

Help solve the Rohingya crisis

FROM PAGE 1
second meeting of the Joint Committee on Trade this year to boost bilateral cooperation initiatives, the PM added.

"We are also happy that MoUs in areas of fisheries and livestock, machinery manufacturing and cultural exchange programmes have been signed, which will strengthen bilateral cooperation."

Meanwhile, the two countries signed three memorandums of understanding (MoUs) after the official talks. The deals are aimed at promoting bilateral cooperation in the areas of fisheries and livestock, industries and cultural exchange, reports UNB.

Hasina in the press statement said her government was keen to institutionalise political, trade and economic partnerships with the Asean countries as well as to join the Mekong-Ganga Cooperation Forum.

She sought Vietnam's support for Bangladesh to become "Sectoral Dialogue Partner" of Asean and also for Dhaka's joining the Mekong-Ganga Cooperation.

The PM said she conveyed to President Quang that Bangladesh believes in maintaining peace, stability and the rule-based order for seas and oceans, including safety and freedom of navigation and over flight, in line with international laws.

"We support peaceful settlement of all international disputes, including territorial and maritime disputes, in accordance with international laws, including the 1982 Convention on the Law of the Sea [UNCLOS]."

She thanked the Vietnam president for bringing with him a business delegation who would discuss with their Bangladeshi counterparts about ways to boost trade and investment.

She said Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and the great leader of Vietnam Ho Chi Minh had dedicated their lives for the independence of their people.

The struggle of Vietnamese against oppressive forces inspired Bangladesh in its war of independence. As a student leader, I myself led and participated in protest rallies against Vietnam



Aided by ministers and officials concerned, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina holds bilateral talks with Vietnamese President Tran Dai Quang and his team at her office in the capital yesterday.

PHOTO: PID

War in late 60s... I can still recall the vivid memories of those days."

The premier hoped President Quang's visit would take Bangladesh-Vietnam relations to a new height.

The Vietnamese president said he and the Bangladesh prime minister held "open and sincere" talks on the bilateral relations as well as on regional and international issues.

On politics and diplomacy, President Quang said the two countries agreed to increase exchanges of delegations at higher levels as well as hold bilateral meetings and contacts on the sidelines of multilateral conferences.

About defence and security cooperation, the president said they agreed to explore cooperation on each other's needs and capabilities and to step up cooperation in participation at peace-keeping operations.

The two countries were ready to

receive military cadets for language studies and specialised programmes, he added.

Quang said both sides agreed to boost exchange of information on crimes and terrorism to ensure security in both the countries and in the region.

The two countries agreed to encourage and widen business activities, study and tap into each other's potentials, added the president.

In this regard, he mentioned that Dhaka and Hanoi would facilitate bilateral trade and look into other potential areas. The two countries would facilitate greater access to information and trade connectivity for the business community.

He said they stressed the need for using technologies in production, cultivation and preservation to increase value of exports of both the countries and protect them from trade barriers when exported to third

countries.

About training, culture and tourism, the president said Hanoi would welcome Bangladesh to continue sending its officials to Vietnam for training, exchange their experience on public administration, economic development, agriculture, aquaculture and environmental management.

On South China Sea issue, Quang said as members of the 1982 UNCLOS, the two sides agreed to work closely to ensure freedom of navigation and peaceful settlement of all international disputes, including territorial and maritime disputes, in accordance with international laws.

The president said they agreed to ask the relevant ministries and agencies for effective implementation of deals they signed yesterday and promote more fruitful and effective growth of Bangladesh-Vietnam rela-

tions.

Finance Minister AMA Muhith, Industries Minister Amir Hossain Amu, Commerce Minister Tofail Ahmed, Agriculture Minister Matia Chowdhury, Foreign Minister AH Mahmood Ali, Cultural Affairs Minister Asaduzzaman Noor, Fisheries and Livestock Minister Narayan Chandra Chanda, State Minister for ICT Zunaid Ahmed Palak, PM's Principal Secretary Nojibur Rahman and Foreign Secretary Shahidul Haque, among others, assisted the prime minister during the talks.

THREE DEALS SIGNED

Bangladesh entered an MoU with Vietnam to promote cooperation in the field of fisheries and livestock.

Fisheries and Livestock Minister Narayan Chandra Chanda and Vietnam Minister for Agriculture and Rural Development Nguyen Xuan

Cuong inked the deal on behalf of their respective governments.

The MoU on machinery manufacturing cooperation was signed by Industries Secretary Mohammad Abdullah and Vietnam Vice-Minister of Industry and Trade Cao Quoc Hung.

The deal on cultural exchange programme was inked by Cultural Affairs Secretary Ibrahim Hossain Khan and Vietnam Deputy Minister for Culture, Sports and Tourism Dang Thi Bich Lien.

QUANG MEETS HAMID

President Abdul Hamid and his Vietnamese counterpart Tran Dai Quang yesterday stressed the need for taking joint initiatives by entrepreneurs to expedite bilateral trade and commerce.

The Vietnamese president paid a pre-dinner courtesy call on Hamid at the Bangabhaban in the evening. President's Press Secretary Md Joynal Abedin said after the meeting.

During the meeting, Hamid said the existing bilateral relations between the two countries were very excellent. He hoped the ties would expand further in future.

About the forced displacement of Rohingyas, who took shelter in Cox's Bazar, Hamid said it was a big challenge for Bangladesh.

He called upon Quang to play an effective role in ensuring safe, dignified and sustainable return of Rohingyas to their homeland.

The Vietnam president said his country always gives priority to the trade and investment relations with Bangladesh. He stressed the need for building more communication through air and waterways between the two countries to boost trade and commerce.

Foreign Minister AH Mahmood Ali, State Minister for ICT Zunaid Ahmed Palak, Foreign Secretary Shahidul Haque and the Vietnamese envoy to Bangladesh were present.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, Speaker Shirin Sharmin Chaudhury, Chief Justice Syed Mahmud Hossain, ministers, lawmakers and senior officials joined the dinner, hosted by President Abdul Hamid.

Reality vs labour law

FROM PAGE 1
non-jute mills under the government-run Bangladesh Jute Mills Corporation (BJMC) across the country have retired or died.

Some of them, including Sohrab, managed to get parts of their benefits, allegedly by bribing labour leaders between Tk 20,000 and 30,000 for each lakh. But in most cases, the employees or their families received nothing.

Many died in the meantime. Data from all the mills were not available, but at least 99 have died after retirement from Khalishpur's Crescent Jute Mills alone since July 2013, documents show.

In some cases, the nominees (particularly the spouse) have also died. The authorities are considering closing their cases as "forgotten and forfeited"

current fiscal year's budget of Tk 400,266 crore and is only about one-thirtieth of the amount (about Tk 11,000cr) that the government pumped into scam-hit state banks in balloon money over the last eight years.

For these people, however, this sum is a matter of life and death.

From November 22-26 last year, The Daily Star visited the Crescent and the Platinum jute mills and spoke to about 50 retired and current employees and their families. Their hardship is hard to quantify

Some take one meal a day; others, like Sohrab, live on people's generosity. Many are bedridden with serious health conditions -- heart problem, paralysis, Parkinson's disease -- but cannot afford treatment. Families with daughters of marriageable age are worried about their future. School and college-going children have dropped out to support their families.

None of these circumstances are unheard of in Bangladesh, where one in every five persons (some 22 percent) lives under the poverty line. But the case of these 5,700 families is different: They all have money, hard-earned too, but their employers will not pay them.

"Take photos of his broken hand and leg. Show it to the government," said a frustrated Nur Jahan.

Her retired husband, Abdul Mojid, is now bedridden since he broke his right hand and leg in an accident last year.

REELING FROM LOSS

Technically, all the dues were to be cleared by the mills, which are autonomous commercial units. But each of them has been reeling from heavy losses for decades, largely due to high production cost.

In fiscal 2016-17, their total loss stood at Tk 482 crore. It was Tk 657 crore and Tk 727 crore in the two previous fiscal years.

Since independence, the BJMC only made money in four fiscal years -- 1979-80 (Tk 106.23 crore), 1980-81 (Tk 33.75 crore), 1982-83 (Tk 24.73 crore) and 2010-11 (Tk 17.53 crore), BJMC data show.

The wages and staff salaries in our jute mills are nearly twice as much as those in private jute mills. Also, unlike private jute mills, we are supposed to pay retirement packages to our workers and other benefits such as yearly leave and free education for their children," BJMC Secretary Muhammad Salehuddin said.

"In addition, the production capacity of our mills, set up in the 1950s and 60s, has almost halved over the years. These are the main reasons why our mills incur losses."

CPD Research Director Khondaker Golam Moazzem, who has done extensive research on jute sector, partially agrees.

According to him, inefficiency, financial mismanagement and corrup-

tion involving jute purchase as well as repair and maintenance works are also responsible for the loss.

The financial condition has turned so bad that sometimes the mills cannot even pay wages and salaries of its 65,000-strong workforce for months on end.

Over the years, the authorities used the provident funds to meet day-to-day expenses such as salary and wages.

As of October last year, the mills spent Tk 442.2 crore from the PF

test, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina ordered the release of Tk 1,000 crore.

At the time, the BJMC cleared some of the dues, including the benefits of those who retired between 2009 and June 2013. Those who retired after June 2013 were not paid anything.

"It is our failure that we could not pay them.... Sometimes, I feel that I lost the moral authority to sit in this chair," said the BJMC secretary.

Cash-strapped, the BJMC, which

us.... We are not sitting idle."

What about the law regarding clearing the dues within 30 days?

"I don't disagree," he said, "But I have no means to pay. And the government knows it."

Contacted yesterday, Finance Secretary Muslim Chowdhury said they were yet to make any decision about BJMC's request for funds.

GONE ARE THE GOLDEN DAYS

In the 1950s and 1960s, when nylon and polythene were rarely used, export of jute and jute products was a key source of foreign currency earnings for the erstwhile Pakistan, thanks to the jute grown in East Pakistan, now Bangladesh.

In the Bangladesh territory, the industry took off in 1952 through the establishment of the Crescent and Khalishpur jute mills in Khulna. By the late 60s, a total of 67 jute mills were established, a testament to how profitable the business was.

After independence, all the jute mills were nationalised and brought under the BJMC, which was established on March 26, 1972, through a presidential order.

In the first four years of independence, more than 80 percent of the country's total foreign currency earnings came from jute and jute products, according to the BJMC's 2016-17 annual report.

However, the jute industry saw a gradual decline as the use of polythene and other synthetic materials took over the market as a substitute for jute, eventually forcing the Adamjee Jute Mills in Narayanganj, the largest in Bangladesh, to close in 2002.

But farmers in Bangladesh never stopped growing jute, a major cash crop for over three million farm households. It is the largest industry producing about a third of manufacturing output and the largest agro export commodity of Bangladesh.

Despite its current condition, jute often becomes the third foreign currency earner (public and private sector combined) after readymade garments and remittance.

Between 1980 and 2013, when all of these 5,700 plus employees toiled away at these 25 state-run mills, the mills earned Tk 21,138 crore from foreign trade alone, BJMC data show.

But when they retired, they were told they cannot be paid because there is no money.

"We have worked really hard for this country, but got nothing in return," said Moazzem Hossain, another paralysed worker who retired in 2016 after 38 years of service.

"We are not asking for any favour or more than what we are entitled to. If only they [the authorities] knew how we suffer!" he said, as he lay in his Platinum colony house, tears streaming down his face.



DELAYED PAY FEEDING DESPAIR ... Md Idris, 50. Unlike Sohrab and Mojid, he still works at Crescent Jute Mills (employee ID No. 1245). Yet he struggles to survive. Pays are irregular in almost all the 22 state-run jute mills, including his. When The Daily Star first met him on November 25 last year, he gestured with his hands that he wants to eat something. His six weeks' wages were due then. In the three months since, he got only two weeks' pay. This paper spoke to him again on February 24, and he said, "I cannot take it anymore. I beat up my son because he cries for food. I want to die."

Trust Fund. This explains why they could not pay the PF money, something Moazzem cited as a prime example of financial mismanagement.

'NO MEANS TO PAY'

In April 2016, jute workers in Khulna region took to the streets over unpaid wages and retirement benefits. One placard of the protesters summed up their desperation: Give us food, prime minister, or we will eat the constitution.

Following two weeks of street pro-

tests, the jute ministry is now seeking Tk 1,800 crore from the government -- Tk 800 crore to clear all its dues, including the retirement benefits, and Tk 1,000 crore in revolving capital to meet future costs, said BJMC General Manager (accounts and finance) Abdul Maleque.

Asked about the ministry's response, BJMC Chairman Mahmud Hasan said, "We haven't got any specific assurance about when or how much money they [the govt] will give

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Myanmar troops increase patrol

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Cox's Bazar

Myanmar troops have increased their patrols along the barbed wire fences at Ghumdhum and Tumbru borders under Naikkhyangchhari over the last three days.

However, they have not taken up a fixed position along the border.

Troops in patrol cars have been moving along the border frequently as witnessed by locals since around 8:00 am yesterday.

Sometimes the troops got down from their vehicles, spoke with the Border Guard Police (BGP) and then left. Meanwhile, workers have been seen erecting barbed wire fences on the other side of the border.

Dil Mohammad, leader of a group of Rohingyas who have taken shelter at Konarpura No Man's Land at Tumbru at around 3:30 pm yesterday, said Myanmar troops and BGP have both intensified their patrol in this border area.

Although their positions are not very visible, he claimed troops have taken up positions in the hills adjacent to the border. They have dug bunkers there, he reported.

A team of foreign journalists went to border area adjacent to Konarpura at around 4:00 pm yesterday and sensing their presence, both Myanmar troops and BGP members rapidly hid in the nearby hills, reports say.

Another Rohingya leader Arif Ahmed said, Myanmar troops