

Saga of Bangladeshi workers in Malaysia

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The ill-fated workers lodged police reports against the local employment agent, Anis said adding that they hope the Malaysian government will help them return to their home country.

The state's deputy immigration department chief went to the demonstration on Sunday and arranged a meeting between the workers and the employment agent's representative.

An official of a human rights organisation in Malaysia yesterday told The Daily Star that the agent assured the workers of arranging jobs for them within a week of the meeting.

"The employment agent has been giving such assurances since our arrival," the human rights organisation official however quoted a disgruntled Bangladeshi worker as saying.

The New Straits Times, a

Malaysian daily, in mid-June ran a report describing a horrifying situation of another group of about 300 Bangladeshi workers, prior to their employment in an electronic goods manufacturing factory.

The men had gone to Malaysia to work in the factory three months before the New Straits Times report, but soon after their arrival, the agent allegedly crammed all 300 of them into a house for a month while waiting for their work permits, the

daily reported.

They were later moved to different hostels as they began working in the factory. The story of their month long ordeal would not even see the light of day if officers from the Malaysian Centre for Services and Counselling for Foreign Workers would not talk to them while visiting the workers' new hostels during a research trip there, according to The New Straits Times report.

"When I saw them, they had marks on their backs as if they had been caned," the counselling centre's Vice-chairman Amir Ibrahim said.

One of the workers, known only as Al-Amin, claimed that the Bangladeshi workers were given

rotten food and were beaten if they complained.

"They pulled our hair, punched and kicked us. When some of us fell ill, they would not even give us medical treatment," the 25-year-old was quoted as saying.

The workers also claimed that they were paid only 100 ringgit or Tk 2000 for two months' work while the legal minimum wage for foreign workers in Malaysia is 500 ringgit a month, which is equivalent to US\$ 147.

A police report was lodged in connection with the alleged mistreatment of the Bangladeshi workers, and the authorities are investigating the employers, the newspaper said.

per said.

According to Malaysia's current rules, outsourcing companies, which hire Bangladeshi workers through recruiting agencies in Bangladesh, must provide accommodations for the workers for free and must pay them the full monthly salaries, as promised in the job contract, for the first three months even if the outsourcing companies fail to give the workers work to do in that period.

If the outsourcing companies fail to provide jobs for the workers in the first 3 months of their arrival in the country, the companies must make arrangements to send the workers back home, the rules stipulate.

CHT councils restructured

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The ministry sources said retired chief engineer of Public Works Department (PWD) Jagat Jyoti Chakma and Prof (retd) Thanjama Lusai have been made chairman of Rangamati and Bandarban district councils. Monindra Lal Tripura is to remain chairman of Khagrachari district council.

The new members of Rangamati District Council are UP chairman Bihari Ranjan Chakma, principal of Rangamati Charukala Academy Ratikanta Tangchangya, Aungusain Chowdhury and Mohammad Rana.

Persons selected as members of Bandarban District Council are advocate Aminur Rashid, TS Bom, Chingsa Pru and Usoinu Marma.

Animesh Dewan, Sanumong Marma, Rubi Karbari and Abubakar Siddique have been appointed as Khagrachari District Council members.

As per the HDCs act of 1989, permanent residents of the hill districts are supposed to elect a chairman, (indigenous) and 30 members (indigenous and Bengali) for each HDC (then Local Government Council or LGC). There is also a provision for three reserved seats for women (two indigenous and one Bengali) in each HDC, said HDC sources.

On December 2, 1997, the Local Government Councils of the hill districts were renamed as Hill District Councils (HDCs) after signing of the historical peace accord between the National Committee of Chittagong Hill Tracts and Parbatya Chattagram Jana Sanghati Samity (PCJSS).

The present caretaker government only followed the footprints of past political governments by installing new interim HDCs, the HDC sources added.

The then Awami League (AL) government in 1996 first installed interim HDCs. Each five-member council consisted of a chairman (indigenous) and four members, one of them being Bengali, HDC sources said adding, the AL's predecessors, the four-party alliance government, also selected their own interim HDCs after the general election of 2001.

The last HDC elections in three hill districts were held on June 25, 1989, sources said.

Goutam Dewan, the first elected chairman of the then Rangamati LGC (now HDC), told The Daily Star that the latest move of reconstructing the HDCs by the present government is praiseworthy, but "... I don't think members of such interim councils can serve the purpose of the public because it's against the concept of the HDC."

The HDC is a community based institution and the concept is that participation of every indigenous person in the community will have to be ensured in the HDCs by directly involving them with all sorts of development activities. Otherwise,

the HDCs will never turn into real public organisations, Goutam explained.

He urged the government to take

steps for holding HDC elections immediately to ensure participation of all indigenous people for sustainable development of the region.