

FREQUENT HARTALS

Transport workers in trouble

HELEMUL ALAM and ARUN BIKASH DEY

Around seven million transport workers across the country, who are paid on daily basis, had suffered severe financial crisis during the three spells of hartal since 27 October, transport leaders said.

As most of the commercial vehicles remained idle, many of the transport workers spent the hartal days with no income.

Though a few bus companies paid their workers some money for food during hartals, thousands of other transport workers did not receive any such allowance.

Daily wages of these workers of around 22 lakh vehicles across the country range between Tk 500 and Tk 1200 a day.

"Hartal renders a blow to the transport workers as they get their payment on daily basis," said Osman Ali, general secretary of Bangladesh Sarak Paribahan Sramik Federation.

Abul Kalam Azad, secretary general of Chattagram Jela Sarak Paribahan Malik Group, said the

transport sector of Chittagong incurs loss around Tk 25 crore on a hartal day.

Around 50,000 public vehicles ply on the city and district routes, he said.

"Most of the vehicles are bought taking bank loans. We will not be able to pay the bank instalments now as there was no income on hartal days," he said.

He added that most of the owners and their families were dependent on the income of the vehicles.

SM Habibul Haque, president of Chittagong Divisional Goods Carrying Transport Owner-Labourer Coordination Forum, said around 8,000 trucks and covered vans, which carry goods from Chittagong Port, remained idle on hartal days.

The average income of a vehicle is Tk 2,000 a day, he said, adding that the sector had incurred losses of around Tk 7 crore in the last four-day hartal that ended Wednesday evening.

Anowar, a truck driver of the capital's Sayedabad area, said he had already borrowed Tk 5000 with an

interest rate of Tk 500 a month, as there was no income on the hartal days.

"I am afraid I will have to take more loans to run my family if more hartals are enforced in future," said frustrated Anowar.

Mohammad Mamun, helper of Tisha Paribahan that operates on Dhaka-Laksham route, said though bus owner had given them Tk 200 as allowance for food during hartals, he was forced to borrow additional Tk 200 to meet his daily expenses.

He said the buses operate on roster basis. Therefore, a bus of his company remains idle for 10 days in a month, he added.

They usually save money from the income of 20 days to help them meet the expenses of the remaining 10 days, when they do not have any work.

He would not be given any chance to work for the days he missed in the hartals, he added.

"We will have to suffer if the political situation does not improve," he added.



PHOTO: FOCUS BANGLA

Hartal supporters torched two parked trucks in Sitakunda of Chittagong yesterday, the last day of the 84-hour opposition-sponsored countrywide shutdown.

PM alone knows about next step

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wondered about Hasina's next move in forming the polls-time government, which is at the centre of the political standoff.

According to Awami League sources, party chief Sheikh Hasina alone knows the plan, parts of which she shares with some leaders very close to her.

Several senior party leaders said they had least idea about the size of the polls-time government or when it will be formed. They also cannot say for sure how many parties will finally join in.

"It may be formed shortly, but I do not know when," said AL leader Hasan Mahmud.

The PM may make it clear in the cabinet meeting, sources said.

Whenever formed, the interim administration is certain to suffer setbacks as the BNP-led opposition alliance has already planned for enforcing blockade or non-stop hartal after the Election Commission announces the polls schedule, likely towards the end of this month.

The 18-party alliance, however, may refrain from calling shutdown for the coming Sunday

and Monday as it had planned, thanks to the visit of an US assistant secretary of state for South and Central Asian Affairs, Nisha Desai Biswal, during the time, BNP insiders said.

She will arrive in Dhaka on Saturday on a three-day visit and is expected to meet government and opposition top brass to broker talks between them.

Dismayed at the BNP-led alliance's hartal during her visit in May, US under secretary of state for political affairs, Wendy R Sherman, criticised such shutdowns and cancelled her meeting with BNP chief Khaleda Zia.

"We will not make the same mistake this time. We want the government to open talks to resolve the political stalemate. And the US official will of course talk about it," a senior BNP leader told this newspaper.

Given the context, next week may offer some crucial developments, though senior ministers are still in the dark about what happens next.

Asked about Sunday's cabinet meet, some ministers said they did not know its purpose. After last week's cabinet meeting, many ministers claimed it was their last meeting.

AL Presidium Member Matia Chowdhury said she got a folder from the cabinet division but she did not have a clear idea about the meeting. Hasan Mahmud echoed her view.

Leaders are uninformed about the latest situation mostly because the party has not held meetings of its crucial bodies recently. The AL presidium, the highest policymaking body, last sat a couple of months ago. Its central working committee, the highest decision-making body, last sat on October 13, insiders said.

Meanwhile, the stance of Jatiya Party, a key component of the AL-led alliance, on the formation of the election-time government is also unclear to many AL leaders. If the JP refrains from joining it, the cabinet will only have members from among the AL and its two partners -- Workers Party and Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal.

In an interview with a private television channel, JP chief HM Ershad said the election would not be acceptable if all the political parties did not participate in it.

"We will not take part in the forthcoming election if all the parties do not participate.

Joining the all-party polls-time government is meaningless if we do not participate in the polls," said Ershad, a former military dictator who was ousted in 1990 through a mass movement led by Hasina and Khaleda.

Ershad said his party was yet to decide on the matter, but added that chances of boycotting the polls and the interim administration were high.

RALLIES ON SATURDAY

The 18-party alliance last night decided to hold rallies across the country on Saturday, demanding the release of five BNP leaders arrested last week.

The announcement came after some BNP standing committee members met party chief Khaleda at her Gulshan office. Khaleda also spoke with some dignitaries, including former government officials, professors, journalists and lawyers.

After the meeting, former secretary Asafuddowla, who was among the dignitaries, told The Daily Star that Khaleda was waiting for a fresh call from the government side to hold talks over the crisis.

Education caught in po-llu-tics



An employee of Rajdhani High School wipes the benches clean for students expected to arrive today, the only school day in this week which had an 84-hour hartal coupled with the last weekend.

PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON

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another subject but that too gets deferred for the same reason," he said.

"None would consider this political factor if I do badly in the exam," added Abir.

The boy has more disappointments to share. His father had promised to take him to his grandfather's after the JSC examination. But little did he know that the examination would take so long and travelling would become so risky all on a sudden.

"I don't think we will be able to go to our village home as it is uncertain when the exam will finish. Moreover, the admission rush begins next month," said Abir's father Raihan Ahmed.

He feels that the way the political situation is deteriorating, things will go even worse in the coming days.

This is how Abir and 19 lakh other eighth-graders feel, thanks to current political turmoil. So far, four of the 11 exam days for JSC and equivalent Junior Dakhil Certificate (JDC) exams had to be rescheduled.

The situation of the kids younger than Abir is even more pathetic. Take five-year-old Surjo, of Gulshan in the capital, for an instance.

His father Shamim said, "The streets have turned into battle fields nowadays. So he [Surjo] stays home all day, getting bored

watching TV. He just loiters around the home asking, 'What to do, Baba?.'

The ongoing series of hartals has put the lives of thousands of kids into total disarray. It is also ruining their holiday plans, restricting movements and giving them a feel of insecurity.

Similarly, shutdowns have messed up the academic calendar of all educational institutions, primary schools to universities.

None of the institutions is able to hold classes or assessments as per schedule. Almost all the public universities are already burdened with session jams. If the strikes continue, the universities, especially the National University, would plunge into severe crisis.

Already in neck-deep trouble, authorities of different educational institutions are now finding it really hard to comply with the Election Commission's request to finish all exams and admission tests by the first week of December, before the upcoming national election.

The directorates of education, including the primary, have already notified all schools under them about the request.

But things are not that easy. November and December are crucial for school goers, as it is time for the annual and public examinations.

After the ongoing JSC exams, the country's biggest public assessment Primary and Ebtedai Terminal Examinations will begin on November 20.

"Given the existing political deadlock, we are unsure of whether the JSC exams will end on time. If more hartals are

enforced, we will face difficulties in rescheduling the exams," said a top official of Directorate of Secondary and Higher Education (DSHE) preferring anonymity.

DSHE Director General Fahima Khatun said although the annual exams at all schools would end by this month they would have to struggle in publishing results and holding admission tests.

Similar concerns came from the primary education officials.

"If we are forced to reschedule the terminal exams, it will put an impact on the annual exams," said Shyamol Kanti Ghosh, director general of Directorate of Primary Education.

As for the parents and guardians, they have gone paranoia worrying about their children's future.

Mahfuzur Rahman, guardian of a JSC examinee, said most of the exams rescheduled were being held on weekends, with no gap. This put an extra pressure on students.

"I am doubtful that my son would do well, as frequent hartals have eaten up his enthusiasm for exams. We wonder what our children have done that they are paying so badly," said Mahfuzur.

Sumaiya Azmi, a mother from Uttara, said, "If the students do not do well in the exams they will have to bear it all through their lives despite being responsible for it. The politicians do not seem to understand the consequences of their activities."

"Don't they have children sitting for the examinations?" she questioned. The country cannot afford such loss in a sector where the future of the young generation is at stake, she added.

Failed company vie for renewal

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amounts totalling to \$ 33.5 million.

A sister concern of furniture giant Otobi, the company also signed a five-year contract in February 2010 for supplying 105 MW of power from a heavy fuel oil (HFO)-fired rental plant in Noapara. This plant too has performed very poorly, leading to a penalty of \$ 34.2 million.

However, instead of paying the penalty, Quantum Power last year went to the High Court and obtained injunctions, according to which the PDB is barred from collecting the fine, but must pay for power purchase.

Despite the conflict, the company a few months ago turned up to a power ministry committee on rental power projects proposing extension of its contract for the Bheramara plant.

"The Quantum Power has proposed that it would withdraw its case against PDB if the contract was renewed and it was allowed to

convert its loss-incurring diesel-fired plant into a HFO-fired one by investing Tk 115 crore," said a high official of the ministry.

Quantum argues that this way the government would be able to save a lot of money as HFO is cheaper than diesel.

"But we don't see how that helps them make any profit. Their project is dead. It generates 15 MW of power instead of a minimum of 104 MW," the official added.

He said Quantum's overall approach to power business seemed wrong, especially since it had set up its two rental power plants with obsolete and malfunctioning machinery.

The power ministry committee has meanwhile decided to extend three rental power contracts belonging to Precision, Energies and Desh Energy, which are also defaulters to some degrees. These companies, like Quantum, had also obtained court injunctions to stop the PDB from collecting the penalties.

However, the case of Quantum is the worst.

"We want to help this company from sinking. Not only it defaulted with the government heavily and refrained from paying the penalty through court injunctions, we know that Quantum Power also has huge bank loans. We don't see how it would ever pay the government if we extend the contracts. We can't help Quantum Power killing ourselves," said a well placed official of the power ministry.

As per the contract, Quantum was supposed to begin commercial operation of the Bheramara plant within four months of signing its contract on February 4, 2010. But it launched the plant after 10 months and faced a penalty of \$ 11.4 million, of which it has paid \$ 8.2 million.

After the plant had begun operation, it could never deliver the minimum 104 MW power as required by the contract due to sub-

standard machinery.

The contract allows Quantum to keep its plant shut for 876 hours (or 36 days) in each contract year, but it remained shut for 5,465 hours (227 days) between December 2011 and December 2012.

A similar situation prevails with Quantum's Noapara 105 MW plant, which began commercial operation 18 months after the contract signing instead of nine months. It produces just around 15-20 MW power and most of the time remains out of operation.

Managing Director of Quantum Power Animesh Kundu said, "The fine is actually about \$ 15 million, not \$ 67 million. There are some mistakes in PDB calculation. That needs to be corrected."

He also added that his company would withdraw the case against PDB if the Bheramara plant contract was renewed.

COMMONWEALTH SUMMIT

PM flies to Sri Lanka today

DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENT

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina will fly to Colombo today to attend the three-day Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) beginning on Friday morning.

Foreign ministry sources said the PM, who will lead a 48-member delegation, will leave Dhaka for Colombo, the capital of Sri Lanka, at 2:00pm by a special flight of Biman Bangladesh Airlines, and return to Dhaka on Friday night.

The delegation members include Foreign Minister Dipu Moni, Ambassador-at-large Mohammad Ziauddin, nine officials from the Prime Minister's Office, nine from the foreign ministry, a 14-member security team and 11 media persons. Bangladesh High Commissioner in London Mijarul Quayes will also join the delegation.

Diplomatic sources said this time the CHOGM is being held in a different way as Britain's Prince Charles will represent his mother the Queen in Sri Lanka. The 87-year-old queen has only missed the biennial

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Hay Festival

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9:00am on the Bangla Academy lawn. Then the inaugural ceremony will feature a conversation between Bangladeshi bilingual author and litterateur Syed Manzoorul Islam, British Pakistani writer, journalist and filmmaker Tariq Ali and Egyptian writer and columnist Ahdaf Soueif, at the main stage of the academy.

The celebration is taking place for the third time in Bangladesh.

This year more than 75 sessions will be held during the three-day festival. Some 50 foreign guests and 200 Bangladeshi writers and litterateurs will participate in those sessions organised at four venues --- the main stage, small stage, imagination tent and the lawn.

The festival will remain open every day from 9:00am to 8:00pm and hold both Bangla and English sessions, along with special programmes for children and workshops for aspiring writers.

Panels such as Egypt and Beyond by Ahdaf Soueif, Endless Revolution by Tariq Ali, Conversation between Bangladeshi writers Shamsul Haque and Hasan Azizul Haque, From Words to Screen featuring Indian actor Rahul Bose are some of the highlights of the event.

This year no registration is required for entering the festival venues to enjoy the sessions, including book launch programmes and cultural events.

There will be bookstalls, including that of Daily Star Books, which will keep new and old titles for readers.

As winter treat, a range of snacks and ice creams will be available for purchase at the programme venue.

The Daily Star is the title sponsor of the international festival hosted by Bangla Academy in collaboration with British Council and Commonwealth Foundation as global partners and Jatrik as project partner.

KK Tea is sponsoring the event along with many other organisations and institutions as partners.

2 envoys

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Shiro Sadoshima said this at a meeting with ACC Chairman Badiuzzaman and two of its commissioners at the graft watchdog's office in the capital's Segunbagicha, ACC Commissioner Mohammad Shahabuddin told The Daily Star.

The two envoys expressed frustration over introduction of the provision in the ACC law.

Their reaction came three days after parliament ratified the ACC act incorporating the controversial provision.

During the meeting yesterday, the two diplomats said the controversial provision is contrary to the country's constitution and would weaken the ACC.

The ACC officials also expressed their disappointment over the issue.