

BANGLADESH
UPDATE



1,203
New cases in 24hrs



3,77,073
Total cases



5,500
Deaths



2,91,365
Recoveries

GLOBAL
UPDATE



1,074,261
Deaths



37,232,322
Total cases

Death penalty

FROM PAGE 1

At least 500 people had joined the rally in front of the parliament building, where Feminists Across Generations -- an inter-generational feminist alliance -- declared a national emergency, demanding an end to all gender-based violence.

They said the death penalty is not a solution; they want an end to rape culture.

Rights activists further demanded the urgent and immediate adoption of a 10-point demand issued by the Rape Law Reform Coalition, including redefining rape to ensure that it covers all forms of non-consensual penetration, whether penile or not, and irrespective of gender, reviewing the Evidence Act 1872 to remove all scope for institutional victim blaming, ensuring protection and access to justice without discrimination for all rape victims, and conducting sensitisation trainings for police, lawyers, judges and social workers so rape survivors are treated with respect and due responsiveness during reporting, investigation and prosecution.

Shireen Huq, founder member of Naripokkho, said that women of different generations have come together to fight this long battle.

"Our mothers have struggled before us and we are standing here so that the younger ones gain strength from this... If we think that rape incidents will come down by passing a law in parliament, then it is wrong. We look forward to a day when there will be no more such incidents, no more sexual violence..." she said.

Shireen believes that death penalty is not the answer to stop rape.

"How many people will we deal with through the death penalty? The problem is all around us, the rapists did not come from an alien planet -- they are our brothers, our relatives. Children need to be taught to respect women from an early age, only then this problem can be solved," she said, adding, "We'd be wrong if we think that rape is a matter of law and justice. It'd be a mistake to assume that a law passed in parliament will reduce the number of rape incidents."

Protesters demanded women's right to occupy all public spaces without the fear of violence, at any time and for any purpose. They wanted families to hold their boys and men accountable for such violence, which they perpetrate. Rapists will no longer be sheltered in homes, schools and workplaces, they said.

Protests against the growing incidents of rape, sexual harassment and other kinds of violence against women have been rampant across the country.

Some protesters also called for the resignation of Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan Kamal over the government's "failure" to stop the alarming rise in sexual violence against women and children.

'NONE OF US ARE SAFE'
At a rally in front of National Press Club around 11:00am, Gonoshasthaya Kendra founder Dr Zafurullah Chowdhury said, "The entire nation has been in a fury, protesting against the recent spate of rape incidents, violence against women and extrajudicial killings. Now, none of us are safe. The

people's rights have been taken away. Just as sexual abuse is a crime, so is snatching away the people's rights."

Zafurullah, also the chairman of the Bhasani Onushari Parishad, said people have woken up and history will not forgive those who have deprived the people of their rights.

The rally demanded a 50-year prison sentence for rapists.

Addressing the rally, which demanded a 50-year prison sentence for rapists, Ganasamhati Andolon Coordinator Zonayed Saki said that political power has been involved in rape incidents becoming increasingly prevalent in the country.

"These heinous incidents were taking place under political patronage. These crimes were never tried. There was power on one hand and lack of justice on the other."

The government talks big but takes no initiative to implement laws in favour of women. There had been no justice in cases such as those of Tonu's murder, Taqi's murder, the killing of Sagar and Rumi, or Abrar's murder. That was why today, incidents like rape and extrajudicial killings have been on the rise, Saki said.

Dhaka University Professor Asif Nazrul said this government is patronising casino traders, murderers and looters.

"Speaking of justice, they occasionally catch a couple of small fish but do not take any initiative to eradicate their root," he said.

Various organisations held human chains, protest rallies and demonstrations in front of the Jatiya Press Club yesterday. The streets resounded with fiery speeches and slogans, demanding speedy trials of rapists and also free and fair elections to establish a democratic government.

Speaking at a human chain held in front of the National Museum, Badiul Alam Majumdar, secretary of SUJON (Citizens for Good Governance), said perpetrators of violence against women remain active under political patronage.

He added the coronavirus pandemic has been joined in the pandemic of violence against women. Women are being abused everywhere, from their homes to their workplaces.

SUJON has declared nationwide human chain programmes, demanding justice for violence against women and the punishment of perpetrators.

WHAT POLICE SAY

A press release of the Police Headquarters (PHQ) yesterday said there is a lot of reaction among the youth and on social media against heinous crimes like rape and violence against women and it has finally caught the attention of law enforcers.

Police are working with utmost professionalism, dedication and sincerity in every case of violence against women and children, including rape, to ensure social discipline and peace in the country, the PHQ added.

"The investigation report will be submitted before a court for trial after completing the investigation of all cases as soon as possible. We firmly believe that proper punishment for these criminals will be ensured in the shortest possible time through the court," the press release added.

Issues that are now even more

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intercourse by a man with his own wife, the wife not being under 13 years of age, is not rape."

Individuals under the age of 16 are defined as children according to Bangladeshi law (although United Nations recommends the age be 18 years), but forced sex within the confines of marriage is legally acceptable as long as the girl is 13 years and over.

"The law is saying, if a girl of 13 years old is forced into having sex by her husband, she cannot file a rape case. And by this, we are legally endorsing the rape of a 13-year-old girl. And we are legally endorsing the rape of child bride, which is absurd and archaic," said Taslima Yasmin, assistant professor at Dhaka University's law department.

Bangladesh is one of the 36 countries in the world where a 13-year-old girl can be forced into submitting to a sexual relationship -- which is equivalent to marital rape -- because she can be "married" under special circumstances and as such it is still legal.

A February 2019 study conducted by Brac's Advocacy for Social Change department found that almost nobody considers marital rape as violence against women. The survey chose 4,800 respondents -- 600 from each division -- and found that only four percent of the people considered spousal rape to be a form of violence. That marital rape is neither recognised nor criminalised is a reflection of what society thinks of men's entitlement over women's bodies.

Seventy-year-old Dola Akter Reba, general secretary of the National Child Forum of World Vision Bangladesh, spoke about how difficult it is to educate people about marital rape.

"Most of the time, in rural areas, when we campaign among communities and try to educate parents about how marital rape can harm the body and mind, they don't want to hear this from us. According to them, after marriage, everything is legal between husband and wife. Those who

are educated sometimes get convinced, but those who are not educated or follow the religions blindly don't pay heed to us, and we face more challenges," said Dola.

The forum works on 88,000 children in 54 upazilas.

A new report published jointly last month by Girls Not Brides Bangladesh and Plan International explored the legal loopholes making it difficult to protect child brides from rape.

"This is contradictory to Bangladesh's international commitment to protect the girl child from sexual exploitation, particularly its obligations to ensure the best interest of the child under the UN Child Rights Convention. Such a provision also encourages the culture of forced marriage of a child rape victim with her perpetrator in order that the perpetrator can get away with the crime easily," said the report.

The report points out that the law does not require obtaining the consent of a minor in an application for child marriage under the "special provision". It also mentions that although there are special provisions in the act that allow for underage marriage, there is no special provision that allows for the dissolution of underage marriage.

Last Wednesday, the United Nations released a report, titled "Child Marriage in Humanitarian Settings in South Asia: Study Results from Bangladesh and Nepal", where child marriage was termed "a fundamental violation of human rights."

"About 59 percent of women aged 20-24 in Bangladesh were married under the age of 18," said Jean Gough, regional director, Unifem South Asia, and Björn Andersson, regional director, UNFPA Asia-Pacific, in their jointly written foreword.

According to Unicef data from 2017, 22 percent were married before the age of 15.

Bangladesh's own statistics also paint a similar picture. A multiple Indicator Cluster Survey of Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) done in 2019 shows the child marriage rate stood at 51 percent.



A woman sitting on the street in front of the National Museum in the capital's Shahbagh area, wearing a sari printed with anti-rape slogans. A group of students yesterday demonstrated there yesterday.

PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

Washing hands of workers' plight

FROM PAGE 1

that he had allowed another agency to use his licence by "mistake".

"I am a new business owner; I had just gotten the licence. A partner wanted to use my licence and I had allowed him. I had nothing to do with this," he claimed.

While he refused to name his "partners", stating that he is in the middle of financial negotiations with them, worker testimonials taken by Brac identified Al Noman Human Resource, M/S Satkhira International, M/S Advent Overseas Ltd, and Star Line Associate as the intermediary agents.

Pranesh Kumar Mahot, a workshop welder, told The Daily Star that he was sent to Vietnam by an Al Noman Human Resource agent named Saiful Islam.

"I was recruited by a Bogura-based dala called Asgor Ali who introduced me to Al Noman Human Resource," he said.

When asked about his clearing agency, M/S A Jhama Trade International, Pranesh replied, "What is Jhama?"

Pranesh said he was given an ad by Al Noman Human Resource stating "Urgent recruitment at Vietnamese Shipyard".

A copy of the ad received by this correspondent states that the agency sought 250 men for the shipyard, and promised a monthly salary of \$510-650 for welders.

"I spent Tk 3.5 lakh to go there after being promised a monthly salary of \$650 to work in a place called Keppel Shipyard. I didn't even earn \$100," Pranesh said.

There was no Keppel Shipyard job waiting for him -- in fact, the BMET clearances obtained by Jhama Trade show no Keppel shipyard, as per Brac's migration unit.

After landing on January 28, Pranesh was made to sit around for more than a week. On February 7, he and 11 others he flew to Vietnam with were taken to a dry dock.

"We all gave interviews and only four of us got jobs, while the rest didn't. I worked there for a month before being fired. After that, I just sat around unemployed for five months," said Pranesh.

The Daily Star contacted two of the intermediary agents sending workers through Jhama Trade.

Both Star Line Associate's proprietor Firoz Md Mansurul Hoque and M/S Satkhira International's proprietor Sk Nazrul Islam told this correspondent that they never sent any workers to Vietnam.

However, as part of an ongoing investigation into these recruiting agencies, Rab-3 identified Firoz as the brother of a Vietnam-based Bangladeshi labour handler named Mostafa.

Eighty-one Bangladeshi workers from Vietnam, and two workers from Qatar, returned on August 18, following their imprisonment in these countries for involvement in criminal activities, according to local police.

A Dhaka court had sent them to jail on these charges on September 1.

On September 21, the High Court issued a rule asking the government to explain why directives should not be given to the authorities concerned to free the 83 Bangladeshi migrant workers.

NOT WHAT THEY SIGNED UP FOR
Jhama Trade's Shanto Das claimed, "I have spoken to the agents in Vietnam. They [the workers] were given jobs, but they refused to work."

To prove his statement, he gave this correspondent copies of four resignation letters in English, signed by four workers.

The workers' families, however, said they were duped into signing the letters. The letters, addressed to the management board of Nam Phuong Xanh, stated, "I would like you to give me permission to not continue working at the Company because I plan to return to Bangladesh. This is my personal desire. I also confirm that when I go to work, the Company pays me full. I also confirm that Company has arranged the work for me, but I don't like this job, so I do not work."

This correspondent called the family of one of the signees -- a worker named Md Milon Miah -- to ask why Milon resigned from his job.

"My brother never held a permanent

position in Vietnam. He went there on January 4 or 5, and got 10 days of work. After that, he was sitting around unemployed for a month. Then he got seven more days of work, before that job too vanished," said Shilon Miah, speaking on behalf of his brother who was until recently in jail.

"That was the last job he had -- he was unemployed until he came back to Bangladesh. He did not get a single coin in wages for the jobs he did," he said.

"Milon only studied up till class five and cannot understand or write in English."

Milon's signature on the letter was his name written in English in disjointed, spaced-out block letters.

"In June, after six months of unemployment, we told the recruiting agent to bring Milon back if he cannot give him a job. The agent agreed and said Milon needs to sign a letter saying he is leaving Vietnam willingly," Shilon said.

That was the "resignation letter", he added.

As agents at all levels deny charges of trafficking, evidence states otherwise.

Mizanur Rahman was sent to Vietnam by M/S Mam and Mam Overseas, according to his BMET card. His family spent Tk 3.5 lakh to send him to work at a furniture factory, stated his brother-in-law Kamrul.

But the visa application letter submitted on his behalf to the Vietnam Embassy in Dhaka on January 10 this year, only sought a visa for four months.

At that rate, the eighth-grade graduate would have needed to earn close to a lakh each month just to get back the money he spent to go there.

The invitation letter was sent by a construction company based in a Vietnamese city of Thu Dau Mot and his family had no idea about any of this. His family had no idea about any of this.

"He has never physically gone to the embassy in Dhaka as far as we know," said Kamrul, "nor did he get any job in Vietnam. That is why he went to seek help at the Bangladesh Embassy in Hanoi and ended up in jail."

Similarly, another worker Kashem Miah was sent on a DN "entrepreneur" visa by Mam and Mam Overseas that was only valid for a month -- January 3 to February 2, 2020.

When M/S Mam and Mam Overseas was called to ask why they applied for such a short "entrepreneur" visa for the worker, the agency's manager Habibur Rahman denied being involved.

"We were fooled by a business partner. Our business partner is Noorjahan Akhter, who was arrested by the police. She owns 25 percent of the business."

Akhter, a Wage Earners' Welfare Board accounts section official and a former data entry operator at BMET, and her husband Md Abdus Satter were arrested in July for trafficking and are currently out on bail.

Anamul Huq and Shariful Islam too were sent as "entrepreneurs" for one month each, by Jhama Trade and M/S Estema International Recruiting Agency respectively.

FAKE PAPERS

While fake documents reigned supreme when sending such workers to Vietnam, none of the government agencies concerned caught it.

For example, before Shital Chandra Sarker was sent to Vietnam by M/S Shandhani Overseas, the recruiting agents got certificates from Nadia Furniture and Medallion Furniture, stating that he worked there between September 2014 and September 2015.

One letter stated that "he was instructed in professional business skills, such as: introducing products in a scientific way, finding, caring, maintaining relations with customers, solving problems at the request of customers."

However, Shital's brother Sanjay claimed that Shital never worked in any furniture store in Dhaka.

"We lived in Dhaka a few years back, but he was not working anywhere. He had just got back from Dubai and was living off his savings. Then, we shifted to our village and he got involved in farming," said Sanjay.

Shital's certificates were attested by a High Court lawyer and an assistant director of BMET, and the attestors were verified. The papers were then

again attested by an assistant secretary of the Ministry of Law, Justice and Parliamentary Affairs, and an assistant secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

At least 14 other workers had similar certificates from all major furniture stores in Dhaka, and attested by the above-mentioned government officials -- but as The Daily Star could not independently verify these, hence it is refraining from naming them.

Shandhani's MD Mosleh Uddin, asked about Shital's case, denied sending any workers to Vietnam.

"My licence was used by someone else and I was billed to bring back 21 workers at Tk 34,000 each," he alleged.

BMET clearance records link Shandhani with sending 20 migrant workers to Vietnam. The clearances stated the workers were being sent to work in four companies, of which only one had a Yellow Pages listing.

Worker testimonials collected by Brac found two other intermediary agencies, Mash Career Services and Kazi Enterprises.

Mash Career's agent Shohag is already in jail, having been arrested by Rab in July.

Kazi Enterprise's Moshir Rahman denied being involved. "I just run a photocopy business in Paltan and my customers are agents. I never sent anyone to Vietnam," he said.

Only two local recruiting agents drew up notarised contracts with the workers they sent, rendering them culpable for trafficking.

As per copies of these contracts received by this newspaper: Anwar Hossain of Five Star Aviation signed a contract with Nur Hossain and sent him via Jhama Trade; and Mojamal Haque from Cumilla signed a contract with Polish Ahmed, Rayhan, Masum Miah, Rubel and Masud, promising them salaries of \$400-600 and sent them using Shandhani Overseas.

Other agents who denied sending workers abroad, when contacted, include M/S Afeef International.

Jashim Uddin, the proprietor of the recruiting agency, alleged that his licence was misused by a "syndicate".

"Ask the migrant workers if they have ever met me. They will not be able to claim that I ever took a single Taka from them, or met them even once," he said.

To clear his name, Jashim also submitted letters directed towards the director general of BMET and the secretary of the Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment, claiming that he is not at fault and is a victim of forgery.

BMET DG Md Shamsul Alam said the agencies in whose name the clearances have been taken are responsible for the situation.

"Their names and licences were used to send these workers abroad. It does not matter if the violations were caused by other agents using their licences -- it was in their name, and they are being held responsible," he said.

CR Abrar, executive director of Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit, however, said local and intermediary recruiting agents too have to be held responsible.

"Right now, the law does not recognise their role but they are the main nexus between recruiting agencies, the government, and the workers. The licensed recruiting agencies never have local branch offices and are always reliant on local agents to recruit, and most of the workers get their clearances through the local agents. This needs to be brought under the purview of law."

Either way, the BMET DG's words bear hope for Raju Ahammad, despite not knowing who he was actually defrauded by.

The worker from Sharsha in Jashore only knows that he was recruited by Port City International -- and has no idea that his only contracts are with M/S Rezwana Overseas, an agency he does not even recognise.

In the absence of documents, Port City's proprietor, Md Badiul Alam denied all allegations when contacted by this correspondent.

"I spent Tk 4 lakh to go to Vietnam. I only got VND 5.5 million, which is equivalent to Tk 20,000. Please help me get my money back," Raju entreated.

EU commissioner tests positive for Covid-19

AFP, Brussels

EU commissioner Mariya Gabriel has tested positive for Covid-19, she said yesterday, the first top Brussels official known to have caught the coronavirus.

Gabriel, the EU commissioner for research and innovation, had already announced on Monday that she would self-isolate after a member of her team tested positive for the virus.

"After a first negative #COVID19 test on Monday, my second one is positive," said Gabriel, who is Bulgaria's representative to the 27-member EU executive.

"I have been in self-isolation since Monday and continue staying at home, following the established regulations. Keep yourself healthy and stay safe!" she said.

The EU commission is headquartered in the Belgian capital of Brussels, which is currently one of the worst hit cities in Europe by the virus, along with Madrid and Paris.

The commission's president Ursula von der Leyen on Monday briefly went into self-isolation after a close contact with a positive case, but her two tests came back negative.

Last month the president of the European Council, Charles Michel, was forced to postpone a European leaders' summit for a week after a security guard in his team tested positive.

Uncertainty

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results of Junior School Certificate (JSC), Secondary School Certificate (SSC) and their equivalent tests.

The evaluation of the candidates would be published by December this year.

Candidates of technical courses said whatever the government decision is should be announced soon to reduce their concerns.

Contacted Bangladesh Technical Education Board Chairman Morad Hossain Mollah said that they were well aware of the issue.

"We are working on the alternatives of giving grades of these students. We will take decisions keeping the students' benefits in mind", he told The Daily Star.

He also said that around 2.8 lakh students were expected to take part in the exams under the technical education board.

With Wednesday's decision more than 13.65 lakh students, who were expected to sit for the HSC or equivalent exams, will pass automatically.

An advisory committee was also formed to chalk out how students who had changed education groups after SSC would be evaluated.

The committee would also decide how JSC and SSC grades would be used for evaluating the candidates.

This is the first time the HSC exams have been cancelled since the introduction in 1964.

The closure of schools for over six months has led to the cancellation of exams and left academic calendars in disarray.

Educational activities of about four crore students are being hampered due to the pandemic.

This year's Primary Education Completion and its equivalent exams and Junior School Certificate and its equivalent exams were also cancelled due to the pandemic.

Covid-19 death

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reported 1,203 new infections in the same 24 hours yesterday.

Against 10,859 tests in 109 Covid-19 laboratories across the country yesterday, the positivity rate was 11.08 percent.

"The daily positivity rate has come down to 12 percent naturally. So, the transmission may or may not increase in the coming days as there is no intervention," Prof Nazrul Islam, member of the National Advisory Committee (NTAC) on Covid-19, told The Daily Star yesterday.

Coming down heavily on the health authorities, the former vice chancellor of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University (BSMMU), said, "Now, there are no programmes to ensure people are wearing masks, maintaining physical distance, and washing hands frequently."

"On the contrary, we are not getting the right information in this regard."

Among yesterday's 23 deceased, who all died in hospitals, 15 were males and eight females.

Of the deceased, two were aged between 41-50 years, five aged between 51-60 years, and the rest 16 were above 60 years of age.

Four of the deceased were from the Chattogram division, while the remaining 19 were from Dhaka, added the press release.

In 24 hours till yesterday morning, 1,453 Covid-19 patients have recovered; this raised the total number of recoveries to 2,91,365, and the recovery rate to 77.27 percent.