

Low pay, hostile

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the Middle East, they observed.

The female migrant workers, especially the domestic helps, have to work up to 18 hours a day. They do not have any day offs, and their employers do not allow them to go out of their work places.

"My employer used to lock me in a room until I would finish the household chores. I had to work from 6:00am to midnight every day," said 20-year-old Asma, who returned home last April.

She went to a middle-eastern country two years ago with high hopes to bring solvency to her poor family. She came back empty handed.

"As our financial condition was poor, my father had sent me (abroad) through local brokers," she told The Daily Star.

She was paid only \$120 a month.

Sources said female migrant workers get paid \$100 to \$150 a month in the Middle East. They also said very good employers pay around \$200 a month but they are very few in number.

But the demand for female workers remains very strong in the Middle East, including in the oil-rich Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and Lebanon.

Preferring not to be named, a high official of the manpower ministry said with the Middle East put

aside, they do not have many optional destinations to send the female workers, "which makes raising questions about working conditions very difficult".

The government, however, have time and again urged the middle-eastern countries to look into the working conditions of women migrant workers but the situation remains the same.

Fraudulent and exploitative practices were also very common in the recruitment stage, said Sumaiya Islam, director of Bangladesh Female Migrant Workers' Association.

"Improper and forged agreements by the sending and receiving agencies are mainly responsible for incidents that lead to tortures and sufferings of the female workers," she added.

Bangladesh recently decided to send its female labour force to new Asian destinations, including Hong Kong and Singapore, where working conditions are better.

BMET Director General Begum Shamsunnahar said around 40,000 women had registered online so that they could be sent to these new destinations.

"We have placed some recommendations including increased salaries and weekly leave facilities for female migrant workers to the labour receiving countries," she told The Daily Star.

Suicide bomber kills 1 in Kabul

AFP, Kabul

A suicide bomber targeted an Afghan police checkpoint on the outskirts of Kabul, killing one person and wounding two others on the first Friday of the fasting month of Ramadan, police said.

The attack came on the third day of the Muslim holy

month in the war-torn country, where Taliban-led insurgents are fighting against the Western-backed government.

"This morning, a suicide bomber wearing a suicide vest detonated his explosives outside the city of Kabul," Kabul police chief, Mohammad Ayoub Salangi told AFP.

Dhaka to seek

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occasions," he said, adding the government has intelligence information that although the Indian authorities have destroyed some factories, many new others have mushroomed there.

Preferring anonymity, another high official of the ministry said, "Our law enforcers' main problem is to check trafficking of narcotics and small arms -- both the things get trafficked mostly from India -- into the country."

At the discussion, Bangladesh would also raise the same old issue of the killing of Bangladeshi nationals along the border, added Kamal.

According to Odhikar, a human rights body, the Indian Border Security Force (BSF) has killed 15 Bangladeshi citizens and injured 53 others between January and June 2013.

Kamal said the discussion of the upcoming talks would be in four categories -- border management, security measures, ratification of treaties, and implementation of already ratified ones and mutual assistance.

Under the border management issue, both the countries will adopt strategies to repair border pillars, and reintroduce deputy commissioner-level meetings in bordering areas to settle problems immediately on the border.

Besides, Bangladesh will table the implementation issues of agreements -- Coordinated Border Management Plan signed in July 2011, and the non-use of lethal weapons by the BSF signed in March 2011.

Home ministry sources also said if BSF strictly implemented the agreement on the non-use of lethal weapons, the killings in the bordering areas would be reduced to zero.

Int'l buyers stick to Bangladeshi RMG

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galvanised global brands such as Hennes & Mauritz AB (H&M) to consider relocating production.

But several industry organizations and factories contacted by Reuters in Vietnam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Sri Lanka and India - Asia's top apparel makers outside China - said international retailers were not beating a path to their door just yet. When it comes to price, Bangladesh is king.

"The reason Bangladesh went from zero to hero in the garment sector is because there is no country with such low labour and other costs," said Arvind Singhal, chairman of India-based retail consultancy Technopak Advisors.

"No buyer is in a hurry to move from Bangladesh because Western retailers are

stressed about passing any retail price increases to customers," he said. "Currently, there is no substitute for Bangladesh, where manufacturers even risk operating from rickety structures to cap costs."

Wal-Mart Stores Inc has stood by its Bangladesh production, saying the South Asian nation remains an important sourcing market. H&M also said its quest for alternative manufacturers was not at the expense of Bangladesh.

"We are not reducing our purchases from Bangladesh. We aspire to have long-term relations with our suppliers," H&M spokeswoman Elin Hallerby said. "We are always looking at new production capacity to support our continuous expansion."

The latest data from Bangladesh highlights its

enduring appeal: garment exports in June rose 26 percent year-on-year to \$2.2 billion.

COST IS KING
More than four million people, mostly women, work in Bangladesh's clothing sector, making it the second-largest global apparel exporter behind China.

The world's biggest fashion retailers, Inditex SA and H&M, as well as Wal-Mart, Gap Inc and JC Penney Company Inc are a few of the brands manufacturing there.

The \$21 billion-a-year industry has been built on low wages, government subsidies and tax concessions from Western countries. But the collapse of the Rana Plaza factory complex outside Dhaka in April raised concerns about safety loopholes. The disaster, one of the world's worst indus-

trial accidents, killed 1,132 people.

The collapse prompted global brands to consider tapping regional alternatives.

Indonesian textile firm Sri Rejeki Isman PT (Sritex), which makes clothing for Zara, H&M and other brands, said it was in talks with H&M about taking over an as yet unspecified amount of Bangladesh-sourced production. H&M declined to comment.

But as large factory owners across the region discovered, translating talks into orders is difficult as, compared to Bangladesh, they are considered too expensive.

"Garments produced in Bangladesh have a very competitive price, around two-to-three times lower than in Vietnam," said Nguyen Huu Toan, deputy director of SaiGon 2 Garment JSC, a

Vietnam factory whose clients include British fashion retailers New Look and TopShop.

The cost disadvantage also impacts Sri Lanka's \$4 billion-a-year garment industry, and factory owners there say any shift in production from Bangladesh will be transient.

"We are much better than any other country in the region, but it is a temporary advantage," said Tuly Cooray, the secretary-general of industry group Joint Apparel Association Forum. "At the end of the day, the price is going to matter."

NOT CUT FROM THE SAME CLOTH

The economic slowdown in Europe and the United States has made retailers all the more keen to seek out the lowest-cost manufacturing centers to keep their store prices down.



Left, the front of the Atani Zamindar Palace, a testimony of Muktagachha dynasty; top right, ornamental patterns on the arches and pillars; bottom, the residence of Jibendra Kishore Acharya Chowdhury.

PHOTO: AMINUL ISLAM

A palace in ruins for lack of care

AMINUL ISLAM, Mymensingh

The Atani Zamindar Palace, an emblem of the Muktagachha dynasty in Mymensingh, is almost on the verge of ruin due to lack of proper maintenance.

The Department of Archaeology (DoA), custodian of the national heritage works, took charge of the property in Muktagachha 20 years back to preserve the palatial house.

But since then, the DoA has done nothing, except putting up a signboard on its premises in 1993, declaring the property a "protected archaeological monument".

In the absence of proper maintenance, the palace is losing its grandeur and land areas surrounding it have overgrown with weeds. House fittings, including doors and windows, are currently in a shabby condition.

Established in 1727 by Sree Krishna Acharya Chowdhury, the palace was once a centre of power and culture.

Many prominent personalities from across the subcontinent, including classical guru Ustad Alauddin Khan, visited the palace several times.

Sipra Acharya Chowdhury, daughter-in-law of one of the zamindars Bakul Acharya Chowdhury, said zamindars had left the palace in 1950.

But the successive governments had failed to protect and preserve the archaeologically important place, she added.

Most of the valuable artefacts of the palace were plundered soon after the zamindars had left and during the Liberation War in 1971, locals said.

The rest of the valuable works of art could be lost forever as thieving is a regular incident inside the palace, they added.

Mir Nahid Ahsan, upazila nirbahi officer of Muktagachha, said a proposal for allocation of Tk 7 crore for restoration and beautification works of the palace was sent to the DoA last year.

Dr Ataur Rahman, regional director of the DoA, said the cultural affairs ministry has recently approved a Tk 90 lakh fund for renovation of the site after receiving the proposal.

"We will soon start our work at the palace," he added.

Debacle in city polls

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The debate has surfaced as party leaders and ministers tried to shift the blame on each other at the threadbare discussions with Prime Minister and AL chief Sheikh Hasina over the last few days.

Party leaders told Hasina that, among many other reasons, people's negative perception of various government moves significantly contributed to the stunning defeats.

National issues, including stockmarket debacle, Hall-Mark and Destiny scams, alleged graft in Padma bridge project, police action on Hefajate Islam and Jamaat-Shibir men and the subsequent propaganda against the government, were the main reasons for the defeat. And this is why the government, not the party, should be blamed for the city polls debacle, according to some top AL leaders.

Moreover, one top leader said, ministers and lawmakers

had distanced themselves from the party grassroots by behaving badly with them. For this, many local leaders did not actively work for the party-backed candidates.

Party leaders argue that people vote or do not vote an incumbent party-backed candidate considering government's activities, and not the party's activities.

However, some ministers think the party should have held councils at its city corporation units much before the polls and enlisted the support of all workers in the campaign. They blame the party organising secretaries for not doing so.

Their failures resulted in the defeats of the party-supported candidates, the ministers argue.

One minister said the government carried out huge development work in the last four and a half years and whatever votes the AL-backed candidates got was

because of government's performance.

"Why will the government take the blame when it has undertaken a lot of development work? Where the party leaders have been? Why haven't they strengthened the party? Is it our failure?" a minister asked, preferring not to be named.

But a senior party leader, who also spoke on condition of anonymity, disagreed with the minister and said the party could hardly redeem the government's failures.

Meanwhile, AL General Secretary Syed Ashrafur Islam, Forest Minister Hasan Mahmud, State Minister for Liberation War Affairs Capt (ret'd) AB Tajul Islam and party leader Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah met Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina at her Gono Bhaban residence yesterday evening.

Meeting sources said they had discussed party affairs for about 15 minutes.

Govt sits on PSC recommendation

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Currently, 56 percent of government jobs are reserved for quotas, leaving only 44 percent open for merit-based recruitment.

Of the quotas, 30 percent posts are for freedom fighters' children and grandchildren, 10 percent for women and 5 percent for indigenous communities. In addition, there is a 10 percent quota for some districts and 1 percent for the physically challenged persons.

The frustration over the quota system burst out this time after the commission applied the quota policy at the preliminary exam of 34th Bangladesh Civil Service.

The unsuccessful candidates took to the streets on Wednesday, demanding cancellation of quotas; their demonstration turned violent the next day.

The PSC in its annual reports for 2009 and 2011 recommended bringing reforms to the system, saying the policy was very compli-

cated and difficult to implement.

The reports say because of the complex quota system, it is almost impossible to select the right candidates with 100 percent accuracy. Simplification of the existing system is essential to select the right candidates through BCS exams.

Talking to The Daily Star yesterday, former cabinet secretary Akbar Ali Khan said recruiting only 45 percent candidates on merit in BCS examinations is unconstitutional and discriminatory.

All the expert commissions formed by the successive governments opposed the quota system, but no government has taken step in this regard, he said. "Quotas should not exceed 50 percent of government jobs and they cannot exist forever."

Akbar, also a former caretaker government adviser, finds district quota illogical. He said district quota for public service was introduced when the country had just 17 or 19 districts. But

VACANT QUOTA POSTS			
BCS EXAMS	FREEDOM FIGHTERS	WOMEN	INDIGENOUS
28th	628	45	140
29th	538	81	111
30th	613	32	139
31st	550	54	129

SOURCE: PSC

this quota creates problem now that the country has 64 districts.

Referring to the constitutional provision on quotas for "backward people", he said the government needs to carefully identify the "backward communities" and decide how long the quotas will remain in place.

On freedom fighters quota, he said, "The quotas should be for children of poor and destitute freedom fighters."

A study conducted by Akbar Ali Khan and another former secretary, Kazi Rakibuddin Ahmad, now the chief election commissioner, suggested reducing the number of quotas and

said the system was unjust. The report was submitted to PSC in 2008.

The quota system was introduced in public service through an executive order in 1972 and was amended several times.

Admitting that a large number of posts remain vacant after BCS exams, former PSC chairman SMA Faiz suggested that if the posts allocated for quota provision remains vacant, they should be filled up from the merit list.

The quota provision needs to be reformed and recruitment on merit should be done as much as possible, he added.

An unlikely

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trainee nurse Clare Evans fell for him on the spot.

Evans took him home and was amazed when her pet dog Harley, who is unable to have pups herself because of a tumour on her spine, adopted the role of surrogate mum.

Evans, 37, who has three sons, said: "From the moment I took Tigger back to mine Harley completely tried to take over the care of him."

"She washes him and lets him cuddle up, and now she's producing milk and feeding him."

"She can be quite a moody so-and-so and I never thought she would be this way with him."

Whenever Harley is around Tigger buries himself into her flaps of skin to keep warm.

Kya, a female German shepherd.

Yogi, however, is also getting parental and has started giving Tigger a protective lick to keep him clean.

Evans added: "Yogi has given him a few baths, but even then Harley will stand very close."

"Yogi sort of acts like a father towards Tigger, so I'm pretty sure that kitten will grow up rather confused."

"Kya meanwhile can't get anywhere near Tigger at all."

Harley and Tigger are set to keep their bond for life, even after Tigger leaves for a new home.

Evans's parents Christine and Alan have agreed to take him in. They live right next door.

She said: "We thought it would be too distressing to separate them completely and my boys were quite taken and didn't want to lose him either."