

Free healthcare services usher in hope for poor patients at Ramu

RIZANUZZAMAN LASKAR

Since the early morning of July 31, Friday, almost all the vehicles heading towards Ramu from nearby districts of Cox's Bazar were crammed with people. Those who could not afford or manage a ride, trekked their way to the district some five miles away from the Cox's Bazar town.

They came in all ages, sizes and proportions -- from septuagenarians to two-year-olds, from scrawny restless children refusing to stay on the same spot for two seconds to people who moved on their wheelchairs.

Their destination was one -- the Hospital for Women and Children at Ramu where Hope Foundation, an NGO working for women and children, held a daylong health camp by bringing together a host of doctors and volunteers

from across the country.

There were 21 specialist doctors from renowned hospitals throughout the country along with a group of visiting young student doctors from Britain, Peru and East Anglia.

The aim was to offer free medical services to the people of the poverty-torn region of the country.

Within 8:00am, hundreds queued at the front yard of the hospital, crouched up against each other. The scrum to register grew more and more chaotic by the moment. So furrowed the organiser's eyebrows in frown, as the available medicine may not be enough for all the people.

Some people had walked for hours, alerted to the camp mostly by the word of mouth.

One elderly woman felt creeping pain in her swelled abdomen as she laid on



PHOTO: STAR

A doctor examines a woman at a free health camp at Ramu. Healthcare is a luxury for most women in the region ridden with malnutrition and illiteracy.

one of the hospital beds with doctors trying to figure out what caused it.

Another man in a wheelchair with swollen, dull eyes was patiently waiting in the queue to see the doctor. And there were hundreds of females and children with a number of complications, including malnutrition, cough, breathing problems, polio and rickets.

By the end of the day, around 2,000 patients got through to see specialist doctors and received medicines free of cost.

"This is what we do here," said advocate Imtiaz Uddin Ahmed, national programme coordinator of Hope Foundation for Women and Children of Bangladesh Inc, adding: "Most of these people do not get to see doctors because of two reasons -- they do not find it important, and there remains simply nobody to attend them to."

Indeed, the hospital serves a district that is ridden with poor mortality, malnutrition and female literacy rates.

"This is what Hope Foundation is working for... providing healthcare to people with little to no access to healthcare," said Dr Anjuman Ara Islam, chairperson of the hospital.

"We have specialist doctors from urban areas visiting our hospitals and clinics to serve the needy. Patients come here for basic medical care, specialist consultation, minor surgery and follow-up instructions for complicated cases. Also, focus on preventative health is strongly emphasised at these clinics," she added.

Apart from the hospital in Cox's Bazar, Hope Foundation also supports eight medical clinics around the country by providing education, acute medical care, treatment and the rehabilitation of sick, injured, disabled and destitute women and children.

Established in 1999, the humanitarian organisation supports its hospitals and medical clinics through support and private donations from Bangladeshis across the globe.



PHOTO: STAR

Students of Asian University of Bangladesh stage a demonstration blocking the road in front of its campus demanding that the university authorities produce valid documents of government approval of its Rajshahi campus. (Story on Page 16)

Plan to lay 80km rail line on both sides of Padma Bridge

BSS, Dhaka

To bring the country's southwestern part under a robust railway network, the government has planned for constructing 80 kilometer rail line on both sides of the proposed Padma Bridge and renovating the existing railway tracks in the region.

As the proposed double-decker Padma Bridge will have provision of the rail line, the government thought about expanding the railway network to put in place a useful and safe communication system in the region, sources in the Ministry of Communications said.

Under the plan, the sources said, new broad-gauge line will be constructed from Dhaka to Mawa and from Janjira to Bhanga, Faridpur at an estimated cost of Tk 4,700 crore.

Besides, the existing Panchuria-Faridpur-Pukuria rail line will be renovated connecting Bhanga with Pukuria and Jessore with new broad gauge lines.

The whole project will be implemented in two phases, the sources said adding that in the

first phase, new broad gauge line will be constructed on Dhaka-Mawa-Janjira-Bhanga-Pukuria-Faridpur and Panchuria route. And, the broad gauge line from Bhanga to Jessore will be constructed in the second phase.

The draft project profile (DPP) for renovation of the Panchuria-Faridpur-Pukuria rail line and construction of broad gauge line from Bhanga to Pukuria at a cost of Tk 291 crore were already been sent to the Planning Commission.

Communication ministry has already completed the survey for alignment of the rail line from Dhaka to Mawa and Janjira to Bhanga. In the Dhaka side, the rail line will be 50 kilometers from city's Gandaria to Mawa and in the Janjira side the line will be of 30 kilometers from Janjira to Bhanga.

The sources said the DPP for 80-kilometer rail line on both sides of the Padma Bridge is now being prepared and the government has sought financial support from Asian Development Bank, World Bank and JICA for implementing the project.

10 BCL men injured in Shibir attack

A CORRESPONDENT, Comilla University

At least 10 students were injured in a clash between the activists of Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL) and Islami Chhatra Shibir at Comilla University in Comilla yesterday.

The injured were identified as Masum, Arnob, Mahub, Israfil, Hasan, Fahim, Imam, Mamun, Arif and Rashed. They were admitted at different hospitals in Comilla town.

Witnesses said Mohin, a first year student of Economics department at the university, was living at a nearby mess of the university for several months, which was controlled by the Shibir activists. As Mohin was a supporter of BCL, Shibir men put pressure on him to leave the mess.

But Mohin protested the move and was determined to stay there. In the meantime, some BCL activists reached there and asked Shibir men the reason of their move. In response, Shibir men attacked them with sticks and knives.

980 bottles of Phensidyl seized, 2 held

UNB, Sirajganj

DB police seized 980 bottles of Phensidyl syrup from a private car and arrested two drug peddlers at Bir Bahadurhat village in Kamarkhand on Thursday.

Acting on secret information, a team of DB police conducted the drive at a house of the village at about 11:00am and recovered the contraband syrup searching the car.

They also arrested Firoz, 35, son of Atur Rahman of Naopara in Munshiganj and Faruq Molla, 38, son of Razzak Molla of Naraganti in Narail for possessing the drugs.

The police said another drug peddler Joni, 35, of Gazipur managed to flee the scene.

'Work together to materialise dreams of Bangabandhu'

BSS, Dhaka

Information and Cultural Affairs Minister Abul Kalam Azad yesterday urged the people to be united and work together under the leadership of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to materialise the dream of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

The minister was inaugurating a three-day photography exhibition on Bangabandhu at Nalinikanta Bhattashali room of the National Museum here.

Bangladesh National Museum and Nazrul Institute jointly organised the programme on the occasion of 34th death anniversary of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. The exhibition will remain open to all till tomorrow.

The information minister said after the independence, Bangabandhu was leading the

nation by undertaking important reconstruction works of a ravaged country. But the anti-liberation forces along with the national and international conspirators, he said, had killed the Father of the Nation in 1975.

Azad, however, said that the present government will take necessary steps to execute the verdict of the Bangabandhu Murder Case.

Portrait of Bangabandhu and some of his rare photographs, including on his visits to the United States in 1974 and his address at the United Nations General Assembly, have been put on display at the exhibition.

Cultural Secretary M Sharful Alam, Chairman of University Grants Commission Nazrul Islam, Director of Jatiya Grantha Kendra Rafiq Azad, Director General of National Museum M Shafiqul Azam and Executive Director of Nazrul Institute Rashid Haider, among others, were present.

NUS training programme on HIV/AIDS ends

METRO DESK

A two-day training programme on 'Reduction of stigma and discrimination against persons with HIV/AIDS' concluded at Caritas Training Centre in the city yesterday, says a press release.

Nari Unnayan Shakti (NUS) in association with the World Bank organised the course for the media people.

The objective of the training is to help eliminate HIV and AIDS-related stigma and discrimination in the country.

Additional Secretary of the health ministry BD Mitra inaugurated the course on Thursday.

Dr Kazi Shahadat Hossain, line director, National AIDS/STD Programme, Shirin Jahangir of World Bank, Dr Sultan Muhammad Razzak, course coordinator, NUS, spoke at the inaugural session presided over by Afroja Parvin, executive director, NUS.

A total of 37 media people took part in the training programme.

Under this programme, NUS will orient around 360 journalists from all the districts. They will write and publish articles in local and national newspapers as part of a competition. The best three articles will be awarded first, second and third prizes.

CLIMATE CHANGE Public hearing held to raise awareness

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Campaign for Sustainable Rural Livelihoods (CSRL) held a public hearing at Shyamnagar upazila in Satkhira to create awareness about the adverse impacts of climate change, said a press release yesterday.

During the public hearing they urged the government to take effective measure to protect the lives and assets of the people living in coastal areas.

They also demanded compensation for the victims of climate change for their rehabilitation.

They also suggested the government to initiate special diplomatic move to secure necessary aid from the developed countries who are responsible for climate change.

The public hearing was attended by local people including the representatives of local NGOs and upazila chairman.

A regular Oliver Twist story

FROM PAGE 16 the targeted house for days on end before making their strike.

The boys, armed with iron rods, blades and other necessary equipment, then enter a house by cutting down grills on the windows or doors. Sometimes they work for days to cut down the iron bars on a window or door. Sometimes they simply jump over a boundary wall and enter the house through back doors when not locked.

They then sneak away with items, which are easily saleable in the market as electronic gadgets and the like.

The very early mornings and twilight are a favourite with these gangsters, the investigators said.

After the burglaries, the boys hand over the stolen goods to Ramzan and Billal who have connections with shop owners.

Swat suspects that Billal has a gang of twelve children though Ramzan after his arrest claimed they only have five boys.

Billal during interrogation denied running a gang. He said "These boys don't work for us. We just buy goods from them at a lower price."

He confessed that he suspected the boys were offering stolen goods at such low prices but the temptation to make some easy profit was the reason why he bought from them, reselling the same for a profit to shop owners.

Assistant Commissioner of Swat Mohammad Mashur said, "The three men use

child burglars as it is easy to carry out burglaries with children. We are also investigating which shop keepers keep links with such gangs and regularly buy stolen goods from them."

Unlike in Dickens famous story, the gang doesn't have to steal poor children and force them into this gang. There are plenty of abandoned urchins on the streets who are lured easily into their gang with the promise of regular food and board.

"I did not have a place to sleep at night, they gave me shelter and food so I did their work," Mashur Rahman quoted one of the two children they picked up as saying.

The other boy said his father abandoned his mother before his birth and he now hates his mother because of the life she leads on the street, so he was happy to work for Billal instead of staying with his mother.

Swat picked up two children working for Billal three days ago and sent them to a vagrant centre in the capital. They are now looking for the other gang members.

Meanwhile, based on confessional statements of the arrestees Swat recovered two projectors, four laptops, four cell phone sets of different companies, four digital cameras, two dvd players, an LCD monitor, and a cassette player from different places including Billal's scrap metal shop and the houses of the three men.



PHOTO: STAR

Sher-e-Bangla Agriculture University Vice Chancellor Prof Md Shah-e-Alam inaugurates a tree plantation programme by planting a sapling on its campus in the city yesterday. Jica Alumni Association launched the tree plantation programme.

Vote school for illiterate Afghans

AFP, Herat, Afghanistan

Seventy-year-old shepherd Khak Mohammad arrives at Herat's eye hospital just as a team of election educators wrap up a lecture on how to vote in Afghanistan's upcoming polls.

As staff pack away mock ballot papers and leaflets aimed at teaching the illiterate masses scarred by decades of war the practicalities of casting a free vote, Mohammad mulls the importance of democracy.

"I will vote. I'm from this country. I have to vote," said the old man, who, like more than 70 percent of Afghanistan's population, cannot read or write.

How he will cast his ballot in Afghanistan's presidential and provincial elections on August 20, however, remains a mystery.

"We have some tribal officers in the village and they tell us how to vote," he tells AFP. "Everything that our tribal officer says, we will do that. I don't know anything. I just vote how the tribal officer tells us."

Afghanistan's Independent Election Commission (IEC) staffers are racing from village to village with their "mock election" -- holding picnics, music shows, sports matches and poetry competitions aimed at educating voters.

But trying to shift ingrained perceptions in a deeply tribal, mostly rural society where ethnic loyalties and hierarchy often trump individual decisions is a huge challenge ahead of the nation's second presidential poll.

During Mohammad's lifetime, Afghans have seen bitter civil war and

been governed by an absolute monarch, a Soviet-backed communist regime and religious Taliban extremists -- but only one elected leader.

Compounding the problem is the woeful education in the fifth poorest country in the world. Two-thirds of people will not be able to read the names on the ballot paper. Among women, illiteracy soars to more than 85 percent.

"Democracy needs a historic background, like in Greece and major European countries... we're just practising it for six or seven years," said Salahelddin Aryapur, a politics professor at Herat University.

"It's a new thing for Afghan people, it's an innovation for the society. It's a tough job to do to bring the new culture of democracy."

At the eye hospital in the western city of Herat, IEC instructors urge men and women who cannot read to memorise the photo, symbol and number of their choice candidate, all of which will be on the ballot paper.

The symbols of the 41 presidential candidates are imaginative and varied -- two hopefuls are represented by differing numbers of aeroplanes, another by an alarm clock, while stethoscopes, work tools and roses are also popular choices.

"When I came here I did not know anything. Now they told us and I know how to vote for the person I want," said 52-year-old mason Abdul Ahad, fingering his prayer beads and peering at the mock ballots through kohl-rimmed eyes.

Ali Ahmad, the IEC civic educator in Herat, says they are trying to reach every potential voter through mosques, hospi-

tals, clinics and tribal offices all over the province.

"We try our best, but maybe there are parts -- due to security -- that we can't go to," he said.

In Herat, they are relatively lucky. It is one of the most educated cities in Afghanistan and isolated from the worst of a violent insurgency by Taliban militants bent on disrupting elections.

In more insecure or remote parts of the country, voter education is rarer and candidates struggle to get their message out, with television and radio not always available in rural homes without electricity.

Some can afford to send envoys to villages and mosques to create a word-of-mouth campaign, but many voters rely on ethnic or religious leaders to make decisions for them.

At a campaign rally in the central Baghlan province, organisers hand out postcards with President Hamid Karzai's logo -- scales of justice -- and a mock-up of the election ballot, and tell villagers which box to tick.

"I don't know the other candidates. I have not seen their pictures. We know when we see the picture who we will vote for. We know Karzai's picture," said Gulnigar, 30, a mother-of-four.

Rahmatullah Habibi, 60, said he knows nothing about any of the other 40 candidates -- because "I am an illiterate and simple farmer" -- but planned to follow his spiritual leader's guidance and vote for Karzai.

"I don't need any information, I have got the information that I will give my vote to Karzai."