

## Establish expat welfare bank for NRBs

Speakers urge govt

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Speakers at a seminar yesterday stressed the need to establish an expatriate welfare bank to help the Non-Resident Bangladeshis (NRBs) living and working abroad in sending remittance to the country through formal channels.

They sought for a quick implementation of the government's decision to establish such a bank that was announced by the finance minister in his budget speech.

"An expatriate welfare bank is an emergency, as the government needs to support the migrant workers in sending remittance through formal channels," said Prof MM Akash, a noted economist.

"Along with sending money through formal channels, such a bank would also help them in getting bank loan in advance that they can be utilised for developing new business ventures," he added.

He was speaking at the seminar on 'Providing bank loans, saving plans and policies to Bangladesh migrant workers' jointly organised by Scholars Bangladesh and Human Capital Development Ltd at a city hotel.

Prof Akash said the bank would also help the migrant workers save money for their future.

The government has declared to establish an expatriate welfare bank with expatriate workers as its shareholders and investors in a bid to help those seeking jobs abroad and using remittance for productive purposes in the current fiscal.

The government high-ups, including the prime minister, have already agreed on the move. The expatriate welfare ministry, finance ministry and Bangladesh Bank (BB) has started working to complete all necessary formalities, including formulation of a legal framework, to set up the

bank.

AHM Mostafa Kamal, chairman of the parliamentary standing committee on finance ministry, branded the NRBs as the pride of the country.

"We don't need to open any letter of credit (LC) to receive billion dollars remittance. But still manpower sector is most neglected," he said, adding: "It is very unfortunate for the nation. But we still have good prospect in this neglected sector."

He said, "Most of the migrant workers go abroad after selling their personal belongings. But when they return they can't afford to repurchase them."

"The prime minister is aware of it. So, the proposal of setting up a separate bank has been placed which will develop products exclusively for them."

In his keynote paper, Dr Towfique Ahmmed Chowdhury, underscored the importance of initiating an inclusive measure so that non-resident workers can send their remittance through formal channels.

He also urged the government to maintain a close network between the BB and other micro-finance institutions (MFIs) to help the families of migrant worker get the money safely and on time.

In another keynote, Syeda Farzana Morshed, CEO of Centre for Development and Competitive Strategies, said the government should take necessary measures to encourage female migrant workers to get involved in entrepreneurship after returning home.

She said 69 percent of the female workers have failed to maintain their economic progress after their return home.

Dr Mohammed Farashuddin, former BB governor, and Iqbal U Ahmed, managing director of Trust Bank Ltd, also spoke at the seminar.



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Local Government Division takes out a colourful procession marking the Birth Registration Day 2009 in the city yesterday.

## Fate of Benarasi Estate still hangs in balance

Land allocated 25 years ago

SHAHNAZ PARVEEN

Benarasi saree weavers at Mirpur in the capital are passing a miserable life as the future of proposed Benarasi Estate at Bhashantek is hanging in balance even 25 years after the land allocation by the government.

Having no land of their own, the weavers are passing their days in fear of fresh eviction as the entire business grew up on public land.

The business of traditional Benarasi sarees is also witnessing a rapid slump with imported and smuggled Indian sarees taking over the local market making hundreds of weavers jobless.

Industry insiders said the government in 1984 allocated around 40 acres of land at Bhashantek to set up an estate for Benarasi weavers entrusting the Bangladesh Handloom Board with the project.

The Tk 294.66 million project has plans to establish handloom factories, washing and dyeing units, housing and other basic amenities for weavers.

Under the project which went on at a snail's pace from the beginning, there is a plan for setting up 906 plots.

Applications were invited from weavers in 2003. Around 1865 weavers submitted applications along with Tk 10,000 in the form of bank draft for each plot.

Since then there have been no progress while the land remains occupied by slum dwellers.

Meanwhile, some of the weavers who submitted the bank draft have passed away and many withdrew their

money.

"Weavers are facing enormous hardships as there is no permanent place for them to operate their business. They were evicted many times from their present place. So they are very much discouraged for fresh investment," said Md Rafique, former president of Benarasi Prathamik Taanti Samity.

He said the number of handlooms has shrunk to 1400 employing around 5500 weavers only.

About 15 years ago when the business was at its peak around 10,000 handlooms spread all the way from Mirpur section 10 to 12 catering to a vast segment of customers, he added.

"Today the rhythms of weaving handlooms are slowly fading away as the profession does not pay as it used to pay. Many

weavers are now working as vendors, rickshaw pullers and day labourers forgetting the trade passed on them by their forefathers," he said.

"Benarasi Palli at Mirpur now exists only in name. Most of the sarees showcased in stores are Indian products. In many cases Indian designs are being reproduced here with raw materials coming from India," said Jainal Abedin Babu, another veteran in the industry.

"Local craftsmen fail to compete as they are discouraged to continue the profession for lack of social and financial security," he added.

Mohammad Babu, a weaver from Mirpur 10, said prices of raw silk and golden thread (jari) are increasing continuously.

"The profit is so meagre compared to excruciating

labour, lengthy production time and enormous investment that it is no longer cost-effective," added Babu who does not want his son to learn the trade.

Md Taherul Islam, director of Benarasi Palli Project, said about 85 percent of land development work and 20 percent of boundary wall of the proposed estate have so far been completed.

"We could not continue our work due to a stay order issued by the High Court (HC)," he added.

In 2003 Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust (BLAST) filed a writ petition with the HC against the eviction of slum dwellers.

The HC in March 2004 issued a stay order saying that the slum dwellers cannot be evicted unless the petition reaches a verdict.



PHOTO: FOCUS BANGLA.COM

Samajtantrik Sramik Front brings out a procession from Muktangan in the city yesterday on the occasion of its fourth convention.

## RTI Forum hails Info Commission

METRO DESK

The Right to Information Forum, a network of more than 30 organisations and individuals, has hailed the formation of the Information Commission headed by former secretary M Azizur Rahman.

The RTI Forum congratulates all member of the commission and hopes that it will act independently to ensure people's access to information as a right.

In a statement yesterday, Shaheen Anam, convener of RTI Forum and executive director of Manusher Jonno Foundation, hoped that the commission will not only act as the arbitrator in the case of non-compliance of the RTI law by public authority but also will be the protector and advocate for the RTI law.

The RTI Forum suggests that a work plan is set in place with clear responsibilities and time lines so that the implementation of the RTI goes into effect immediately.

Besides, the Commission should provide guidance for improving record and information management system, including establishment of a web portal, so that people are able to access information without having to seek it, it added.

"The RTI law was enacted in response to demand raised by members of the civil society, media and academics. The RTI Forum now stands ready to support the commission in terms of capacity building, policy formulation and preparation of guidelines."

"We hope the Information Commission will play their role independently and sincerely and through proper implementation of RTI law, a new era of transparency, accountability and people's participation will emerge in Bangladesh," the statement added.

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