

From Jordan

FROM PAGE 1
of joy was evident as Hasan Tarek Tuhin spoke to The Daily Star on arrival at Zia International Airport (ZIA).

Tuhin and all his co-workers feel they have escaped death, as they had to endure severe torture while working in Al-Shaheed Apparels, a garment factory, for six months. They lived on half a meal and, most surprisingly, without any salary.

"We were in a hell and all we were dreaming of for the last few months was freedom," said Tuhin. He voice says he has got a new life.

A total of 115 Bangladeshi youths went to Jordan for job through a local manpower agent, Golden View International. Of them, 86 so far returned home with the help of Bangladesh embassy. The others were earlier sent back by the company or fled from the Arab country.

Those who came back Saturday are Manik Mia, Faruk Ahmed, Rabiul, Abdul Khaleq, Raju Ahmed, Siddique, Abdul Razzak, Tamij Uddin, Babul, Nurul Islam, Hasan Tarek, Rezaul Kabir, Awlad Hossain, Shahab Hossain, M Nafid, Shariful Islam, Shahar Ali, Milon Hossain, Humayun Kabir, Zia Uddin, Selim Hossain, Amir Hossain, Imran Hossain, Abdul Mannan, Masum Billah, Nur Hossain, Yusuf Hossain and Al-Amin.

All of them rushed to this correspondent at the arrival lounge of the airport to narrate their horrible experiences. And a few told the sad tales.

DREAM JOB
Most of the youths hailing from Comilla, Jessore, Natore, Jhenidah and Brahmanbaria districts secured the "dream job" in Jordan in exchange for Tk 1.2 lakh to Tk 1.75 lakh.

"A broker in my village working for the manpower agency promised me the job for Tk 1.75 lakh," said Shahar Ali of Jhenidah.

Most of them managed the money by selling land or taking loans from relatives and money lenders.

"I sold 15 katha land and took Tk 35,000 loan from a money lender," said Milon of Jessore. So did Nasir, Tuhin and others.

Golden View International, however, claimed to have taken only Tk 70,000 from each of them. "We are not responsible if they paid more than this amount to any other third party," said Shahadat Hossain, manager of the agency.

Al Shaheed Apparels sought 250 workers from Bangladesh. They promised \$120 a month for each worker, apart from free food and lodging. Golden View sent 115 people in phases during November-December last year, said Shahadat.

TOUGH JOB
Some 117 workers stayed in a six-room house in the middle of a desert, some 10 kilometres away from the garment factory. About 20 people were stuffed in each of the rooms, said the returnee workers.

"We had to sleep on the floor with a thin blanket in biting cold," said Nasir of Brahmanbaria. "We used to wake up at around 6:00am and wait in a long queue since there were only six toilets in the house."

They could not even have their breakfast to catch the bus waiting for them. "Half-fed or without taking any food, we had to rush for the bus and start working in the factory at 7:00am," said Khaleq, another returnee.

The labourers worked for 15 to 16 hours, with a three to five minutes break for lunch, before returning to their dorm at 10:00pm. "After the day's work, we had to clean all the rooms before going to bed," said Tuhin.

SCANTY FOOD, REGULAR

TORTURE

All the returnees complained of scanty food served after the hard work. They said the company served them "poor, inadequate and non-nutritious" food.

In the morning, the employers used to serve a loaf of bread, known as 'khubuj', and a cup of soup, which was difficult to consume. "Boiled cabbages and a very small amount of rice were on the menu for lunch and dinner," said Nasir.

The employer used to punish the workers if they wanted more.

"We were subjected to punishment when we wanted more food," said Shahar Ali. "The guards used to beat us up with the broom-sticks. Sometimes they used to force us to stand naked in an air-conditioned room in severe cold."

Once they tortured six of them so badly that they had to remain in bed for 15 days.

"I asked for some medicine when I have a sprained toe. They refused to give and thrashed my toes with the broom-stick," said Nurul Islam.

"I was sent to jail twice for demanding salary," said Tuhin. "The jail authorities did not give me any food during the three-day and four-night stay there. I had to live drinking only water from a tap in the toilet," he added.

Immediately after joining the company in December, the factory authorities forced them to work for 48 hours at a stretch without any rest.

Many workers, who could not withstand the torture, fled from the factory without taking their passports and other documents deposited to the employers.

The workers told this correspondent that around 20 workers had fled the factory during December-January while the employers had sent some others back to Bangladesh for demanding salary.

PROTESTS FOILED

The workers attempted to abstain from their work demanding salary and adequate food but the company authorities foiled their bid, the workers said.

"One day one of us pretended to be sick and did not go to work," said Tuhin. "We sent him to the capital with two applications, seeking help from the Bangladesh Embassy and the labour court, informing them about our sufferings."

Embassy officials and representatives from the labour court then talked with the factory officials but they failed to improve the situation. "The authorities promised to give us salaries but never kept their words," Tuhin alleged.

The workers also informed Golden View International about their suffering but the manpower agency did not come to their help.

AGENCY'S STATEMENT

The employees of Golden View International at its Banani office said their Managing Partner Wahidul Islam is in Jordan to arrange the worker's repatriation.

Company Manager Shahadat told The Daily Star that they are bringing the workers back home at their own expenses. They would also compensate them, he asserted.

The manpower agency so far sent about 3,000 workers to work in the garment factories in Jordan, Shahadat said.

MINISTER'S COMMENT

State Minister for Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment Mohammed Quamrul Islam said the ministry has formed a committee to investigate the matter.

The recruiting licence of the agency has been withheld. The agency will have to compensate and rehabilitate the workers, he told The Daily Star last night.

courts, he added.

"After completing all these formalities, we could give the retention orders for the judicial posts at the courts on October 26, 2004," said the assistant secretary.

The finance ministry has assigned the establishment ministry as well to give decision regarding retention order for the administrative posts, but the establish ministry has yet to make any decision in this regard, thereby aggravating the situation at the settlement courts, Alam added.

The housing ministry forwarded the matter of retention order to the establishment ministry on September 2 last year, said a housing ministry official, adding, "Since then we have been regularly reminding the officials concerned, but they do not pay heed to that."

Hamidur Rahman, assistant secretary of the establishment ministry, denied the allegation, and said, "We received the files from the housing ministry only 10 to 15 days ago."

A settlement court employee requesting anonymity said, "It is quite natural that different ministries are now blaming each other for the situation, because they know that an overall negligence on their part has been responsible for it."

The Indian minister, leading an 11-member delegation, will also meet President Pervez Musharraf and Prime Minister Shaikat Aziz before returning home on Wednesday.

FROM PAGE 16
"We have already held in-depth talks with Iranian officials ... and want to discuss this project in detail with Pakistani officials covering all aspects."

The Indo-Pak talks

Dr Kamal terms Bidisha's arrest illegal

UNB, Dhaka

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Eminent lawyer and Jatiya Oikya Mancha President Dr Kamal Hossain blamed the government for using law for political gain and said it is impossible to think of such activities in a civilised society as are happening to Bidisha, wife of a former president.

"I have no language to criticise such heinous incident," he told journalists about the arrest of Bidisha Ershad, wife of former president and Jatiya Party President HM Ershad, at a press conference at the National Press Club yesterday. He termed her arrest "illegal and a violation of the Constitution".

He also pointed out that the country's newspaper industry has to meet its needs by importing 75 percent newsprint but the local newsprint industry cannot even ensure proper supply of the rest 25 percent.

Noting that two years ago imported newsprint used to cost Tk 41,000 per ton, the Prothom Alo editor feared the price is likely to jump up by the end of this year due to the price hike of newsprint in the international market.

He cited the examples of India and Pakistan where the tax on imported newsprint is five and six percent respectively.

Considering the rate of Tk 208 per column-inch for the government advertisements very low, he demanded increasing the rate at least to Tk 500.

Speaking at the meeting, Barrister Mainul Hossain, president of the BSP and the editorial board of the daily Ittefaq, said the country's newspaper industry will face a grim future if the tax on newsprint import is not reduced.

"We have no interest in importing newsprint from abroad and rather want the country's newsprint industry to flourish. But the quality of locally produced newsprint must be good," the BSP president observed.

He also asked the government to realise the fact that thousands of people are involved with this industry.

President of the Noab and Editor of The Independent Mahbubul Alam also feared the production cost of newspaper will increase due to the price hike of newsprint in the international market, and urged the government to reduce the tax on imported newsprint and increase the rate of government advertisements.

Editor and publisher of The Daily Star Mahfuz Anam said the government should come forward to resolve the existing crisis of the country's newspaper industry.

Referring to the newsprint mill owners association's demand to impose 50 percent tax on imported newsprint, he said such demand is a threat to the country's newspaper industry.

Editor of the daily Samakal Golam Sarwar told the meeting that increase of the newsprint price is not a matter of concern for the BSP and Noab only but for all related with the newspaper industry.

President of the National Press Club and Editor of the News Today Reazuddin Ahmed called for an integrated approach to save the country's newspaper industry.

Jugantor Editor Abed Khan, Inqilab Editor MM Bahauddin, Manabzamin Editor Motiur Rahman Chowdhury, Acting Editor of the Ittefaq Rahat Khan, Bangladesh Observer Editor Iqbal Sobhan Chowdhury, president and general secretary of both factions of the Bangladesh Federal Union of Journalists Gias Kamal Chowdhury, Manzurul Ahsan Bulbul, Ruhul Amin Gazi, leaders of both factions of the Dhaka Union of Journalists Elahi Newaz Khan and Shah Alamgir also took part in the discussion and expressed their solidarity with the Noab and BSP demand.

An eight-member steering committee was formed to realise the demands. The committee members included Mahbubul Alam, Barrister Mainul Hossain, Reazuddin Ahmed,

FROM PAGE 1
Account Data, the CPD enquired whether the committee got any chance to scrutinise the new set of GDP estimates for FY04.

Citing the frequent discrepancies between provisional and final GDP figures, the report also questioned the credibility and usefulness of the provisional estimates for policymaking.

The budgetary measures and the whole planning process depend on the provisional data. So, if that data are far from reality, as it has always been the case, then how the budgetary measures can be realistic, the CPD asked.

Under such circumstances, it observed, the Mid-term Macroeconomic Framework loses much credibility.

The CPD report said experience shows that typically the provisional GDP growth estimates based on nine-month data are but ambitious projections. So, when the full year's data become available, the final growth calculation has to be moderated or brought down, it pointed out.

For instance, in eight of the last 10 years, the final GDP estimates were lower than the provisional figures. The only two exceptions are FY2000 and FY2004, when the provisional estimates were surpassed by the final count.

In 2000, the provisional estimate of 5.47 percent GDP growth was raised in the end by 43 percentage point to 5.90 percent. But the difference in FY04's provisional and final estimate is nearly its double -- .75 percentage point.

Cuttax, save Newspapers

FROM PAGE 1
Motiur Rahman, editor of the daily Prothom Alo, in his paper on the country's existing newspaper industry, said currently import of newsprint costs Tk 59,500 per ton.

On the international market the cost per ton of newsprint ranges between \$580-590 while in the domestic market the cost of locally produced newsprint stands at \$665 although the quality is very low compared to imported newsprint, Motiur Rahman mentioned in the paper.

He also pointed out that the country's newspaper industry has to meet its needs by importing 75 percent newsprint but the local newsprint industry cannot even ensure proper supply of the rest 25 percent.

Noting that two years ago imported newsprint used to cost Tk 41,000 per ton, the Prothom Alo editor feared the price is likely to jump up by the end of this year due to the price hike of newsprint in the international market.

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PROPOSALS

The local newspapers have to import 75% of the total amount of newsprint used. The rest of 25% is supplied by the local newsprint industries. Still, for various reasons these industries are often unable to supply the required amount regularly. For the last two years the price has been rising in the international newsprint market. Presently the C&F costs for every ton newsprint range from \$580 to \$590. And the price is going up every day. Moreover, the government in their budget for 2004-2005 fiscal year has increased the import tariff on newsprint from 22.50% to 25%, a rise of 2.5%.

Apart from this, almost 35% (15% VAT, 4% surcharge, 3% advance income tax, 1% PSI, DF VAT 0.13%, port expenses, shipping agency charge, 2% insurance charge, transportation expenses etc) excise and other expenses have to be paid. Therefore a newsprint importer has to pay almost 60% extra on tariff, VAT and other expenses after paying the C&F cost. Hence the cost for per ton newsprint comes to around Tk 59,500.

On the other side, according to the SRO no 211-law/2001/1913/Tax of the National Board of Revenue, government's law of purchasing 50% of the ABC quota from the local newsprint market against the exemption of 25% tariff on the other 50%, is not actually coming to any use. Because the newspapers often fail to meet the deadline as the standard of the local newsprint is not up to the mark and there are too many joints.

The past experiences have shown us that it becomes impossible for the local mills to supply the allotted 50% of the ABC quota because of power cuts, technical faults and limitations, lack of raw materials etc. At the same time they can not maintain the supply of high standard newsprint according to the demand. Therefore it becomes risky for the daily newspapers to depend on them because of the uncertainty of supply from the local mills. That's why the provision in the name of tariff exemption by the National Board of Revenue according to circular no 211-law/2001/1913/Tariff, on the local newspapers and publications, can not be termed practical in any consideration.

We also do not understand how logical it is to provide the special quota facility to the newsprint industry, which is indirectly a financial liability, in the time of competitive market of free trade. Locally produced newsprint costs Tk 42,000 per ton which is equivalent to \$665 while in the international market newsprint costs \$580/590 per ton. Which means local newsprint is \$85 higher in price, but the standard of local newsprint is very bad compared to those of foreign ones. In July 2004, the price was Tk 34,000. Since then till October 2004, in these four months the price was raised to Tk 42,000 per ton.

WHY THE IMPORT TARIFF ON NEWSPRINT RAW MATERIAL SHOULD BE REDUCED

1) In the last two years the price of newsprint has been increased \$150 per ton in the international market. That means two years ago, the rate for newsprint was Tk 41,000 per ton whereas now it is Tk 59,500 which is Tk18,000 more per ton. Of course devaluation of the currency is a factor. Experts believe that newsprint may cost \$630 per ton by the end of this year.

2) At the same time the devaluation of taka against US dollar (64-58 = Tk 6) has also paved the way for the recent increased rate of Tk 4,800 in the last two years.

3) We have noticed that when the price of a particular product goes up

in the international market, inevitably causing a rise in importing expenses, the government, at least for a short period, relaxes the import duties to reduce import expenses, so that the product is within the buying capacity of people. But newsprint is the only raw material of the newspaper industry, and the price of which in international market has been going up for last two years, and the government has also been increasing the tariff. If this situation continues, future of thousands of journalists and workers involved in the newspaper industry, would be in uncertainty.

4) In our neighbouring countries India and Pakistan, the import duty on newsprint is 5% and 6%, whereas here it is 25%, five times more than these two countries.

5) Though to meet the demand of the readers the newspapers have added more pages, it is not possible to increase the price of a daily taking the current socio-economic situation of the country into context.

6) The rate for every government advertisement is only Tk 208 per column inch. After deducting the income tax and service charge (from 9% to 17%), the net amount a newspaper gets varies from Tk 173 the least to Tk 190, the highest. But in every well-circulated newspaper, black and white space costs Tk 450 for each column inch. In that case, when an advertisement is printed according to the government rate mentioned above, it does not even cover the half of newsprint and printing costs. At the same time the newspapers have to wait for the payments for about three to six months after the advertisement is published. DFP's advertisement rates have not been increased in the recent years also.

7) According to the current market rate, only the newsprint costs more than Tk 7 for a 20/24 page newspaper. Adding the costs of printing, processing, distributing, salaries and other expenses, it costs more than Tk 10 to bring out each copy of a daily. Now after excluding the 35% agent commission, unsold copies and other expenditures, when a copy is sold for Tk 8, the average return from per copy is only Tk 4.55.

When it is a matter of sustenance of an industry and the remuneration of thousands of employees, when the production rate and the standard of the local newsprint have not improved, the matter of withdrawing import duty on newsprint imported as raw material for newspaper industry should get special consideration before the budget for next fiscal year is announced. In that case, the international market and the condition of the local mills, the advertisement market, DFP's advertisement rates, the announcement of new 6th wage board, the price of the newspaper, etc definitely should also be taken under consideration. We believe that the role of the National Board of Revenue in this regard is very significant.

Therefore, the steps mentioned below should be adopted as soon as possible regarding newsprint, to ensure a better future for the newspaper industry:

1) To withdraw the import tariff on newsprint imported for newspaper industry. To fix a minimum rate of 5%.

2) To cancel the circulation by the National Board of Revenue, no 211-law/2001/1913/Tax since it is not possible for the local mills to supply the allocated ABC quota of 50% good quality newsprint.

3) To increase the rate of government/DFP advertisements. To fix at the rate of Tk 500 for each-column-inch.

Tigers fail

FROM PAGE 16
both dismissed giving regulation catches behind the wicket.

Aftab was stranded at the other end on 82, which was the highest individual score by a Bangladeshi, when Trescothick at first slip plucked the ball at the second attempt.

Although the third day was a mere formality for England to clinch the one-sided Test series 2-0, 19-year-old Aftab had plenty to enjoy and had there been a little support at the other end he could have gone the distance.

The Chittagong right-hander struck two fours in the second over of the day against Steve Harmison including a superb straight drive before Hoggard struck at the other end in fourth over.

It was Bangladesh's 23rd innings defeat in their 38th Test but their effort in the second innings, which was Tigers' highest total and featured three half-centuries, provided some sort of confidence ahead of the triangular one-day tournament that also involves Australia.

"We were not doing well throughout the series but it was good to see us coming back well in the second

innings here. It will definitely give us some confidence going into the one-day series," said Bashir after the match.

England captain Michael Vaughan however considered the two Test series as a sort of practice and said that the victory came a bit easier than he had expected.

But Vaughan admitted that he was disappointed not to finish the game inside two days.

"We bowled fantastically through the series but yesterday we did not bowl well and they were chasing for wickets when they were chasing the opponents a leeway," said the England captain.

Hoggard was adjudged man-of-the-match for a haul of eight wickets including 5-73 in the second innings.

England opener Marcus Trescothick was the player-of-the-series his back-to-back hundred.

Bangladesh opener Javed Omar also won the 'best Bangladesh batsman award' for his consistency with the willow including the superb 71 that led the Tigers' fightback in the second innings.

Quit politics

FROM PAGE 1
source of money, his dealings with 'shady' people, both local and foreign, and his next plan in politics.

Bidisha's father Abu Bakar Siddiq met Ershad yesterday morning, who assured him of withdrawing the case against his wife on three conditions - that Abu Bakar sends his daughter abroad, that she will not return before the next general elections and that her son Eric will stay with Ershad. But Ershad told him in the afternoon that he can do nothing now and that the issue has "spun out of his control".

Earlier, at 2:40pm Bidisha was taken out of the Gulshan Police Station yesterday after her overnight stay there following her arrest and taken to the court for remand.

BIDISHA FAINTS

The police took Bidisha to the court custody in a white microbus at around 2:40pm yesterday amid tight security, some 21 and a half hours into her arrest and confinement at Gulshan Police Station. Later, several policewomen carried on hands a seriously ill-looking Bidisha to the dock of the Court of Chief Metropolitan Magistrate, Dhaka at 3:20pm.

She fainted immediately afterwards, prompting the policewomen to pour water on her head and massage her body. She regained her senses after about 10 minutes. During hearing, Bidisha sat on a chair while defence lawyer Shafiuddin Bhuiyan argued for the court setting her free on bail.

STRIFE BLAMED
A JP presidium member put the suit against Bidisha and her subsequent arrest down to a strife between two groups of JP leaders, with one keen on maintaining a good relation with the ruling BNP and the other with main opposition Awami League.

The former president flies off to Saudi Arabia at 12:00 this afternoon, but it could not be known when he would return.

Son Eric Ershad and JP Vice-Chairman Golam Moshir will accompany him in Saudi Arabia, which he visits every six month for medical check-up, said a JP press release. He will also perform Umrah with Eric there.

Ershad has completed all procedures to divorce Bidisha and it is only a matter of time before the divorce letter reaches his second wife, sources said.

"There is no chance of a reconciliation between Ershad and Bidisha," said a close aide to Ershad, seeking anonymity. "There is also no possibility of Bidisha returning to Jatiya Party politics."

CASE MEANT FOR HUMILIATION
Bhuiyan said the case was filed to harass and humiliate her, and the government pressured Ershad into filing the case to advance its petty interests. Moreover, Bidisha is a victim of both the media and the government. In the face of the government pressure, complainant Ershad signed the FIR (first information report), he added.

The defence lawyer argued that the sections under which the charges have been brought against Bidisha are not applicable in this case, because a husband or a wife cannot bring charges like breach of trust (406), cheating (420), theft (379) and mischief (427) of Bangladesh Penal Code) against each other in accordance with the provisions of the Criminal Procedure Code (CrPC).

The lawyer also maintained that Section 497 of the CrPC provides for the court's granting bail to aged people, women, and mothers having sucking baby.

"Bidisha deserves bail as she is

Galib denied

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