases its advertisements to inform people about the sector and encourage everyone to maintain health guidelines during their visit, normalcy will return, and people will be encouraged to visit resorts and tourist spots.

To this end, Saiful said they are taking different measures to revive the sector. They formed a crisis management committee at the beginning of the pandemic.

"We have also prepared a loss and damage estimate for three months during the shutdown and sent it to the government through the ministry concerned to take necessary steps, including giving stakeholders low-interest loans," he informed.

Based on UN World Tourism Organisation guidelines and after consulting with stakeholders, we also sent a recovery plan to the tourism ministry, and they approved it before Eid. It will be implemented now," he added.

Mentionable that although the shutdown has been lifted, the coronavirus outbreak in Bangladesh appears to be far from over, with over 2000 new cases detected last Monday. Travelling still come with some risk and strict maintenance of health guidelines is compulsory during this time.

1,000 illegal gas lines cut in Savar

STAR REPORT

A mobile court yesterday disconnected around 1,000 illegal gas connections to households at Johorchanda area of Ashulia in Savar.

Savar upazila administration and zonal office of Titas Gas Transmission and Distribution Company Ltd in Savar jointly conducted the mobile court, according to Titas officials.

The court removed illegal pipelines across two kilometres and cut off connections to 1,000 households, said Eng Abu Sadad Md Sayem, manager of Titas' Savar zonal office.

Huge pipes and other materials were also seized during the drive, he said.

"Earlier, we had conducted drives four times at this area and disconnected lines, but during the pandemic, the users reinstalled them," said Sayem, adding that they had filed a case against some people there over illegal connections.

When asked about the people behind providing these connections, he said they are investigating the matter.

However, during yesterday's drive, the official did not fine or arrest anyone, as heavy rain hampered the court's activities, sources said.

Our Savar correspondent tried to talk to several users of such connections, but all declined to comment.

Meanwhile, in port city, a team of Karnaphuli Gas Distribution Company Ltd conducted a drive at several areas yesterday and disconnected 13 illegal and defective gas lines.

The authority formed 12 teams to raise awareness among people and find illegal and defective gas connections. They will continue the drive till every customer is reached, said Karnaphuli Gas sources.

Syed Abu Nasr Md Saleh, general manager of Karnaphuli Gas, told The Daily Star, "The team disconnected 10 domestic and three commercial lines for allegedly getting unplanned illegal connection."

"Among them, three connections, including one at an office of power development board at Nasirabad area, were disconnected for using defective gas lines," he said.

"The drive was carried out in Chattogram due to the Narayanganj mosque explosion," he added.



Authorities in Savar and Chattogram have started drives to tackle illegal and faulty gas connections. Around 1,000 lines were disconnected in Ashulia, while 13 were cut in the port city yesterday. These campaigns come after the devastating Narayanganj mosque explosion, which is suspected to have occurred due to a gas leak.

PHOTO: RAJIB RAIHAN, PALASH KHAN



Injured Bangladeshi worker rescued from 40m crane in S'pore

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

A Bangladeshi migrant worker was rescued in a frantic effort by firefighters in Singapore after he got stuck on a tower crane high off the ground on Monday.

The 46-year-old man working on the crane found himself suspended 40 metres up and unable to head down to safety, after injuring his leg in mid-air, The Straits Times reported on Tuesday.

The report did not mention identity of the man and how the worker got himself injured.

When alerted to the incident at a construction site on Monday at 4:25pm (local time), the Singapore Civil Defence Force (SCDF) sent in a team of firefighters and members of its elite division, the Disaster Assistance and Rescue Team (Dart), to rescue the worker, the report said.

Four Dart specialists scaled a cat ladder to access the crane, before traversing across its narrow arm to reach the injured man, it said, citing SCDF's Facebook post.

The team members secured themselves in place and set up a lowering system with ropes and pulleys.

One of the Dart specialists, who was cross-trained as an emergency medical technician, treated and bandaged the man's wound while up on the crane.

Meanwhile, another team of Dart specialists on the ground prepared a stretcher and secured it to a rope that the team on the crane had prepared.

Working in tandem, the two teams hoisted the stretcher to where the injured man was, before safely securing him to the stretcher, said the ST report, referring to a video post.

One hour into the operation, a Dart specialist on the crane attached himself to the stretcher, which was then slowly lowered to the ground in concert with the other specialists and firefighters who had been deployed.

SCDF said a paramedic assessed the man's injuries before he was taken to Sengkang General Hospital.

The Singapore Ministry of Manpower, which was investigating the incident, said the developer of the project at the site is Singhaiyi Huajiang Sun.

The site occupier is China Construction (South Pacific) Development, while the injured worker's employer is Capital Cranes Global.