

TRAFFICKING VICTIMS Another 125 brought home from Myanmar

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Cox's Bazar

Some 125 Bangladeshi trafficking victims, who were rescued by the Myanmar authorities during the Southeast Asian migrant crisis in May, were brought back home yesterday.

The victims were taken to a temporary camp set up at Cox's Bazar Cultural Centre, Tofael Ahmed, additional superintendent of police in the district, told The Daily Star.

Of the 125 Bangladeshis, 85 are from Cox's Bazar, four from Tangail, six from Bandarban, three from Feni, two from Bhola, one from Chandpur, seven from Madaripur, one from Gopalganj, two from Rajbari, five from Brahmanbaria, one from Gazipur, two from Dhaka, two from Kishoreganj and four from Meherpur. Twenty seven are children among them.

Their repatriation followed a flag meeting between Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB) and Myanmar Immigration Department at a Border Guard Police camp in Myanmar's Maungdaw.

On the Bangladesh side, a 20-member BGB delegation, led by Lt Col Md Robiul Islam, director of 17 BGB Battalion of Cox's Bazar, attended the three-hour meeting starting at 10:30am.

Cox's Bazar police and the Criminal Investigation Department would inquire how the Bangladeshis were trafficked and who were involved in the crime, police said.

Then the victims would be sent back to their homes with the help of Bangladesh Red Crescent Society and the International Organization for Migration (IOM).

The 125 people are among the 1,000 Bangladeshis and Rohingyas of Myanmar, who were rescued while being trafficked into Malaysia by sea in May.

After verifying their identification, Bangladeshis are being deported.

As Thailand began a crackdown against human trafficking early May, traffickers had abandoned boats with migrants at sea. Some 4,000 people were rescued by the authorities of Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand later.

Afghan blasts kill 11, mostly kids

AFP, Herat

At least 11 people, most of them children, were killed in a series of explosions at an Afghan gas storage facility, which triggered a massive inferno in a nearby settlement for displaced people, officials said yesterday.

It was not immediately clear whether the blasts late Monday on the edge of the relatively peaceful western city of Herat were the result of an accident or caused by a militant attack.

"Around midnight (Monday) a gas tanker exploded which triggered blasts in a gas storage plant, killing 11 people and injuring 10 others," Herat police spokesman Abdul Rauf Ahmadi told AFP.

Tarique

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not named as accused in the First Information Report. However, Tarique and 20 others were shown fugitives in the charge sheet. So far, 11 people have been arrested in the case.

This is the first time that Tarique, elder son of BNP chief Khaleda Zia, has been charge-sheeted in a criminal case during the tenure of the Awami League. Currently, he is facing several corruption and defamation lawsuits as well.

Referring to the charge sheet, the SP said on January 21 BNP leaders and activists set a bus on fire near Tarique Zia intersection in Monipur Khaspara area of Gazipur during a hartal enforced by the opposition alliance.

Later, a sub-inspector of Joydevpur Police Station filed the case, under the special power act, accusing 18 named and 45 unnamed people.

According to Harun, police investigation found the involvement of Tarique, who has been staying in London since 2008, in a conspiracy to topple the government.

Tarique had met Badal and Rony at his London residence and planned to carry out subversive activities in different parts of the country, including in Gazipur, during the opposition's countrywide blockade and hartals after the January 5 elections, boycotted by the BNP-led alliance.

Meanwhile, the BNP yesterday said submitting a charge sheet against Tarique was "nothing but a farce".

"Tarique Rahman has not been involved in the country's local politics for long. Then how is it possible for him to be engaged in any subversive activities?" said BNP Spokesperson Asaduzzaman Ripon.

Talking to The Daily Star, he also alleged that the government was using law enforcement agencies to malign Tarique.

Criticising the Gazipur SP, Ripon claimed that the police official was actively involved in Chhatra League politics in the past and now working as per the government's wishes.



Cows being sent to Bangladesh through Indian border near Ghojadanga, Basirhat in North Chhabish Parganas of West Bengal last year. Top right, some Indian cows are being brought to Durakuti Hat in Lalmonirhat Sadar upazila on July 15 this year. However, in two weeks afterwards, things changed with BSF going tough against cattle smugglers. A road leading to the Durakuti cattle market was almost empty on July 29.

PHOTO: STAR

Loss on both sides

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years. And cows brought in from India through informal channels meet most of Bangladesh's demand for beef.

Along the porous border with West Bengal, cattle smuggling, often by criminal gangs, raises hundreds of millions of dollars annually in illicit profits.

The illegal trade is so lucrative that many locals risk their lives and indulge in it to make a fast buck.

According to Reuters, illegal cattle trade between the two countries accounts for \$600 million a year. However, the Christian Science Monitor put the figure at \$920 million, quoting experts.

If cattle supply from India comes to a halt, Bangladeshi consumers would not be the only sufferers. India will also be burdened with an additional expenditure of more than Rs 31,000 crore (Tk 38,769 crore) annually, as about 1.25 crore cattle have to be taken care of annually till they die naturally, accord-

ing to The Economic Times.

Many Indian nationalist and religious groups have been advocating a ban on cow slaughter in the Hindu-majority country. In Hindu culture, the cow is regarded as a sacred animal.

Since Hindu nationalist party BJP came to power in India last year, it took a bold stance against cow slaughter as well as cattle smuggling.

Days after advocating a nationwide ban on cow slaughter, Indian Home Minister Rajnath Singh on April 1 this year asked BSF jawans on the Indo-Bangla border to put a stop to cattle smuggling so that people in Bangladesh give up eating beef.

Sources said BSF jawans seized around 90,000 cattle and arrested some 400 smugglers in bordering districts of West Bengal in the last six months.

SK Tiwari, BSF deputy inspector general for South Bengal, confirmed the seizure and the arrest of smugglers, but didn't give any numbers.

Bhaskar Mukherjee, additional superintendent of police in Uttar Chhabish Pargana, said they were carrying out drives to arrest smugglers and seize cattle.

Idris Ali, Trinamool Congress lawmaker from Bashirhat of Uttar Chhabish Pargana, said West Bengal Chief Minister and party Chairperson Mamata Banerjee, on several occasions, had voiced her strong stance against cattle smuggling through the border.

Seeking anonymity, a cow smuggler at Bashirhat, a major cattle smuggling corridor, said he had been without income for the last few months.

"Truck owners and drivers are not willing to carry cows meant for transporting to Bangladesh as these trucks are seized and the drivers are arrested."

According to Bimal Pramanik, an independent researcher in Calcutta, most of the illegal trade takes place through West Bengal and more than

two million cows are smuggled to Bangladesh every year.

KG Moazzem, additional research director of Centre for Policy Dialogue, however, told The Daily Star that the number would be around 1.5 million.

Pramanik told the Christian Science Monitor that three out of every four cows slaughtered in Bangladesh are from India.

"If Indian cows don't reach Bangladeshi slaughterhouses, there will be a big crisis there," he said.

The impact is already visible in Bangladesh. The drop in supply has pushed up beef prices across the country.

The retail price of beef has gone up by Tk 80-100 a kg to Tk 400 at the capital's kitchen markets since April. State-run Trading Corporation of Bangladesh (TCB), however, puts the price at Tk 370-380 a kg.

In February, consumers could buy the same quantity of beef for Tk 280-

300, according to the TCB which monitors daily prices of commodities.

Syed Hasan Habib of Bengal Meat, a leading manufacturer of meat products, told Reuters recently that they were forced to close two processing units, as prices of cows had gone up by 40 percent over the last few months because of India's move.

Another senior executive of the company said they had to hike prices of all beef products because of rising prices of the red meat.

According to World Health Organisation, per capita meat consumption in Bangladesh is one of the lowest in the world.

Protein intake here is already far below the global average. Per capita annual intake of meat is around 80 kg in the world, while it is only 7.3 kg in Bangladesh.

If beef goes off the menu for most Bangladeshis, their protein intake would take a blow, say experts.

Extrajudicial killings

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response to a question at a pre-departure press conference.

Swayne, who came to Dhaka on August 23 on his first visit, however declined to comment on extrajudicial killings in Bangladesh. "I am not in a position to make that judgement on the basis of a three-day visit," he observed.

He however said, "I believe it is essential that those crimes are investigated and the perpetrators are brought to justice. So, it's for the government and police to ensure those crimes are investigated."

The British minister has concluded his three-day Bangladesh mission yesterday, visiting a garment factory, Korail slums at Banani and the UK-funded projects in Dhaka and Kurigram river islands to see how British support has been transforming lives of some of the poorest people in Bangladesh.

He met Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, Finance Minister AMA Muhith, Foreign Minister AH Mahmood Ali and the founder and Chairperson of BRAC Sir Fazle Hasan Abed.

At the press conference held at British High Commission Staff Amenities Centre at Baridhara, Swayne declared up to £3 million in humanitarian aid for flood victims in Bangladesh.

British High Commissioner in Dhaka Robert Gibson and head of DFID Sarah Cooke were present on the occasion.

Minister Swayne lauded Bangladesh's success in achieving the MDG targets and expressed the hope

that the country would equally be able to achieve the newly set Sustainable Development Goals where new issues like governance has been included.

He said new goals include the whole issues of peaceful society and a healthy civil society under the rule of law to bring the government to account. "We want a peaceful society with strong civil society, strong institutions including the press which are able to hold the government accountable," he added.

Responding to a question on the ICT Act, the UK minister said freedom of press, freedom of speech and space for civil society -- these are very important issues.

He declined to comment on the freedom of press and expression in Bangladesh.

"If any foreign politician came to me in London and told me 'you do it', I should be quite rude to him. As I said it is not for me as a foreign politician to come and tell you how to run your country. That is a solution that Bangladesh itself can find. That's for you," he insisted.

On arrest of a British national, he said he has no knowledge about the details of police investigation. "I don't know anything about the case. It's a police and judicial matter."

In reply to another question on the role of international community to increase price of Bangladesh readymade garment, Swayne said it is rare that anyone volunteers to pay high price.

But people are certainly ready to pay higher price for quality goods, he said and suggested that Bangladesh should take control of its supply chain.

Court orders judicial probe

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inquiry after extra judicial killings, but he couldn't recall whether those had yielded any results.

Arzu was the prime accused in a case filed with Hazaribagh Police Station for beating dead 16-year-old Raja on August 17 on allegations of stealing a laptop and mobile phones, according to locals.

Hours after Raja's death, Arzu was picked up by some Rab-2 personnel from Hazaribagh Park area, Rana told journalists. The next day, he was killed in what the elite force said was a gunfight.

Rana filed the case on Friday accusing three Rab officials -- Rab-2 Commanding Officer Lt Col SM Masud Rana, and Deputy Assistant Director Shahidur Rahman and Inspector Wahid of the Rab unit's Shia Masjid camp -- of abducting and killing his brother.

A Rab source named Ratan and three to four unnamed people were also accused in the case.

Following this, the Rab-2 CO was withdrawn from the unit and attached to the force's headquarters on Sunday.

After yesterday's court order, Masud Rana said he wanted justice for his brother's "murder".

"The case was filed not against any force or group, but against those who we think abused power," he told The Daily Star over the phone.

Contacted, Deputy Director Maj Maksudul Alam of the Rab's media wing refrained from making any comment on the court order, saying it was a judicial matter.

TAPOSH INSPIRED FILING THE CASE
Arzu's family initially didn't want to file any case after the killing though local BCL leaders pressed them for it, said the family members and the locals.

The BCL men insisted that Arzu was innocent and he was not accused in any case but the one filed for Raja Miah's death.

A day after the incident, local lawmaker Sheikh Fazle Noor Taposh visited Arzu's residence in Hazaribagh.

There, locals told the AL lawmaker that the Rab men had killed Arzu being "influenced" by a drug racket. They also said it was not a gunfight, but a cold-blooded murder.

Convinced by them, Taposh, also a nephew of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, asked the family to file a case and assured them that he personally would look into the killing, said a local whishing anonymity.

On August 22, the MP publicly accused the Rab of killing Arzu and demanded proper investigation into the incident.

"We will not tolerate killings of our leaders and activists in the name of so-called gunfights and those responsible for the killings will be brought to book," he said at a special prayer for Arzu.

'RAB TO STAY'
Law Minister Anisul Huq yesterday said the Rab would remain operational as it was now.

"Through its activities, the Rab has proved to people its necessity," the minister told reporters after a meeting with visiting UK Minister of State for International Development Desmond Swayne in the capital.

If anyone is murdered in the name of crossfire, actions will be taken against those responsible, he said. "The current government does not indulge in extra-judicial killings."

Between August 18 and 21, four leaders and activists of the ruling Awami League and its front organisations were

killed in "shootouts" involving police and the Rab.

According to the ASK, 72 people have died at the hands of law enforcers in "shootouts" in the first six months of this year.

As many as 1,612 people were killed in such incidents between January 2004 and August 2015. Of them, 610 have been killed since 2009 when the Awami League-led government assumed power.

Though the High Court has so far issued three rules on extra-judicial killings, it could not come up with a final decision.

"This was primarily because extra-judicial killings are not recognised under any law of the country," said Manzill Murshid who himself had filed a writ with HC in 2006 challenging the legality of such killings.

Billionaires

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Wang spent 16 years as a soldier before achieving billionaire status by amassing an empire as founder of the Dalian Wanda Group, a conglomerate that operates in real estate and entertainment.

His ambitions run far and wide, and recent investments have focused heavily on the entertainment sector. In 2013, Wang spent \$1.6 billion to buy British yacht maker Sunseeker, which has built vessels for James Bond films. Prior to that, Wang acquired US movie chain AMC Cinemas for \$2.6 billion in 2012.

Dalian Wanda is China's largest property owner with over 17 million square meters in its portfolio. The company operates shopping malls, luxury hotels and more.

2nd power plant

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working with Bangladesh Power Development Board on the current project, may be awarded the second project if it can successfully complete the first one, meeting sources said.

Local and international environmental organisations have already raised serious questions about the first coal-fired power plant in Rampal, saying it does not meet the minimum social and environmental standards.

The first plant is located just 14 kilometres upstream of the Sundarbans Reserve Forest, the world's largest remaining contiguous mangrove forest and a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

The government is increasingly moving towards producing more electricity from sources other than gas,

since the reserve for the cheapest and cleanest energy source is dwindling fast and will finish by 2030 according to a forecast.

The country has electricity generation capacity of 11,532MW with average daily generation standing at 7,500MW. The demand for electricity is increasing by 10 percent annually, according to official statistics.

The government forecast that the electricity demand will go up to 18,838MW in 2021 and 33,708MW in 2030.

Domestic and imported coal will produce 50 percent of the total electricity while 25 percent of power will come from domestic gas and imported liquefied natural gas and the rest from oil, nuclear and renewable energy, according to the government's Power

System Master Plan.

The second Rampal plant involving Tk 6,553 crore is one of the five projects Ecne approved at the meeting at the National Economic Council.

Other Ecne-approved projects

Ecne yesterday approved a Tk 54-crore project proposal to construct a road to Myanmar in order to strengthen economic relations with the neighbouring country.

The proposed road to be named Bangladesh-Myanmar Friendship Road will pass through Balukhali in Cox's Bazar's Ukhia upazila and Ghumdhum in Naikkhanchharhi upazila of Bandarban district. It is expected to be completed by June 2017.

The road will have four lanes, the planning minister said, adding bridges

on the road would have the same number of lanes.

As part of the project, Bangladesh will construct a 23-km road inside Myanmar while China will finance another 117-km road inside the country, said Kamal.

Once completed, the road will help Bangladesh forge economic, social, cultural and political relationships with not only Myanmar but also China and other nations of Southeast Asia, officials said.

Ecne approved another proposal to build a sewage treatment plant in the capital's Khilgaon at a cost of Tk 3,318 crore, two-thirds of which will be financed by China.

The Chinese government has already nominated Hydro China Corporation for Dasherbandi Sewage

Treatment Plant scheduled to be completed in 2019.

For the project, 60 acres of land will be acquired in Gazaria area, Khilgaon.

Once the plant is built, sewage from Gulshan, Banani, Baridhara, Bashundhara, Tejgaon, Moghbazar, Eskaton, and parts of Dhanmondi and Kalabagan will be treated using modern techniques, according to the proposal from the planning ministry.

At present, sewage from the areas is released untreated into the Balu and Shitalakkhya rivers, posing a threat to river ecology.

Ecne also approved another project proposal involving Tk 482.10 crore to improve the living standards of people through proper management of water resources in Faridpur, Rajbari, Magura and Gopalganj districts.