

New year's day with new books

Education minister promises primary and secondary students

Primary and secondary students will get new textbooks on New Year's day, as around 80 percent of over 36 crore copies of textbooks have already reached their schools, said Education Minister Nurul Islam Nahid yesterday. "The remaining textbooks will reach the education institutions on time," he told reporters after visiting three printing presses at Matuail in the capital.

The minister said the number of free textbooks to be distributed this year rose by more than 2.84 crore copies. The government would distribute 36.22 crore copies among students from class-I to class-X.

"We have been distributing textbooks free of cost since 2010 and the number is increasing every year," Nahid said.

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In front of destroyed homes and shops, people of Korail slum huddle together in small groups under the sky late last night. A fire swept through their shanties in the afternoon. Top right, a few people trying to put out the smoldering fire. Bottom right, a young man who had his legs burnt being taken to hospital.

PHOTO: AKRAM HOSEN/PALASH KHAN



Inflow slides on oil price

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since December last year.

This was mainly because incomes in the Gulf Cooperation Council economies are affected by low oil prices, which dropped to its historic low in January.

Bangladesh gets bulk of its remittance from the Gulf countries.

"The bonus and overtime payments have come down. Their [migrant workers] per capita income has gone down, while their living cost has gone up, cutting their savings," Zahid Hussain, lead economist at the World Bank's Dhaka office, told The Daily Star yesterday.

The remittance is on the decline despite a significant increase in the number of Bangladeshi workers abroad.

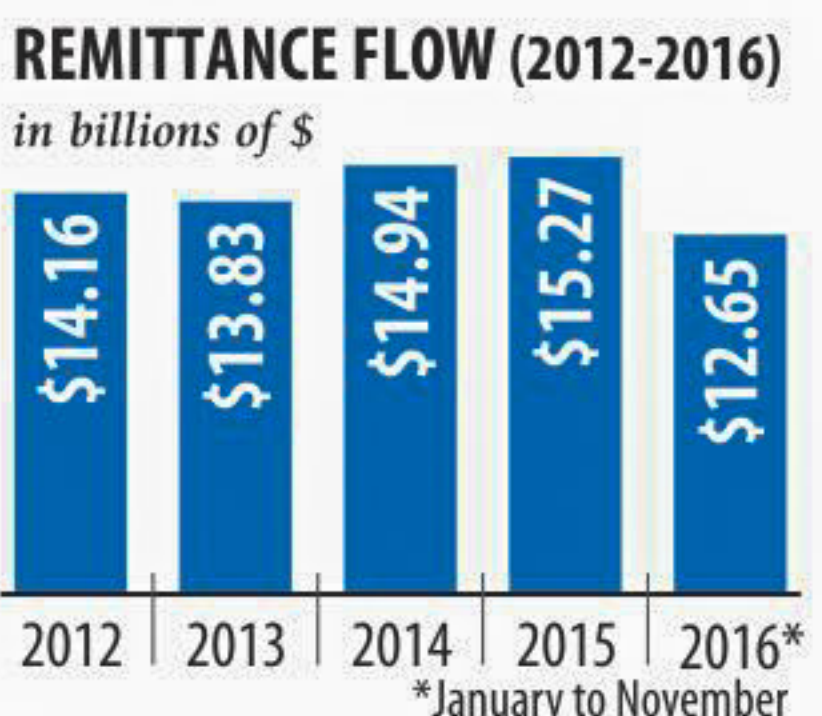
According to a WB development update report, 6.8 lakh Bangladeshi migrant workers went abroad in fiscal 2015-16, up 48 percent year-on-year. And 71.3 percent of them went to the GCC countries.

Saudi Arabia accounted for the highest incremental share, while a significant number of the workers went to Oman, Qatar and Malaysia.

There is anecdotal evidence that

the real income of migrants is waning in the GCC countries, as prices for staple goods and public services have increased, according to the WB report released in October.

Saudi construction firms have been hit hard due to the lower oil prices, which have curbed and, in



some cases, delayed government spending on major infrastructure projects. If the ongoing fiscal consolidation in the GCC countries is sharper than expected, remittance flows could slow sharply, the WB said.

Zahid Hussain said that the sending

of money from abroad through *hundi* has increased, causing a slide in inflow of remittance through official channels.

The rate of US dollar in informal market is more than that in the official market. This encourages migrant workers to send money through *hundi* instead of official channels, he said.

One gets Tk 82 for \$1 in informal market but less than Tk 78 in official market.

The demand for US dollar has risen in the informal market, said Zahid Hussain.

One of the reasons is that militant attacks in different countries, including Bangladesh, have led banks and other financial institutions to enforce strict compliance of anti-money laundering laws in transferring funds. This has resulted in a rise in costs of money transfer through official channels.

Both the finance ministry and Bangladesh Bank have identified that *hundi* was a major reason behind the slide.

Last month, the issue was raised at a meeting of the fiscal coordination council with Finance Minister AMA Muhith in the chair.

Many left homeless, penniless

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staying out in the cold," said Mariam, holding her 10 month old wrapped in a towel.

Like her, residents of about 500 shanties -- home to about a couple of thousands people -- at Korail Boubajar slum were rendered homeless by a fire yesterday afternoon.

About 200 trained locals had helped douse the fire that began around 2:45pm.

Visiting the area around midnight, these correspondents found around 100 of them sitting on the ground beside the narrow waterlogged alleys.

Some 40 rickshaw pullers were sitting on ashes. Most of them had their heads resting on their palms.

"I have lost all my clothes, my savings of Tk 2,500 and my phone, which I had left home. I don't know how I will be able to work after sitting here the entire night," said rickshaw puller Mofijul Islam.

Seeing flames engulfing her neighbourhood and feeling the heat on her face from inside her home, Meena Begum grabbed her two children, aged five and seven, and ran.

Her husband, a vegetables trader,

had kept Tk 10,000 in a wooden cupboard.

"The house was gutted within moments. My husband will become unemployed tomorrow [today] as he will have nothing to buy his goods with," said the woman.

Another woman, Sorna Begum, a single mother and domestic help by profession, had left for work leaving behind her three children, the youngest of whom was only six months old.

"I still can't find them," said the woman yesterday evening.

THE FIRE

The fire, believed to have begun from a bedding store around 2:45pm, took almost one and a half hours to douse, said firefighters.

The exact reason for the fire is still unknown, said Masudur Rahman Akand, assistant director of Fire Service and Civil Defence.

About 200 locals, trained in fire fighting, along with 14 fire engines doused the fire, said the fireman.

Due to narrow alleys inside the slum in the capital's Mohakhali area, fire fighters had to leave their trucks about half a kilometre away, said

Masudur.

Most of the destroyed shanties, some multi-storied, were stilt house on the Gulshan Lake. Burnt, they collapsed into the water.

President of Korail Slum Unnayan Committee Abdus Sobahan said most of the residents of the shanties were rickshaw pullers or garment workers and they were not home during the fire.

Several NGO-run schools in the slum had become shelters for some of the affected people. Some moved into their relatives' homes.

Visiting the area, Dhaka North City Corporation Mayor Annisul Huq assured assistance for the affected people.

TRAINING HELPED

Poly Akhter Mukta, a resident of the area, said almost every year there are fires in the slum.

Fire service department conducts monthly fire drills and provides training to 200 volunteers.

"When the fire broke, we started working before the fire fighters arrived. Some of us evacuated the houses while others cleared the alleys for the fire trucks," she added.

Nobody wants hands tied

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of any law made in that behalf, be made by the President."

The language of the article suggests enactment of the law is mandatory. But no successive governments paid heed to the constitutional provision. They made no move in line with the constitutional provision in the last four and a half decades.

Even a move by ATM Shamsul Huda-led Election Commission for the enactment of the law to end controversies over the formation of EC did not get support from the government.

The reason is clear.

If the law is made specifying a procedure and criteria for appointment to the EC, it will curtail the absolute power of the head of government to pick persons of his/her choice for the formation of the commission.

All signs now suggest no possibility of enacting the law before the formation of the new EC in February.

In the absence of the law and any other mechanism, the president will appoint CEC and other election commissioners on the advice of the prime minister.

WHO DETERMINES THE APPOINTMENTS?

To reject Khaleda Zia's proposals for constituting the next EC on the basis of consensus among political parties, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina on Saturday referred to the president's power to form the EC.

Her statement that "she [Khaleda] has made her proposals; now she can tell the president about it, and he'll make the decision ... we've nothing to say" does not match with the constitutional provision.

If one reads only the Article 118 (1), s/he may get an impression that the president has absolute jurisdiction over the formation of the EC as, according to this article, the CEC and other election commissioners will be appointed by the president.

But Article 118 (1) cannot be read in isolation from the constitution's article 48 (3) that clearly says: "In the exercise of all his functions, save only that of appointing the Prime Minister pursuant to clause (3) of Article 56 and the Chief Justice pursuant to clause (1) of Article 95, the President shall act in accordance with the advice of the Prime Minister."

Even in these two cases, his discretionary power is very nominal. Because he has no option but to appoint the leader of the majority party in parliament as the prime minister.

And in case of the appointment of chief justice, the president is expected to appoint the senior most judge of the

Appellate Division.

When Article 118 (1) is read along with Article 48 (3), it becomes clear that the president's jurisdiction over the formation of the CEC and other EC members is misconstrued.

As the president must act on the advice of the prime minister, his powers are, in real sense, exercised by the prime minister. The presidency is a ceremonial office with no effective power.

If no discussion is held as Khaleda proposed, the president will make the appointments based on the choice of the government to form the EC which will conduct the next parliamentary elections in early 2019.

HOW WERE PAST APPOINTMENTS MADE?

The formation of EC appeared important following the fall of autocratic Ershad regime in December 1990 as election is the only peaceful way to assume state power in democracy.

But unlike other Saarc countries, including Sri Lanka, the Maldives, Bhutan, Nepal and Afghanistan, no mechanism has been developed to ensure better appointments to form the EC.

The absolute freedom the government enjoys in forming the EC, however, did not yield positive results.

In the last 25 years since restoration of democracy, seven CECs were appointed along with other election commissioners to lead the EC.

Of them, three commissions led by Justice AKM Sadeq, Justice MA Aziz and Kazi Rakibuddin Ahmad were mired in deep controversies.

Justice Sadeq and Justice Aziz were appointed by Khaleda's BNP government and Rakibuddin was appointed by Hasina-led AL government.

Justice Sadeq-led EC conducted one-sided parliamentary election in February 1996 and Rakibuddin-led EC held January 5, 2014 one-sided election.

Justice Aziz-led EC was unable to hold January 22, 2007 parliamentary election amid a growing political crisis which led to the declaration of the state of emergency.

Three commissions-led by Justice Abdur Rouf, Abu Hena and ATM Shamsul Huda, constituted by caretaker governments, were successful to hold three parliamentary elections in 1991, in June 1996 and 2008 respectively.

CEC MA Sayed, who was appointed by Hasina-led AL government, was an exception. He was able to hold eighth parliamentary election in 2001.

Amid controversies over the formation of EC, people's confidence eroded in the functioning of the constitu-

tional body which is a crucial institution for holding free and fair elections.

THE HUDA MODEL

In 2007, CEC Shamsul Huda-led EC drafted proposal for enactment of the law in line with the constitutional provision to ensure formation of EC free from controversies.

It proposed formation of EC based on political consensus through the top parliamentary body -- the Business Advisory Committee.

According to the proposal sent to the government, a search committee will be formed to nominate panel of candidates after examining their qualifications in line with law.

The outgoing CEC will be convener of the committee which will consist of a High Court judge nominated by the chief justice, chiefs of public service commission and anti-corruption commission and comptroller and auditor general.

The search committee will prepare the panel proposing three names against each of the posts. Then the panel will be sent to the office of the prime minister to place it before the Business Advisory Committee of the Jatiya Sangsad.

The top parliamentary body led by the Speaker consists of prime minister, leader of the opposition and senior MPs from both ruling and opposition benches. On scrutiny, the parliamentary body will finalise the panel and forward it to the president who will make the appointments.

WHY NEW EC SO IMPORTANT?

In absence of any law and mechanism, how the new EC will be constituted now depends on Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina.

If she advises the president, the head of state will open dialogue with political parties seeking their opinions on the formation of the new EC. If she wants, her government may move to enact a new law in the current session of parliament.

If she does not prefer any of the options, she can advise the president to appoint persons of her choice to constitute the EC.

In absence of the non-partisan election-time government, the EC has to play most pivotal role to ensure free and fair elections.

Therefore, formation of a non-controversial EC matters much to restore people's confidence in the electoral system and in the government as well.

If new EC mires in controversy at its birth, it may find it difficult to ensure congenial atmosphere for holding free and fair parliamentary election under a partisan government.

Buddhist leaders meet Hefajat ameer

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, Ctg

Some Buddhist leaders met Hefajat-e-Islam Ameer Shah Ahmad Shafi at Darul Ulum Moimul Islam Madrasa in Hathazari upazila on Saturday night.

Engineer Subash Barua, a Buddhist leader who attended the meeting, said they talked to Hefajat leaders and activists at the Chittagong Press Club on November 25 when they organised a programme to protest the attack on Rohingyas in Myanmar. Hefajat had held a similar programme there.

"On that day, we decided to have the meeting," said Subash.

"The meeting was actually organised to increase religious harmony among people," Subash said while talking to this correspondent over the phone yesterday.

According to a press release of Hefajat yesterday, its ameer Shafi had told the meeting that he would continue to support the rights and security of the people who are not Muslims, including Buddhists.

Moniruzzaman starts office as BB deputy governor

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

After serving over three decades at Bangladesh Bank in various capacities, SM Moniruzzaman yesterday took up his new role as its deputy governor.

The public administration ministry appointed him to the post on November 30. Before that, he was the executive director of the BB, according to a central bank statement yesterday.

He obtained his BA (Hon's) and MA in economics from Rajshahi University. He has also an MA in economics from Eastern Michigan University in the USA. He joined the central bank as an assistant director in 1984. In the last 32 years, he held many senior positions at the BB.

During his time as the BB general manager, he carried out special duty in the boards of Bangladesh Commerce Bank Ltd, United Commercial Bank Ltd and Islami Bank Bangladesh Ltd as BB's observer, said the statement.

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APPOINTMENTS OF CEC, ECs IN SAARC COUNTRIES

BANGLADESH
According to the constitution, the president makes the appointments of the CEC and other election commissioners. The appointments are supposed to be subject to the provisions of a law. But the law has not been made yet. Though the power remains in the hand of the president, he cannot exercise it on his own without the PM's advice.

INDIA
The constitutional provision in India is almost same as in Bangladesh. The president appoints the CEC and election commissioners. But he acts on the advice of the cabinet led by the prime minister. No controversy was raised over the appointments in the last six decades.

PAKISTAN
According to the constitutional provisions, the president appoints the CEC and other election commissioners following approval by a parliamentary committee. The prime minister, in consultation with the leader of the opposition, forwards three names against each of the positions to the committee. The committee picks one for each post. The 12-member body is made of equal number of members from the treasury bench and the opposition.

SRI LANKA
In Sri Lanka, there is a constitutional council led by the Speaker. On recommendation of the council, the president appoints the CEC and other election commissioners. The prime minister, opposition leader, one MP appointed by the president, five persons, including two MPs, appointed by the president based on the nomination by both the prime minister and the opposition leader are among the members of the council.

NEPAL
In Nepal, the president, on recommendation of the constitutional council led by the prime minister, appoints the CEC and election commissioners. The council consists of the PM, the chief justice, the speakers of both the houses, leader of the opposition and deputy speaker of the House of Representatives.

BHUTAN
The King of Bhutan cannot exercise any absolute power to make any appointments to the EC. He has to appoint the CEC and other election commissioners from a list of names recommended jointly by the prime minister, the chief justice, the Speaker and the opposition leader.

THE MALDIVES
The president appoints as election commissioners the persons approved by a majority of parliament members from the names submitted to it. A separate law has been enacted in line with the constitutional provision which says whenever it is necessary to make any appointment to the EC, the president submits to parliament the names of the nominated members.

AFGHANISTAN
According to the law on the formation of the EC, the president appoints the CEC and other election commissioners from a list prepared by a select committee. The speakers of both the houses, chief justice, chairperson of the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission and one person from the civil society are among the members of the committee.

[Compiled by Shakhawat Liton]