

Tea workers lowest paid

Speakers tell seminar

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Tea plantation workers remain one of the least paid labourers in the country who live a very miserable life, said the speakers at a seminar yesterday.

However, increased wages and facilities can improve the life of workers and raise their productivity benefiting the tea industry eventually, they added.

The seminar titled 'Tea workers, forests and forest people' was organised by Society for Environment and Human Development (SEHD) at the WVA auditorium in the city as part of a national assembly of tea workers and forest dwelling people.

"Tea workers are paid only Tk 32.5 as daily wages while

the present price of one kg coarse rice is Tk 20 or more. Most of us have eight to 10-member family. With the price of every essential going up regularly, we can barely survive," said Rambhajan Koiri, the newly elected general secretary of Bangladesh Tea Workers Union.

Koiri also pointed out that around Tk 60 is deducted weekly from the meagre salary as electricity bill while another seven percent is deducted monthly as provident fund.

"With this amount we cannot improve our life. We cannot buy property and we are totally dependent on landowners. Having no other skills we cannot escape from this life. Moreover, to cope with the price hike many workers have taken loans

which they cannot pay back," he added.

At present there are around 118, 000 labourers working in 163 tea estates.

Most of them are situated in Moulovibazar, Habiganj and Sylhet. There are also a few in Panchagarh, Chittagong, Rangamati and Brahmanbaria.

The first tea garden of the country was established by the Duncun Brothers at Malinichhara (Surma Valley) in Sylhet in 1854.

Ancestors of most of the tea workers were brought in from Assam, Madras, Orissa, Bihar, Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal of India as cheap labour.

They belong to different ethnic groups like Oraon, Shantal, Munda, and Gondo.

SEHD General Secretary Philip Gain said life of a tea worker remains the same as it was when they were brought in to this country from India in 1850s.

In addition to a meagre salary, they are also deprived of education, quality housing and health facilities, he added.

He said labour law is regularly violated at tea gardens and the workers remain isolated from the mainstream.

Gain laid emphasis on increasing the wages and providing education to the children of tea workers.

Dr Pratima Paul Majumder, senior researcher at Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS), and Farhad Mazhar, managing director of Ubinig, also spoke on the occasion.



Affected locker renters of Brac Bank form a human chain in the city yesterday demanding proper compensation for their gold ornaments and other valuables stolen from the lockers at the Dhanmondi branch of the bank last year.

BRAC BANK HEIST

Locker renters demand proper compensation

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

A number of affected locker renters of Brac Bank formed a human chain in the city yesterday demanding proper compensation for their gold ornaments and other valuables stolen from the lockers at the Dhanmondi branch of the bank last year.

The victims also warned that they would go for legal action if the bank fails to compensate them properly.

A gang of burglars had looted gold ornaments and other valuables of the bank's clients from the lockers in January last year.

Soon after the incident, the bank officials disclosed that some 70 lockers, out of 132, were found broken and 15 of them were not in use at the time of the heist.

"I had nearly Tk 20 lakh worth of gold ornaments in my locker, but the bank offered me only Tk 1.5 lakh compensation," said NGO activist Shoaiba Rahman, an affected locker renter.

BRAC Bank offered a compensation package of three categories -- Tk 1.5 lakh for small, Tk 2.5 lakh for medium and Tk 5 lakh for big locker renters.

Shoaiba said at least 16 renters rejected the bank's compensation package, saying that 'it is too small compared to their claims'.

Dr Mushtak Hossain, another victim, said he has been offered only Tk 2.5 lakh against a deposit of 150 tolas of gold ornaments worth nearly Tk 40 lakh.

Both Dr Mushtak and Shoaiba said they would go for legal action if the bank fails to pay proper compensation for their valuables stolen.

When contacted, a senior BRAC Bank official told The Daily Star that the bank authorities offered the compensation package on the basis of a central bank order regarding the insurance coverage for lockers in banks.

After the heist at BRAC Bank, the central bank made the insurance coverage mandatory for lockers, the official said.

He also said over 50 percent of the 47 victims have already received their package offered by the bank.

Qulkhwani

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Qulkhwani of Faruk Mosleh Uddin Khan (Nipu), assistant director of Bangladesh Red Crescent Society, will be held at his 7/7, Lake Circus, Kalabagan residence in the city today, says a press release.

He passed away due to a cardiac arrest at LabAid Hospital in the city on Saturday at the age of 47.

He left behind his wife and one son to mourn his death.

AUG 21 GRENADE ATTACK

5 prosecution witnesses give depositions

COURT CORRESPONDENT

A Dhaka court yesterday recorded the statements of five more prosecution witnesses in connection with the August 21, 2004 grenade attack cases.

Judge Mohammad Masdar Hossain of the Speedy Trial Tribunal-1 recorded the statements of Apurba Chandra Saha, Dilip Ghosh, Mohiuddin Babul, Sujon Bhowmik and Faruk Ahmed.

Later, they were cross-examined by defence lawyers.

The court then fixed May 14 for the next hearing and summoned several witnesses to appear before it.

In their statements, the

witnesses told the court that they were present at the rally on Bangabandhu Avenue on August 21, 2004 where Awami League (AL) Chief Sheikh Hasina was delivering a speech to the crowds on the crisis prevailing in the country.

Several grenades exploded just as Hasina was about to end her speech at about 5:40pm, the witnesses said. Later they came to know from newspapers that Hasina had been the target of the attack, the witnesses said.

With yesterday's deposition, a total of 50 witnesses have now given their statements before the court and cross-examined by defence

lawyers.

The prime accused in the case, former deputy minister Abdus Salam Pintu, Harkatul Jihad Al Islami (Hij) chief Mufti Abdul Hannan and 12 others, now in jail, were produced before the court yesterday.

Eight others, including Pintu's brother Maulana Tajuddin, have been absconding since the cases were filed. Twenty-three people were killed and several others injured in the attack in 2004.

On June 11 last year, the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) pressed charges against Pintu, Hannan and 20 others for carrying out the grenade attacks on the rally.

500 NSU

students sued

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Five hundred unnamed students of North South University (NSU) were sued for damaging university offices and attacking law enforcers on Sunday.

Two separate cases were filed with Gulshan Police Station in this connection.

Badrul Alam, owner of the NSU administrative building, Star Tower, filed one case for damaging his building and Sub-Inspector Helaluddin of Gulshan Police Station filed the other for attacking law enforcers. The plaintiffs however did not name any student in the cases. None was arrested in this connection.

The NSU students staged demonstration and put up barricade on roads, leading to clashes with police, protesting an increase in tuition fees.

The NSU authorities on Sunday shut the university for two days to avert further unwanted incidents.

Bidisha files writ seeking custody of son

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Bidisha, former wife of former military ruler HM Ershad, yesterday filed a writ petition with the High Court (HC) seeking a direction upon Ershad to hand over their son Eric Ershad to her (Bidisha) custody.

Sources said Bidisha stated in her petition that Eric has been in the custody of Ershad for a long time but he has not allowed her to meet Eric since January 2008.

The petitioner also said earlier they reached a compromise through their lawyers after their divorce in 2005 that Eric would remain in the custody of both of them for one week by rotation.

EVICION OF LANDLESS Punishment to criminals demanded

DU CORRESPONDENT

Ganotantik Bam Morcha, an alliance of left leaning political parties, yesterday demanded exemplary punishments to the culprits those evicted landless people from Khas lands at Newchar under Haimchar upazila in Chandpur and Chehelgazi in Dinajpur.

The leaders of the party made the demand at a press conference at Bangladesh Samajtantrik Dal office in the city.

They said a total of 121 families of the Khas lands at Newchar who were living there for over a decade were evicted by the cadres of some 'false' big landowners and looted crops and valuables of landless people on May 7.

They also alleged that cadres also put landless people's houses on fire and beat them up.

On the other hand, some local pro-Awami League influential people evicted some 135 families from a Khas land at Chehelgazi in Dinajpur on April 19.

The leaders also demanded withdrawal of cases filed against landless people in this connection.

Coordinator of the alliance Badrul Alam read out a written speech at the press conference that was also attended by BSD Convener Khalekuzzaman, Jatiya Ganofront Coordinator Tipu Biswas, and Biplobi Workers' Party General Secretary Saiful Haq.



Barapukuria Coal Mine Officers Welfare Association and Barapukuria Coal Mining Co Sramik O Karmachari Union take out a silent procession in Barapukuria on Sunday protesting destruction of the mine's properties by an organised group of demonstrators on May 5. The association and the union believe that the destructive activity was aimed at stopping all development activities of the coal sector by a vested interest group and demand exemplary punishment of those responsible for it.

'Solve power, gas, coal crises'

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

National Committee to Protect Oil, Gas, Mineral Resources, Electricity and Port yesterday demanded the government to solve the electricity, gas and coal problems.

The committee made the demand from a procession at Mohammadpur in the city yesterday.

Convener of the committee Engineer Sheikh Muhammad Shahidullah led the walk that was also participated by member secretary of the committee Prof Anu Hossain, Prof Akmal Hossain, Nur Mohammad, and Engineer Enamul Haque.

They said coal should be extracted ensuring cent percent ownership of the people and not harming the soil and environment.

One beaten to death

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

A construction worker was beaten to death by some co-workers at Khilkhet in the city yesterday as he blamed one of them for stealing his cellphone.

The deceased was identified as Sabuj Hossain, 24, worker of the construction firm Lake City Concord in the area.

Police said three workers led by one Masud severely beat him up, leaving him dead on the spot on the eighth floor of the building.

Kilkhet police recovered the body and sent it to Dhaka Medical College Hospital last night for autopsy.

Police said Sabuj blamed Masud three days ago for stealing his cellphone from the construction site.



Rain likely

UNB, Dhaka

Rain or thundershowers accompanied by temporary gusty or squally wind is likely at a few places over Rajshahi, Khulna, Dhaka and Sylhet divisions and at one or two places over

Barisal and Chittagong divisions in next 12 hours until 6.00pm today.

Day temperature may fall slightly over the country during the period, Met Office said.

The sun sets in the capital at 6:33pm today and rises at 5:17am tomorrow.

Country's highest temperature 36.8 degrees Celsius was recorded yesterday at Jessore and lowest 20.6 degrees Celsius at Mymensingh.

Highest and lowest temperature and humidity recorded in some major cities and towns yesterday were:

City/Town	Temperature in Celsius		Humidity in percentage	
	Max	Min	Morning	Evening
Dhaka	35.5	21.6	49	79
Chittagong	35.0	25.0	74	68
Rajshahi	34.5	25.0	66	63
Khulna	35.6	27.5	64	62
Barisal	34.5	22.7	68	70
Sylhet	34.0	20.8	55	67
Cox's Bazar	35.0	23.0	77	68

EC mulls use of e-voting machine in DCC polls

UNB, Dhaka

Electronic voting machine may be introduced during Dhaka City Corporation elections considering multiple advantages of the modern system of conducting vote, an election commissioner said yesterday.

"We may try to use the electronic voting machine in the upcoming DCC elections as it has various advantages," M Sohul Hussain told reporters at the Election Commission Secretariat.

Explaining his election observation in India, he said

the Indian people were casting vote without untoward situation being created. "In Rajasthan and Jopur, we have seen that there are no festivities of election. Nobody is concerned with the polls," he said.

"We saw some micro-election observers deployed in some critical or vulnerable polling areas to watch the elections and they were maintaining full connection with the Election Commission," he said, adding that during by-elections and some upazila elections at home, Bangladesh

Election Commission also deployed some officials to monitor the polls.

About the Independent Election Commission Secretariat Act, Sohul said the commission would soon discuss with the government the matter of bringing some amendments to the amended act as there are some flaws found in the section 5 of the laws.

Replying to a question he said the commission decided to sit in dialogue with the political parties to discuss various issues, but the schedules were not fixed yet.

GTCL goes for 'forced' re-tender for 3rd time

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At Saturday's meeting the board overruled all arguments saying that there was only \$21 million available for the job although some board members strongly argued that the budget issue should be left to the government for decision.

The GTCL board late last month okayed two gas pipeline construction projects worth \$72 million against an approved budget of \$37 million. Both these pipelines are related to the gas compressor project under which three compressor stations were supposed to be installed at strategic points on the national gas grid.

Agreements for two pipeline projects signed last month were with Korean company Daewoo. These are a \$26 million 51-kilometre (km) 30-inch pipeline from Monohardi-Elonga to Bangabandhu Bridge and a \$46 million 87-km 30-inch pipeline from Hatikamrul near Bangabandhu Bridge to Bonpara of Bheramara.

In addition, there is another pipeline project in two parts. The first part is a 55-km 20-inch pipeline from Rajshahi to Bheramara and the second part is a 165-km 20-inch from Bheramara to Khulna with a total budget of \$50 million. The tender for this project has not been opened yet.

Competent sources said without the compressors at Muchai, Ashuganj and Elenga, some important pipelines of the country will not be able to transmit enough gas at desired pressure, which will affect some future power projects.

In March, the GTCL argued in favour of the compressors saying that due to excessive

demand, gas pressure was unacceptably dropping in the 24-hour cycle every day in important locations like Chittagong, Demra, Siddhirganj, Rupganj, Narayanganj, Munshiganj, Manikganj, Mymensingh, Baghabari etc. Power stations, fertiliser plants and industrial units are regularly being affected.

The new pipelines, aiming to connect the south-western region, would suffer the most as these are located far away from the main gas fields. "These will simply serve as a political show," quipped an official.

The pipeline and compressor project has been delayed by three years as the first 2006 tender for gas compressors had to be cancelled when an ADB investigation detected corruption in the bidding process.

The second tender was held in January 23, 2008 and closed on June last year in which four companies participated. ABB and Hyundai qualified technically and their financial offers were opened in February. But the lowest bidder Hyundai's offer turned out to be \$150 million, about three times the allocated budget of \$55 million. At Saturday's meeting some officials put this figure down to \$21 million.

Hyundai's offer was, however, more than a \$100 million lower than ABB's offer.

After the bids were opened, though there was no scope, the GTCL raised several points with the two bidders. ABB did not respond positively to these clarifications.

With Hyundai, the GTCL raised four points on price adjustment formula, design pressure of pressure vessels,

block valves for future connection and senior orifice fittings.

Hyundai was asked to respond to these clarifications by April 20 but the company initially said these matters could be resolved during final negotiations, if the bid is declared responsive. As GTCL did not change its stance, Hyundai agreed on all four points in the way the GTCL wanted on May 5.

Meanwhile, there were some activities to divert funds or seek fresh loan from the ADB to implement the project as per Hyundai's estimate as this price reflects the present market situation and dismissing the tender was no solution.

On the other hand, some officials opposed the compressor project from the beginning, apparently fearing that this might affect the budget for the equally overpriced pipeline projects.

The GTCL's board meeting was supposed to decide on the tender at a meeting on May 7 headed by ex-Petrobangla chairman who was made Officer on Special Duty (OSD) last month. However on May 6 the meeting was hurriedly rescheduled for Saturday after renaming the chairman of the board as the current Petrobangla chairman.

During Saturday's meeting, an 11-member Tender Evaluation Committee submitted its report to the board. The committee declared ABB's bid as non-responsive.

On Hyundai's bid, the committee said, "...consider the bid proposal of Hyundai Engineering Company Ltd, Korea for further evaluation if the bidder can satisfactorily justify and comply with the issues enumerated at Enclosure-2 [the four points

earlier raised by GTCL] within the quoted price and to seek re-confirmation/re-submission from HEC on those issues allowing five days time."

But some members of the board began with a negative note that this bid had to be cancelled because Hyundai did not submit bid clarifications by April 20. As some members raised opposition, the project's consultant was called in for his opinion. He strongly recommended accepting the bid saying that Hyundai eventually submitted the clarifications before the board meeting and this did not affect anything of the tender.

At this point, two senior officials started arguing that there was not enough fund for this project.

The board eventually decided that both the second stage bids be treated as non-responsive and the current bidding process be declared closed with intimation to all concerned; more realistic estimates be drawn for installation of compressor stations under a fresh bidding process to be initiated and steps be taken by GTCL for placing specific fund allocation proposal to the authorities.

The ADB offered a loan of \$235 million to the government in 2006 for gas infrastructure and training. Of this fund, \$189 million was given to the Gas Transmission Company Ltd (GTCL) for the compressor and three pipelines.

Keeping around \$14 million as contingency budget from the \$189 million fund, the GTCL held separate tenders for the pipeline and compressor projects.