

Loss-ridden railway

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This is the second time the government is raising the fares in four years.
Termining the hike logical, Railway Secretary Feroz Salah Uddin said train fares had not been raised timely in the past in accordance with the hikes of fuel prices and the salaries and benefits of railway employees.

"We are not thinking about making profits. Our target is to minimise the losses," he told The Daily Star, adding that they would propose the government for minimum fare hikes every year, instead of increasing it after a long gap.

Apart from reducing the losses, he claimed that the hike would also help improve services.

After about 20 years, fares of both passenger and freight were raised by 50 percent in October, 2012, to improve services and reduce railway's loss, which was Tk 800 crore a year then.

But the losses kept on piling up due to high fuel prices, mismanagement, passengers travelling without tickets, and corruption in the railway.

The losses would increase further due to recruitment of several thousand employees and the implementation of a new pay-scale for government officials and employees.

Talking to this newspaper, many passengers condemned the move.

Israt Jahan, who regularly travels between Dhaka and Chittagong, said overall train services had not improved as promised by the authorities while

hiking the fare in 2012.
She believes passengers would not get the benefit of planned fare hike unless services were improved with adequate number of modern trains and their operation on time.
Experts and some former railway officials said fare hike should not be the only way to increase revenue and that authorities should open new avenues of income.

They said the railway could easily earn a lot just by operating freight trains on different routes, especially the Dhaka-Chittagong port. This opportunity was not being availed as the railway lacked adequate lines, trains, engines, and wagons, they added.

Currently, 339 passenger trains and 30 freight trains operate on 38 routes across the country.

They suggested that the authorities stop passengers from travelling without tickets, and prevent system loss and ticket scalping.

A number of railway development projects were underway but their implementation pace was slow for which rail services did not improve, they said.

The railway secretary said they were buying new carriages, wagons and locomotives to improve overall services.

In the JS body meeting, the parliamentary watchdog recommended setting up a specialised university on rail communications and setting up railway engineering department in government



With the Boro season already underway, farmers planting paddy in a field at Baniafair village under Tangail Sadar upazila on Monday. PHOTO: MIRZA SHAKIL

Thank you

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takes just a few minutes," said Amir Hossain, an NGO worker.

On December 29, DNCC Mayor Anisul Huq officially declared the road from Shyamoli to Aminbazar free from illegal parking. Since then, the situation has improved drastically.

Visiting the area on Sunday, this correspondent found the road almost clear. No bus, truck, or pick-ups were seen parked on the road. There were some warning signs on the road: "stopping here is completely prohibited".

Long distance buses were seen inside the terminal.

However, some Manikganj-bound buses were seen stopping for a while near the underpass to take passengers.

A few city buses were also seen hurriedly dropping off and picking passengers in front of Gabtoli Bus Terminal. However, on the other side of the road, many city buses were seen waiting for passengers in a haphazard manner and competing with each other to take passengers.

Although transport leaders complied with the mayor's initiative, they on December 29 demanded separate terminals for buses and trucks.

Talking to The Daily Star, Mayor Anisul Huq said the process would take several years to implement, as the matter is still at the policymaking level.

The DNCC mayor has so far freed several areas in the capital from illegal parking. The areas are: Gabtoli-Aminbazar, Uttara-Abdullahpur, Pallabi bus stand, Tejgaon Industrial Area and Tejgaon Truck Stand, Mohammadpur, Mohakhali Bus Stand and Karwan Bazar.

However, the eviction drives were not very smooth. Anisul faced obstruction from transport workers while conducting drives. A dash between transport workers and police erupted while the mayor himself was leading a drive to free the busy road in front of Tejgaon Truck Terminal from illegal parking on November 30.

The obstructions, however, could not deter the DNCC mayor from achieving his goal of creating a better liveable Dhaka. He had successfully cleared the road from illegal parking.

To bring the metropolitan bus service under discipline and to ease commuter's suffering, Anisul said he plans to bring down the number of city bus companies to five.

In reply to a question, he said they were planning to bring 3,000 new city buses, including 1,000 air-conditioned buses, soon. "These buses would operate on five routes in

Strike, talks go on

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37 public universities with about 12,400 teachers and 2.4 lakh students.

"We will not back away from our movement. Our movement will go on and we will continue discussions to solve the crisis," Farid Uddin told The Daily Star after the meeting.

Nahid said they had an open and fruitful discussion with the teachers and that he expected a solution before long.

"We are moving towards a solution to the crisis. I hope it would be possible to solve the problem through discussions," the minister told this correspondent.

Federation Secretary General Prof ASM Maksud Kamal said the minister wanted to know the implications of removing selection grade and time scale from the 8th pay scale, and they explained those to him.

"He [the minister] wanted to know our proposals to solve the crisis. We replied that we have nothing new to say. He told us that he agreed with our demands," he said.

The federation began the indefinite strike on Monday, protesting the "government inaction" in addressing their demand for removing the "pay disparity" with bureaucrats.

Prof Farid Uddin teaches economics and Prof Maksud disaster science and management at Dhaka University.

Teachers have been protesting the 8th pay scale since May last year, pressing for a four-point demand, including a separate pay scale for public university teachers.

The other demands are parity between senior professors and senior secretaries, and between professors and secretaries in salaries and allowances; upgradation of teachers' status

in the warrant of precedence, and equalisation of the provisions for cars and foreign and government scholarships and allowances between teachers and bureaucrats.

Things took a turn for the worse, after the government issued a gazette on the pay scale on December 15 without mentioning the selection grade and time scale.

Frustrated, the teachers staged protests at their universities. On January 7, they gave an ultimatum for the government to meet their demands by January 10.

As no such move came, they started an indefinite work stoppage programme on Monday.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina criticised the teachers and asked them not to wage a movement, but in vain.

Meanwhile, academic activities at all these universities have come to a

near halt, causing concerns among the students.

"Our final exams were supposed to begin today [yesterday], but now we're uncertain about the exams," said Shamima Yeasmin, a master's student of philosophy at Chittagong University.

Like on Monday, faculties and departments of almost all the universities looked deserted and no classes were held yesterday.

At Dhaka University, teachers did not take classes or hold midterm or other class tests, but conducted the ongoing semester and other yearly final examinations.

At a press briefing at DU yesterday morning, Farid Uddin protested the prime minister's remarks.

"The prime minister is not getting information from a neutral source. That's why she made such comments,"

he said.
At a programme on Monday, Hasina expressed her disappointment about the teachers' demand for the same status as secretaries. "If you [teachers] want status equal to secretaries, just resign and become a secretary by sitting examinations through the PSC. Then there will be no problem."

Referring to the PM's comments, Prof Farid said, "Teachers are very embarrassed, disappointed and surprised to hear prime minister's remarks. I am sure that if she heard our voices, she would not have made such biased comments."

He also claimed that despite several requests for a meeting with the premier for the last eight months, the teachers got no response.

The PM can solve the problem easily, he noted, urging her to sit with the teachers.

Hasina warns troublemakers

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20-party alliance.
The BNP-Jamaat men, who "murdered people and destroyed public properties by arson attacks", must be punished, she said.

The PM also blasted BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia for raising questions about the number of martyrs in 1971. She warned that no scoffing at the Liberation War and freedom fighters would be tolerated, and urged people to unite against it.

Earlier on December 21, Khaleda said there have been debates over the actual number of martyrs. "It is said that such and such lakh people embraced martyrdom during the war. What is the actual number of martyrs?" questioned the BNP chief.

In yesterday's address, the PM also spoke about the recently-held municipal polls, incidents of militant acts, war crimes trial and the government's future plans.

When Bangladesh is moving forward through united efforts, anti-liberation forces and their collaborators are trying to create instability and chaos in the country, she said.

"The main target of the defeated forces in the Liberation War is to

promote militancy and save war criminals, mass murderers and Razakars-Al-Badrs."

The PM asserted that no one would be able to hinder the war crimes trial.

Pointing to the BNP and its ally Jamaat, she said people boycotted those who do not want war crimes trial.

On the December 30 municipal election, she said, "The polls were freer, fairer and more peaceful than those in the past."

"You [People] have elected your candidates, and rejected militants and arson attackers. I thank you for this."

Referring to the Gallup hope index, the PM said Bangladesh is the most hopeful nation after Switzerland in the world.

Seeking support from all, she said, "Taking the hopeful and confident countrymen along, I will turn Bangladesh into a middle-income country by 2021, and a prosperous and developed nation by 2041."

"We are a victorious nation. No one will be able to subdue us," added Hasina.

GOVT'S SUCCESS STORIES highlighted by the PM

- Bangladesh ranks **45th** in terms of GDP size
- Per capita income now **\$1,314** from **\$543** in 2006
- Poverty rate falls to **22.4pc** from **41.5pc**
- 5 crore** people move to middle income group from low income group
- Remittance income rises to **\$15.2b** in 2015 from **\$4.8b** in 2006
- Foreign currency reserve exceeds **\$27b**
- 35.75 lakh** people employed abroad in last 7 year
- Extreme poverty now **7.9pc** from **24.2pc** in 2006
- Power generation rises to **14,077 MW**
- Average life expectancy now **71** from **66.5** in 2006
- Gas production reaches **2,728m** cubic metres daily in 2015 from 1,600 mcm in 2006
- Implementation of the LBA with India
- Salaries of civil, military employees increased up to **123pc**

GREECE FARM SHOOTING 30 Bangladeshi victims go to European court

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Some 30 aggrieved Bangladeshis, who were shot and injured on a strawberry farm in Greece in 2013, filed a case with the European Court of Human Rights in Brussels last week over Greece's alleged violation of human rights.

Tarikul Islam, minister and head of chancery at the Bangladesh Mission in Greece, yesterday confirmed this to The Daily Star over the phone.

"We have received information that some aggrieved Bangladeshis filed a case with the European Court of Human Rights to seek justice for the alleged violation of their rights. We will soon clarify our stance on this," he said.

Zainul Abedin, president of All European Bangladesh Association, yesterday told the BBC Bangla Service that the Bangladeshis had filed the case as a Greek court acquitted the accused people and had not delivered any order regarding compensation for the victims.

Meanwhile, the Greek Council for Refugees (GCR) said the migrants, who worked in strawberry plantations in Nea Manolada, submitted the complaint over violation of the Article 4 of the European Convention on Human Rights, which outlaws forced labour and slavery.

"It is the first time such a case has been filed against Greece, and the first time that the large-scale phenomenon of forced labour is to be addressed at a European level," reports Moscow-based news agency Sputnik International, quoting a GCR press release.

"... Four international human rights organisations and an academic institution have announced their plan to support the lawsuit. The Greek authorities are invited on January 20, 2016, to comment on the breach of obligations under Article 4," it added.

Around 200 migrants, mostly from Bangladesh and Pakistan, worked in the plantations. They protested against a six-month long delay in wages and went on a strike against the owner of the farm in April 2013.

The farm owner, Nicolas Vagela Kos, threatened that he would not pay the arrears if the demonstrators did not go back to work. But the agitating Bangladeshis refused to do so until their arrears were paid.

Then two staff of the farm opened fire on the workers, leaving 32 Bangladeshis injured.

On information, the Greek police rushed to spot and arrested the culprits. Four of them were sentenced to different terms.

In July 2014, two of the plantation's employees were sentenced to 14 years and seven months' and eight years and seven months' imprisonment for illegal use of firearms and inflicting bodily harm. However, the indicted were later allowed to pay monetary fines instead of serving the terms, adds Sputnik International.

Around 25,000 to 30,000 Bangladeshis are working in different sectors, especially in farming and garment, in Greece, according to the Bangladesh Mission in Greece.

Asset now burden

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"I had a happy life with my wife and children. But everything has been ravaged. I have now become a burden for them," the 36-year-old told this correspondent, staring blankly at his burnt palms.

He is a living example of what happens when politics becomes a mere game of power where the lives and properties of people are simply expendable.

On February 7 last year, trucker Mostafa, accompanied by his assistant Hashib, was returning to his hometown Bogra after unloading a shipment at Ahmedpur of Natore. It was night already.

The BNP and its allies had been enforcing nationwide blockades and shutdowns, marked by an unprecedented extent of violence and bloodshed, for about a month now. They were protesting the January 5 parliamentary elections they had boycotted and trying to unseat Sheikh Hasina's government

that assumed power for the second time in a row through the polls in 2014.

As Mostafa reached Rupihara on Bogra-Natore road in Bogra's Shajahanpur upazila, suspected blockaders firebombed his truck. The blaze killed Hashib and left Mostafa critically burnt.

The next five months he spent in hospital beds, writhing in pain and fighting for life.

If those sufferings were excruciating for him, what followed was unbearable.

"I now need to take others' help for everyday things. I cannot even wear my clothes properly on my own," said Mostafa, heaving a sigh.

"People feel repulsed by my scars. I wear extra clothes to cover them. People do not want to sit beside me in the bus."

Around 19 years ago, Mostafa, then a well-built youth, married the love of his life -- Golapi Begum. They later

became happy parents of four children. He was living at Kazipur of Sirajganj district at the time and used to drive private cars and minibuses.

Two years ago, he started driving heavy-duty trucks for a better income and he did find it.

He soon bought a small piece of land at Chhoto Kumira of Bogra town, built a tin-roofed house on it and started living there.

He would earn enough to bear all the expenses. Life was full of happiness.

"But the petrol bombs shattered all my dreams," Mostafa said before breaking down in tears, something he was doing often while talking to The Daily Star.

"I cannot work anymore. I do not earn a single penny. Is this called living? Isn't death better than this?"

With the lone breadwinner of the family crippled, his wife now works as a domestic help and his eldest son Ibrahim, 18, pulls rickshaws.

"It is on their income that my family survives."

Mostafa managed to marry off his elder daughter Nurjahan, 16, last year by taking loans from relatives and neighbours.

But the worries about the future of two other children -- Nurunnabi, 8, and Nurunnahar, 6 -- upset him.

"Doctors have said I need further treatment. I need money for that as well."

Mostafa said he did not get any financial aid from the government. Some organisations and individuals gave him around Tk 60,000.

While he now desperately seeks help from the government, his wife wants something more.

"Those who did this [pointing to Mostafa's face] ... those who are responsible for my husband's present condition ... I want exemplary punishment for them," said Golapi Begum, her voice choked with a mixture of pent-up rage and insufferable pain.

Body found in container

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, Chittagong

Police yesterday recovered the body of a young man from inside a container at a container depot in the city.

The deceased was identified as Md Makhles, 28, a temporary worker of the depot. He was from Chandpur.

Md Alamgir, officer-in-charge of Patenga Police Station, said the authorities of Vertex Offdock Logistic Services located at Kathgor caught Makhles and another worker Mamun on charge of "theft" around 2:00am yesterday.

Makhles and Mamun were tied and confined to a container, said the OC, adding that, according to the authorities of the depot, Makhles "commit-

ted" suicide with a rope inside the container around 10:30am.

"The authorities informed us about the incident around 4:30pm. We rushed to the spot and recovered the hanging body from inside the container," he said.

Asked if it might be a murder, the OC said they were investigating the incident.

Police detained Mamun, who said he was asleep and woke up when the security supervisor opened the container door, said the OC. Both the security supervisor and Mamun claimed to have seen Makhles hanging from a hook of the container with the rope, with which he was tied earlier