

26-year-old Jalal Ahmed represents a rare trend. He is one of very few victims in the country who has managed to send his traffickers—the ones who kidnapped him and forcefully sent him to a jungle in Thailand back in 2013—to jail.

With the help of a few NGOs, Jalal had filed a case under the Prevention and Suppression of Human Trafficking Act. While that did send the *dalals*, who had tricked him, to jail, the victory was short-lived. The traffickers managed to get bail through the High Court soon after they were sentenced to prison. And ever since, they have been threatening both Jalal and his family to withdraw the case.

There have been at least 4,152 cases filed under the trafficking act. However, the number of convictions is just around 10 to 15 per year. According to the Bangladesh Counter Trafficking-in-Persons, of the 778 trafficking cases filed in 2017, only one witnessed a successful conviction.

What the above essentially depicts is that while Jalal wasn't able to put his traffickers behind bars for good, he was lucky to get a conviction, an outcome that thousands of other victims are yearning for.

The eldest among his siblings, Jalal wanted to help his family, which was struggling to make ends meet. It was in these trying times that he met Ziaur Rahman, a *dalal* who resided in the same village in Cox's Bazar. He told Jalal that he could send him to Malaysia for work.

"He asked me to go with him to Chittagong to get my passport made," recalls Jalal. "Instead, he tricked me and took me to Katabonia in Teknaf and held me captive inside a house," he adds.

After a week in Teknaf, Jalal was taken to the shore one night and squeezed onto a small boat. "It was meant to carry just four to five people, but there were 15 of us. We all sat on top of each other. There was barely any room to keep your feet. It was dreadful," he recalls.

After a painful, five-hour-long journey, the victims were transferred to a trawler. They were kept there for 23 days.

"We got just one meal a day. If we asked for more, they would torture us," he says. The trawler gradually became more crowded and there was a total of 241 people in it before it started moving.

12 days later, they reached a jungle in Thailand. "We were treated like animals there. We were tortured until we agreed to ask our families to pay for our release," says Jalal. "My family took loans and paid Tk 3 lakh as ransom to a *dalal* in Bangladesh."

The completion of the transaction, however, did not end Jalal's travails. It was precisely during that period that the Thai police learnt of the kidnappings in the jungle and made mass arrests during a raid. As a result, Jalal and the other victims had to languish in jail for 11 months.

"The situation in the jail was unbearable. At one point a number of us went on a hunger strike. We told the jail authorities that you can either kill us or release us, there is no point living like

this," remembers Jalal. That's when the Thai police officials contacted the Bangladeshi Embassy, which paved the way for Jalal's return and eventually led to the filing of the case against the traffickers in Bangladesh.

According to researchers, a majority of the cases don't work out because victims

are forced to settle matters outside the court in exchange of money.

Take for instance, the case of Wahida Begum. She had gone to Saudi Arabia through a recruiting agency to work as a housemaid. Exactly 26 days after she landed in the Middle East, she called her husband to let him know that she had

THE ENDLESS WAIT FOR JUSTICE

Victims who have filed trafficking cases in Bangladesh are stuck in a vicious cycle due to the poor implementation of the law

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ILLUSTRATION: KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO

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been raped by the father, his brother and the son of the family.

Wahida's husband filed a trafficking case against the recruiting agency and, with the help of various NGOs, compelled the agency and the Bureau of Manpower Employment and Training to fast-track Wahida's return. It was successful. Wahida returned home within a week.

However, as soon as she returned, Wahida's husband decided to strike a deal worth Tk 70,000 with the recruiting agency and settle the issue. This deal was made even though Wahida didn't want it.

"Do you think I am crazy enough to go against my husband? If he does not want to pursue the case, there's nothing I can do. At least we got a portion of the money that we invested, back," says Wahida.

Aside from out-of-the-court settlements, researchers say, another reason that is delaying the cases filed under this act is the absence of tribunals for trafficking cases. The government, as per the trafficking act of 2012, was supposed to form separate tribunals to deal with trafficking cases in order to speed up the process. However, no tribunals have been set up as yet.

As a result, the women and children repression prevention tribunals were tasked with additional duty to deal with the cases. However, with a huge backlog of cases of its own, these tribunals, according to researchers, have not been effective enough to deal with trafficking cases.

Another reason why it becomes difficult to dispose of these cases is the transnational nature of the crimes. Since the victims often suffer in other countries, it becomes difficult to provide evidence in court to charge the local traffickers. For instance, when Wahida returned home, she returned empty-handed and did not have any documents from the embassy that could prove the torture against her.

There's also the issue of lack of training. According to researchers, the government is yet to provide police officials specialised training to deal with matters related to trafficking. And this includes a number of aspects, right from the ability to understand the mental situation of the victim to being technically ready to nab the criminals.

"When victims go to police officials, they should try to calm them down because they have already lost a lot of money and have been immensely tortured. Instead of telling them that they deserve it, they should know how to talk to them and then take cases," says a trafficking researcher preferring anonymity.

Last year, Bangladesh was demoted to the Tier 2 Watch List as per the Trafficking in Persons Report 2017 by the US Department of State.

Going by the current situation, it's unlikely that the country will witness a promotion any time soon. If the government and the concerned authorities actually want to create a wind of change, they really need to start thinking of ways of implementing the existing laws appropriately. ■

SPOTLIGHT

On the morning of July 26, 2018 the "bihari" camps in Mirpur sectors 10 and 11 were gripped by panic as they waited with bated breath for a bulldozer to drive up their alleyways and tear down their homes.

As I stepped out on lane number 5 of Block C in Mirpur 11, a tiny four year old spotted me and made a dash for her house crying, "Mother, they've brought the bulldozers!" A flustered woman ran to the door pulling a scarf over her hair. "Who are you? What do you want?" she yelled at me. I tried to explain that I did not bring a bulldozer and then attempted to ask questions about their fear of being evicted, but the sight of an outsider had jarred the mother so much, the conversation did not go much further. The mother-daughter duo were residents of a block of tiny one-roomed houses at MCC camp.

According to the locals of the area, the imams of Masjid Baitul Rahmat had announced during *fajr* prayers that anyone who did not want their belongings crushed under the wheels of the bulldozer had to pack up by the start of the business day. None of the people I met that day had actually packed up because unlike the residents of Dhaka, who all have a "village home", the Biharis only have these camps. This is where they were settled in 1972 as refugees by the International Committee of the Red Cross after Pakistan refused to take back its Urdu-speaking population.

On May 2, 2016, the Planning Commission's Member Secretary of the Physical Infrastructure department, Khorshed Alam Chowdhury, presided over a meeting evaluating the details of a project to expand the road systems of Dhaka North City Corporation (DNCC). The roads of Mirpur were to be expanded in width to fit at least two opposite-facing lanes comfortably. A total of 126 roads and lanes of Mirpur 10 and 11 were targeted, as per project documents supplied by the DNCC office. According to numerous government officials, this project is significant for another reason as well—these roads are a stone's throw from the proposed metro rail stations that are being built in Mirpur 10 and Mirpur 11. The webbed network of these lanes also connects the (relatively) newly built main roads of Kalshi to the spine of Mirpur, i.e. Begum Rokeya Sarani.

And among these lanes that are to be widened, at least 22 run alongside Bihari camps, as per spot visitations by *Star Weekend*. The Bihari community, however, alleges that the actual number is closer to 39. The number of Bihari families in this area is around 12,000, according to population statistics.

Shaheen School, established in 1973 and located inside the camp, and touting itself as an institute for "non-locals" (Biharis) is set to have its playground reduced to a narrow strip of lawn. Its playground is already

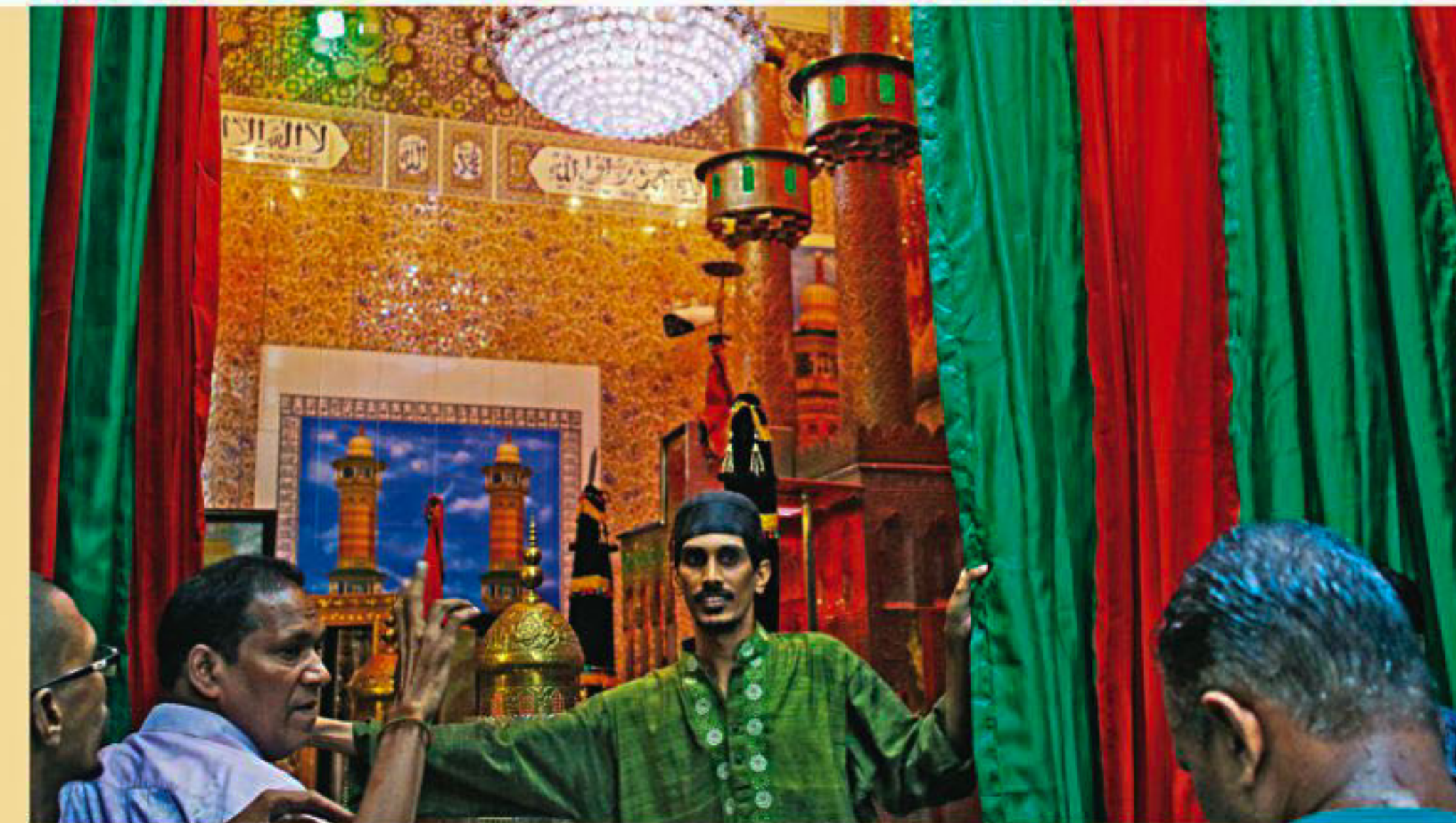


PHOTO: KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO

THE ROAD EXPANSION PROJECT THAT WILL DEMOLISH BIHARI HOMES

ZYMA ISLAM



PHOTO: KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO

more of a front yard and allows for little sport other than a game of tag. "The camps are completely devoid of any playgrounds, and while the boys play rough on the streets, this place provides a safe space for recreation for girls," said Mohammed Shamsad Alam, the headmaster of the school.

"They will also be breaking down our school's Shaheed Minar. It's important for us to have that because it helps with integrating the Urdu-speaking children with the majority population. We barely have any funds to rebuild a wall, let alone a Shaheed Minar," he adds. According to project documents, the yard is set to lose 5 feet in width.

Also on the demolition list is a magnificent one-storey high silver *Tajiya* gifted to the Shi'a practising community by benefactors in Iran. The *Tajiya* is a well-hidden secret to those not local to the area. Tucked away behind large green mausoleum doors

on Lane 18 of Mirpur 11 Block C, the *Tajiya* is rarely opened to the general public, but is a sight to behold. The exquisitely carved shrine is, for this rootless

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