



With hardly any dry land available following the flashfloods, farmers in Tahirpur upazila of Sunamganj keep whatever was left of their damaged Boro crops on a primary school ground for drying and husking.

PHOTO: MINTU DeSHWARA

# No school for haor kids for nearly a month

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working with his father yesterday during school hours.  
His father Milan Das said most of the only crop he cultivates every year was destroyed by floods. So, they were trying hard to recover whatever quantity of paddy could be harvested and saved.  
"We were supposed to get food grains from the crops for the whole year....He [Hiran] is working with me

as it is more important than going to school," said Milan, from Anandanagar village.  
Mondiatra Primary School has been facing a similar situation.  
Its Headmaster Sanju Mia said most of the school students were not attending classes.  
Ataur Rahman, upazila education officer, Tahirpur, said the authorities were aware of the low presence of

students at school, but they couldn't do anything given the situation in the flood-hit areas.  
Meanwhile, the government opened three Open Market Sale (OMS) points to sell rice at a subsidized rate in Tahirpur upazila.  
Still, people living in remote villages are not getting benefits since they are far away from the upazila.  
The OMS centres in Tahirpur, one of

the worst affected areas in Sunamganj, can provide up to 1,800 people with subsidized food grains, at Tk 15 a kg, whereas a majority of 2.5 lakh people living in Tahirpur are affected by floods.  
"Apart from distributing relief, the government can open more OMS centers in remote areas. People will be more benefitted in that case," said Kamruzzaman Kamrul, upazila chairman of Tahirpur.

# Workers lack legal, social protection

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promised him financial assistance. But the help never came.  
"I'm helpless now. I don't know what to do," said the landless man, the lone breadwinner of a four-member family.

DEATHS IN ACCIDENTS AT WORKPLACE	
SECTOR	DEATHS (2016)
TRANSPORT	486
CONSTRUCTION	147
GARMENT	88
AGRICULTURE	87
DAY LABOUR	69
FISHERIES	44
DOMESTIC WORKER	34
SHIP-BREAKING	23
OTHERS	262

SOURCE: BANGLADESH OCCUPATIONAL SAFETY, HEALTH AND ENVIRONMENT FOUNDATION

edged that the workers in the informal sector are vulnerable to social and economic insecurity.  
"Considering this, we have planned a scheme for provident fund for informal sector workers," he told this newspaper yesterday.  
Under the scheme, if a worker deposits Tk 100, the government will deposit the same amount with his or her account. After five years, the worker can withdraw the money with 5 percent interest, Shipar explained.  
If the money is deposited for 10 years, the interest rate would be 7.5 percent. The amounts can vary while the duration of the fund would be between five and 20 years.  
The scheme will have provisions for providing benefits in case of injury, serious sickness or death, added the secretary.  
**INFORMAL LABOUR**  
According to the International Labour Organization, informal employment is outside labour or social protection, including both self-employment in small unregistered enterprises and wage employ-

ment in unprotected jobs.  
Bangladesh's informal labour sectors include agriculture, which employs 47 percent of the country's labour force, and domestic labour.  
Day labourers and those working in small factories and businesses are also part of the informal labour force.  
According to the Bangladesh Labour Law 2006, 42 sectors are recognised as formal labour sectors that have minimum wages for workers.  
Some of the major formal sectors are garment, transport, construction, pharmaceuticals, shipping, fishing and ship-breaking.  
"Mainly the export-oriented industries such as ready-made garment factories are monitored by the government. Most others remain out of government monitoring," said Syed Sultan Uddin Ahmmed, assistant executive director at Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies (BILS).  
Workers even in some major formal sectors, including construction and transport, operate largely on an informal basis, noted Sultan.  
For example, contractors or subcontractors employ workers in the construction sector but don't provide any appointment letters. The sites too lack safety measures that lead to accidents, he added.  
Abdur Razzak, general secretary of Building Construction Workers Union of Bangladesh, said that according to the law, a contractor has to give workers employment contracts, maintain a registry book, define working hours, set wages and overtime benefits, ensure workplace safety, and pay treatment costs and compensation in case of injury or death of workers.  
"The government, however, hardly inspects the construction

sites," he said.  
In case of rights violations, workers hardly go to the labour court as it takes long to have the matters settled.  
A leader of Dhaka District Transport Workers Union said the employers hardly provide any job contract to transport workers.  
Though bus drivers are not supposed to work for more than eight hours a day, those on long-haul routes have to work 12 to 13 hours a day, alleged the leader seeking anonymity.  
"If a driver is killed in an accident, the employer may provide him Tk 20,000 to Tk 1 lakh. It completely depends on the employer's discretion. No law is applied here," said a bus driver on condition of anonymity.  
On the other hand, the employer gets insurance coverage if the vehicle is damaged, added the driver.  
Labour Secretary Mikail Shipar said the government faces shortage of manpower in enforcing the labour law.  
He, however, pointed out that the number of staff at Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishments has been increased to 993 from only 318 in 2013.  
Now, more than 300 inspectors are working in 23 districts, he said.  
There are 83 lakh economic units in the country, and it's quite impossible for the government alone to inspect those. The employers' cooperation is very important here, added the secretary.  
Mustafizur Rahman suggested strengthening labour unions and increasing government capacity for implementation of the labour law.  
"We are speaking of taking the country to the middle-income level, but we cannot achieve it without ensuring decent work," he said.

# Mihir Kumar Nandi

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was a relapse recently and when he went back to Kolkata the doctors informed him that the cancer had spread to his colon," she said. They did not consider further surgery and only prescribed medications. Earlier this month he had to be hospitalized after his condition deteriorated.

Born on December 14, 1945 in Keuchia village of Chittagong's Satkania to Fanindra Lal Nandi and Mallika Rani Nandi, Mihir Kumar Nandi got his first music lessons from his father, but later came under the tutelage of Waheedul Haque and Acharya Shailada Ranjan Majumder for Rabindra Sangeet. He was also a disciple of Ustad Nirod Baran Barua and Pandit Ashok Dasgupta for violin, Sangeetacharya Soumitra Lal Dasgupta for dhrupad vocals and Ustad Aditya Narayan Das for tabla, sitar and esraj.

His musical career began when he enlisted as a singer with Chittagong Betar in 1964, and started teaching Rabindra Sangeet and classical music a couple of years later. He also served as a part time teacher at the Chittagong University's music department, and as a jury member of Bangladesh Television and Bangladesh Betar's special grade artiste, music director and composer.

He worked at the Bangladesh Chemical Industries Corporation as a senior officer, but music was where his heart was. One of the foremost exponents of the cultural revolution in Chittagong in the late '60s, he was a frontline campaigner of the cultural front of the 1969 mass uprising.

Mihir Nandi was an integral part of the Shadhin Bangla Betar Kendra in the tumultuous days of 1971 where inspirational and patriotic songs found a voice in him to boost the spirit of the Freedom Fighters, and the refugees in the camps in India.

After Bangladesh's liberation, Mihir Nandi concentrated on build-

ing up and flourishing the practice of pure music in the port city. He founded a music school, Ananda Dhvani and was closely involved with cultural organisations like Chittagong Arya Sangeet Samiti, Udichi and Rabindra Sangeet Sammilan Parishad. He was one of the forerunners of the first Pahela Baishakh celebrations in Chittagong in 1978 where it is still held every year.

For his contribution to music, Mihir Nandi was awarded the Shilpakala Padak 2015 by the Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy.

"One of the special things about Mihir mama is his socio-political consciousness. I have known him since 1968-'69, and since then he was a leader of the cultural movement against the Pakistan government, when he hung a harmonium from his neck and sang on the streets," said Shila. Musical exponents are usually not too politically inclined usually, but he was a leader of the progressive cultural movement in Chittagong.

While Dhaka has long been the epicenter of Bangladesh's cultural practices, there are people spread all across the country who have dedicated their lives to upholding our culture and passing it on from one generation to the next. These luminaries often remain beyond public and mainstream media attention and it is only when they pass away are their contributions recognised.

In a rather conservative region like Chittagong, Mihir Kumar Nandi fought and overcame many obstacles for decades to spread music and cultural practices that will probably remain uncovered. But the man that he is, Mihir Nandi would probably not care for a heroic reception and recognition; the facts that his life's work bore fruit and his music would live on through his students and colleagues, probably bring him more satisfaction than column inches of a newspaper dedicated to him.

# They toil for 12 hours

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Bangladesh, he told The Daily Star yesterday on the eve of the International Labour Day.

According to the survey, at least 46 percent transport workers work for more than 15 hours a day, while over 40 percent work for about 13-14 hours. Besides, 20 percent of them work without any regular rest.

The survey was conducted on working hours of five labour intensive sectors -- security guards, transport, hotel/restaurants, re-rolling and private hospital/clinic/diagnostic centres or pathological labs.

The areas of the survey were Dhaka and its surrounding areas. Workers of the five sectors, employers, government officials and trade union members were interviewed for data.

Transport workers are found to have no appointment letters and cent percent of them work for more than eight hours a day.

More than 90 percent of them do not have weekly holidays and 98 percent do not have public holidays. Eighty-four percent transport workers work on the May Day, says the survey.

According to the survey, 58 percent security guards have no appointment letters and more than 80 percent of them work for more than eight hours a day. Of them, 48 percent work for 11-12 hours and 24 percent work for more than 15 hours a day.

About 66 percent of security guards have no weekly holidays and 88 percent of them work on public holidays, says the survey.

In hotel or restaurants, 42 percent workers work for nine to 10 hours a day and 40 percent work for 11-12 hours, while 14 percent work for 13 to 14 hours a day.

In re-rolling industries, 34 percent workers work 13 to 14 hours, 26 percent 11-12 hours and 16 percent work for more than 15 hours.

In private hospitals and clinics, 42 percent workers work for more than eight hours.

Sultan Uddin Ahmmed said May Day, which has been observed for the last 130 years, is a day when all pledge to improve labour conditions.

"Let the day be not only held at some formal functions but also to realise the demand of eight-hour working days," he said.

Besides, fixing national minimum wage and decent work is also a must to improve income level and discrimination in labour wages, he added.

In another survey, BILS found that 888 workers were killed and 1,093 injured in workplace accidents and violence in 2016.

The transport sector witnessed the highest of 249 deaths followed by 85 deaths in construction, 52 in fishing, 46 in agriculture, 39 in foil and packaging, 38 in day labour, while 28 migrant workers died abroad.

# Meat traders call off their Ramadan strike

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Meat traders took a step back from their decision to go on strike from the first day of Ramadan after the commerce minister yesterday assured them of meeting their demands within four to five days.

They, however, will abstain from work for an indefinite period if the authorities concerned fail to meet their demands.

The demands include reducing fees on cattle purchase by the lessee of Gabtoli Cattle Market.

"Commerce Minister Tofail Ahmed told us that he would hold talks with

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# Heated debate over VAT law

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Supplementary Duty Act 2012 from the next fiscal year.

The new law envisages a uniform 15 percent VAT instead of the existing multiple rates now applicable to many goods and services.

However, the move raised concern among many that application of the uniform rate would increase the already high cost of living.

The NBR, however, maintains that the new law will not increase prices of goods in general as businesses will be able to get rebates.

At the event, Motaleb, one of the organisers of a demonstration by shop owners last year, said representatives of businesses met senior NBR officials 18 times with their propos-

als on the new VAT law. The proposals included continuation of package VAT under the new law.

The FBCCI and the NBR work on VAT, but the result is zero, he said.

He said although they were assured of their demands being met following demonstrations, "I saw in the newspaper that a uniform 15 percent tax [VAT] is going to be imposed and package VAT will not continue."

Motaleb said, "This is a critical time. You will implement the budget and if we are to demonstrate like students, then you will fail. We, small and medium businesses, are facing tough competition."

He cited factors such as cheap imports from neighbouring coun-

tries.  
He also said traders were not trained on the new law, which will be implemented under an automated environment.

"They trained some people for show... but if regular traders do not receive training, how will they understand what the Electronic Cash Registry [ECR] is?"

"We have to know it first. None of us are yet to receive training on the ECR."

Asking to reconsider the FBCCI's proposals, he said, "If the FBCCI's demands are not accepted, we will start demonstrations."

Finance Minister AMA Muhith then interrupted Abu Motaleb and said only 32,000 of the 8 lakh regis-

tered firms in the country submit VAT returns.

"How many of your small and medium enterprises pay VAT?" You are waging demonstration unnecessarily. If you take to the streets, you will be stopped," said an irritated Muhith.

Then the businessmen present there began to protest the finance minister's comment.

Some stood up and began to shout.

FBCCI First Vice-President Shafiul Islam Mohiuddin attempted to calm things down.

He said businesses were still engaged in dialogue. "We are yet to see the budget. We expect that our valid demands will definitely be

considered and they [the government] are working on it. Please be patient. Nothing will be imposed upon us."

Later, Muhith suggested Motaleb withdraw his statement and said Motaleb threatened to bring the country to a halt.

"It is very unfair to issue threats here," he said.

NBR Chairman Nojibur Rahman then said nothing could be achieved by force. "Be logical for the betterment of the nation, we will be with you."

He said the finance minister wanted to give a lot to the businesses.

Nojibur said the NBR would remain open to discussions so that it

could frame pro-people and taxpayer friendly, business and investment oriented policies.

"If you cannot respect us, do not dishonour."

"If you help us maintain our dignity, we will be serving you," he said.

Talking to The Daily Star yesterday, a senior official of the NBR said a large amount of VAT does not go into the state coffers due to low level compliance.

A portion of VAT comes as VAT at source, the official said requesting not to be named.

It was difficult for the revenue authority to detect the source due to lack of capacity of VAT administration and collusion between field officials and dishonest businesses.