



Helal Uddin returned to Manus Island by boat from Bangladesh to stay with his wife and child

PHOTOS: COURTESY

A MIGRANT'S VOYAGE

The story of a man who sailed across the world in search of refuge, only to end up in a prison in Papua New Guinea

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Md Helal Uddin, a 29-year-old young man from Bangladesh, has been languishing in the prisons of Papua New Guinea (PNG) for almost a month. The accusation against him is that he entered the country illegally. Helal never claimed that he entered PNG legally; but he could not find any other way to get back to his wife Alice Michael, a native of PNG, and his two-year-old son Mohammad Ali. How Helal raised his family in such a remote country in the Pacific where hardly any Bangladeshis have even set foot, is a mindboggling story of adventure, love and sacrifice.

Born and raised in Joatpur village under Burichong upazila of Cumilla district, Helal never wanted to leave his home. He used to support his elderly parents, who are poor farmers, by working as a peon in

the local office of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). However, his luck started to run out after the election of 2008 when BNP suffered a major electoral defeat. By 2012, many of his leaders were in jail or on the run and the local BNP office where Helal worked was closed. Jobless and under threat of being arrested or tortured, Helal saw no alternative to leaving Cumilla. At that time, Helal was contacted by some of the BNP workers who were planning to go to Malaysia in search of work and shelter. Helal agreed to join them, lured by the promise of work opportunities and a better life. He invested all his savings of around Tk 100,000 and confirmed his place on that fateful journey.

Instead of going to Dhaka, however,

Helal was asked to reach Teknaf by February 21, 2013. When he reached the rendezvous point, he was informed that his journey to Malaysia would be by boat, not by airplane. He was terribly frightened but it was too late to back out. He was forcefully taken aboard a small wooden fishing trawler with 250 other people. Helal's voyage started on February 22, 2013.

When Helal reached Thailand on the first week of March, three of his fellow passengers died of sea-sickness and fever; their bodies were thrown aboard. Due to excessive shortage of food and drinking water, Helal was also in a bad state. He purchased some food and water from Thailand and started for Malaysia again.

Continued to page 6

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