



A group of people prepare a boat to sail from Khurer Mukh in Teknaf. This is one of the coastal places found to be the starting points of trafficking to Malaysia.



Rebi Akter



Nurul Kabir



Abul Kalam



Theng



Meu Mong



Jalal Ahmed

PHOTO: STAR

Voyage of horror

'They starved us, threw the dead overboard,' says trafficking victim

THE STAR ONLINE, Malaysia

Death, hunger and torture were all part of Bangladesh's Mohammad Rashid's arduous sea journey from Teknaf to Malaysia.

Rashid, 26, was seeking work to support his family when a man offered him passage for a pittance.

With high hopes, he made the treacherous voyage with over 400 other men in a boat in the hope of finding work on foreign shores - but ended up half-starved and thousands of Malaysian Ringgit poorer.

He was lucky. Some of those who made the trip with him died of sickness and starvation, and their bodies were tossed overboard.

"By boat, we all went to the Myanmar border. There, we were loaded into a larger ship and taken to

Thailand. From there, we crossed the border into Kedah."

From Kedah, he took a bus to Kuala Lumpur, where a friend picked him up. By then, he was incredibly sick and weak.

"I couldn't work because I was so weak. It took me two months to recover, with my friend looking after me. On the boat, we didn't have enough food or even enough water. It was cramped and dirty."

Teknaf, nicknamed 'Malaysia airport', sees thousands of Bangladeshis make the journey to Malaysia, with vessels leaving daily.

"Throughout the whole journey I was repeatedly asked for money. My agent beat and threatened me until I paid nearly RM14,000 [Tk 3.35 lakh] in total." Rashid, who didn't even bring his passport with him, told The Star.

123 Bangladeshis rescued

FROM PAGE 1
"Those who voluntarily entered the country illegally will be sent to Immigration Police, and eventually sent back to their country of origin," added Sisen.

Thirteen-year-old Bangladeshi Busri Salam, who was among the 117 migrants, said the group disembarked from a boat in Thailand and trekked for two weeks in the jungle to try and reach Malaysia.

"My brother is in Malaysia. I wanted to go there," he said.

Huddled in a meeting room in Rattaphum, the migrants, including three children, brushed their teeth, slept, prayed and ate, according to a Reuters reporter at the scene. Some villagers came to give them water, rice and fruit.

The authorities yesterday questioned the migrants to see if they were victims of human trafficking.

Meanwhile, Thai police found the group of 32 Bangladeshis -- all males -- walking along the edge of a forest in Tambon Tha Chamuang of Rattaphum.

The men had travelled from Bangladesh and were likely to be part of the same group found earlier this week. They had been abandoned by traffickers while en route to Malaysia, said the authorities.

All of them looked exhausted and hungry. They were later sent to the temporary Rattaphum shelter, where the 117 migrants have been given refuge.

Many of those involved in smug-

gling gangs are believed to have fled in an attempt to avoid capture during the Thai authorities' current crackdown, leaving their victims to fend for themselves.

Regional police official Maj Gen Puthichart Ekachant said, "So far there have been 199 victims found in Songkhla province alone."

Of those, 74 were Rohingyas from Myanmar and 58 were Bangladeshis while the background of 67 was yet to be determined, he added.

Some 33 bodies, believed to be of migrants from Myanmar and Bangladesh, were found in shallow graves in Songkhla this month. Three suspected trafficking camps were also found.

Thailand is racing to meet a deadline for uncovering camps, used for human trafficking, within its borders.

Thai Prime Minister Prayut Chan-ocha announced a 10-day deadline for crackdown on the illicit trade. On Friday, Prayut called for a three-way meeting with neighbours Malaysia and Myanmar to try to tackle it.

Thai police were seeking court permission to arrest 20 suspects, in addition to the warrants issued earlier for 29 others allegedly involved in trafficking migrants from Myanmar and Bangladesh, Deputy National Police Chief General Aek Angsanant said yesterday.

So far 11 suspects have surrendered or been arrested.

[Sources: The Nation, ANN, Bangkok Post and Reuters]

Business just safe for trafficking kingpins

FROM PAGE 1
Hossain, 55, the 207th on the list. This paper has obtained part of the 2013 probe report, which was never made public.

Mohammad Islam, brother of Awami League lawmaker Abdur Rahman Bodi, was identified as one of the 26 Hundi businessmen of the country, handling the clandestine trade's transactions.

Another 1,600 people were said to be involved in the trade at different levels.

"Alongside them [the trafficking rings] are people from different sections in the society and local public representatives," read a paragraph in the report.

Traffickers' connection with "established" and "influential" people of the society help them evade the police dragnets, the report stated.

The investigation discovered 60 "converging points" where fortune-seekers from all over the country were gathered before being put on boats or ships to Malaysia. Almost all of these points are located along the coasts of Cox's Bazar and Chittagong.

THE GODFATHERS
Apart from Mohammad Islam, the other Bangladeshi godfathers, identified in the police report, include a couple -- Rebi Akter and Nurul Kabir from Ukhia's Jaliapalong union in Cox's Bazar.

The rest are Foyez Ahmad Shikder Bhuttu alias Foyez and Mohammad Sumon from Ukhia; and Abdul Hamid, Abdul Amin, Akter Hossain, Salim Ullah, Dil Mohammad and Anar Ali from Teknaf.

Of them, Sumon operates from Malaysia and Dil Mohammad from Myanmar.

The Thai nationals are known only as Mong and Then, both from Runang of Fudaba district in Thailand.

The Myanmar national has been identified as Abdul Gafur while Malaysian national known as Mrs Manking is pulling the strings from Thailand.

The Daily Star has managed to get an insight into the rise of some Bangladeshi kingpins of human trafficking trade.

COUPLE DANGEROUS
Rebi, 38, spent half a decade as a field-level insurance broker before stepping into the trafficking business in 2011.

"And in just four years, she became 'Rebi Madam' for the people here," said Abul Kashem, executive director of the Ukhia branch of Help, an NGO working on safe migration.

Raised at her stepfather's house in Ukhia's Borobil village, Rebi married Nurul, a day labourer, almost two decades ago.

Rebi started the business at Borobil

and brought her husband and three brothers into the business in no time, putting herself on top of the district police's list of wanted criminals.

Rebi is having a five-storied building constructed in her village with the money she is believed to have made from the business.

Officer-in-Charge Jahurul Islam Khan of Ukhia Police Station described Rebi as a "dangerous and evil woman".

She goes to any length to silence whoever raises voice against her, said another police official.

For instance, Rebi threatened anti-human trafficking activist Abdul Hamid for organising a rally in Ukhia on July 18 in 2013.

When Hamid filed a general diary with the local police following this, Rebi had her teenage daughter file a rape case against him, Hamid told this paper.

And this is the weapon she uses against anyone who comes in her way, said Anwar Hossain, chairman of local Jaliapalong union parishad.

"You never know when you are going to be framed in a case by her," he said.

But in case of Hamid, Rebi, who along with her husband stands accused in at least a dozen cases, didn't stop just there.

Detained in November last year, she walked out of jail on bail on January 16 this year and allegedly attacked Hamid twice in the next few days before being arrested again on January 21.

She along with her husband is currently on bail.

FISHERMAN TURNS BIG FISH
Son of a fisherman from Chhepotkhali in Ukhia, Foyez had lived on fishing for 40 years until he started human trafficking in 2010.

He is believed to be the one who started using different canals and tributaries ending in the Bay for trafficking people. This helped him climb the ladder quickly and soon the petty fisherman emerged as one of the big fishes in the business.

He now owns a luxurious mansion and a multi-storey commercial complex in Jadimura Battoli area of Ukhia town.

Accused in at least three human trafficking cases, Foyez is currently on the run, said Jahurul Islam Khan, officer-in-charge of Ukhia Police Station.

However, a local journalist preferring anonymity told this daily that Foyez is often seen roaming around the town in minibuses or on motor-bikes. "But police do not arrest him as, we believe, he bribes the law enforcers regularly."

THE OTHER FIRSHERMAN
Like Foyez, 30-year-old Abdul Hamid too had been a fisherman until joining the band of traffickers in 2011.

The man, who lived in a shabby hut only four years back, now has two concrete houses in his village Kachubuniya under Sabrang union, a commercial complex in Teknaf town, and a number of shops in Noapara Bazar.

Hamid is accused in three cases and currently absconding, said Officer-in-Charge Aatur Rahman Khandaker of Teknaf Police Station.

However, a number of locals said they often see Hamid moving about the area freely under the nose of policemen.

Apart from the four, Abul Kalam of Sonachhari village in Cox's Bazar is considered another big fish in the blood-spattered trade.

Visiting the village under Jaliyapalong union, these correspondents hardly found any youth in the village.

A number of elderly villagers approached the reporters with photographs of their sons who, lured by Kalam and his cohorts, set out on illegal sea journeys for Malaysia and never came back.

Kalam has been on the wanted list of police for years but yet to be arrested.

THE NEXUS AND THE LOOPHOLES

"From police to politicians -- everyone is linked to trafficking gangs in one way or the other," said Aminul Haque, a field officer of Oviabashi Kormi Unnayan Programme, an NGO on safe migration.

The police in the anti-trafficking report stated 3,793 fortune-seekers were rescued from different places over the last five year. A total of 276 cases were filed against 1,589 alleged traffickers in these connections.

It, however, did not mention how many of them were arrested or tried.

Interestingly, in seven such cases in Ukhia since 2012, police dropped names of almost half of the total 75 accused, court documents show.

"Weak police probe ruins most cases," said Special Public Prosecutor Mohammad Nurul Islam of Cox's Bazar Women and Children Repression Prevention Tribunal that deals with human trafficking cases.

Ukhia's Amena Khatun narrated a terrifying story of police's complicity in the business.

Her husband was killed by traffickers in a Thai jungle in July 2013 though she paid Tk 2 lakh ransom to broker Abdur Rahim but failed to meet the deadline.

"I reported Rahim to police. But they called me to the Inani police

outpost. Then Rahim, together with the policemen there, forced me to accept Tk 70,000 and asked me not to proceed any further with my husband's murder," Amena told The Daily Star.

Mohammad Yakub of Narsingdi said he along with 29 others was escorted by eight people, including four policemen in uniform, on to a boat to Malaysia at an unknown location. He was later released from the traffickers' captivity in a Thai jungle after paying a hefty ransom.

On November 7 in 2013, a rescued victim of trafficking testified before the Cox's Bazar tribunal that a BGB member named Habibullah had sold him to traffickers, prompting the court to order a police investigation into this.

Not just Bangladeshi law enforcers, a Reuters report last year revealed how Thai, Myanmar and Malaysian police, navy and border guards also were involved in the modern day slave trade.

Delwar Hossain, former in-charge of St Martin's Island police outpost, thinks law enforcers can "easily" contain all criminal activities, including trafficking. "But it requires a strong commitment from politicians who run the state and controls the law enforcers."

Man killed, 20 hurt in stampede

A CORRESPONDENT, Narsingdi

A man was killed and 20 others were injured in a stampede at the wedding reception of a lawmaker's daughter in Shibpur upazila yesterday.

The dead is Fazlu Miah, 60, of Brahmandi village in the upazila.

Locals said industrialist Sirajul Narsing Mollah, an independent MP of Narsingdi-3 constituency, arranged the marriage feast on Bajnabo Abul Fayeze Mollah High School ground for villagers.

The stampede was triggered around 3:00am as a large number of people thronged there to have the feast at a time. Fazlu and 20 others were wounded in the incident.

Over 10,000 people were attending the programme, said witnesses.

Fazlu was rushed to Shibpur Upazila Health Complex where on-duty doctors declared him dead. His body was sent to Narsingdi Sadar Hospital morgue for an autopsy, said Khandaker Imam Hossain, officer-in-charge of Shibpur Police Station.

The injured were given first aid.

Internet.org to be launched today

Robi users will be able to browse selected websites for free

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Free internet access to selected websites will be introduced in Bangladesh today by Internet.org, a non-profit group that allows free online browsing through mobile gadgets.

Subscribers of mobile phone operator Robi will enjoy the service through Internet.org app, an invention of the social media platform Facebook.

Through this service, any Robi user can easily access Facebook but they cannot upload any image or video, Robi informed.

The service will be inaugurated today by State Minister for ICT Division Zunaid Ahmed Palak. Markku Makelainen, director of global operator partnerships of Internet.org, will be present.

"This will augment the government's pursuit of digitalising our society. The ICT ministry, Facebook and Robi have come together for this great cause," said Mahtab Uddin Ahmed, chief operating officer of Robi.

The third largest mobile phone operator in the country already found 29 partners in the public and private sectors.

He said Internet.org would let users view websites for education materials and information on government, health, job, weather, sports, finance and more.

"Internet.org gives the users a greater access to relevant local and international content," Mahtab added.

Minister Palak said the government plans to achieve 100 percent internet penetration by 2021 and services like this will increase the number of

internet users.

Market sources said the ICT Division is launching the service through a mobile phone operator to that end.

The ICT Division also offered another mobile service operator to launch the service but it could not avail the service due to regulatory issues, sources in the ICT division said.

Robi hopes that the number of internet users will increase by around 15 percent through this service.

As of March, Robi had around one crore internet users out of 4.43 crore in Bangladesh, according to Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (BTRC).

Internet.org was founded on August 21, 2013, to ensure easy access to internet globally. Their slogan is "Everyone of us, everywhere, connected."

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