

HUMAN TRAFFICKING LINK

Municipal mayor held in Thailand

THE NATION/ANN

Thai police have arrested the mayor of Padang Besar in Songkhla province over his alleged involvement in human trafficking and started a probe into a close aide on suspicion that the latter was also involved.

Bannajong Pongphol, the mayor, faced seven hours of questioning before being taken to a press conference in Trang yesterday as authorities suspect he might have been linked to the discovery of many corpses in Kaew Mountain in Tambon Padang Besar.

His aide, Suphoj Muensew, was charged with attempted murder in relation to a raid on the chief of Trang prison in 2013.

National police chief General Somyot Poompanmoung yesterday said investigators were looking into whether Bannajong and Suphoj had a hand in the death of the many migrants whose bodies were exhumed recently.

He said police would report to the government the names of a number of people allegedly involved in human trafficking whose positions meant they could not be touched by police.

Padang Besar deputy mayor, Prasit Lemleh, surrendered to police on Thursday. He has been detained at a court in Songkhla, after being questioned by police.

EXCLUSIVE FOR THE DAILY STAR

Deputy police chief General Aek Angsanant said arrest warrants had been issued for 36 people over their alleged roles in the trafficking of humans for labour, including 11 suspects whose warrants were issued yesterday and six suspects in custody.

Two operation centres dealing with the issue have been set up under the

supervision of Provincial Police Regions 8 and 9, whose jurisdictions are in the upper and lower South.

Daily meetings and briefings will be held at these two centres, with details to be made public every day, said Maj General Phuthichart Ekkachant, a deputy commissioner of Provincial Police Region 8.

Phuthichart said that so far four detention camps with 51 buildings in total had been found and 55 migrants were under government care -- 24 Rohingyas, 15 Bangladeshis and 16 others whose nationalities were yet to be determined. He said the remains of 33 bodies had been found, with DNA verification for their identity ongoing.

He also said border patrol police were looking for 17 Rohingyas who had gone missing in Khao Kaew, located between Songkhla and Satun, while part of a group of 50 who were apprehended while being brought to a destination in Satun by a Thai smuggler.

Malaysia too has 'slave camps'

FROM PAGE 1

human traffickers are kept.

Malaysians are also directly involved in the trafficking syndicate, he alleged yesterday.

Kalam, who works with Thai police as a translator when Myanmar refugees are rescued, said the slave trafficking camps near the Thai border typically house between 500 and 1,000 people.

"The situation has worsened in the last 10 years, with about 50 camps near the border."

"There are more camps in Malaysia now as the Thai government has been clamping down on human traffickers," Kalam, 58, alleged.

He said refugees in these camps were forced to live in deplorable conditions, with little food and drink.

While not making specific accusations against Malaysia, Thailand's 4th Army Region commander Lt Gen Prakan Choolayuth said his government was "hoping that neighbouring countries will help in the crackdown of human trafficking activities across the border".

Kedah police chief Senior Deputy Comm Datuk Zamri Yahya, however, has refuted allegations that such camps exist on the Malaysian side of the border.

"There's no such thing. As far as we know the camps are only at the Thailand side."

"On the Malaysian side, police, including the Border Intelligence Unit, the General Operations Force, special teams from Bukit Aman and other enforcement agencies are working together to curb illegal immigrants and human trafficking activities," he said.

Thailand Prime Minister Prayut Chan-ocha plans to meet Malaysian and Myanmar leaders over the problem.

"Human trafficking has to be jointly tackled and it should be understood that the problem did not originate in Thailand," he said, adding the country was just a transit point.

Prayut said migrants arrested in Thailand would be taken care of.

"They will be charged with illegal entry. After that, they will be detained, not jailed."

Over the last few days, Thai authorities have discovered abandoned jungle camps in Songkhla where mass graves have been found.

Dozens of bodies were exhumed in one site while 26 bodies were found in shallow graves a kilometre away.

Kalam said yesterday he believed that Malaysians were directly involved in the

human trafficking syndicate on the Thai side of the border.

"Several refugees who have spent time at these camps have heard conversations taking place in Bahasa Malaysia."

"I have told my people in Myanmar not to come to Malaysia because they may be kidnapped and beaten by human traffickers, but they don't believe me," he said.

Kalam, who has been living in Thailand for more than 30 years, said his fellow nationals were lured by human traffickers with promises of good jobs, but were instead sent to hilltop camps.

"They come by boat, about 500 people crammed into one boat."

"They charge each person RM7,000, which they have to pay once they start working."

"But they get cheated. Traffickers send them to camps and ask for ransom from their families," he told The Star.

Speaking in fluent Thai and some broken English, he revealed that those who did not pay up or attempted to run away would be beaten, some to death.

"Once money is paid or when someone is willing to 'buy' the Rohingya, they'll be sent to Malaysia."

"Over there, people wait in a car to pick up the refugees," he said.

3 listed human traffickers killed

FROM PAGE 1

Four policemen were injured during the gunfight, police said. They took treatment at Teknaf Upazila Health Complex.

The bodies of the deceased were handed over to their families after autopsies.

Cox's Bazar Superintendent of Police Shyamol Kumar Nath yesterday told The Daily Star that, "It was the first ever encounter between police and human traffickers in the area."

According to police, all were listed

human traffickers and members of an organised trafficking gang. Dholu was accused in four human trafficking-related cases. He was released on bail 15 days ago after serving four months in jail.

His son Belal Hossain, 25, is also a member of the syndicate. He has been behind bars for the last two months.

Contacted, family members of the deceased refused to comment on the matter. However, a relative of Jahangir, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said plainclothes police picked up the trio from their houses on Thursday

morning.

With the three, at least 56 people were killed in "shootouts" or "gun-fights" with law enforcement agencies this year, according to The Daily Star reports.

The incident took place at a time when human trafficking issues were making headlines in the media outlets of South-East Asian countries following the discovery of a number of graves in abandoned camps in Thai jungles. The victims were believed to be the fortune seekers from Bangladesh and Myanmar.



These trawlers, which were carrying jobseekers to a cargo ship in the deep sea, were seized by the Coast Guard in Reju Canal of Teknaf.

PHOTO: STAR

Illegally driven as legally restricted

FROM PAGE 1

to-government agreement signed in November 2012 after a four-year freeze from early 2009. Under the arrangement, the migration cost was set below Tk 60,000.

The rate was Tk 84,000 when the private sector managed the recruitment in 2006 and early 2009. But studies found workers were charged higher, around Tk 2 lakh each, Harun told The Daily Star over the phone from Kuala Lumpur.

Brokers, human resources managers of employers and outsourcing companies and certain Malaysian officials are believed to have shared the extra money charged from the migrants.

Another source of their moneymaking was having workers way more than required, showing fake demands.

In 2007 and 2008, over four lakh Bangladeshi workers were sent but thousands of them remained unemployed or detained and finally returned home empty-handed.

Talat Mahmud, then labour counselor of Bangladesh high commission in Kuala Lumpur, allegedly attested many documents without verifying job demands as he had good connections with the manpower brokers in Malaysia.

He was called back to Dhaka following Kuala Lumpur's cancellation of 55,000 work visas in early 2009.

Malaysia's immigration director-general Datuk Wahid Md Don was found guilty of accepting RM60,000 bribe for approval of 4,337 visa applications for Bangladeshi workers in Malaysia on July 10, 2008.

On October 30, 2013, the official was sentenced to six years in prison and fined RM3,00,000.

Now with the G-to-G arrangement in place, the flow of bribe money to brokers and officials has stopped, said a Bangladeshi recruiting agent having Malaysian business links.

"They now look to Nepal, India or Vietnam for workers," he said, requesting anonymity.

MANPOWER TO MALAYSIA FROM BANGLADESH

1992	Formal labour recruitment begins
1997	Closed
2000	Opened and closed
2006	Opened
2009	Closed
2012	G-to-G recruitment begins in small numbers

KEY PROBLEMS

High migration cost
Unauthorised brokers trade job documents
Recruitment of surplus workers
Irregularities in public offices
Absence of effective actions for correction

The recruitments from those countries are done through private sector, which in Bangladesh is plagued with irregularities for lack of regulating and monitoring.

Malaysian employers too are turning away from Bangladesh. They often complain of laidback attitude of government officials and bureaucratic tangles in the government-to-government arrangement, said Ruhul Amin, joint secretary general of Bangladesh Association of International Recruiting Agencies.

The agencies had talks with the government several times about the issues but things hardly changed, he said. "So, Bangladeshi jobseekers are going illegally," Ruhul added, pointing to the country's surplus labour and limited job opportunities.

Zaid Bakht, research director of Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies, said every year some 2 million youths join the labour force in the

country.

Some 60 percent of them are absorbed into domestic and foreign labour markets. The rest remain either unemployed or underemployed; many often become desperate to find jobs abroad, even illegally.

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

The three countries were the biggest job market for Bangladeshis.

Before 2008, between 50,000 and 1,00,000 Bangladeshis migrated to Saudi Arabia for jobs every year. Over the past few years, the number has come down to 5,000 to 7,000.

In case of the UAE, the number was about 1.5 lakh, which is now 10,000 to 12,000.

Many youths now want to try their luck in Malaysia that has annual labour shortage of some one lakh. One of them is Mohammad Yakub, 27, of Paikarchar in Narsingdi. He used to work at a power loom factory which often remained closed.

A broker pledged him a safe voyage to Malaysia and monthly Tk 50,000 income there, and Yakub decided to give it a try.

But en route, he landed in a Thai jungle. Held captive and tortured, ransomed and released and again jailed, he finally returned home in March this year.

His family had to pay a ransom of Tk 2.5 lakh for his release.

"We had to sell half of our four-decimal homestead and borrow the rest of the amount," said his mother, Sahera Begum, sitting at her hut at Kundapadi village.

"Our son has become too weak. After his return, he got a job at a local factory, but he cannot work hard as before."

Yakub at least managed to come back. But to determine how many lives were lost in the attempts requires further studies.

Tories win majority

FROM PAGE 1

however. North of the border, nationalists won a historic landslide in Scotland, just seven months after losing a referendum on independence.

In another dramatic development, Labour leader Ed Miliband, Liberal Democrats leader Nick Clegg and UK Independence Party (UKIP) leader

Nigel Farage stepped down over their parties' electoral drubbing.

With all 650 seats declared, the Conservatives have ended up with 331 seats in the lower house of parliament, 24 more than in 2010. Labour have 232, the Lib Dems 8, the Scottish National Party (SNP) 56, Plaid Cymru 3, UKIP 1, the Greens 1 and others 19.

The Tories get a 36.9 percent share of the UK national vote, Labour 30.4 percent, UKIP 12.6 percent, the Lib Dems 7.9 percent, the SNP 4.7 percent, the Green Party 3.8 percent and Plaid Cymru 0.6 percent.

Turnout is set to be 66 percent, marginally up on 2010 and the highest since 1997.

The Conservatives' victory means they will be able to govern without the need for a coalition or a formal agreement with other parties.

'GREATER BRITAIN'

David Cameron has promised to lead a government for "one nation" and make "Great Britain greater" as he returned to Downing Street as prime minister.

Speaking outside No 10 after visiting Buckingham Palace yesterday, he said the UK was "on the brink of something special".

"We will govern as a party of one nation, one United Kingdom ... That means ensuring this recovery reaches all parts of our country, from north to south, to east to west."

Having secured five more seats than needed for a Commons majority, the Conservative leader is now beginning the process of putting together the new government. George Osborne has been reappointed as chancellor, Theresa May as home secretary, Philip Hammond as foreign secretary and Michael Fallon as defence secretary.

Cameron said he would reach out to all parts of the UK and strive to "bring the country together" in the wake of the SNP's election landslide in Scotland, where it won 56 of the 59 seats.

He said he would press ahead with devolution of powers to all nations as well as referendum on the UK's EU membership.

"In this parliament I will stay true to my word and implement as fast as I can the devolution that all parties agreed for Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland."

PHOTO: AFP



SNP Leader Nicola Sturgeon celebrates as election results are announced at the Emirates Arena in Glasgow yesterday. More on Page 8.

Shela river route shuts from June

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Moultribazar

Shipping Minister Shajahan Khan yesterday said plying of all types of vessels through the Shela river in the Sundarbans could be stopped permanently from June.

Speaking at a programme in Sylhet's Tamabil, the shipping minister said, "Operation of vessels through the Mongla-Ghashiakhali channel has started from last Thursday on an experimental basis. This will continue until the end of this month. If this experiment is successful, the operation through the Shela river will be stopped permanently."

Minister Shajahan said the ecology of the Sundarbans would improve once the government stopped plying of all kind of cargo vessels through the Shela river.

The minister's announcement came four days after a fertilizer-carrying cargo vessel capsized in the Bhola river at Sarankhola range in the Sundarbans.

Although four days have elapsed, the authorities are yet to salvage the vessel.

On December 9 last year, an oil tanker had sunk in the Shela river and spilled around 3.58 lakh litres of furnace oil in the river, posing a threat to the forest environment.

Since then, the government has been dredging the Mongla-Ghashiakhali channel to revive the original route to go to the Mongla port.