Jute mill workers left in the lurch

QUAZI AMANULLAH, *Khulna*

More than 3,000 workers and employees of state-owned Platinum Jubilee Jute Mill (PJJM) at Khalishpur in Khulna have been living in dilapidated quarters risking their lives since the last five years.

The authority is unable to renovate the five buildings in worst situation, out of eight, due to severe fund crisis.

The staff quarters, meant for living of workers and employees, were built in 1980 during the heyday of the jute mill as it topped the list of profitable enterprises under Bangladesh Jute Mills Corporation (BJMC) in the Khulna-Jessore industrial belt.

But none of these quarters had ever undergone any renovation work since 1980 even after the buildings suffered damages due to cyclonic storms Sidr and Aila during 2007 and 2009 respectively.

Apart from buildings, condition of medical centre and educational institution is also deplorable, said Dr Rezaul Karim, medical officer of PJJM.

Roof of the corridor of the medical centre collapsed as a nor'wester hit Khulna city a week ago, he said.

Permanent worker of the jute mill Mantu Miah said roofs and walls of four buildings have developed big cracks which may cause tragic incidents to workers and employees.

According to Belal Hossain, treasurer of PJJM Employees Association, five two-storied buildings, each of them having 26 cabins resided by over a hundred of families, were already declared condemned last year.

Now, bachelor workers are living in those buildings, while many workers and employees with family members had shifted to safer places to avert any accident, Belal Hossain added.

Visiting the labour colony area on April 17, this correspondent found three more buildings in sorry state as roofs and walls are on the verge of collapse due to big cracks and damage of plasters of walls.

Bamboo poles are being used to save roofs of these most dilapidated buildings from collapse. The workers are using bamboo-ladders to go upstairs from ground floor as all original stairs have also been badly damaged.

Moreover, none of these dilapidated buildings of the labour colony has electricity connection.

Md Jashimuddin, the project director of PJJM, and expressed his inability to renovate the dilapidated buildings due to fund constraint and said the jute mill had no capacity to take care of this matter as it has been a losing enterprise for a long time.

The small amount of fund allocated from BJMC recently was not enough to renovate the medical centre and the dilapidated buildings, he said.

Rafiqul Islam, liaison officer of Khulna zone office of BJMC, said they are trying to renovate the dilapidated buildings from their own fund as the BJMC could not allocate fund. He, however, hoped to finish the renovation work by one year.

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Workers and employees of Platinum Jubilee Jute Mill in Khulna live in such dilapidated buildings. The authority is unable to renovate five such buildings due to a fund crisis.

Indian minister to lead business team to Dhaka

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

Indian commerce minister Anand Sharma arrives on Saturday leading a 33-member delegation and a host of high profile businessmen on a two-day visit to Bangladesh to hold talks to bolster the bilateral trade relations.

Both the commerce ministers will hold trade talks during the visit, said a senior official of the Commerce Ministry of Bangladesh.

Bangladesh will raise some important issues during the meeting, said Commerce Minister of Bangladesh Faruk Khan.

"We will mainly demand duty-free access for 61 products, including 54 garment items, removing the quota from the exports of garment from Bangladesh to India, a special quota of raw cotton from India; and address border haats and jute and jute goods exports issues," Khan said.

At present, Bangladesh enjoys duty-free export of eight million pieces of ready-made garment (RMG) products to India under the South Asian Free Trade Agreement (SAFTA) implemented in July 1, 2006.

During Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's visit to India in January last year, she requested the Indian government either to increase the volume of quota or lift the quota on exports of RMG products; although the Indian government is yet to respond to the request.

Khan said they will not discuss the transit issue during the meeting, although it is a widely discussed issue nowadays in Bangladesh. A special committee has already submitted a report to the commerce ministry on transit issue recently.

Khan also said Bangladesh will again raise the issues of different tariff, para-tariff and non-tariff issues to the Indian minister during the meeting, so that the bilateral trades become smooth.

He said he has already raised all the issues to the Indian government during his visit to India last October. "We will discuss the progresses of the previous discussion," he added.

The trade gap between the two countries increased to above $3 billion in the fiscal 2009-10. The data from the state-owned Export Promotion Bureau (EPB) shows that Bangladesh exported knitwear products worth $5.24 million and woven garments worth $16.91 million in the first nine months (July-March) of the current fiscal year.

The exports of knitwear to India was $2.54 million and woven garment was $9.99 million in the fiscal 2009-10, while in 2008-09 Bangladesh exported $1.70 million worth of knitwear and $10.25 million worth of woven garments, the data shows.

According to the tentative official programme, the Indian commerce minister will call on Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, business leaders of the Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industry and Foreign Minister Dipu Moni.

The Indian delegation will include Rahul Khullar, commerce secretary, Arvind Mehta and Talin Kumar, joint secretaries (commerce ministry), RP Singh, joint secretary in the Department of Industrial Promotion Board, V Srinivas, joint secretary in Textile Ministry, IL Jha of Powergrid Corporation of India, Sada Kant, joint secretary in home ministry, TS Tirumurty, joint secretary in external affairs ministry and Sharad Gupta, director general in external affairs ministry.

BRAC BANK

Syed Mahbubur Rahman, managing director and chief executive officer of BRAC Bank, shakes hands with Samish Kumar, CEO of Trans-Fast Remittance LLC, after signing a deal on remittance service at a programme in Dhaka recently.

CREATIVE COMMUNICATION

ACI Motors launched Deadong combine harvester and rice transplanter at ACI Centre in Dhaka on Wednesday. Wais Kabir, executive chairman of Bangladesh Agricultural Research Council, and Arif Dowla, managing director of ACI Ltd, attended the programme.

Qubee doubles internet speed

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

WiMAX service provider Qubee has doubled its internet speed to provide the fastest wireless internet service to its customers without any extra cost.

"We have bumped our internet speed to twice as fast as it had been previously for every single existing and new customers at no extra cost," said Nehal Ahmed, chief marketing officer of Qubee.

"This means 256 Kbps users can now enjoy up to 512 Kbps; 512 Kbps users will experience up to 1 Mbps and 1 Mbps users will enjoy up to 2 Mbps without paying any extra charges."

Ahmed was speaking at the launch of the company's new initiative at a press conference at Dhaka Sheraton Hotel yesterday.

Introduced in October 2009, Qubee, owned by London-based wireless broadband business company Augere, is the largest WiMAX service provider that handles 20 percent of the total bandwidth traffic in the country.

Its customer's range from students, young professionals to business owners, said one of the official of the company.

Alistair Johnston, global marketing director of Augere, said "We are committed to continuously enhance the Bangladeshi customers' experience of internet by offering high speed internet for all."

So, that move will enable customers to experience fast and reliable internet services at affordable prices, Johnston added.

The company introduced the broadband "Pre Pay" services in the country for the first time and offered modems at Tk 1,000.

Customers can now avail up to 1Mbps speed through Qubee Pre Pay by paying Tk 400 a month.

Shafiqul Islam, chief technical officer of Qubee, said they have plans to roll out as much network coverage as possible across Bangladesh to capture the growing market by offering quality customer care and reliable services.

Firoz Ahmed, head of sales and distribution of Qubee, and Faisal Hyder, chief financial officer, were also present.

Stocks rebound, but turnover low

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

Stocks gained yesterday after five days of losses amid a low turnover due to a tight money market.

The benchmark general index of Dhaka Stock Exchange (DGEN) increased 60 points or 0.97 percent to close at 6,119 points. DGEN had lost 291 points in the last five days. The Selective Categories Index of Chittagong Stock Exchange gained 63 points or 0.56 percent to 11,168.

The turnover on the DSE stood at Tk 476 crore, down Tk 134.83 crore from the previous day. It is the lowest on the DSE since March 1 when it was Tk 431 crore.

Around 5.06 crore shares changed hands on the DSE and that was lower than the average trade volume of the last 14 days.

The retail and institutional investors faced a credit crunch, while some investors took a wait-and-see policy fearing uncertainty over government actions against the suspected people in the probe committee report for the market debacle in January, said market insiders.

"The market turnover and volume highly deteriorated due to a tight money market and the big investors' limited exposure to the stockmarket after the probe report," said Lankabangla Securities in its analysis.

"The investors did not indulge in the rising trend of the index rather took a wait-and-see policy," said the analysis.

Professor Salahuddin Ahmed Khan, a teacher of finance at Dhaka University, said, "Market breadth indicates that the health of the market is negative because the turnover declined on the bourses."

Khan, also a former chief executive officer of DSE, said: "Some government institutions are trying to start an upbeat trend."

Of the 253 issues traded on the DSE, 212 gained, while 38 declined, and three remained unchanged.

Salvo Chemical Industry topped the turnover leaders with 38.93 lakh shares worth Tk 25.7 crore traded on the DSE floor.

Salvo Chemical Industry was the biggest gainer of the day, posting a 587 percent rise in its share prices, while the City Bank was the worst loser, slumping by 23.73 percent.

PRIME BANK

M Ehsanul Haque, managing director of Prime Bank, receives the International Star for Leadership in Quality award in gold category from Jose E Prieto, chief executive officer of Business Initiative Directions, at a programme at Paris in France recently. BID International Quality Convention Paris 2011 awarded companies from 58 countries for achievements in quality and excellence.

Marico Bangladesh chair due today

STAR BUSINESS DESK

Harsh C Mariwala, chairman of Marico Bangladesh Ltd, is scheduled to arrive in Dhaka today for a four-day official visit.

He is the president of Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry.

During his stay in Dhaka, Mariwala will meet the presidents of Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industry, Saarc Chamber and different ministers of Bangladesh to discuss bilateral trade and potentials of Indo-Bangla trade ties,

New CEO for Siemens Bangladesh

STAR BUSINESS DESK

Shouvik Bhattacharya has recently been appointed the chief executive officer of Siemens Bangladesh Ltd (SBL), the company said in a statement yesterday.

Bhattacharya will succeed Michael Schuermann who has moved on to new responsibilities in Siemens AG in Germany.

An electrical engineer from the Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda (India), Bhattacharya joined Siemens Ltd India in 2006 and headed the energy sector sales team for North India before joining SBL.

"His vast knowledge of the electrical and electronics business combined with more than 25 years of extensive experience in South Asian markets will be a great benefit for the company," said Armin Bruck, chief executive officer of Siemens South Asia Cluster.

"The time is right to accelerate the company's renewal; to bring in new executive leadership with different skills and strengths in order to drive company success. The Siemens Cluster Management believes that Shouvik has the right industry experience and leadership skills to realise the full potential of Siemens Bangladesh."

Telecom CEOs meet adviser on fees

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

Chief executive officers of four mobile operators met the prime minister's establishment and administrative affairs adviser, HT Imam, on licence renewals yesterday.

The meeting of the four CEOs -- Tore Johnsen of Grameenphone, Ahmed Abou Doma of Banglalink, Michael Kuehner of Robi and Mehboob Chowdhury of Citycell -- was successful, said a top official of a telecom operator to The Daily Star.

The four mobile operators are supposed to renew their licences by November.

HT Imam has assured the mobile companies that he will take the issues up with the appropriate quarters, including the finance minister, said the official.

Four issues have been placed before the adviser: business-friendly spectrum fees, fees to be paid in installments, taking the social obligation fund off the guideline and the non-licensing issues to be taken out of the guideline.

After a meeting on April 12 with the mobile operators, the telecom ministry declared that the spectrum fees could be submitted in installments, the social obligation fund would be 0.5 percent of revenue earnings and the non-licensing issues would be taken off the licence document.

According to the posts and telecommunication ministry, the financial issues of the renewal process fall within the purview of the finance ministry. They will judge the fees that have been fixed by the Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (BTRC) in the 2G (second generation) draft licensing guideline.

According to the draft guideline, four mobile operators will have to pay a total of Tk 12,118 crore in spectrum fees. Grameenphone will have to pay the highest -- Tk 5,504 crore, Banglalink Tk 2,994 crore, Robi Tk 3,000 crore, and Citycell Tk 620 crore.