

RELIEF SITUATION IN SUNAMGANJ

Line for help gets longer

DWOHA CHOWDHURY, back from Sunamganj

Around a thousand people gathered in front of Bishwambarpur upazila parishad complex on Friday morning to buy rice being sold as part of an Open Market Sale scheme without any idea who were to get the assistance.

Many of them were sitting far away from the long queue, rejected and dejected, as they didn't know the OMS dealer had scheduled different days for different villages.

Ironically, they didn't get the rice even on their scheduled date.

Hamida Khatun, 60, of Dhanpur village in the upazila was one of the villagers who were denied OMS rice twice.

"I also came here on the day when we were scheduled to get the rice. But I returned empty-handed. I have come here again today with the hope if I get a chance," she said.

She added she was not listed in the Vulnerable Group Feeding (VGF) programme launched by the government for the haor people.

Like Hamida, Fazer Banu, a widow

of 55, turned up from the same village with a faint hope to feed her seven-member family, but all she received was harsh refusal.

Sunamganj is the worst affected district of the recent flash flood that hit the northeastern region in the last week of March. The flash flood destroyed almost hundred percent of the Boro paddy in the haor areas.

Following destruction of their only annual crop, the people of the haor areas have been living in distress and are eagerly waiting for relief.

Abdul Jalil, 75, a freedom fighter from Dakshinkul Balijuri of Tahirpur upazila, was waiting in another long queue for OMS rice at Anwarpur Bazar in the upazila.

"I cultivated Boro on 2.5 acres of land in the Sanir Haor area but could barely save some rice to feed my 12-member family," he lamented.

His name also did not appear on the VGF card and nobody was willing to take the responsibility as to why such anomaly occurred.

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At first glance, the women might appear as voters lined up in front of a polling centre. But actually, they are flashflood-hit haor people queuing for subsidised rice at Tk 15 per kg outside a government Open Market Sale point in Bishwambarpur Sadar of Sunamganj. Inset, men wait outside another OMS point in Tahirpur upazila. The photos were taken on Friday.

PHOTO: DWOHA CHOWDHURY

Majority now Bangladeshis

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stands at more than 2,800, making the country the largest single origin of migrants currently arriving on European shores.

Those rescued in the Mediterranean Sea have told aid workers they paid more than \$10,000 each to be taken from Dhaka to Dubai or Turkey and onwards to Libya, where the violence and chaos engulfing the fractured country is fuelling powerful smuggling networks.

The International Organisation for Migration (IOM) said the emerging route had dramatically changed the demographics of asylum seekers arriving in Italy, who until now have largely hailed from sub-Saharan Africa.

"The thing that's really changing is the main nationality of the migrants, and the number coming from Bangladesh," IOM's Flavio di Giacomo told The Independent.

"By the end of March last year only one Bangladeshi had arrived in Italy - and this year the number is more than 2,831 for the same period."

Some migrants taken ashore in Sicily and Apulia said their trip to Libya was organised by an "agency" that provided them with a working visa for between \$3,000 and \$4,000.

"From Bangladesh, they first travelled to Dubai and Turkey, and finally reached Libya by plane," an IOM spokesperson said.

"At the airport, an 'employer' met them and took their documents."

The practice is common in forced labour seen in both the Gulf and Libya, where smugglers frequently detain migrants before extorting their loved ones for money, or forcing them into labour or prostitution.

Some Bangladeshis crossing the Mediterranean have lived in the country for up to four years, while others stay there for just months while attempting to travel directly to Europe.

According to information gathered by IOM, Bangladeshi migrants pay up to \$10,000 to reach Libya, then another \$700 to board a boat.

The crossing from North Africa to Italy is now the deadliest sea passage in the world, with a record of almost 1,100 people drowning, suffocating or dying of hypothermia on overcrowded boats so far this year.

Hanan Salah, a senior Libya researcher at Human Rights Watch (HRW), said the country was a destination for Bangladeshi migrants looking for work before civil war broke out in 2011.

"As for the current situation, to my knowledge there are no direct flights from Dubai to Tripoli, or anywhere else in Libya," she told The Independent.

"Most foreigners flying in would be entering through Mitiga airport in Tripoli after transiting in Tunis [the capital of neighbouring Tunisia]."

"We have reports that in some cases, documents of foreign nationals are confiscated and they are given a 'slip' - it can be a way to extort money from them."

Chaos following the British-backed removal of Muammar Gaddafi has seen countless armed factions, including Isis, wage bloody battles for territory as widespread lawlessness allows smugglers to work unchecked along the coast.

They coordinate with gangs inland to detain migrants in squalid detention centres, where Ms Salah has met imprisoned Bangladeshis, while others continue to work in restaurants, services and construction.

Nicholas McGeehan, a Gulf researcher at HRW, said the route from Dhaka to Dubai was well-trodden by "unscrupulous recruitment agents".

"What the agents sell is a route out of destitution and poverty," he added.

"It's typically the young men that go, either of their own volition or as the main earner for the family."

"They're sold a dream and the dream all too often turns very sour, whether it's in the Gulf States or this, which sounds even worse."

Mr McGeehan said "ignorance and deceit" combined to convince migrants that the more they pay, the safer they will be - drawing them into debts that make them increasingly vulnerable to exploitation.

"South Asian states are all too happy to get people off their hands if there are remittances going back," he added.

"The scale of corruption of officials being involved in recruitment is huge - it's rife."

Bangladeshis are frequently employed for semi-skilled or unskilled labour in north Africa or the Gulf, receiving worse pay and treatment than migrants from richer countries.

Dr Gareth Price, a senior research fellow in the Asia programme at Chatham House, said that although poverty was the main driving factor, persecuted Rohingya Muslims from Burma had also been fleeing Bangladesh.

Members of the country's opposition Jamaat-e-Islami Islamist party have also been hanged for war crimes and claim they are being persecuted, with several members seeking asylum abroad.

"Europe is a high value destination," Dr Price added. "If someone discovers a route, then the supply of people, whether trafficked or willingly trying to get into Europe for work, creates its own market."

He said the migrants resorting to smugglers would not meet requirements for a legal working visa in Europe, where bank accounts are frequently checked for a minimum amount of funds as a condition of entry.

"They might be working for very little but they think they are," he added. "There's a lot of people who would take the risk."

A controversial agreement struck between the EU and Turkey last year has reduced comparatively shorter and safer crossings over the Aegean Sea to a trickle, leaving Libya the main launching point for refugee boats.

Italy signed a deal with the fragile Government of National Accord (GNA) in Tripoli in February that also promised training, equipment and money to fight smugglers - an agreement initially endorsed by EU states at a summit in Malta.

But moves to support Libyan detention camps have been criticised by humanitarian groups and the UN, which warned that refugees suffer arbitrary detention, rape and torture, and that pushing them back into a warzone could violate international law.

The dire situation has so far scuppered prospects of replicating the controversial EU-Turkey deal, while talks between the GNA and a rival Russia-backed warlord in the east ended without agreement this week.

Making his first visit to Libya, Boris Johnson urged warring leaders to "get together and work out a plan for the common benefit of the Libyan people".

"Establishing effective governance is the key to defeating terrorism in Libya and countering illegal migration," the Foreign Secretary said.

But with no solution in sight, carnage continues in the central Mediterranean. One rescue ship recovered the body of a man friends said was shot by smugglers for his baseball cap, while another vessel pulled six bodies out of the sea.

Hackers cast pall as France votes

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bruising and divisive campaign pitting the 39-year-old former banker who embraces free-trade against his anti-EU, far-right rival Marine Le Pen.

"The dissemination of such data, which have been fraudulently obtained and in all likelihood may have been mingled with false information, is liable to be classified as a criminal offence," France's electoral commission said in a statement.

The documents spread on social media just before midnight as the candidates officially wrapped up campaigning, in what Macron's team termed an attempt at "democratic destabilisation, like that seen during the last presidential campaign in the United States".

Hillary Clinton has alleged Russian hacking of her campaign's emails was partly to blame for her defeat by Donald Trump in the US presidential election in November.

Macron's campaign employs tough server protections and network encryption, but experienced hackers can always find a way in.

"In this kind of organisation the real potential fault-line is the human element," the head of computer services for En Marche! recently told AFP, requesting anonymity.

Because security procedures can become long and cumbersome, some people can be tempted to get around them by using personal email services which are little or badly protected.

Macron's team said the files were

stolen weeks ago when several officials from his En Marche party had their personal and work emails hacked - in one of "an intense and repeated" series of cyber-attacks targeting the candidate since the launch of the campaign.

"Clearly, the documents arising from the hacking are all lawful and show the normal functioning of a presidential campaign," aides said in a statement.

But they warned that whoever was behind the leak had mixed fake documents with real ones "in order to sow doubt and disinformation".

The WikiLeaks website on Friday posted a link to the documents on Twitter, saying it had not yet discovered fakes in the cache of files and adding "we are very sceptical that the Macron campaign is faster than us."

Last month, cybersecurity research group Trend Micro said Russian hackers called Pawn Storm had targeted Macron's campaign, using "phishing" techniques to try and steal personal data.

Senior Le Pen aide Florian Philippot suggested on Twitter that the leak might contain information the media had deliberately suppressed.

Polls released earlier Friday had showed Macron gaining momentum, forecasting victory for the pro-European, pro-business former banker with around 62 percent to 38 percent for Le Pen.

Macron and Le Pen -- who is hoping to ride a global wave of anti-establishment anger to the Elysee Palace -- have offered starkly different

visions for France during a campaign that has been closely watched in Europe and around the world.

The reaction to the leaks came after a frantic final day of campaigning, which included the tragic death of a socialist lawmaker after she spoke at a Macron rally.

Corinne Erhel, 50, was the last to take the stage Friday in western France when she suddenly collapsed. She was rushed to hospital, where she was pronounced dead.

Fresh security fears also surfaced on Friday following the arrest of a suspected extremist who had pledged allegiance to the Islamic State group.

Guns were discovered as well as the pledge on a flash drive and several of the group's flags, sources close to the case told AFP after the arrest in Evreux, north of Paris.

The suspect, a 34-year-old Muslim convert, was arrested early Friday after police found his car near the base.

Le Pen has tried to portray Macron as being soft on security and Islamic fundamentalism, playing to the concerns of many of her supporters after a string of terror attacks in France that killed more than 230 people since 2015.

Three days before the first-round vote in April, a policeman was shot dead in an Islamic State-claimed attack on Paris's Champs-Elysees, and jitters rose again on Friday when police arrested a suspected extremist near a military airbase.

Flute plays export music

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month of Chaitra wholesalers would arrive from Dhaka's Chowk Bazar and they used to buy as many as 1.5 lakh flutes at a time. Those wholesalers took orders by letter, from Chittagong, Mymensingh, Khulna and elsewhere. Flutes from this village were made to fill their orders and supplied across the country by launch and train."

Neighbour Niranjan Chandra Sarker also makes flutes. "We use muli bamboo," he says. "Normally the flutes are made to the four phases of the harmonium scale and measure around twenty inches. A flute will have three to seven holes." Tota, mukh, aar, veen, balloon, classical, khandani, mohan and natural: eight different types of flute are available.

"To make a flute we first cut and dry

the bamboo," says another flute maker Anil Chandra Biswas. "Later the bamboo's bark is peeled. We add clay motifs and lightly burn the flute so that when the mud falls off the motifs are visible. Then the holes are measured and marked in pencil before being punctured with pointed iron rods. After washing the flute it is packed, ready for delivery."

"I have been buying flutes from this village for the last 40 years," says Nihar Sarker, a trader from Gazipur. "Flutes are especially popular with young people and children." But he also laments the encroachment of plastic toys which has seen demand for bamboo flutes reduce. The popularity of video games has similarly diminished domestic flute demand among younger generations.

Yet there is a bright star on the hori-

zons: the export market. "Foreign buyers already place orders through locally-based businesses like mine," says wholesaler Subrata Saha from Araihaazar in Narayanganj. "I receive orders from abroad every year, some times specifying the flute motifs they want." Around one crore flutes per annum are crafted in this remote and serene village destined for export to countries across Europe as well as the United States.

"People should patronise the Sreemoddi flute making business," says Homna Upazila Nirbahi Officer Quazi Shahidul Islam, "and if the artisans believe soft government loans can help them to expand their industry of course we will help them." He says he hopes to discuss with the flute makers of Sreemoddi what kind of cooperation would be most helpful.

Double trouble for parents

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a paediatrician last year. Both strongly recommended that she should be limited to one hour of screen time a day. They also stressed that she should increase her outdoor activities to remain cheerful.

"The double burden of prolonged screen time and low physical activity is a major public health concern for many developing countries... presenting a variety of health and psychosocial problems," said Asaduzzaman Khan, senior lecturer at the University of Queensland's School of Health and Rehabilitation Sciences, Australia.

He is one of the two researchers of the study published in the Amsterdam based medical journal Mental Health and Physical Activity on March 1.

Asaduzzaman's co-researcher was

Nicola W Burton of the School of Human Movement and Nutrition Sciences at the same university.

The study was conducted among 898 students of eight secondary schools in Dhaka, aged between 13 and 17 years, from November 2012 to January 2013.

It found 25 percent of the adolescents with longer screen time and less than an hour of physical activities reporting depressive symptoms. The symptoms were more prevalent in females (29 percent) than in males (20 percent).

"Adolescents with high screen time who did not meet MVPA [moderate-to-vigorous physical activity] recommendations had more than twice the odds of reporting depressive symptoms than their counterparts who met MVPA recommendations," reads the study.

The findings seem particularly grim when seen in the context of the densely populated capital. According to Population and Housing Census 2011, nearly 14 percent of Dhaka's population of 70 lakh are teenagers. While recent data is not available, it is highly likely that the numbers have increased.

The study suggests that shrinking open spaces in the densely populated city is one of the reasons behind teens spending increasing time on screens.

Children in urban areas of many other countries get to play in open spaces. But that is not an option for many children in Dhaka.

This newspaper in an investigation in 2015 found that at least 10 parks out of the 54 surviving ones in the entire Dhaka city were replaced with a community centre, kitchen market, mosque, rickshaw garage or truck

parking lot, mostly by the city corporation itself, while many others were being occupied fast.

According to urban expert Prof Nazrul Islam, every 10,000 city residents need an open space of four acres for healthy growth of children and prevention of diseases related to lack of physical activities.

Asaduzzaman and Nicola's study observes that screen time among young people in many developing nations has increased considerably in the last few years due to socio-economic transition and the advancement of technology.

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Total Solutions in Dhaka, said adolescents in the city are caught in a vicious cycle. "Their social life is shrinking, while technology-based one-way communication is rising. It's not good for their physical and mental growth."

The main factors are limited scope for outdoor sports, study pressures and security concerns, especially for girls, Sadia told The Daily Star.

Policymakers and parents need to seriously think about allowing the teenagers to have time for social interaction and outdoor activities alongside studies.

"We won't have a healthy generation otherwise," Sadia Sharmin said.

Asaduzzaman said they were planning on developing a culturally appropriate intervention to help Bangladeshi adolescents shun their sedentary lifestyle and remain physically active.