

# Labour migration to Iraq: The case of the 27 and beyond

PORIMOL PALMA

IT is a classic example of how vulnerable the Bangladeshi migrants remain even when they go abroad through legal channels, maintaining all procedures. It also raises serious questions about the bureaucracy's efficiency and its commitment to protect the Bangladeshi migrants, who fuel the engine of the country's economy.

I am talking about the condition of the 27 workers who went to Iraq in February and March to work for M Kodia Co. General Trading, a construction firm. They all had valid passports, visas, and emigration clearance from the Bureau of Manpower Employment and Training (BMET). To manage the migration cost of Tk.3-4 lakh, they also took loan from the Expatriates' Welfare Bank, which was created in 2011 to ensure that overseas jobseekers did not have to sell property or get indebted to meet the cost. A migrant rights NGO, Bangladesh Migrants Foundation (BMF), also ensured that workers (at least the 10 who maintained links with BMF) paid to the recruiting agencies via banks.

However, after the workers arrived in Iraq, the company told them that it did not have jobs at that moment, and asked them to stay at a labour accommodation facility in Najaf, some 160 kilometres south of Baghdad. They were given poor food, often only rice and lentils, and insufficient water and sanitation facilities. The generator malfunctioned frequently for long periods. It is unimaginable how bad things become when one is thirsty and has no cooling system in the Arab desert. The migrants, who once dreamt of changing their fortune with the monthly salary of \$350, were even prevented from moving out of the facility, making it no less than a prison.

Not being able to tolerate the migrants' agony, their relatives demonstrated in Dhaka -- on July 22 and August 27 -- and submitted applications to both the BMET and the expatriates' welfare ministry seeking rescue of the victims. These events got good media coverage too. BMET sent letters to the Bangladesh embassy in Baghdad, which sent an officer to visit the workers in Najaf only once in early August. However, that has not produced any result until now, other than threats from the employer and representatives of the recruiting agencies.

Col. Ziadur Rahman, Bangladesh's labour counsellor in Baghdad, however, told The Daily Star that the employer concerned did not respond to his request for a meeting. He also said that he did not attest the job demand letters of the 27 workers, and that it was not possible for his office to arrange alternative jobs for them. Ziadur Rahman pointed out they needed the Iraqi foreign ministry's permission to move to another place for security reasons.

Meanwhile, the employer gave them \$1,200 as salary

for four months, and forced them to sign a paper stating they want to return home voluntarily, and will demand no further compensation. Until now, the employer has not handed over the workers' passports or arranged their repatriation.

When the victims are facing a critical situation, the BMET, instead of ensuring the workers' rescue, has asked for arbitration between the victims' relatives and the recruiting agencies -- Morning Sun Enterprise, Meghna Trade International, Idea International and East Bengal Overseas -- that sent the 27 workers to Iraq.

This series of events raises a number of questions. First, why is the government arranging the arbitration when rescue of the victims is an imminent need? Is it to help the recruiting agencies, which may face human trafficking charges? If it is not, what problem is the expatriates' welfare ministry trying to solve through arbitration at this juncture?

Second, why could the Bangladesh embassy not engage Iraq's labour ministry to solve the problem even in six months? On August 31, Iraqi Labour and Social Affairs Minister Nassar-Al-Rubaiee signed a memorandum of understanding with Bangladesh on recruiting Bangladeshi workers, saying they needed a large number of labourers for reconstructing Iraq. If that is so, why couldn't these 27 workers be recruited by any other company?

Third, if security is a concern for the Bangladesh embassy officials in Iraq, then how does Bangladesh allow its citizens to migrate there? How can the state put its citizens in danger? It is even more intriguing why the BMET had issued emigration clearances to the workers without having their job demand letters attested by the Bangladesh mission in Baghdad, which could ensure the genuineness of the jobs. This is especially important due to the fact that things are not very stable in Iraq now.

An estimated 7,000 Bangladeshis live in Iraq. According to the BMET, the average flow of monthly labour migration to Iraq is 400. Nobody knows what kind of condition they live in. The way the problems of the 27 migrants are being handled speaks much of how the others are being taken care of by the officials who are paid by the hard-earned money of the workers.

The involvement of the NGO, BMF, is also questionable. NGOs working on migrants' rights have long been demanding cutting of migration cost. Then why did BMF allow workers to pay hefty amounts as migration cost? Couldn't it inform the government of such an exorbitant cost being charged by the recruiting agencies?

Wage earners and taxpayers deserve answers to these questions.

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## Black Hole: Gravity's last laugh!

QUAMRUL HAIDER

A black hole -- one of Einstein's general relativity's weird predictions -- is literally an unfathomable hole drilled in the superstructure of the Universe. Inside this hole, the immense strength of gravity distorts the structure of space and time so severely that light rays can no longer travel in a straight line, but rather follow a trajectory curving back towards the hole.

If a star has a mass greater than 3 solar mass, there is no force in the Universe that can prevent gravity from crushing it into zero volume and infinite density, known as singularity. Astronomers and physicists, used to working with objects of finite size and density, are ill at ease with singularities. Nature is also "embarrassed" by the collapse of a massive object into a point. Hence, it conceals the object from us inside a region of space called "black hole."

Although black holes confound common sense, they are real albeit oddballs in the stellar "zoo." Super massive black holes at the center of many galaxies have non-stellar origin. These gravitational Frankensteins are due to the collapse of interstellar matter with mass equal to millions and billions of solar masses.

A black hole is separated from the rest of the Universe by an imaginary boundary called the event horizon. It is a bizarre terminus beyond which everything is forever hidden from our view. Once a massive dying star collapses to within its event horizon, it disappears permanently from the Universe, leaving behind black hole as relic of its past life.

However, because of time-dilation, an off-shoot of Einstein's special relativity, time slows to a crawl at the event horizon, and the process of falling into the black hole appears to take forever. According to astrophysicist John Wheeler, black hole "teaches us that space can be crumpled like a piece of

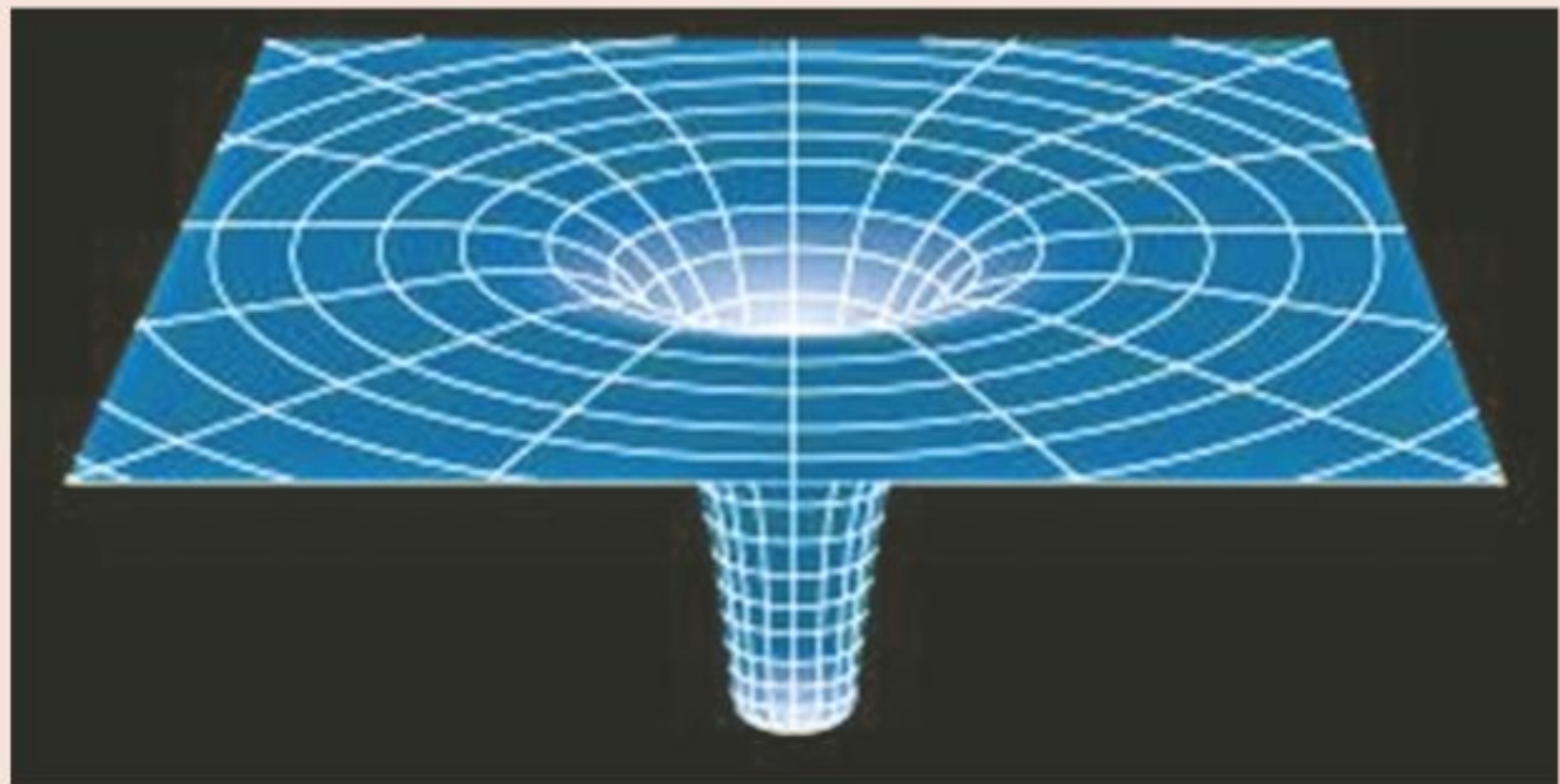
paper into an infinitesimal dot, that time can be extinguished like a blow-out flame, and that the laws of physics that we regard as 'sacred,' as immutable, are anything but."

The distance from the center of the black hole to the event horizon is called the Schwarzschild radius, named after a German physicist who in 1916 advanced the idea of black holes. It is 3 kilometer per solar mass. Thus if a 3 solar mass star shrinks to a radius of 9 kilometer, it will become a black hole; for a 4 solar mass star the radius is 12 kilometer, and so on. Our Sun will never become a black hole because it is not massive enough to cross over the event horizon. Instead

black hole. Many such black holes have been discovered in our galaxy, the Milky Way, by the Hubble telescope.

Study of rotational motion of galaxies allows us to figure out the mass at the galactic center. For some galaxies, including ours and our nearest neighbor Andromeda, the mass is found to be millions and billion times the solar mass. Concentration of so much mass in so small a region is possible only in super massive black holes.

The space-based Chandra X-ray Observatory, named after the Nobel astrophysicist Subramanyan Chandrasekhar and launched by NASA in 1999, has been specially designed to detect black holes. Since



its luminous career will end more sedately as a white dwarf.

A black hole is well nigh impossible to detect because light from inside the hole cannot escape to the region beyond the event horizon. Hence, there is a total information blackout. How do we then infer about its existence?

In many binary systems, two stars orbiting about their common center of mass, it is often found that one of the orbiting stars is invisible. The invisible companion, betraying its presence by exerting gravitational pull, draws in material from its companion's atmosphere. As the material falls into the hole, it emits blazing X-rays. This is a signature that the invisible star is a

its launching, Chandra's success has been phenomenal. To date, it detected numerous black holes, including super massive ones at the center of galaxies as far away as 2.7 billion light years from Earth. Chandra is not only unveiling black holes all over the cosmos, it is also challenging our prevailing ideas about how they are formed and providing a fertile ground for theoretical speculations.

Black holes are proof that gravity controls the life of stars and has the last laugh. It is a star's one-way ticket to eternity.

The writer is a Professor of Physics at Fordham University, New York.



## SCIENCE BRIEF



## THE INSIDE SCOOP



## Butterflies and Moths

AZADI HOSSAIN

AS brilliant in colour as many exotic flowers, butterflies are among the most beautiful of all creatures. Butterflies are more familiar to us than moths because they are active by day, whereas moths are active mainly by night. However, there are more than 147,500 different kinds of moths compared to about 17,500 kinds of butterflies. Together these creatures make up the insect group called Lepidoptera. Moths and butterflies have a life cycle

in four stages- egg, caterpillar (larva), pupa (chrysalis), and imago (adult). The change in form from caterpillar to butterfly is called metamorphosis. All butterflies and moths are plant eaters and live wherever plants grow, except in extremely cold regions. Some, such as red admiral butterflies, hibernate (sleep) during winter. Others, such as bogong moths, migrate long distances to find food. A few butterflies and moths are pests to humans. Cabbage white caterpillars devour garden vegetables, and clothes moth caterpillars eat the nature fibers in clothing.



## SMARTCAST

## Earthquake detection

SMALL sensors found in most smartphones and laptops are sensitive enough to detect the movement of moderate and large earthquakes, and could vastly expand the information gathered during seismic events in densely populated cities, new research suggests.

The devices, called micro-electro-mechanical systems (MEMS) accelerometers, measure movement in three dimensions and tell the phone's screen to flip from horizontal to vertical when the phone tilts. In laptops, they detect the motion of falling, and force the hard drive into a safe mode prior to impact.

Given the widespread use of laptops and smartphones containing these devices, researchers at Italy's National Institute of Geophysics and Volcanology decided to test whether the sensors could adequately record earthquake movements.

"Theoretically, any device connected to the Internet with an internal MEMS accelerometer, such as a computer or mobile phone, can become a strong-motion seismic station, and that could be easily used to enormously increase the number of observation points when an earthquake occurs," said study co-author Antonino D'Alessandro.

Source: Live Science



CROSSWORD  
By THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Big gulp

5 Ready to swing

10 Window sections

12 Mown strip

13 Metal fastener

15 Forum cry

16 Seventh letter

18 Game caller

19 Private response

21 Minimal change

22 Theater worker

24 Mortise's mate

25 Lumber measure

29 Combust

30 Practical

32 Eroded

33 Fitting

34 Monk's title

35 Pleasantly mild

37 Comes down

39 Follow

40 Fancy neckwear

41 Yorkshire city

42 Farm fowl

DOWN

1 Aerosol output

2 Gives up

3 Get into the market

4 "My word!"

5 Nick and Nora's dog

6 Binary base

7 Unproductive

8 Go to

9 Burglar's crime

11 "In the Heat of the Night"

17 Improve

20 Mr. Scratch

21 Kayak's cousin

23 New York university

25 Lighter fuel

26 Threat ending

27 Exec's place

28 Source of excitement

29 Tower setting

31 Endures

33 Pro votes

36 Coffee, in slang

38 Cabinet wood

Yesterday's answer

NEW CROSSWORD BOOK! Send \$4.75 (check/m.o.) to Thomas Joseph Book 2, P.O. Box 536475, Orlando, FL 32853-6475

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AXYDLBAAXR  
is LONGFELLOW

On letter stands for another. In this sample, A is used for the three L's, X for the two O's etc. Single letters, apostrophes, the length and formation of the words are all hints. Each day the code letters are different.

9-6 CRYPTOQUOTE

N Z D E Y B Z N Z P V G D Z D M Z

ABBGYLAF ILDM ILFZ GFU

Y I Z Z D I A V U Y . — C N G E D E Y

Yesterday's Cryptoquote:  
WE SHOULD NEVER FORGET WE HAVE THE POWER TO RUIN LIVES AND REPUTATIONS — AND THAT SHOULD NEVER BE TAKEN LIGHTLY.

- HELEN THOMAS

BEETLE BAILY

by Mort Walker

ZERO'S MAD AT EVERYONE

HE SAYS, FROM NOW ON, HE'S JUST GOING TO SAY WHAT HE THINKS!

WELL, AT LEAST HE'S HONEST

2-21

HENRY

by Don Trachte

HAVE YOU BEEN WAITING LONG, HENRY?

2-22

QUOTABLE  
Quotes

"The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy."

Martin Luther King, Jr.