

MISSING CREW OF MV HOPE

Ship owner offers reward for tip

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, City

The owner firm of Bangladeshi cargo vessel MV Hope yesterday offered a \$6,000 reward for the information leading to the recovery of six of its missing crewmen -- \$1000 for each.

Captain Mohiuddin Abdul Kadir, representative of the insurance firm P&I (Protection and Indemnity) Club, said the ship owner's agent in Thailand had offered the reward to draw attention of the local fishermen and boatmen.

The online version of Phuket Gazette, an English language newspaper of Thailand, uploaded a piece of news Tuesday afternoon, saying that the local fishermen had seen four bodies in life jackets floating around 50 km off the spot where the

ship tilted.

On that night, the ship's owner firm Trade Breeze Shipping Limited had contacted Captain Segsit 1 -- an official of the ship owner's agent firm in Thailand named Thoresen Shipping & Logistics -- to verify the report, Captain Kadir told The Daily Star.

"We told him to take immediate measures to recover the bodies if they were missing crew of the MV Hope," Kadir said.

The cargo ship tilted in the Andaman Sea near the coast of Phuket in Thailand on July 4. All the 17 crewmen abandoned the ship fearing that it would capsize.

Nine crewmen have so far been rescued, and bodies of two have also been recovered. But six other crewmen remained missing.

Meanwhile, three out of four crewmen, who were undergoing treatment at a hospital in Phuket after they were rescued on Thursday and Friday, would arrive in Dhaka tonight on a Bangkok Airways flight, said Captain Kadir.

They are seaman Abu Bakar Siddique, second officer Mohammad Mobarak Hossain, and deck cadet Raek Fairouz.

Engine cadet Mushfiqur needed to stay in the hospital for a week more, Kadir said.

He added that the bodies of chief officer Mahabub Morshed and chief engineer Kazi Saifuddin were supposed to be taken to Bangkok from Phuket today to complete some legal procedures.



An elderly sick person had to be walked out of a hospital in Shahbagh intersection yesterday as there was no transport. Two of the largest hospitals in the capital are at the intersection and a demonstration blocked all vehicular movement there.

PHOTO: STAR

High-tech

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During the flight, passengers will be able to stand up and enjoy fantastic panoramic views of Earth, experience weightlessness and even eat a meal if they desire.

The ebloodi is the brainchild of Spanish entrepreneur Jose Mariano Lopez-Urdiales, boss of Barcelona-based Zero2Infinity.

Space tourists will journey to earth's outer limits in a capsule that can hold six people -- four passengers and two pilots.

Annelie Schoenmaker of Zero2Infinity, said: "The ride will be very gentle and peaceful as well as environmentally friendly."

"Passengers will be able to see the sun and the stars at the same time, while looking down on the curvature of the earth."

Russian adventurer Artemy Lebedev, who is one of the few people on the planet to have visited every country, has already signed up for a trip to near-space.

Commercial operations will begin in 2015 but a trip will cost around \$95,000 per person.

Schoenmaker said: "The experience will be very much like that in an aeroplane although there will be a period of about 30 seconds when passengers will experience weightlessness and will be able to float around the cabin."

Brinjal modified

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Farmers are found to apply pesticides of up to 50 times in a cropping season of brinjal against a recommended dose of 25, making the vegetable highly toxic.

Once the crop is released, Bangladesh will join a group of 28 countries that grow GM crops. Though it will be the country's first home-grown GM crop, consumers in Bangladesh have long been exposed to GM food through consumption of imported GM soybean oil.

GM crops are derived from traditional plant varieties by altering their genetic make-up in laboratories for faster growth, resistance to pests, production of extra nutrients, or any other beneficial purpose. This is usually done by adding one or more genes to a plant's genome using genetic engineering techniques.

Dr Md Rafiqul Islam Mondal, director general of Bangladesh Agricultural Research Institute (BARI), told The Daily Star that BARI scientists had successfully engineered brinjal, one of the country's most consumed vegetables, by inserting a crystal protein gene (Cry1Ac) taken from the soil bacterium *Bacillus thuringiensis*, known as Bt,

back in 2005.

It took seven years to complete greenhouse trials and open-field trials of Bt Brinjal in various agro-ecological zones in the country, and now it is ready for release to farmers, said Dr Mondal.

Bt gene insertion in brinjal makes it resistant to fruit and shoot borer that causes 50 to 70 percent loss of brinjal yield a year in the two regions.

Though brinjal is a staple in vegetarian diets throughout South Asia, and one of the cheapest vegetables to procure by resource-poor communities in Bangladesh, a large percentage of the crop does not make it to the market because of FSB infestation.

A major factor behind Bt Brinjal's development was to help farmers save money they spend on pesticides for curbing FSB infestation.

Moreover, unrestrained spraying of chemical pesticides adversely affects the health of farmers and workers. Pesticide residues from a concentrated use tend to remain for a longer period in vegetables, and ultimately affect the health of consumers.

In Bangladesh, brinjal acreage is around 50,000

hectares, which is one fourth of the total acreage of all vegetables. Annual brinjal output is estimated at about 3.5 lakh tonnes.

Dr Al Amin, who heads the BARI Biotechnology Division, told this correspondent that with technical and financial supports from Cornell University in the USA and USAID, two BARI scientists went to India in 2005.

Using lab facilities of leading Indian seed company Mahyco, they infused Bt gene into nine brinjal cultivars of Bangladesh. Mahyco has received the application rights of the Bt cry1Ac gene technology from US company Monsanto.

He said the national bio-safety committee approved the contained field trial of Bt Brinjal in 2007-08.

"Later, we carried out open field trials in Jamalpur, Ishwardi, Hathazari, Joydevpur and other agro-ecological zones for local adaptability of the crop over the last few years."

In all the trials, they found Bt Brinjal effective in fighting FSB and farmers no longer required to spray insecticides, he said.

Dr Wais Kabir, executive chairman of Bangladesh

Agricultural Research Council (Barc), said, "Genetic modification is an opportunity and we need to tap its benefit. Agronomically, Bt Brinjal is found to be good."

But a number of green groups and anti-GM activists have serious reservations about releasing GM crops in Bangladesh.

Farida Akhter, executive director of UBINIG, a non-governmental organisation, is one of them.

She demands the government should share the trial findings before releasing Bt Brinjal.

Farida fears poor brinjal farmers would be forced to buy Bt Brinjal seeds from multinational companies every year.

However, Dr Al Amin said farmers would be able to collect and use the seeds of Bt Brinjal like other varieties of brinjal. "It is no different in this case and there is no question of buying seeds from any multinational company."

Allaying fears about GM crops, Agriculture Minister Matia Chowdhury said, "We will do everything which is in the best interest of the country. Bt Brinjal will go through the entire bio-safety regulatory process

before its release."

"Don't they [those who are vocal against the GM technology] see the damage caused by overuse of pesticides in brinjals," asked the minister.

"We faced such criticism during the introduction of hybrid technology in the country and we will face the same this time too," she said.

Dr Wais Kabir said there was scope for public consultation before the approval of the GM crop for commercial release.

Haseena Khan, professor at the Department of Biochemistry and Molecular Biology at Dhaka University, welcomed the country's advancement in frontier science in agriculture.

"We must also give emphasis on preserving our traditional crop varieties and rich biodiversity," said Haseena, who is now at the South Asian University in New Delhi on sabbatical leave.

A total of 28 countries grow GM crops on 170 million hectares of land -- with the US and Brazil on the forefront, according to a 2012 report by International Service for the Acquisition of Agri-Biotech Applications

(ISAAA).

Of the countries that planted biotech crops last year, 20 were developing and eight were industrialised countries. Sudan and Cuba planted biotech crops for the first time in 2012.

A 100-fold increase in acreage from 1.7 million hectares in 1996 to 170 million hectares in 2012 makes GM crops the fastest adopted crop technology in the history of modern agriculture, says ISAAA, a non-profit international network that operates from New York, Kenya and the Philippines.

In South Asia, India, Pakistan and Myanmar grow only one GM crop -- cotton. If Bt brinjal is approved for release, Bangladesh will be the first in the region to grow a GM food crop.

The release of Bt Brinjal was stalled in India amid outcry by green groups, while anti-GM activists damaged the GM crop in experimental areas in the Philippines.

But none of the two countries slapped any ban on Bt Brinjal. India imposed a temporary moratorium on Bt Brinjal's release while research on the GM crop reached an advanced stage in the Philippines.

Correction

A report headlined "Hope for rational accord", which was published in The Daily Star on July 8, mentioned IndustriALL as a European Rights Group. In fact, IndustriALL Global Union is an international trade union for industrial and manufacturing sectors. The inadvertent mistake is regretted.

Govt opens

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On June 29, wrapping up his budget speech in parliament, the finance minister said the government would open a separate foreign currency account of \$1.2 to 1.4 billion with the central bank for bearing the foreign exchange liability for the bridge project.

Meanwhile, the Bridges Division on July 7 sent a letter to the finance secretary seeking the government's consent to use \$2.03 billion foreign currency for the project. The total project cost is \$3.03 billion.

The letter mentioned that pre-qualified bidders for the project want a guarantee of payments in foreign currency. If such guarantee cannot be given right now, an uncertainty may arise regarding the bidders' participation in the tender process.

The government has set apart Tk 6,852 crore for the bridge project in the budget for the current fiscal year.

To build the 6.12-kilometre bridge with its own funds, the government on June 26 floated an international tender involving \$ 1.18 billion for building its main structure (road and rail line). It also invited the four pre-qualified bidders to participate in the tender process.

In this context, officials of the finance and communications ministries yesterday expressed surprise over the communications minister's disclosure on Tuesday that a Chinese firm proposed to invest \$2.4 billion in Padma bridge project.

The communications minister said the proposal has been sent to the ERD but the ERD officials said they are yet to get it.

Some officials said the communications minister's disclosure might create uncertainty about the pre-qualified bidders' participation in the tender process. After floating international tender for the project, there is no scope to consider such proposal, they added.

Asked, Prof Jamilur Reza Choudhury, who is closely associated with the Padma bridge project, said he has no comments about seeking external financing after keeping provision in the national budget. He, however, said the ERD is the appropriate authority to evaluate the Chinese proposal.

US retailers set factory

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"A primary goal of the alliance is the engagement of and partnership with the Bangladeshi and US governments, as well as with the factory owners to ensure that there is accountability among all parties and thus the opportunity for sustained and lasting change in Bangladesh."

The deal followed a similar commitment by 70 mainly European retailers to boost safety in Bangladesh plants, which have a long record of worker deaths from fires and other dangerous conditions.

In April, a nine story building housing several factories that supplied some of the world's biggest names in fashion collapsed, killing 1,129 people in one of the world's worst industrial disasters.

The Rana Plaza collapse increased pressure on the world's largest clothing

retailers, like Inditex, H&M, Primark, Gap and Walmart, and threatened to damage Bangladesh's \$20 billion garment export industry, second in size only to China.

In late June, the United States said it would remove preferential trade status from Bangladesh to press the government to enforce worker safety.

The new alliance pledged to inspect all its supplier factories within one year, and members agreed to refuse to source products from plants that are determined unsafe.

They plan to share inspection results through a "Fair Factories Clearinghouse", with findings available to factory owners, workers and the government.

In addition, the group pledged to enforce mandatory training and education for factory staff and manage-

ment, and that all factories serving the alliance will have to have democratically elected Worker Participation Committees.

The retailers also agreed to set up an anonymous worker hotline, administered by a third party, to enable workers to report safety problems without fear of retribution.

"All workers, no matter where they live, have the right to a safe environment. Partnership and collaboration are critical to making sure that happens," Walmart, the world's single largest retailer, said in a separate statement.

"We believe companies and government have a responsibility to ensure that tragedies like those in Bangladesh do not happen again, and that we really can work together to empower government and private parties to act on dangerous safety conditions."

Bhutan may enact 'India law'

TNN, Thimphu

Bhutan may introduce a law or convention to stop its political parties from making its relationship with India an election issue in future.

After weeks of mudslinging over who "displeased or provoked" India, the kingdom's incumbent party, Druk Phuensum Tshogpa (DPT), and the major opposition People's Democratic Party (PDP) on Tuesday hinted at the possibility of a provision to prevent India-Bhutan ties from turning into a political issue.

"After the July 13 general election, we may review the electoral process and explore means and ways to stop parties from discuss-

ing bilateral ties with India during campaigning," DPT vice-president Sangay Thinley Dorji told TOI.

PDP, too, is keen on the proposal. "We can always have an agreement not to discuss India-Bhutan ties during electioneering. Bhutan's relationship with India is of utmost importance for all Bhutanese," said PDP secretary-general Sonam Jatso.

Considering Bhutan's great dependence on Delhi for its economic survival, the debate over India seems to have put DPT, which won 45 out of 47 seats in the 2008 election, on the back foot. For, DPT prime minister Jigme Thinley is said to have warmed up to Chinese overtures, giving New Delhi a severe heartburn.

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