

The sisters indomitable

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training course at the capital's Teachers' Training College (TTC) on digital content development.

The training, first of its kind in Bangladesh, started on January 4 and was jointly organised by Teaching Quality Improvement (TQI-II) -- a project under the Directorate of Secondary and Higher Education -- and Access to Information (a2i) Programme of the Prime Minister's Office. The TTC facilitated the training sessions while Young Power in Social Action (YPSA) and Bangladesh Visually Impaired People's Society provided technical support.

Hailing from Azampur village in Patia, the four sisters with their lone brother were raised in Chittagong city.

Their father Nasiruddin Chowdhury and mother Shamima Akter Chowdhury are cousins. When the first child, Habiba, was born, their neighbours started jeering at them. Then the second child, their brother, came and he had vision. But after the birth of Salima, the third child, the family moved to Chittagong city to get rid of gossip-mongers and find ways to ensure their children's education.

"Our parents were determined to ensure good education for us so that we can be established in society," said Taslima.

She said their father had struggled a lot to find the best educational institutes for them.

They all completed their primary education from the Government School for the Blind and the Deaf in Muradpur of Chittagong.

Tanzila, who teaches at Mohsina Model Government Primary School, said she had studied at Rahmania High School while the other three had their secondary education from a school at Bangladesh Forest Research Institute. After completing their HSC, they all got enrolled at Chittagong University.

Apart from formal education, they also had training on computer and information technology, a sector where a huge number of teachers are still needed.

"Our parents tried their best so that we can have our own identity in the midst of sighted people," said Taslima.

But the challenges were too many.

When their parents had taken them to schools for admission, the school authorities did not want to enrol them. They had to make efforts to convince them.

The next challenge was availability of books.

"It was one of the biggest challenges. Books for our studies were not available," said Taslima.

They got Braille textbooks only during



Ummay Tanzila Chowdhury, one of the four visually impaired sisters, from Patia of Chittagong. She is now doing a masters in sociology at Chittagong University.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

their primary education. At the secondary, higher secondary and tertiary levels, they had to study without any Braille books. So they had to rely solely on class lectures or turned a few courses into Braille books on their own.

She said they had to record the class lectures or seek help from peers for their studies. "We continued our studies amid a lot of hurdles."

Habiba even faced problems getting jobs initially. She was not allowed initially to sit for the recruitment test for primary school teachers around six years ago. The problem was solved later.

Taslima and Tanzila, however, did not face such difficulties.

They said that there was one more problem they faced at work. Initially their colleagues did not accept them warmly. But things started to change when the other teachers saw them giving classes like sighted people and realised they were also competent and qualified for the job.

Taslima, who joined the school in December 2013, said she had become a popular teacher in her school.

"Now whenever I need any assistance, many of my students come forward to help," she said.

Suman Das, a teacher of her school, said, "Though she [Taslima] is visually impaired, she knows more than us about many things, especially about using computer."

Sumon also praised her for her ability to discuss a topic nicely and thoroughly. She mostly gives classes on narrative subjects like Bangla and environment. "She is doing very well," Suman told The Daily Star recently.

All three of them were also very active at the digital content development training.

Their trainer Mirza Mohammad Didarul Anam said the sisters were very keen to learn how to develop digital content for their students and their progress was very impressive.

European Parliament delegation due today

DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENT

A four-member European Parliament (EP) delegation arrives in Dhaka early today to witness the state of political rights, freedom of expression, labour rights and the overall human rights situation in Bangladesh.

Diplomatic sources said the team, led by Jean Lambert (Green Party-UK), chair of the delegation for relations with the countries of South Asia of the European Parliament, will convey to the Bangladeshi leadership and interlocutors the EP's priorities on democracy and human rights in Bangladesh.

They said the delegation will give particular importance on freedom of expression in Bangladesh.

Dhaka is considering the visit significant in the light of the overall political situation in the country. During the visit, the delegation will raise the democracy, freedom of expression and human rights issues about which they are concerned.

During their three-day stay here, the delegation members will meet Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia, Commerce Minister Tofail Ahmed, Foreign Minister AH Mahmood Ali, State Minister for Chittagong Hill Tracts Affairs Bir Bahadur Ushwe Sing, Chairman of Bangladesh Human Rights Commission Prof Mizanur Rahman, senior politicians, business persons, civil society representatives and journalists.

Three other members of the delegation are: Richard Howitt (Labour Party-UK), vice-chair of the delegation for relations with the countries of South Asia, Ivan Stefanec (Christian Democrats- Slovakia), who is the member of the Committee on Internal Market and Consumer Protection and Delegation for relations with the countries of South Asia, and Sajjad Karim (United Kingdom Conservative Party), who is the member of Committee on International Trade.

Syrians 'need our help not our vengeance'

Says Canadian PM

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

Canada is set to cease air strikes against IS by the end of February but will increase its humanitarian aid contributions to the region instead.

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, who was elected to office in November, said his government will end its bombing missions in the war-torn region by 22 February with six fighter jets being withdrawn. Canada will, however, keep two surveillance planes in the region and triple the number of soldiers training Kurdish troops in northern Iraq.

UK to look into ways to ease visa process

Assures new envoy

DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENT

The United Kingdom would look into ways to ease the visa process for Bangladeshis.

Newly appointed British High Commissioner to Bangladesh Alison Blake made the assurance during her call on Foreign Minister AH Mahmood Ali yesterday.

The minister asked the British envoy to ease the visa process for Bangladeshis and the UK envoy assured him of "every possible support" to further ease the visa process, said a press release.

Blake talked about bilateral issues and areas of future cooperation for taking the relations to new heights

during the meeting yesterday.

Newly appointed Indian High Commissioner Harsh Vardhan Shringla also met the minister yesterday.

He said he had a good meeting with the minister and sought guidance, advice, and blessings from him for implementing his "mandate", which is to deepen and strengthen India's bilateral relations with Bangladesh.

In response to a question on water sharing issue, the Indian envoy told reporters that it was a "courtesy call" and this issue would be discussed separately, indicating that the water resources minister was the appropriate person to discuss the issue with.

UP polls timetable likely tomorrow

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The Election Commission is likely to announce tomorrow the schedule for Union Parishad polls to be held in around 700 UPs in the third week of March.

The commission would finalise the schedule today at a meeting among the chief election commissioner (CEC), other EC commissioners and top officials of the EC Secretariat, sources said.

Polls to the rest of around 4,500 UPs would be held in phases later, said the EC officials.

For the first time, elections to the chairman posts in the UPs are going to be held on partisan lines. The EC has already revised the electoral code of conduct to that end and would issue a gazette notification today.

As per the revised code, ministers and lawmakers will be barred from joining any kind of electioneering in the UP polls.

The law ministry has meanwhile scrapped the EC's proposal to have the authority to cancel candidacy of chairman and councillor aspirants for violating the electoral code.

The EC last month incorporated a provision in the draft amendment to the electoral code of conduct with that proposal. The commission later sent the draft of the revised code to the law ministry for vetting.

But the ministry dropped the provision while scrutinising the draft and sent it back to the commission yesterday on completion of the vetting.

"I think the commission should have the power to cancel candidacy. It will help the commission to curb violation of electoral rules by candidates and their supporters," said a deputy secretary of the EC Secretariat asking not to be identified.

The commission enjoys such power

in case of parliament, city corporation, upazila parishad and municipality polls. The UP polls should not be different, the EC official told The Daily Star yesterday.

Election Commissioner Zabeed Ali has meanwhile said they would give top most priority to maintaining law and order during the polls.

Yemen clashes kill 6

AFP, Aden

Clashes yesterday between Yemeni forces and al-Qaeda militants in Aden killed at least six people, including four members of the same family, security officials and witnesses said.

Al-Qaeda controls part of the southern port city which has become the temporary headquarters of the government of President Abedrabbo Mansour Hadi as it battles to retake large parts of Yemen from Shia Huthi rebels.

Forces loyal to Hadi laid siege early yesterday to Aden's central Mansura district and clashed with militants, while coalition Apache helicopters provided air cover, security officials in the city said.

The operation was part of a bid to drive the jihadists out of the city.

Four members of one family were killed when a rocket hit their house in the neighbourhood of Kabouta near Mansura, a relative said.

The victims were Rowais Othman Saleh, his wife and two daughters, the relative said, adding that a third daughter aged five was wounded.

The source of the rocket was not clear.

At least two gunmen were also killed in the fighting, officials said.

Coming back to life

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In real life, she is Ayesha Siddika, 35. She chose to reveal her identity and tell her story in an interview with The Daily Star. Her coming out in the light is her protest against the social exclusion and constant insults she has been facing since her return to Bangladesh in December.

"Since I came back, no one except my three daughters and my mother talks to me properly," she said.

"Other people see me as a fallen woman. My in-laws, my own relatives talk behind my back. Neighbours do not allow their children to play with my daughters.

"But I want to tell everyone that no matter how they treat me, I want to love everyone and work for tortured and abused woman of my country; teach them how to stand on their own two feet and earn a living," said Ayesha, a budding poet and artist.

Born into a poor family in Kachua, Jessore, Ayesha was married off at 12, before she could complete Class eight.

In 2007, Ayesha took tailoring training at the Youth Development Training Centre in Jessore and on completion of her course began working as a trainer at her home. She also started a business of making and selling baby-dresses at her home in Rajarhat, where she lived with her husband and three daughters.

"These work paid for my daughters' education, which was not possible with my husband's earnings," she said.

"I always had this dream of becoming a renowned poet and often tried my hand at poetry," she told this correspondent at The Daily Star office yesterday.

In 2001, then 20, she began to frequent a literary soiree at the Jessore Institute Public Library, where her interactions with noted local poets improved her writing.

Her poems began to appear in a magazine of the institute and one of her poems, Bihangya Nari (Bird Woman), was selected for the 2014 collection edition of the magazine.

"My husband did not like all this, but he never stopped me either. He was indifferent to my talents and wishes," she said.

Last year, the two of them decided to visit India for treatment of a headache that often troubled Ayesha. But when a fight broke out between the couple, Ayesha went to India alone on May 15.

Immediately after crossing the Benapole border, she began to miss her daughters and started crying sitting by a road. It was at this stage that she fell into the hands of traffickers.

"A stranger came and asked me what was wrong," she said, "He talked nicely and consoled me so much that within an hour I ended up telling him all my problems."

The man assured Ayesha of tailoring and beautician jobs in India with much higher pays. He advised her to go to Bonga rail station, where another member of the gang, posing as a relative of the first man, met her.

The second man got on the train with her to go to Shialdah, where she never reached.

"After we crossed Dum Dum, he lit a cigarette and the smell of a gas began to give me a headache and soon I fell into a deep sleep," she said.

When Ayesha woke up, she found herself locked in a bathroom without her luggage, passport, money and mobile phone. She remained a captive there for three days and survived by drinking tap water.

On the fourth day, a couple opened the bathroom door and told her they had bought her as a sex worker.

They blackmailed Ayesha with threats of uploading on the internet the obscene pictures they took of her and telling her daughters about her condition. The physical and mental torture continued for four more days till she gave in.

"When I agreed, they stopped locking me up in the toilet," she said, recounting how she escaped on the eighth day of her captivity, when the residents of that flat in Kerala's Khozidhoke were all asleep.

At a nearby hospital, she sought help from a nurse who took her to the police station. From there she was taken to Mahila Mandiram, a shelter home for destitute and trafficked women.

Then started Ayesha's long wait for coming home. "I did not receive any help from Bangladesh government. Probably they did not know. There are so many women like us in many shelter homes in India, perhaps it is not possible for the government to know."

At the shelter centre, she met Anoop Gangadharan, head of a Kerala-based NGO, Arms of Joy, which works for destitute women and children. He heard her story and took initiative to translate into Malayalam and publish the poems she wrote during her stay in Mahila Mandiram.

The NGO also organised an exhibition of pictures painted by Ayesha during her stay at another shelter home Nirbhaya, where she was shifted after she attempted to commit suicide.

"My husband had gone to India in September to bring me back, but when he heard everything he came home alone," she said, recalling the betrayal she felt.

In November, a Kerala court ordered the authorities to send her back to Bangladesh. The order followed her deposition in a case against the sex racket that included the Indian couple and another five men who sexually abused Ayesha during the captivity.

"The collector of Khozidhoke using his official jurisdiction arranged for my return in December," she said.

She also expressed her gratitude for the Indian authorities and NGOs for helping her and giving her courage during the "most distressful time" of her life.

Ayesha now wants to publish "Aphoto Ami" in Bangla and another book she is writing on philosophies of life. "If 2,000 copies can be sold in India, as far as I know, won't at least five copies of my book be read by my fellow countrymen?" she asked.

Govt to bear

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Health Services (DGHS), said nobody infected with Zika virus entered the country after February 1.

DGHS Director General Deen Mohammad Noorul Haque said if people coming from abroad are diagnosed with Zika virus, they will be sent to an isolation ward set up at the Shahjalal International Airport and be quarantined.

Officials of the health ministry said they took precautionary measures at air, water and land ports in the country.

The government strengthened surveillance at the ports and installed web cameras at the Shahjalal airport to screen travellers coming from the countries affected by Zika epidemic, they added.

The Zika virus has been suspected of being responsible for birth defects in Brazil.

In South America, panic ran high as infections of pregnant women by the virus were thought to be causing microcephaly meaning the babies were born with a small head and brain.

There is no vaccine for the disease, the WHO says.

WHO of South-East Asian region that includes Bangladesh has been urged to strengthen surveillance and take measures to prevent the spread of Zika infection.