

# God sent us the fishermen

Says Bangladeshi farmer who survived the Mediterranean shipwreck

AFP, Zarzis, Tunisia

A Bangladeshi farmer watched dozens drown beside him in the Mediterranean before “God sent us the fishermen”, who saved him from the cold waters and took him to Tunisia.

Ahmed Bilal was one of 16 survivors of the shipwreck, in which an estimated 60 people died on Friday while trying to reach Italy.

“I can’t stop myself crying,” said Bilal, who lost two younger relatives in the accident, from a Red Crescent emergency centre in the southern Tunisian coastal town of Zarzis.

The 30-year-old said he began his journey to Europe six months ago, flying with three others to Dubai and onwards to Istanbul in Turkey.

From there they took another flight to the Libyan capital Tripoli, Bilal said, where they joined around 80 other Bangladeshis and were held in a room in western Libya for three months.

“I already thought I would die in Libya,” he said. “We had food only once a day, sometimes less. There was one toilet for 80 people. We could not wash -- only our teeth -- and we were crying, begging for food.”

Medical charity Doctors Without Borders (MSF) estimates 6,000 migrants in Libya are being detained “in conditions that generally fall well below international standards”.

The situation has worsened since eastern commander Khalifa Haftar launched an offensive to take Tripoli last month, with more than 450 people killed due to fighting linked to that military campaign, according to the World Health Organization.

## ‘I HAVE NOTHING NOW’

Bilal had no idea what he would face when he embarked on the journey from Bangladesh’s Sylhet region, where he had seen villagers with relatives in Europe live a better life.

After his family sold their land, the father of two paid a Bangladeshi

smuggler nicknamed “Good Luck” around \$7,000 (6,230 euros) to arrange the trip.

“He said we would have a better life and we believed him. I am sure most of the people he sends die on the way”, said Bilal.

He and the other migrants left northwestern Libya on a large boat, before being transferred to a smaller one.

Manzour Mohammed Metwella, an Egyptian who was on board, said the boat “started to sink almost immediately.”

“We swam all night,” said the 21-year-old.

Survivors said all the passengers were men, with 51 from Bangladesh, three Egyptians, several Moroccans, Chadians and other Africans.

After seeing people drown in front of his eyes, Bilal said he “was losing hope myself, but God sent us the fishermen who saved us.”

The fishermen were able to rescue 14 Bangladeshis, one Moroccan, and the Egyptian Metwella.

“If the Tunisian fishermen hadn’t seen them, there wouldn’t have been any survivors and we would have never known about this” boat sinking, said Mongi Slim from the Red Crescent.

The survivors now have 60 days to decide whether to return home, seek asylum through the United Nations refugee agency, or try their luck in Tunisia.

But there is no asylum law in Tunisia and residents are already facing high unemployment and overstretched public services.

“We lost so much, I have nothing now,” said Bilal, admitting he still wants to reach Europe to earn money.

“But I don’t want to go on the sea like this again, I am done with this risk.”

Humanitarian organisations have faced hostility from governments for running rescue missions in the Mediterranean.

# Teach your sons

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been instilled in generations.

Shamima Akhter, director of public affairs at Bangladesh chapter of an international beverage company, said in a society that always favours men, her eight-year-old daughter is expected to face greater risks and challenges than her 12-year-old son.

“She [her daughter] should know how to fight back. But it is more important to tell my son what challenges I have been subjected to and his sister will face” so that he learns to respect women, acknowledge their contribution to family and society, Shamima said.

Her son is about to step into adolescence and Shamima thinks this is the time she should talk to him about the changes he and his female classmates will experience, physically and emotionally.

Girls around this age are often made fun of and bullied because of their physical changes, Shamima said, adding, “My son should be aware that his mother has gone through these stages and his sister will too. The physical changes are completely natural ... There is nothing that girls should be ashamed of.

“Such conversation is very important.”

At the insistence of Shamima, her children attended boxing classes outside. “It is to teach my son that ‘you don’t know what power someone can possess’ within his or her physique and ‘don’t think you have more power as a boy’ while to teach the daughter ‘you are not weak.’”

Sharmin Islam, a gender specialist and a mother of two, always discourages gender stereotyping at home.

“My daughter is just in her teen years, and my son is five. As children, both of them are equally vulnerable,” she said, adding that as their mother she is responsible for talking to them about consent. She said she would need to have that conversation with them in future.

“Ultimately, the most important lesson for my son and daughter alike, is that they cannot discriminate. Every human being deserves equal respect, regardless of their gender, sex, or sexuality.”

Sharmin has seen how gender roles have changed over the last few decades.

“When we were children, it was uncommon for women to work outside. Many thought it was the norm for women to do household work, while men made zero contribution to that end.”

According to Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, female labour force participation is 36 percent, up from 23 percent in 1990.

With working mothers struggling to find a balance between work and family, it has become imperative that men share household activities.

Worsening the situation is an increasing number of incidents of workplace violence.

This is because men, who grew up in an environment that favours them, fail to understand what constitutes violence and abuse, said Shamima, who has worked in sexual harassment policy making and anti-sexual harassment committees in her company.

The High Court issued a set of guidelines in 2009, saying all educational institutions and workplaces across the country must form a five-member committee led by a woman for the prevention of sexual harassment.

Citing her experience in dealing with complaints, Shamima said many educated men in such committees were not gender sensitive enough. “They don’t understand why some comments or statements might have psychological impact ... This has to do with the familial upbringing they have had.”

While talking to The Daily Star, Shahida, an RMG worker, who always fears for her teenage daughter’s safety, said, “Men should be educated properly.”

Times are changing and women’s roles in society are not limited to that of a mother. They are now professionals, activists, change-makers.

As Sharmin aptly puts it, “People tend to think boys take after their fathers. But today, mothers are just as much of a role model.”

Today’s boys will be tomorrow’s men, and their stance against gender violence can truly turn the tides, and create a truly equal world.

## PM returns from London

UNB, Dhaka

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina returned home from London yesterday morning wrapping up her 10-day official visit to the United Kingdom.

A flight of Biman Bangladesh Airlines carrying the prime minister and her entourage landed at Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport at 9:55am.

The flight took off from the Heathrow International Airport in London for Dhaka at 6:35pm (London time) on Friday.

Bangladesh High Commissioner to the UK Saida Muna Tasneem was present to see the prime minister off at the airport.

Hasina went to London on May 1.



Migrants, who were rescued after their boat capsized in the Mediterranean Sea off the Tunisian Coast on late Thursday, are seen inside a local Red Cross shelter in Zarzis, Tunisia, yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

# FBCCI, NBR at loggerheads

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collection and establish transparency and accountability in a country that has one of the lowest tax-GDP ratios (about 9 percent) in the world.

VAT, a type of consumption tax, is the biggest source of revenue for the government, followed by income tax and customs tariff.

The new law originally envisaged a uniform 15 percent VAT on goods and services, doing away with the multiple rates under the existing law -- a change that sparked protest from businesses, particularly from the FBCCI on grounds that it would hurt small and medium businesses and stoke inflation.

In the face of protests, the government deferred enforcement of the new VAT system law thrice, the latest being in June 2017, when it announced at the eleventh hour of the postponement by two years.

Later, the NBR formed a joint panel with representatives from the FBCCI to review the act and resolve the standoff.

Then at a meeting chaired by the finance minister with business bodies on March 31, the businesses agreed in principle with the proposal

of multiple VAT rates: 5 percent, 7.5 percent, 10 percent and 15 percent.

The meeting also decided to increase the VAT-free annual turnover threshold to Tk 50 lakh from the existing 36 lakh. It agreed to increase annual turnover limit to Tk 3 crore from Tk 80 lakh and hike turnover tax to 4 percent from the present 3 percent.

The FBCCI in the letter said it did not see any visible step by the NBR for enacting revisions in the law.

The federation said it had been demanding impact assessment of the new law, which would replace the VAT law 1991, for the last several years.

Lastly, in February 2018, it demanded a cost-benefit analysis of the new VAT, according to the letter.

The NBR, in its response to the FBCCI, said it had approached 7-8 organisations, namely Dhaka University’s development studies department, the Centre for Policy Dialogue, the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies and Brac University, for conducting the impact assessment.

“But none of the organisations expressed interest to do such an assessment,” the NBR said, adding

that this was why it could not do the assessment.

The NBR also said it would take initiatives in this regard after the passage of the budget for the next fiscal year.

“And the impact assessment will be done out of NBR’s own necessity,” it said, adding that the assessment cannot be a precondition from businesses for replacement of the law for the tax system that has been in effect.

Based on the positive outcome of the meeting on March 31, a follow-up meeting was called on May 2 and representatives from the FBCCI were also present.

But in the middle of the meeting, the representatives requested rescheduling of the meeting after a telephone conversation with someone from the FBCCI, the NBR letter said.

“Therefore, the allegation of not holding the meeting is very woeful. It gives one a perception that the FBCCI is trying to create a barrier to the implementation of the VAT and SD Act 2012,” the NBR said.

The FBCCI in its letter demanded rebate for products where multiple rate would be applied. Otherwise, it will create inflation, it said.

In November last year, the revenue

collector formed a high-powered panel to consider the views and recommendations of various trade bodies regarding the new law.

“The recommendations of the committee have been sent to the FBCCI. The FBCCI has not given any opinion regarding the suggestions in the report,” the NBR said, adding that the federation representatives expressed their satisfaction about the report in various meetings.

The FBCCI showed a positive attitude towards the implementation of the new law, according to the NBR letter.

“The initiative to implement this law has been made after resolving the long-running disputes from the business community. Even after that, such a letter from the FBCCI is distressing.”

The NBR also requested the president of the country’s apex trade body to examine the context and reasons behind the issuance of the letter.

Contacted, Sheikh Fazle Fahim, the incoming FBCCI president and first vice president of the present committee, acknowledged receiving a letter from the NBR, but said he was yet to go through it.

“We will respond to the NBR letter soon,” he added.

# Rape suspect killed in ‘gunfight’

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When Kajal tried to flee, he was hit by two bullets. He was declared dead at Gangni Upazila Health Complex around 4:40am, said the OC. Kajal used to run a local gang, he said.

Police recovered a firearm and two bullets from the spot.

In Baniachang upazila of Habiganj, a first-grader was allegedly raped by a neighbour on Friday night.

Around 8:00pm, when the seven-year-old was in the courtyard of her house, she was abducted by Jahangir Miah, 20, and raped in a nearby bush, said the victim’s mother.

Around one hour later, the family heard screams from the bush and found her gagged with a towel. She was taken to Sylhet MAG Osmani Medical College Hospital.

Rashed Mobarak, OC of Baniachang Police Station, said they were looking for the suspect.

In Kaliganj upazila of Jhenidah, a class-10 student of a madrasa was allegedly gang-raped by two youths on Friday night.

After raping her at a field, around 900

yards from her home, the criminals left her there with the hands and legs tied.

Family members said the girl was coming back home from a neighbour’s house around 8:00pm. At that time, the criminals forced her into the field.

Locals rescued the girl early yesterday. Family members said one of the rapists was Md Alamin, 19, of the same village. The victim could not recognise the other.

Kaliganj police sent her to Jhenidah sadar hospital for medical examination. A case was filed.

In a separate incident in Kaliganj upazila, police arrested two youths yesterday for allegedly raping a seventh-grader on April 25.

The two are Khairul Islam, 22, and Mortaza Bappi, 23, of the upazila’s Balidapara village.

In Tungipara upazila of Gopalganj, a first-grader girl was allegedly raped by her cousin on Thursday.

A case was filed against the accused, Milton Fakir, 22, on Friday.

The victim’s mother said Milton is the son of her cousin. “I came to my father’s house with my daughter

10 days ago. After having iftar on Thursday, I went to a neighbour’s house, leaving my daughter at our house. At that time, Milton came to our house and took her to their under-construction building and raped her,” said the mother.

AKM Anamul Kabir, OC of Tungipara Police Station, confirmed the incident.

In Moulvibazar, a court sent two youths to jail on Friday for attempting to rape a fifth-grader in Sreemangal upazila on Wednesday.

In Haziganj upazila of Chandpur, police arrested two youths early yesterday for allegedly getting a teenage girl pregnant after gang-raping her eight months ago.

In Bagerhat, a human chain was formed yesterday by Bagerhat district unit of National Women’s Council demanding speedy trial for the rape and murder of a first-grader madrasa student on May 5.

Students from different schools participated in the programme in front of Bagerhat Press Club.

EDUCATION OFFICER SUELED FOR

RAPE

A 19-year-old woman lodged a case against an education officer in Jamalpur yesterday.

The accused is Md Majedul Islam, assistant upazila education officer in Melandah.

Quoting the woman, OC of Jamalpur Sadar Police Station Mohammad Salemuazzaman said she was raped multiple times after she started working at the house of the accused as domestic help one year ago. He also threatened her not to disclose the matter.

Sensing her pregnancy, Majedul hurriedly married her off to another person in a village of Jamalpur sadar two months ago. The incident came to light when she got the seven-month-old child aborted on Friday.

Police sent the body to Jamalpur General Hospital for an autopsy and DNA test, said the OC.

The accused went into hiding.

(Our Kushtia, Sylhet, Moulvibazar, Jhenidah, Faridpur, Bagerhat, and Mymensingh correspondents contributed to the story.)

# 60 migrants, mostly Bangladeshis

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UNHCR, has called for stepped up search and rescue operations to avoid future tragedies in the Mediterranean, which it calls the “world’s deadliest sea crossing”.

“Across the region we need to strengthen the capacity of search and rescue operations,” said Vincent Cochetel, UNHCR special envoy for the Mediterranean.

“If we don’t act now, we’re almost certain to see more tragic events in the coming weeks and months,” he warned.

## A PERILOUS JOURNEY

According to the UNHCR, the journey across the Mediterranean “is becoming increasingly fatal for those who risk it”.

In the first four months of this year, one person has died (crossing the Mediterranean) for every three that have reached European shores, after departing from Libya, it said.

Libya, which has been wracked by chaos since the 2011 uprising that killed veteran dictator Muammar Gaddafi, has long been a major transit route for migrants desperate to reach Europe.

There were fears of further migrant crisis in the Mediterranean with the escalation in fighting between the UN-backed Libyan government and Libyan National Army (LNA) since early last month as the LNA was trying

to take control of Tripoli.

Since then, the Bangladesh embassy in Tripoli has relocated some 300 of its nationals from the suburbs of the Libyan capital to some safe places in the city, said Counsellor (labour) Ashrafur.

He said many migrants were reluctant to return home as they spent a hefty amount of money for migration.

The official said some 20,000 Bangladeshis could be living in Libya.

Some 36,000 Bangladeshis were repatriated from Libya after the crisis began in the North African country in 2011. Three years later, Bangladesh stopped sending workers there.

But manpower brokers in Bangladesh in cooperation with their gangs in Libya and other countries continued to send workers to Libya via the UAE, Egypt of Sudan, thanks to lax law and order in Libya, said Bangladeshi law enforcers.

The IOM says as many as 443 migrants either died or went missing in the Mediterranean while trying to reach Europe in boats as of May 8 this year. The figures were 2,299 in 2018 and 3,139 in 2017.

The UN agency says 21,645 migrants, including 17,000 via sea and the rest via land, arrived in Europe as of May 8 this year. The figures were 390,432 in 2016, 186,768 in 2017 and

144,166 in 2018.

According to European Union, there are some 100,000 undocumented Bangladeshis in Europe.

## 1,552 killed

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accidents occurred that killed 415 people and injured 884 others.

In March and April 384 and 327 accidents occurred that killed 386 and 340 people and injured 820 and 610 respectively.

Ashis Kumar Dey, general secretary of NCPSRR, said that they identified 10 major reasons behind the accidents.

Racing tendency among drivers, contractual leasing of vehicles to drivers or conductors on daily basis, employing drivers without licence, lack of awareness among pedestrians and light vehicle drivers, overloading and overtaking tendency of drivers, and violation of traffic rules are some of the main reasons behind road accidents, Ashis said.

Besides, long-time driving without interval, unfit vehicles, violation of traffic rules on long routes, raising number of motorbikes and three-wheelers on roads and highways, and carrying passengers and goods in locally-made motorised vehicles are other reasons behind accidents, he added.