

16 Bangladeshis

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"The 16 workers are trouble-makers. They might have been taken to another place to ensure a peaceful environment at the camp," Amir Hossain, assistant technical manager of the agency, said.

"Majority of the 180 migrant workers still want to stay and work in Iraq but only 20 to 25 of them are creating trouble," he claimed.

Asked whether they were violating the rights of the Bangladeshis by confining them, he declined to comment.

The official also refused to say whether the stranded Bangladeshis, including the 16, would be repatriated.

Contacted, Maj Gen Rezanur Rahman Khan, Bangladesh ambassador to Iraq, once again denied that the 16 Bangladeshis were being confined.

He said they were just staying inside the building in Najaf city and added that it might be possible to send them back home within this week.

Being informed about the poor condition of the 16 Bangladeshis, Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment Secretary Khondaker Showkat Hossain yesterday said no worker could ever be confined under any circumstances.

"It is a violation of the rights of the migrant workers. We will look into the matter," he promised.

Earlier on Wednesday, the ambassador said they had arranged jobs for 63 of the 180 Bangladeshi workers at a construction company in Baghdad, just a day after the alleged abduction of the 16.

Some of the Bangladeshi workers, who did not want to stay in Iraq under any circumstance, were spread-

ing the rumours, the ambassador had said.

On the other hand, the rest of the 180 workers still remain stranded at the camp which is situated in a desert area of the violence-torn country.

Rezanur said the embassy would try to get jobs for them or help them go back home.

"We will try to work according to their wishes," he had said.

The 180 Bangladeshis have been passing miserable days at the camp in the southern province of Najaf due to lack of food, water and other amenities, including power supply, ever since they arrived in the country, alleged their families back at home.

The stranded workers have repeatedly requested both their employer and the Bangladeshi agency to either provide them with jobs or send them home, but all their pleas fell on deaf ears.

Much progress

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Bangladesh.

IS Chadha, Indian high commissioner in Dhaka from 1985 to 1989, lauded Bangladesh's initiatives to check India's security threats since 2009, but criticised the lack of responses from India's part, especially in the implementation of the LBA and the signing of the Teesta deal.

"This failure was a result of lack of political consensus," Chadha said.

Echoing Chadha, Deb Mukharji said unless a political consensus was reached, it would be difficult to settle the pending issues.

He recalled how the landmark 1996 Ganges treaty was signed when he was the Indian high commissioner in Dhaka, and how he had to convince the then Congress and BJP leadership of the importance of the deal.

"Problems [in bilateral relations] are known, the answer is known and the way forward is there but the question is how we give substance to what visions are there [to overcome the problems]," he said.

Some diplomats also advocated making the Joint Rivers Commission an autonomous body so that it can function without any political influence.

Veena Sikri, who discharged her diplomatic assignment in Bangladesh between 2003 and 2006, suggested that India and Bangladesh address the bilateral challenges on their own without allowing any third country's intervention.

"We are like brothers and sisters. Don't look for godfathers -- China or US," she said.

Veena Sikri said Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi sent out a signal to all neighbours by inviting the heads of government to his oath-taking ceremony. This meant he was committed to continuing with the Indian foreign policy for the neighbours.

However, she identified non-compliance of agreed issues as the greatest challenge for improving ties with Bangladesh.

"We don't do what we agreed upon," she said, blaming both sides for the situation.

She cited examples how progress has stalled in the LBA, the Asian Highways and the container transit deals even after the two countries had already signed them.

"All were agreed but nothing was implemented," Sikri said.

On the January 5 polls in Bangladesh, she said that India considers the election was necessary for the continuation of constitutional and democratic process in the country.

The International Relations (IR) department of Dhaka University and the India-Bangladesh Foundation jointly organised the two-day India-Bangladesh High Commissioners' Summit at the DU Senate Hall. A large number of retired and serving diplomats, noted economists, academics, media personalities and students attended the first-of-its-

kind programme.

Former Bangladesh foreign secretary and envoy in New Delhi Ferooz Sobhan said despite many achievements, there remained a gap between "reality and perception" while a lack of mutual trust and confidence remained a "big problem".

Harun-ur Rashid, who served at the helm of the Bangladesh mission in India, said India, being the stronger economy, has to take the small neighbouring countries on board to move forward.

The immediate past Bangladesh high commissioner in Delhi, Tariq Ahmad Karim, echoed Harun and said, "Interdependence helps us grow together."

The future of the two countries would be decided on regional and sub-regional cooperation, he added.

However, former Indian envoy in Dhaka Pinak Ranjan Chakravarty thinks the future of India-Bangladesh relations depends on how the countries deal with security threats and radicalism.

"We, therefore, need to go for intelligence cooperation, and also find ways to combat cyber threats."

Pinak suggested that Bangladesh set up automobile accessory manufacturing plants, provide industrial zone for Indian manufacturers, go for joint maritime exploration, technology-based e-retailing of their products, medical tourism and so on.

Former Bangladesh diplomat Hemayetuddin said India needs to be "careful" about the border killings, as one killing can spoil much of the achievement and create misconceptions among the people of the country.

Indian diplomat Rajeev Mitter said Bangladesh was not being able to cash in on the duty-free access of its products to India, and the reasons behind it need to be studied.

Diplomats at the programme also stressed the need for implementing the Framework Agreement on Cooperation for Development signed in 2011 in Dhaka to take Indo-Bangla relations to greater heights.

Inaugurating the summit, Foreign Minister AH Mahmood Ali said India-Bangladesh relations have withstood "the test of time", setting a precedent for other regional countries to follow.

Former Bangladesh high commissioners Faruq Ahmed Chowdhury, Mostafa Faruque Mohammed and CM Shafi Sami, and current Indian envoy in Dhaka Pankaj Saran also spoke in the programme.

The inaugural session was addressed by DU Vice-Chancellor Prof AAMS Arefin Siddique; Prof Ashegua Irshad, chair of the IR department; and Prof Imtiaz Ahmed, project coordinator of the department.

Discussions were held in working sessions on three different topics -- Lessons from the Past, Changes and Hurdles in Contemporary Times, and India-Bangladesh Relations and its Futures. Each of the sessions, chaired by Prof Imtiaz, were followed by question-answer sessions.

Hasty repair

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"This bus came in yesterday [Tuesday]. The owners have asked us to quickly repair it because they would not run the bus until the repairs are done," said mechanic Masud of Al-Fallah garage.

"Our workload has been increased over the last three days. We used to paint about two buses a day. Now, we are painting at least five," said Kabir Miah, who was painting a bus at Box Nagar area near Dhaka Zoo.

Around 20 buses were lined up on the road in front of Sher-e-Bangla National Cricket Stadium in Mirpur yesterday afternoon. Workers were painting them, changing windowpanes, replacing wheels and repairing engines.

"This bus has all necessary documents. But its colour was faded and a few indicating lenses were broken. The owner wants to get these faults repaired due to the government's drive," mechanic Solaiman, who was working on one of the buses, told The Daily Star.

Many trucks were seen getting repaired on roads near Gabtoli cattle market in the capital.

"After the drive started, most truck owners have been repairing their vehicles," said Mostafizur Rahman, a truck owner.

Talking to The Daily Star, Bangladesh Sarak Paribahan Samity Secretary General Khandaker Enayetullah said, "Before the drive started, we held two meetings with our members and directed them to repair their vehicles."

"Many bus owners are repairing their vehicles and they will operate those after making them fit," he added.

When there is no government drive, unfit vehicles ply the roads with hardly any monitoring by law enforcers; pick-ups top the list of such faulty vehicles, sources said.

Through an unholy nexus between the owners of unfit vehicles, and some law enforcers and BRTA officials, the vehicles ply in and outside the capital round the year.

This is one of the key reasons for accidents.

However, the BRTA seems to be content with raising awareness rather than making sure that no unfit vehicle runs on the roads.

BRTA Chairman Nazrul Islam told The Daily Star, "We have come to know that transport operators are repairing their vehicles because the awareness has been created after the drive. It is a positive sign."

Currently, more than 21 lakh vehicle are registered with the BRTA. Of them, over 93,000 ply the streets of Dhaka.

AL men clash

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around 11:00am at Shaheed Alauddin Children Park as the supporters of the two AL leaders were chanting slogans against each other.

Over 500 plastic chairs were smashed during the clash.

On information, police rushed to the spot and brought the situation under control.

The injured took first aid. The council began again half an hour after the clash.

Shafiqul alleged that some BCL men loyal to Moni first attacked him and tore his shirt.

"My supporters tried to save me from the attackers," he said.

Moni denied the allegation, claiming it was the supporters of Shafiqul who had attacked his men without any provocation from his side.

After the council, a 101-member committee of Pataukhali district unit AL was announced, naming Shahjahan Mia its president and Khan Mosharef Hossain general secretary. The duo had been in the same posts in the old committee formed about 18 years ago. The last council was held in 1996.

Central AL leaders advocate Yusuf Hossain Humayun, Abul Hasanat Abdullah, Mahbulul Alam Hanif MP, Jahangir Kabir Nanak MP, Bahauddin Nasim MP, Chief Whip ASM Feroz, AKM Jahangir Hossain MP and Mahbubur Rahman Talukder MP, among others, spoke on the occasion.



Around 100 Bangladeshis stuck at a camp in Najaf city of Iraq. They have been enduring untold sufferings there for nearly seven months with inadequate food and water.

PHOTO: COURTESY

Cheated workers denied justice

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they returned home empty-handed between November last year and January this year with the help of the Bangladesh Mission there.

Currently, at least 180 more Bangladeshis, who were similarly cheated by brokers and agencies, are now enduring immense suffering.

CHEATED YET NOT COMPENSATED

On his return in December last, Mosharraf, from Tangail, and some of his fellow jobseekers submitted a written complaint to the expatriates welfare and overseas employment ministry demanding compensation and action against the agencies.

But the ministry officials told the victims that they could not take any action if the victims could not submit evidence of their contracts with the agencies.

Evidence there was none, as they had only verbal contracts with the brokers. So, none save for three of them got a penny back.

The three that got their money back were unusually lucky, as their hiring agencies in Dhaka -- East Bengal Overseas and Idea International Overseas -- willingly returned the sum after they came back. The two other agencies -- Meghna Trade International and Morning Sun Enterprise, also based in Dhaka -- have simply vanished.

"My local broker took the money on behalf of the agency. Besides, the agency arranged everything for my departure to Iraq. So why the agency will not compensate me?" Mosharraf, 40, told The Daily Star recently.

Hundreds of brokers have been working on behalf of the agencies across the country for years, but the government can't hold them responsible because of loopholes in the relevant laws.

Last year, the government passed the Overseas Employment and Migrant Workers Act-2013 to protect Bangladeshis working abroad. But it has no provision for taking action against brokers.

"Incidents of the migrants being cheated are rising alarmingly, but the victims are not getting justice in the absence of a proper law," Prof Tasneem Siddique, founder chairman of Refugee and Migratory Movement Research Unit, told this correspondent.

BACK TO SQUARE ONE

Before going to Iraq, Mosharraf used to be a farmer and Tofazzal Hossain of Dinajpur, another cheated jobseeker, a day labourer. Life was hard as they often had no work. They wanted a change.

It was then that they came to know about jobs abroad from the brokers. The middlemen assured them of jobs and good pay, but demanded Tk 2.5 lakh from each. Desperate, both men borrowed the money from local lenders and banks to

pay them.

But little did they know their money would buy them sufferings, not jobs. Once in Iraq, the two along with the 25 others were dumped in the labour camp that had no running water or electricity. The camp is in a desert area, so it was very hot.

"They gave us little food and treated us like prisoners. We could not move outside the camp. They threatened to shoot us if we tried to go outside the camp," Tofazzal told The Daily Star over the phone.

With their money lost and dreams shattered, it was a nightmare that these men left behind.

Back home, Mosharraf and Tofazzal, like many others of the group, returned to farming and working as day labourer.

Shaon Ali, who claimed to pay the brokers Tk 3.7 lakh, now works as a salesman in his Meherpur hometown.

With his college education, he thought the job in Iraq would change his life. It did, but only the other way around.

"I have no hope that I will get my money back," said the 19-year-old boy.

NO PUNISHMENT? Government officials say it is difficult to bring to book the middlemen under the law because the victims cannot produce any evidence.

At present, some 880 recruiting agencies are doing manpower businesses in the country, according to Bureau of Manpower Employment and Training (BMET).

Under the law, the agencies can open offices across the country, but brokers who work as sub-agents for them are not recognised in the law.

Government officials argue that they cannot punish the agencies for the illegal activities of the middlemen.

But Prof Tasneem disagrees. "If the government wants to protect the migrants, there are many clauses in the new law to bring the brokers or the fraud agencies to book," he said.

Bangladesh Association of International Recruiting Agencies (Baira) offers an alternative solution. Top leaders of the association recommend that the government recognise the brokers in the law so that the victims and law enforcers can sue them.

"When the sub-agents [brokers] are brought under the legal jurisdiction and are allowed to work with the agencies, the government can hold them accountable," said Ali Haider Chowdhury, vice-president of Baira.

Taking advantage of loopholes in the law, a section of agencies in connivance with the middlemen are cheating hundreds of jobseekers for years.

Over the last one year, the government has taken some actions against them but that could not deter them from cheating these people badly in need of jobs.

Nurul Islam, joint secretary (employment) of the ministry, said they took punitive action against fraud agencies upon specific allegations. The actions include cancellation of licence or forfeiting the security money.

Between January and September this year, the ministry received at least 110 complaints against recruiting agencies. Upon investigation, licences of six agencies have been suspended.

"We want to send a strong message to the agencies that nobody is above law and anyone cheating jobseekers will face punishment," said Khandaker Mosharraf Hossain, expatriates welfare minister.

The minister, however, called on the jobseekers to verify if the job offer is legal or illegal. "They should learn clearly about their work, salary, overtime, accommodation and other benefits."

LIFELINE OF ECONOMY Migrant workers are considered one of the major lifelines of the country's economy. They are the second biggest contributor to the national GDP after the garment sector. Around nine million Bangladeshis are now working at various sectors across the world. Last year, they sent more than \$14 billion in remittance to the country. It was over \$13 billion the previous year, according to the BMET.

Baira leaders say incidents of cheating have risen in recent years because jobseekers are trying to migrate illegally, as there are fewer jobs through legal channels these days.

Due to various irregularities by private recruiting agencies, the Saudi Arabia imposed restrictions on Bangladeshi workers in 2008 and the UAE in 2012. Kuwait has stopped taking Bangladeshi workers since 2006 altogether.

These three countries are the biggest job market for Bangladeshis.

Before 2008, between 50,000 and 1,00,000 Bangladeshis used to migrate to KSA for work. Over the past few years, it has come down to 5,000 to 7,000 a year. In case of the UAE, about 1.5 lakh Bangladeshis used to go there. It is not more than 10,000 to 12,000 now.

The government is also failing to make the most of the Malaysian job offer. The Malaysian government has a demand for about 50,000 Bangladeshi workers per year. But the Bangladesh authorities can secure 4,000 to 5,000 jobs against the demand.

In all, about 6 lakh Bangladeshis went abroad for work in 2012, over 4 lakh last year and about 4 lakh so far this year.

Invest more

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Authority hosted the event for the third time.

Speaking at the function, Malaysian Deputy Minister for International Trade and Industry Dato Lee Chee Leong said there is much that Bangladesh and Malaysia can do for further expansion of bilateral trade and investment. "Events like Showcase Bangladesh provide us with a good platform to explore the business potential," he said.

Malaysia's investment in Bangladesh is currently concentrated on energy and telecommunications sectors, he pointed out. "The involvement of Malaysian companies in Bangladesh can be further expanded."

Several areas like infrastructure, power generation, telecommunications, education and hospitality have been identified as potential sectors for Malaysian involvement and investment in Bangladesh, mentioned Lee Chee Leong.

He said Malaysia would be an ideal gateway for Bangladeshi companies

wanting to expand their businesses in the region as Malaysia will assume the chairmanship of Asean next year.

Bangladesh High Commissioner to Malaysia Atiqur Rahman said Malaysia is among the top 10 investors in Bangladesh, but there is enough scope for further investment.

Relocation of labour-intensive industries, including the textiles and textiles accessories; furniture processing and agro-processing industries, from Malaysia might be the most promising options, said the diplomat.

BMCCI president Nasir A Choudhury, secretary general Raquib Mohammad Fakhrul, treasurer Syed Almas Kabir, chairman of the fair organising committee Syed Nurul Islam and former BMCCI president Syed Moazzem Hossain spoke, among others.

About 60 Bangladeshi companies from banking and insurance services, readymade garments, textiles, infrastructure, ICT and telecom and other sectors have joined the showcase with their products and services.

Obama calls for free polls

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parliament, where 25 percent of the seats are ring-fenced for the military.

"The majority of our people understand that this constitution cannot stand as it is," if democracy is to be achieved, the democracy figurehead added.

The pair spoke in the garden of Suu Kyi's villa in a reprise of their landmark meeting in 2012, which saw the US leader throw his political might behind Myanmar's transition from junta rule.

After talks with his counterpart Thein Sein late Thursday Obama expressed cautious optimism for the once-cloistered nation that balanced out earlier warnings on the risks of "backsliding" on the transition.

"We recognise change is hard and you do not always move in a straight line but I'm optimistic," Obama said.

During his two-night trip to Myanmar the US leader has also raised alarm over the direction of

reforms, however, citing the cramping of freedom of expression, ongoing conflicts and the treatment of Myanmar's minority groups -- especially the Muslim Rohingya.

Their talks at Suu Kyi's lakeside family home came almost four years to the day after she was released from years of house arrest.

He later moved to a university compound for a town hall style question-and-answer session where the serious political discussion was punctuated by peels of laughter as a relaxed Obama took off his jacket and bantered with the mainly young audience.

Several among the crowd briefly held up banners reading "reform is fake", prompting a riposte from the US leader who said "Oh we have some signs... that's why we are here, to talk".

On his last visit, Obama received a fanfare welcome from thrilled locals a year after Thein Sein began

to open up the country.

Most political prisoners have been released and by-elections have seen Suu Kyi become a lawmaker, while foreign investors have arrived in lockstep with the lifting of most sanctions.

But the atmosphere has slowly soured, with many observers saying reforms have stalled.

This time there was little of the street-side cheering for Obama.

Even Suu Kyi's star power earned as the torch-bearer of democracy during the dark junta years having waned in the eyes of some as she has edged away from her role as a resistance icon to become a player in the nation's fractious politics.

Air Force One departed at dusk, taking the US leader and his entourage to a final stop on a three-leg tour in Brisbane, Australia, for talks with G20 leaders, where global growth and security issues are likely to dominate.