

Migrant workers

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strong overseas recruitment policy amending the existing regulations.

The minister said the government is actively working to establish a bank for the expatriates to provide them with loans that will facilitate migration, and will provide investment opportunities for workers who will return home from abroad.

A gangway will be built connecting Zia International Airport and the airport train station, so returning migrants may go to the station directly on arrival, without any harassment from taxicab or microbus drivers and others, Musharraf Hossain said.

For the welfare of female migrant workers, the government will set up reception centres in different countries under the supervision of Bangladesh missions, he promised.

Chairman of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Expatriates Welfare and Overseas Employment Ministry Anisul Islam Mahmud said the government has almost no contribution in around \$10 billion remittance sent by expatriate Bangladeshis.

The migrants' earning is around 2.5 times the foreign exchange earning of \$4 billion from the readymade garments sector, he said.

He said the recruiting agencies send money overseas illegally to buy job demands, and the government and Bangladesh Bank know it, but they did nothing to provide legal ways for the agencies to send money abroad, although the recruiting agencies are the ones who created the large overseas market for Bangladeshis.

He suggested 'economic diplomacy' for Bangladesh and said officials appointed to Bangladesh missions must have labour related orientation.

State Minister for Foreign Affairs Dr Hasan Mahmud said protecting migrant workers' rights is a shared responsibility of both the receiving and sender countries. International organisations like IOM could help in a great way in that regard, he added.

"At the dialogue, IOM Regional Representative for South Asia Rabab Fatima said labour migration growth seen over the past few years might not sustain, because many countries including Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand already announced that no more visas will be issued, and in the case of unavoidable retrenchment, foreign workers will be laid off.

The outflow of Bangladeshi workers to Gulf countries, where more than 80 percent of them are employed, declined by 16 percent, she said.

Measures are also taken in South Korea and Europe to prioritise local employment, Fatima said, adding that the measures may result in workers returning home and fewer of them going abroad to work.

According to official statistics, this year 2 lakh workers went abroad and 27,000 returned. The number of returnees is around double the number of last year's corresponding period.

Fatima suggested maintaining a database of returnees, and taking measures to reintegrate them in the local economy through micro-credit programmes, and small and medium enterprise schemes.

Referring to the still upward trend of remittance from abroad, Centre for Policy Dialogue's Distinguished Fellow Dr Debapriya Bhattacharya said, "The worst is yet to come. We should not be complacent."

On layoffs of migrant workers, the eminent economist

said there is no early warning system in the country, and so it is difficult to predict on the subject.

"We need a good database and regular monitoring. Otherwise the debate will be unending," Bhattacharya said, emphasising on exploring new markets and initiatives to protect migrant workers' rights.

Warbe Development Foundation Chairman Syed Saiful Haque said they have reports that say many migrant workers are returning empty handed, but the authorities are not analysing the situation. "We are waiting for a tsunami," he added.

Federation of Chambers of Commerce and Industries (FCCI) President Anisul Huq said expatriate workers are not the only ones losing jobs, a several thousand garment workers at home will also lose jobs in the next few months.

He however said if a proper database is maintained, ways can surely be found for their employment. Exploring new job markets is a must for the government, he said.

"Expatriate workers are the golden goose. With a minimum investment, we can change the scenario," said The Daily Star Editor and Publisher Mahfuz Anam who moderated the dialogue.

The sector must be recognised as an industry, and a strong legal framework that supports the recruiting agencies and the workers is imperative for that, he added.

Bangladesh Association of International Recruiting Agencies Joint Secretary Shameem Ahmed Chowdhury, Bangladesh Bank Executive Director Chowdhury Mohidul Haque, Bureau of Manpower Employment and Training Director General Masud Ahmed also spoke, while Asif Munir of IOM presented the keynote paper.

Khoka, Abbas

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"I told him [Abbas] that we all should work together to make the chairperson's programme successful," Khoka said while talking to The Daily Star before the meeting.

Asked if he can convene any party meeting since he is no longer a designated leader of the party's city committee, Khoka said, "The chairperson has asked me to organise the party in the city and as a party worker we are working to make Saturday's rally a success."

Mirza Abbas said the party office already informed him about the meeting. "I will do anything and I will go to any place to make the chairperson's programme successful," he told The Daily Star.

Jatiyatabadi Samik Dal, labourers' wing of the main opposition BNP will hold the rally on the occasion of May Day.

Earlier, organisers of such a preparatory meeting did not invite Khoka and his followers and this annoyed him.

On Monday night, Khaleda held an exclusive meeting with Khoka and asked him to work to reorganise the party's city unit, the most important unit of the party.

Khaleda also called Mirza Abbas to her Gulshan office on Tuesday night and discussed the next city unit committee. She asked Abbas to work together with Khoka.

Abbas said meetings between him and the chairperson was nothing new. "I met her a hundred times in the last 30 years... But a game is going on against me," said Abbas.

A number of leaders including Samik Dal President Nazrul Islam Khan, former city unit general secretary Abdus Salam and a few ward councilors attended yesterday's meeting.

incomplete. The JP leaders said they would come back on Wednesday with a complete report. But they did not submit the report as of 5:00pm yesterday.

The Workers Party of Bangladesh, Muslim League and National People's Party earlier submitted brief expenditure reports.

The EC has decided to appoint chartered accountants to audit the election expenditures of political parties and candidates that contested in the December 29 parliamentary election and to post the documents submitted by the parties on its website.

Thirty-eight registered political parties contested the ninth parliamentary elections. According to the Representation of the People Order, they were required to submit the expenditure reports by March 31.

They said Jatiya Party leaders came up with an election expenditure report on Tuesday but took it back when they were told the report was

209 BDR

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There is a strong possibility that the missing arms and ammunition could fall in the hands of militants and criminals, posing a serious security threat to the country, the BDR director general said earlier.

Apart from Pilkhana, a good number of firearms, ammunition and explosives went missing from other BDR sector and battalion headquarters across the country.

BDR Director General Maj Gen Md Mainul Islam told The Daily Star over telephone last night, "It is impossible to accurately say how much ammunition the mutineers used and how much was taken away."

He said some of the missing grenades were used during the mutiny at Pilkhana. He, however, could not say whether mortar shells were used inside the BDR headquarters or they were taken away.

Commerce Minister Faruk Khan, chief of a committee that coordinates probe into the Pilkhana carnage by different ministries, said the tally of firearms and ammunition missing from other BDR units will also be prepared.

DESERTER BDR MEN

The number of deserter BDR members now stands at 57, sources said. The number shrunk as BDR jawans joined different BDR units and following arrest of BDR men across the country.

However, the BDR DG could not give the exact number of deserters yesterday. He said a few days ago they handed over a list of 78 deserters to the New Market Police Station.

The government on April 7 declared Tk 50,000 bounty on each fugitive BDR jawan.

Our court correspondent adds: Two more BDR members yesterday confessed to their involvement in the Pilkhana carnage while 50 others were shown arrested in the case. Two of them were placed on five-day remand each. The rest were sent to jail.

BDR men who confessed to their involvement are sepoy Al Masum and Zakaria. Sepoy Renel Chakma and Neon Marma were placed on remand.

The CID, which is investigating the case, also produced 21 suspected BDR mutineers before the court on completion of their remands. They were sent to jail as well.

With the latest arrests, the total number of arrestees in the case stands at 1,329. Besides, 52 BDR jawans have so far made confessional statements.

PROBE REPORT TO BE PLACED AT IS

Commerce Minister Faruk Khan told BBC Bangla Service radio yesterday that people would come to know about the report of the national committee formed to probe the BDR carnage through parliament.

He, however, said the findings of the investigation being conducted by the army would not be made public.

The deadline for submission of the national committee report expires on May 11.

Temp falls

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fell to 34.9 degrees Celsius yesterday from 36.5 degrees a day before. The highest temperature in the country yesterday was 38.6 degrees recorded in Jessore while it was 39.2 degrees on the previous day.

According to meteorological office, temperature may continue to fall, and rain is likely within two days.

A news agency report said a housewife died of heat stroke in Barisal yesterday.

Shelafi Majumder, 22, of Sarikol village under Gourmadi upazilla fell sick due to the heat wave. She was rushed to local health complex where doctors declared her dead.

Earlier on Tuesday, deed writer Yasin Patwary, 65, died of heat stroke at Charfashion in Bhola.

Meanwhile, diarrhoea situation in 48 districts showed signs of slight improvement. The number of diarrhoea patients admitted to hospitals stood at 2,204 on Tuesday compared to 2,240 on Monday and 2,292 on Sunday.

Patients with diarrhoea and other water-borne diseases however continued to throng hospitals.

The International Centre for Diarrhoeal Diseases Research, Bangladesh (ICDDR,B) had 493 patients yesterday evening as against 586 Tuesday evening.

Physicians said the situation might improve markedly if temperature falls further.

Organised crime

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Besides, they force the city dwellers to pay high amount of money and they hurl abusive words against them failing to get it.

Witnesses said, they take position on different intersections and taking the opportunity of traffic signal, they tactfully get into the private cars or other vehicles and mugs valuables including mobile phone sets and money from the passengers.

On April 21, three eunuchs got into the car of an Uttara resident and snatched away his cell phone set and money while he was returning home.

Another gang of hijras mugged Tk 2,000 along with a cell phone set from fruit trader Khalid of Mohammadpur Krishi Market at Chandrima Udyan at about 7:00 pm on April 18.

Some city dwellers alleged that the hijras also forcibly enter into their residence and demand money and they give threat to take their children outside the house while failing to get the money.

Meanwhile, six to seven hijras yesterday morning broke into several residences on Road 3, Sector 5 in Uttara and demanded Tk 5,000 from each of the residences. On information, police and Rab rushed in and saved the residents.

Sources said, the eunuchs mainly live in different places in and around the capital, including Fayedabad, Kathaltola, Ashkora and Gaoir under Dakkhin Khan police station while Rajabari, Kamarpura and Dia Bari under Turag police, Major Bosti, Machhimpur, Station Road

and Amtoli under Tongi police, Kuril Bishwa Road under Badda police and Shahjahanpur under Khilgaon police station.

Talking to The Daily Star, Rahela, a leader of the hermaphrodites who lives in Fayedabad, denied the allegation and said, "There are some males who cheat people in guise of hijra," and added that around 9,000 eunuchs are living in and around the capital.

Dhaka Metropolitan Police (DMP) Commissioner Shahidul Huq told The Daily Star that he would ask DMP police to take action to prevent the harassment of the city dwellers by the third gender.

Police said the eunuch community can easily avoid suspicion of law enforcers while they are involved in snatching in the name of seeking alms from the victims. They have changed their traditional technique of mugging taking an opportunity of traffic jams.

Police said generally the victims do not lodge complaints with the police so they could not launch drives against the hijras involved in criminal activities.

While contacted Salma Ali, executive director of Bangladesh National Women Lawyers Association (BNWLA), said some of the hijras might have involvement in criminal activities, as the government do not take steps to rehabilitate them.

She said their entertainment, means of their earning, is losing its appeal gradually in this modern era forcing them to commit crimes.

Set VoIP free

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will go up to Tk 7,500 crore from existing Tk 6,000 crore.

"The committee has asked the Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (BTRC) to explore the technical and legal process immediately to legalise the use of VoIP," Hasanul Haq Inu, chairman of the standing committee, told journalists after a meeting of the committee at the parliament building.

The BTRC has also been asked to submit a report to the ministry concerned detailing the ways of opening up the VoIP, he said.

The telecom watchdog last year permitted three private international gateways (IGWs) to handle international calls generated to and from Bangladesh.

But the number of calls made through illegal VoIP could not be stopped because of uncompetitive pricing. The IGWs operators claimed that over 40 percent international calls are handled by illegal VoIP operators due to irrational pricing.

Legal international call handlers now charge 4 cents a minute, which hovers between 2.5 and 3 cents on the illegal market. The standing committee suggested bringing down the charge to 3 cents.

The BTRC has realised Tk 861.16 crore from several mobile and PSTN operators in fine for their involvement in illegal VoIP business.

"We have made three important recommendations to the government that include reducing the charge of international calls through international gateway to 3 cents from 4 cents to increase government revenue," Inu said.

He said the committee also made a recommendation for increasing the number of IGW operators to six within the next two months.

Inu said the committee strongly recommended that the government withdraw Tk 800 tax on mobile SIM card and also duty on import of PSTN (public switched telephone network) handsets.

Such initiatives will increase number of mobile phone users and help the government generate more revenue, said the committee.

Swine flu claims

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Several new cases have been reported in Europe. The World Health Organisation has called a meeting on the outbreak.

Earlier, it confirmed that the flu was being transmitted between humans and called on countries to check their contingency plans for a possible pandemic.

But the WHO - the UN's health body - also urged caution, saying measures like travel bans were unlikely to prove effective.

France will ask the European Union today to suspend all flights going to Mexico because of the flu outbreak, Health Minister Roselyne Bachelot said.

She said the request would be made at a meeting of the 27 EU health ministers, due to be held in Luxembourg.

Speaking in Washington yesterday, President Obama offered his condolences and said the federal government was doing the utmost to contain the virus.

He also urged local public-health bodies to be vigilant and said schools with confirmed cases "should consider closing".

Meanwhile, new cases of swine flu have been confirmed in several European countries - all people who recently visited Mexico.

They include three cases in Germany - two women and one man, three people in Britain - including a 12-year-old girl - bringing the UK total to five, one woman in Austria and in Spain, the number of confirmed cases doubled to four.

Mass slaughter of all 300,000 pigs in the country in an effort to fight swine flu - although no cases have been reported in the country.

Situation in Mexico
In Mexico, there is some confusion over exactly how many people died from H1N1. The first fatal case of the virus is believed to have been contracted here in Oaxaca. It is a tourist centre and the obvious concern is that when the visitors leave, they may take the virus with them.

Meanwhile, the search for the source of the outbreak continues, with the focus on the vicinity of a pig farm in the eastern part of the country.

The Mexican government is urging against jumping to conclusions and is suggesting the possibility remains that the virus originated outside the country, our correspondents add.

The capital, Mexico City, has banned restaurants and cafes from serving all food except takeaways to try to prevent the spread of the virus.

Schools across the country have closed, public gatherings are restricted and archaeological sites have been placed off-limits.

Mexico City's chamber of trade estimated restrictions in the city were costing businesses there at least 777 million pesos (\$57m or £39m) a day.

People have been cancelling beautician appointments, wary of close physical contact. Reuters news agency reports.

"The customers are scared stupid - they don't want to go out," said hairdresser Esther Gonzalez.

Egypt, for its part, began a

Sea ports

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especially those from the affected countries or regions as part of precautionary measures.

Screening at the Sylhet Osmani International Airport and Chittagong Shah Amanat International Airport will also start in a couple of days.

The health minister said the screening would also be done at all land and seaports.

Inbound passengers with symptoms of flu, cold or pneumonia at ZIA have been asked to report to the health help desk.

The government has meanwhile trained the airport officials to detect the virus and also started training programmes on the disease for the health staffs at different public hospitals.

The health minister at the meeting strongly asked the officials of different ministries to take the issue seriously and implement the government decision strictly to prevent the flu outbreak.

The government has insisted that travellers with flu symptoms be hospitalised and given treatment in quarantine cells available in hospitals in 29 districts.

"The government has taken the issue very seriously and we are keeping close contacts with the flu affected countries and the WHO for the next course of action," said the minister. He added the country has adequate number of influenza medicines stockpiled.

The deadly virus has been detected in Mexico, the US, UK, Canada, New Zealand, Israel, Spain and Germany.

Meanwhile, the livestock ministry officials told the meeting they are preparing an action plan on the deadly flu. The health minister asked them to submit the report immediately.

The World Health Organization has declared "public health emergency of international concern" in the wake of spread of the deadly virus H1N1.

The minister said they could be able to handle the situation even if the flu comes to the country.

"Since the flu spreads through air travel, it may come to Bangladesh. But we are fully prepared to tackle it," he added.

Representatives from the ICDDR,B, the WHO, Institute of Epidemiology, Disease Control, and Research (IEDCR), among others, attended the meeting.

JMB patrons

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accused in several cases for abetting Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) led by Bangla Bhai. Aminul has been on the run since he was sentenced 31-and-a-half years in jail.

After the case was lodged, the third court of judicial magistrate in Rajshahi ordered police in Bagmara to investigate it and take legal actions, said Babul Hossain, lawyer of the complainant.

Other accused include Rajshahi district BNP General Secretary Shish Mohammad, Union Council Chairmen Rofikul Islam of Bihani, Besaratullah of Basupara union, JMB advisers Abdus Sattar and Lutful Rahman, JMB's killing squad member Mostafizur Rahman Mostak.

The complainant said he delayed filing the case, as he was scared of the political and financial clout of the accused.

He alleged JMB militants unleashed a reign of terror by killing and torturing people in the name of eliminating underground operatives at Bagmara and its adjoining areas in 2004.

On April 13, 2004, JMB cadres abducted him from his house and took him to a JMB camp at Razakar Ramjan Kaya's house at Hamirkutsa. They demanded Tk 1 lakh from him.

As he denied paying they tortured him for two days. Later, he had to pay Tk 50,000 and came out of the camp crippled on the third day into his abduction.

Wake up call

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"We have capability more than what we think we are capable of," said Al Gore.

Melting of ice in the mountains will have serious negative impacts. Rivers flowing from the mountain ranges in Central Asia alone play a key role in the livelihoods of 40% of the world's population.

"It gives a clear direction that we must act," he said.

When asked about the US role in checking climate change, Al Gore said, "The leadership shown by the Obama administration gives me hope that we now have reached a tipping point in favour of reaching a global agreement on the need for action on climate change."

"Now the US senate is totally different under the leadership of Obama," Gore said adding as a US citizen he wants his country to take the leadership in the fight against climate change.

Jonas Gahr said they have formed a taskforce of scientists who will continue their research on Arctic, Antarctic and high altitudes mountains. The findings will be placed at the Copenhagen climate change conference slated for December 29.

Security upped

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Chhattisgarh and Bihar in the first two phases of polls on April 16 and 23, leaving more than 20 people dead.

The third phase will see voters delivering their verdict in 107 constituencies, including Rae Bareilly where Congress President Sonia Gandhi is in fray, and Gandhinagar from where BJP's prime ministerial candidate L K Advani is seeking re-election.

The electioneering for this phase generated considerable heat on Tuesday when main opposition BJP and Left parties charged Congress with misusing Central Bureau of Investigation which has taken off the name of Italian businessman Ottavio Quattrocchi, an accused in Bofors gun deal payoff scandal, from its list of most wanted persons.

Just a day earlier, Congress attacked Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi after the Supreme Court ordered a probe into his alleged role in 2002 communal riots in the state.

Modi, being projected by a section of the party as its prime ministerial candidate, hit back by alleging Congress has hatched a conspiracy to put him in jail while trying to save a foreign national, unnamed reference to Quattrocchi, once considered close to the Gandhi family.

The third phase will see completion of polling in 372 out of the total of 543 parliamentary constituencies while the voters in the remaining two rounds will exercise their franchise on May 7 and 16 when the counting is taken up.

The campaigning was also marred by incidents of shoe-throwing.

A 26-year-old computer engineer hurled a sneaker at Prime Minister Manmohan Gandhi in Ahmedabad in Gujarat but missed him and a shoe was hurled at BJP leader and Karnataka Chief Minister B S Yeddyurappa in his home state. An attempt at throwing a shoe at Advani earlier was foiled.

Campaigning for her mother Sonia Gandhi in Rae Bareilly, Priyanka has wooed the voters by invoking memories of her grandmother Indira Gandhi.

It is not only Priyanka's nose that resembles with that of Indira but she has inherited the latter's wardrobe. And none in Rae Bareilly misses the resemblance between the two.

"This is Indira's sari. She was shorter than me. I have to do some alteration in wearing it because I'm taller than her", 36-year-old Priyanka giggled and

told media persons in the constituency when they told her that she looks like her grandmother.

On her marriage in 1996, Priyanka was dressed in a pink sari worn by Sonia Gandhi and Indira Gandhi at their wedding.

India's marathon general election passes the half-way stage Thursday, with Mumbai entering the fray barely five months on from the deadly Islamist militant attacks on the city.

Ten seats in India's lower house of parliament are up for grabs in India's financial and entertainment capital, which has seen an increase in "white collar" political activism since the November strikes that killed 166.

Anger at India's leaders for failing to prevent the carnage has led independent candidates to stand and stirred the traditionally apathetic educated, urban middle class to take part in the political process.

Yet despite the awakening, national security is not considered a priority issue across the country as a whole, with the vast majority of voters more concerned with local issues that impact their daily lives.

"The belief that the 26/11 (November 26) attacks on Mumbai and India will somehow change the character of voting is quite wrong. It's exaggerated," said the editor of the city's Lok Satta newspaper, Kumar Ketkar.

"Terrorism is not uppermost in the minds of the majority of voters," he told AFP.

Politics professor Balveer Arora, from Jawahar Lal Nehru University in New Delhi, agreed.

"There's no wave of nationalism in these elections, despite 26/11," he said.

In Uttar Pradesh, which sends the most number of lawmakers to parliament, all eyes are on two powerful caste-based parties - one of them led by the populist firebrand, Mayawati Kumar.

Mayawati, dubbed the "queen" of India's lowest caste, the Dalits, is widely seen as the kingmaker for the next administration in New Delhi and could even emerge as prime minister of a "third front" grouping of leftist parties.

With so much support going to regional parties, there is no chance of either the incumbent Congress party-led alliance or the bloc led by its main rival, the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) securing an absolute majority of the 543 elected seats in parliament.

Taliban-held town

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helicopters had attacked militant positions in the area as part of the move to take Daggar.

The official asked for anonymity because he was not authorised to release the details. He had no word on any casualties from yesterday's operation.

The Taliban advance into Buner brought them to within 60 miles (100 kilometers) of the capital, Islamabad. The army also says troops have killed scores of militants in recent fighting in Lower Dir, another area neighboring Swat.

Both lie within Malakand, the region covered by the government's much-criticized peace deal. Officials agreed to impose Islamic law in return for peace in a region devastated by two years of bloody fighting.

Pakistani officials said the Islamic law concession robbed