



ILLUSTRATION: NAHFIA JAHAN MONNI

GOING UP THE AMERICAS

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That Bangladeshis migrate to far-flung parts of the world is nothing new—undertaking long, dangerous, and expensive journeys to reach countries in Europe, East Asia, Africa, and even the Americas. While many Bangladeshis migrate to the US legally, there are also those who undertake the difficult trek up South and Central America to enter the US through its southern border. These Bangladeshis routinely show up as numbers in border control and migration statistics of arrests, asylum claims, and deaths while crossing over into the US.

Bodies of these migrants have washed up on the shores of the Rio Grande river, which lies near the US-Mexico border. "There are many more bodies which are traceless in Mexico or the numerous other countries on the migrant trail which go

unreported," says Sohel Mahmud, a member of New York-based community organisation DRUM. Short for Desis Rising Up and Moving, DRUM NYC is a non-profit which organises immigrant workers and youth of South Asian descent.

Once at the border, most migrants know to surrender and claim asylum, he says. While migrants are entitled to seek asylum in the US, processing of claims are backlogged and can take months. Those who illegally enter, thus, are likely to be picked up and their cases heard more quickly. In the meantime, they can make their way to relatives and friends in the country and disappear into the vast number of undocumented immigrants in the US.

"It's everyday news here, that many

people [from Bangladesh and other countries] are coming here through Mexico," says Mahmud. A majority of DRUM's own members are undocumented and crossed into the US after trekking across South and Central America. DRUM has been asked to use their social networks to assist in identifying the bodies found at the US-Mexico border when local authorities fail.

Two such Bangladeshis were 18-year-old Shahadat Hossain Naim and 21-year-old Moinul Hassan Hridoy whose bodies were found in mid-May last year. In their pockets, medical examiners found a passport photo and a scrap of paper showing that at least one of them had crossed the Guatemala-Mexico border and other scraps with phone numbers and Bangla words on them. After surmising

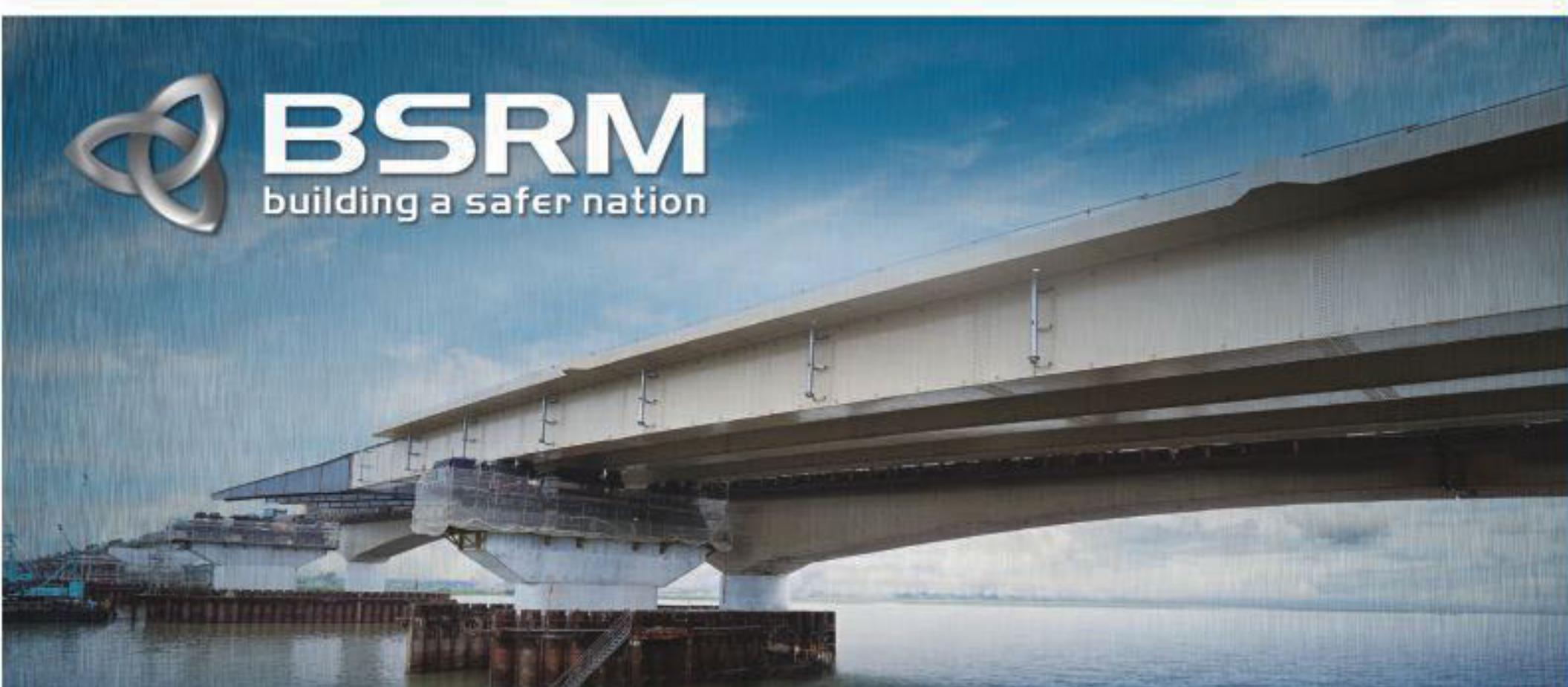
that the dead were Bangladeshi, DRUM was alerted.

They were eventually identified after DRUM reached out through social media, local ethnic media, and Bangladeshi media. Both the men were from Noakhali (but travelled separately till Mexico) but while a cousin of Naim identified him in a few hours, Hridoy was harder to identify, says Mahmud who helped reach out to the family members. Hridoy was eventually identified using DNA evidence.

Migrants, and not just Mexicans, trying to enter the US by the land border gained widespread attention late October year after a "caravan" of thousands of migrants from Central America tried to cross into the US from Mexico.

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