

Madrasa board sees pass rate drop

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Although Madrasa Education Board has topped the list of 10 education boards in terms of pass rate for the 11th consecutive year, the rate has dropped by two percentage point on the previous year to 88.19 percent.

However, the number of GPA-5 achievers increased by 68 percent on the previous year to 2,414. Of them, 1,767 are males and 647 females.

Last year, 1,435 students scored the top grade.

A total of 89,603 students took the Alim exams this year, up from 82,558 in the previous year. Of them, 79,020 came out successful.

Out of 2,706 madrasas, 585 achieved 100 percent success rate while five got zero pass rate.

TECH EDUCATION BOARD
Bangladesh Technical Education Board stood second among the 10 education boards in terms pass rate this year.

Although the pass rate declined by about one percent compared to last year, the number of students and GPA-5 achievers increased this year. Under this board, 84.57 percent students came out successful this year against last year's 85.58 percent.

A total of 1,02,248 students took the exams this year, up from 98,296 last year. Of them, 86,469 examinees passed and 6,587 secured GPA-5.

Students from 1,675 technical institutions took the exams. The number of technical institutions with 100 percent success rate dropped this year to 158 from last year's 183.

Like the previous year, no institution got zero pass rate.

Hajj flight trouble to end soon

Says Menon

BSS, Dhaka

Civil Aviation Minister Rashed Khan Menon yesterday assured that the problems related to the Hajj pilgrims coincided with cancellation of flights would be resolved soon.

"There would be no sufferings to the Hajj pilgrims in the coming days. We are facing some problems due to the online system as it was introduced here for the first time," he said after an inter-ministerial meeting on "Fair and Smooth Hajj Management".

The minister said some decisions were made in the meeting in presence of Religious Affairs Minister Motiur Rahman. They include: the Hajj Agencies of Bangladesh was asked to submit to the ministry of religious affairs within four-five days a list of pilgrims dividing them into 50 people in each group, names of Moallems (helpers), numbers of Hajj pilgrims enlisted with respective Hajj agencies and addresses of houses rented in Saudi Arabia for the pilgrims.

"This list will be sent to Biman Bangladesh Airlines and Saudia Arabian Airlines and the sale of tickets will be as per the list ...," he added.

An official release yesterday afternoon said Bangladesh will write to Saudia seeking more slots for carrying pilgrims.

The meeting was told that visas of 69,451 Hajj pilgrims have already been processed and as of yesterday a total of 41,840 pilgrims had left Dhaka.

A total of 1,01,758 Bangladeshis are expected to perform Hajj this year. Biman and Saudia have been selected by the government for carrying the pilgrims.

No changes

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posts by the chairperson," a standing committee member told The Daily Star after the first meeting of the new standing committee.

Khaleda convened the meeting at her Gulshan office around 9:15pm where 11 members of the 17 were present. Two posts of the 19-member body are yet to be announced.

Meeting sources said those "qualified leaders" who did not get post in the committee might get the vacant posts.

On August 6, BNP announced its fully-fledged executive and standing committees, nearly four and a half months after its national council on March 19.

The meeting sources said they also discussed the Ramapl Power Project and within a few days they would announce a protest programme.

The meeting also finalised the framework for grassroots bodies, including district, union, upazila, metropolitan units.

Suspend move to hike gas tariff

Energy experts call on BERC at public hearing

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Opposing the government's move to hike gas prices, rights groups and energy experts yesterday suggested Bangladesh Energy Regulatory Commission (BERC) should suspend the initiative until the Energy and Mineral Resources Division settled the supplementary duty and VAT issues.

Taking part in the public hearing on the tariff hike proposals of gas distributors, they questioned collecting 55 percent supplementary duty (SD) and VAT from the gas tariff.

The eight-day public hearing ended yesterday at the BERC in the capital.

Distributors have proposed increasing the prices by up to 94.89 percent for different categories of consumers.

From the gas tariff, the government collects 40 percent as SD, 15 percent as VAT, 11.22 percent for the Gas Development Fund (GDF), 26.29 percent for Energy Security Fund, and 3 percent as advance income tax (AIT).

During the hearing, representatives of Petrobangla said the gas distribution, transmission and production companies would get Tk 840 crore out of their total income of Tk 8,000 crore if the proposed tariff was implemented.

It means over Tk 7,000 crore would go to government exchequer in the name of SD, VAT, AIT, GDF, and Energy Security Fund.

Prof Shamsul Islam, adviser of Consumer Association of Bangladesh, said the public hearing should be suspended as the Energy and Mineral Resources Division was yet to settle the SD and VAT issues.

He said there was no accountability in using the GDF fund. "There would have been no necessity to hike gas tariff if the government had utilised the GDF fund properly."

Energy expert Prof Nurul Islam said Petrobangla was facing fund crisis as it set gas tariff without adequate transparency.

Khondkar Saleque Sufi, an internationally acclaimed energy expert from Bangladesh, said gas production cost would increase if the tariff was hiked.

Ruhul Hossain Prince, representative of the Communist Party of Bangladesh, said there was no reason for hiking the gas tariff as no impact assessment has been done so far.

BERC Chairman AR Khan said it would fix the gas tariff considering the overall costs and its impact on consumers.

"The BERC would announce the [new] tariff as soon as possible. We won't announce any unjust tariff hike," he assured.

Gas distributors have proposed increasing the charge for double-burner stoves in households to Tk 1,250 a month and single-burners to Tk 1,000, up from Tk 650 and Tk 450. Gas tariff was last raised in September last year.

Earlier, the BERC's technical evaluation committee rejected the proposal of raising the gas distribution charges of Titas Gas Transmission and Distribution Company Ltd and Gas Transmission Company Ltd as the current tariffs were enough to meet their operational costs.

Trade bodies including Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Dhaka; Dhaka Chamber of Commerce and Industry; and Bangladesh Textile Mills Association opposed the government move, saying it would increase the cost of doing business.

The BNP also termed the gas price hike proposal anti-people and warned of an agitation if the tariff went up.

ACC might appoint rep for mega projects

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The Anti-Corruption Commission is mulling over appointing representatives to monitor mega projects and take immediate remedial measures if any corruption is committed.

ACC Chairman Iqbal Mahmud said this at a consultation meeting with the development partners on a draft strategy of the anti-graft organisation for 2016-2021 at the National Economic Council auditorium of the Planning Commission.

A PowerPoint presentation there on the ACC's work plan outlined how to eradicate corruption by achieving 59 objectives on priority basis in the next five years.

"We're thinking about appointing anti-corruption guys to mega projects so that during the implementation of phases [of the projects], we can keep watch on what is happening," said the ACC chief.

Describing the work plan as "a little bit ambitious", Hasina Begum, programme officer of the International Labour Organisation (ILO), said it was necessary to change the mindset of the ACC staff but the period set was short for that.

Representatives of development organisations at the meeting suggested formulating case matrix and result framework to evaluate ACC's activities.

Iqbal Mahmud said the ACC would consider the suggestions and modify the draft strategy in light of the recommendations.

Underscoring the need for own armed force, he said the ACC needed the force to conduct drives smoothly.

Among others, Asian Development Bank Country Director Kazuhiko Higuchi, First Secretary of the Australian High Commission Tom Nettleton, GIZ Head of Programme on Rule of Law Promita Sen Gupta and ACC Commissioner Nasiruddin Ahmed spoke at the meeting.

Stark reminder

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and bewildered on an orange chair inside an ambulance, shortly after he was rescued.

Khaled Khaled, an Aleppo-based member of the Syrian Civil Defense, a volunteer rescue group that operates in rebel-held territory, identified the boy as five-year-old Omran Daqneesh.

The boy was then rushed by members of the group, also known as the White Helmets, to a nearby hospital, Khaled told Al Jazeera. He suffered from light headwounds and was released later that night.

Three other people were killed and at least eight others, mostly women and children, were injured in the same air strike, according to Khaled.

It was the images of Omran, though, that made the headlines and drew shock and revulsion from both Syrians and foreigners on social media.

A video shot by media activists showed Omran being lifted from a house and placed, before rescuers leave him to go back to the scene. Omran is left alone in the chair, staring blankly, before rubbing his bloodied head.

In a video of a chaotic nighttime scene, a man is seen carrying the boy, covered in grey dust, from the rubble of an unidentified building and placing him on a seat in an ambulance, before leaving him to go back to the scene. Omran is left alone in the chair, staring blankly.

The boy then runs a hand over his blood-covered face, looks at the blood and wipes his hands on the ambulance chair. He does not cry or make a sound.

The image has been shared thousands of times on social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook.

"We can get numb seeing dead and injured children remotely day after day," said journalist Anne Barnard on Facebook, "but some pictures particularly get to the mom in me and this is one. The orange chair. The expression. I want to give him a hug".

On Twitter, Sima Diab said: "What was your five-year-old son doing today? Mine was playing football. Not Omran, he was saved from an air strike in Syria."

The pictures of Omran - referred to by many as "the boy in the ambulance" - were reminiscent of the image of Aylan Kurdi, another Syrian boy whose body was found on a beach in Turkey last year after he drowned as he and his family attempted to cross the Mediterranean in the hope of finding refuge in Europe.

The image of Kurdi's body brought world attention to the growing refugee crisis, as tens of thousands of Syrians attempted to make the same dangerous journey, fleeing war-torn homes for the stability of Europe.

Will Omran's photo do the same for Syria?

Family gets threatening

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Fazle Rabbi claimed that he and his family members received at least 10 phone calls from people who asked them to come to Dhaka and "discuss the matter" rather than seeking legal action.

"The protests [over her death] were impressive. But will it bring any result? Come to Dhaka and let's have a chat," Rabbi quoted a caller as saying.

The callers have been identifying themselves as cousins and brothers of a Tejgaon College unit Chhatra League leader against whom there are allegations of killing Afsana, Rabbi said.

On Saturday evening, two men took Afsana, a final-year student of architecture department at SAIC Institute of Management and Technology, to Al Helal Hospital in Mirpur and left the hospital, hospital sources said.

An unknown person phoned Afsana's mother in Thakurgaon the same day and said Afsana's body was at a hospital in Dhaka.

Her relatives found the body on Sunday morning at the Dhaka Medical College morgue after a frantic search throughout the night.

Talking to The Daily Star, Rabbi, also a Chhatra League leader in Thakurgaon, said he suspects that his sister was murdered and that is why unknown people called him and asked him to stay quiet.

"You live 500 kilometres from Dhaka. Will you be able to do much by filing a case? Come to Dhaka and let's have a settlement," Rabbi quoted a caller as saying.

Meanwhile, there were demonstrations in Dhaka and Thakurgaon, demanding a fair probe into the death and arrest of the perpetrator(s).

Leaders and activists of Bangladesh Chhatra Union held a press conference at Dhaka University yesterday while students, teachers, journalists and women leaders formed a human chain at Thakurgaon over the death.

Speaking at the press conference, Chhatra Union General Secretary GM Zilani Shubho said, "Chhatra League

activists are trying to protect the murderers with muscle power. Its Tejgaon College unit leaders and activists had beaten up our activists on Wednesday when they tried to join a protest rally. Four of our activists were injured."

He also alleged that Afsana was raped before murder.

AKM Shafiquzzaman, assistant professor at Dhaka Medical College, said there was a deep round mark around the victim's neck. Other than that, there were no injury marks on her body, he added.

He, however, said it was too early to determine the cause of her death as some reports were not ready.

Chhatra Union also announced that it would submit a memorandum to the home ministry on August 22 demanding immediate arrest and punishment of Afsana's killer(s).

It also announced nationwide protest at deputy commissioners' offices today.

Kafrul police, who are investigating the case, said they recorded it as an unnatural death case and were yet to nab any suspect.

Afsana used to live in a one-room apartment, which she shared with another girl, at Manikdi in Dhaka Cantonment area. But the incident did not take place there, police said.

At a human chain in Thakurgaon, residents of the town demanded arrest and exemplary punishment of Afsana's "killer(s)".

Abu Torab Manik, president of Thakurgaon Press Club, Suchorita Dev, general secretary of Bangladesh Mahila Parishad, and local UP Chairman Anil Chandra Sen, among others, spoke at the protest.

The speakers demanded a proper investigation into Afsana's death. They also said effective steps must be taken to ensure punishment of the perpetrator(s).

Narayanganj district unit of Bangladesh Chhatra Union formed a human chain in front of Narayanganj Press Club yesterday demanding justice for the "murder".

Longest, futile trip to US

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Bahrain from 2005 to 2010, was one of the four. He along with 48 other Bangladeshis was deported.

Halim narrated to The Daily Star his journey of two years after falling into the trap of an international human trafficking syndicate, which targets jobseekers from Asia and Africa for smuggling to the US and other countries in the Americas.

Each of them had to pay Tk 20-25 lakh to a broker named Khorshed Alam from Dhaka for the journey in January 2014.

"Our broker set his agents in all countries to help us overcome all possible hurdles and show us the way to reach our final destination," said Halim.

They used air, water and land routes. They travelled through Qatar, the UAE, Brazil, Bolivia, Peru, Venezuela, Ecuador, Columbia, Panama, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Honduras, Guatemala and Mexico and finally entered the US through California and Texas.

PERILOUS JOURNEY
After returning from Bahrain in 2010, Halim got married in Comilla. The marriage did not last long as his wife left him. Since then he faced many difficulties as he tried to earn his living by farming and small businesses in his village.

He was not enjoying his life. He later came across the broker and decided to take the risk of travelling to the US.

"Some people from our village went to the US and are now working there. So, I thought I would be able to have a fresh start to my life after settling in the US. But I could not succeed; I have failed and am suffering even more," said the dejected man.

Halim, Kabir, and two other victims from Noakhali, travelled together up to Bolivia. They paid \$100 each and managed one-month visa from the Bolivian immigration police. They got separated after staying around 10 to 15 days in Bolivia.

Halim went to Peru where he spent four to five days before entering Ecuador after a 50-hour bus journey.

When he arrived in Colombia, he was astonished to see many jobseekers from Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Nepal, Somalia, Eritrea and some African countries.

"I found around 60 to 70 people from different countries, including Bangladesh, in the dens of the human traffickers in Colombia. Some people used to stay there as informers and security guards," he recalled.

All of them were taken to Panama later on speedboats. When they were taken to the city, they were caught by the police and taken to a detention centre. However, they were released after 10 days and asked to leave

Panama.

They then crossed Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Honduras, Guatemala and Mexico in three to four months.

IN USA ONLY TO SUFFER
It was November 13 when he left Mexico and entered Texas. Soon after his illegal entry, the US immigration police caught and sent him to a detention centre.

"I sought political asylum. The US immigration police produced me before a court six to seven times. But on June 21, 2015, the court rejected my appeal and ordered to deport me," Halim said.

The court rejected his appeal as the Bangladesh embassy allegedly requested the US police not to allow Halim political asylum. "Actually, it was not my intention to seek political asylum there. But I had no other idea at that time," he claimed.

Contacted, Ann B McConnell, public affairs officer for the US embassy in Dhaka, told The Daily Star in an email that the US Department of Homeland Security is the lead US government agency on deportation and asylum and that the Bangladeshis were deported after being afforded the due process under the US judicial system.

On April 6, 28 Bangladeshis who had taken similar journeys to the US were deported.

Jessore board

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badly," he told The Daily Star.

As many as 35,000 students of the board failed in English last year. These students took well preparation this year and most of them came out successful, Prof Mazid said.

The number of examinees -- 1.35lakh -- of his board was much higher than other boards, except for Dhaka.

"Seeing the disastrous results last year, we took up a challenge. We held views-exchange meetings with heads and other teachers of all colleges and parents.

"The colleges took special care and we monitored the colleges," Prof Mazid said.

Asked if teachers gave marks generously, the Jessore board's chairman said no question of this sort arose.

Echoing his views, Education Minister Nurul Islam Nahid said there was a pressure on the Jessore board from the ministry and guardians after last year's results.

He said the ministry paid extra attention to the Jessore board.

Asked if there was any directive from the ministry or boards to the teachers who checked the papers, Nahid rejected such possibilities outright.

"There was no need to do so," he said.