

Ensure hassle-free journey home

Hasina asks Quader

Bss, Dhaka

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina yesterday directed Road Transport and Bridges Minister Obaidul Quader to ensure hassle-free journey of home-bound people.

The prime minister came up with the directive during a meeting with different ministers, advisers and party leaders at the Gono Bhaban, said PM's Press Secretary Ihsanul Karim.

During the meeting, the prime minister also discussed various aspects of law and order ahead of Eid-ul-Azha with Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan.

She gave directives to the home minister so that Eid prayers are held smoothly.

Besides, Health Minister Zahid Maleque briefed the prime minister about the latest situation of dengue in

the country.

During the time, Sheikh Hasina gave various instructions to the health minister about overall treatment of dengue fever.

Meanwhile, the prime minister held meetings with Agriculture Minister Abdur Razzak, Finance Minister AHM Mustfa Kamal, Information Minister Hasan Mahmud, her Adviser HT Imam, State Minister for Women and Children Affairs Fazilatunnesa Indira, State Minister for Cultural Affairs KM Khalid and Deputy Minister for Education Barrister Mohibul Hasan Chowdhury Nowfel.

Besides, she held meetings with Awami League Presidium Member Advocate Sahara Khatun, Joint Secretary Jahangir Kabir Nanak and Cultural Affairs Secretary Ashim Kumar Ukil.

Enslaved in Oman

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from Omani capital Muscat on August 1 and described the gravity of the situation to him and relatives of some other women migrants.

About 20-25 more Bangladeshi women are still confined to an office of the agency in Oman, Shafia said.

"They are sold sometimes for five days, sometimes for a week. They are forced to do all kinds of work," she said, explaining how women had to toil all day and then get raped.

On return to the agency office form their temporary "workplaces", the women would be sold to someone else and the physical and sexual abuse would continue.

"If they refused to go, the traffickers would beat them, with their hands tied to the back," Shafia said.

Fatema Akter Pakhi, 23, is one of them. Before her return on August 5, she had been beaten so badly one day that she passed out and lay unconscious for a long time. "We thought she died. We sat beside her and prayed throughout that night," Shafia said.

With her health condition fast deteriorating, Pakhi was sent back. As she landed in Dhaka, she was taken to Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University for a medical check-up.

"Doctors suggested a number of tests before going for treatment," said Supriya Shahnewaj, project manager of OKUP.

As Shafia was recounting her experience on Wednesday at The Daily Star office, Pakhi felt sick and rushed to the washroom to throw up.

Shafia said she had also been allowed to fly back home after her family struck a deal with the agency in Oman over the phone. They had to pay the agency Tk 10,000 for her release from captivity.

On hearing the treatment of Fahima and other women at the hands of the traffickers, the BMET summoned her recruiting agency, M/S Masud Jamil Overseas, to its office on Monday. Hours later, an official showed up to say that the agency had already contacted its manpower recruiting partner in Oman.

"He [the staffer of the agency] presented an audio clip before us where Fahima is heard saying she was fine," said Amena Akter, a trainer and counsellor at the OKUP, who was present at the BMET office at the time. "I didn't know then what to say," Amena said.

Shafia said she was one of the witnesses to the recording, and it was done under duress.

Such treatments by the traffickers fall under the UN definition of modern-day slavery. It refers to

situations of exploitation that a person cannot refuse or leave because of threats, violence, coercion, deception, and/or abuse of power.

FALSE PROMISE

Fahima went to Oman on May 15. A manpower broker in Shariatpur had assured her that she would get Tk 40,000 a month as a hospital cleaner.

All the arrangements were completed by the broker for Tk 1.5 lakh. Fahima spent a big chunk of her income from her previous job in Saudi Arabia to go to Oman.

Another broker Baten facilitated the process, said Fahima's son Shaheen. Before boarding the flight to Oman, Baten met Fahima at Jatrabari by the roadside.

In a similar fashion, Baten was involved in the migration process of at least three others, including Pakhi. He sent them to Oman through different agencies.

Pakhi, Shafia and Fahima had all the legal documents before flying out but the documents say they were hired for the job of a domestic worker. They got the documents before their flight and were unaware of the fraudulence.

Both Pakhi and Shafia said they had not received any training and undergone any medical check-up compulsory before joining work overseas but the broker had managed to get clearance from the BMET in both cases.

Meanwhile, the OKUP wrote a letter to Director General of BMET Salim Reza requesting prompt actions to rescue the rest of the women from the Oman agency's office and immediate arrangement to bring them back. There is a Bangladeshi woman called Maya who is in-charge of that office, according to the letter.

Despite repeated attempts, The Daily Star could not reach Salim Reza for comments.

Labour Counsellor at Bangladesh Embassy in Oman Humayun Kabir said on Friday that he had just landed there and was yet to join office.

As soon as he gets the list of the women migrants, he would look into the situation they were in and find out the agencies involved and take action, he said.

For Shaheen, the past one month has been full of a frantic search for people who could help him get his mother back safe. He went to local broker Mosharraf and Baten several times but to no avail.

The BMET instructed the recruiting agency to bring her back by August 13. Shaheen now waits to receive his mother, clinging to the hope that his wait will not get any longer.

Dampened by dengue

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they had to be cautious about some dengue patients, as the illness could take a turn for the worse even after partial recovery.

"Around 500 patients, 460 with dengue, are now undergoing treatment at the hospital's medicine ward, which has a 60-bed capacity," said the doctor.

The hospital itself has 500 beds. He said 20 medical officers, senior doctors and 26 nurses were working round-the-clock in phases to handle the huge number of patients.

In addition, 15 doctors of the hospital's medical college were helping the doctors for the past two weeks.

Director of the hospital Amin Ahmed Khan said 779 patients were undergoing treatment there, of which 553 were dengue patients.

Earlier, the number of patients had decreased to around 250 just before Eid but had since doubled, he said.

In the DMCH, 2,993 patients, of which 875 have dengue, are now undergoing treatment, hospital sources said. Most of the non-dengue patients were discharged, they said.

In Shaheed Suhrawardy Medical College Hospital, 450 patients have

been undergoing treatment for dengue. The number was around 1,200 last week.

CHILD DIES OF DENGUE

Rusha, a fourth grader of YWCA of Mohammadpur in Dhaka, came to Jhakathi's Rajapur town with her parents on Thursday to celebrate Eid-ul-Azha.

None of them, however, knew that the child would never see another Eid, let alone this one.

On Friday morning, Rusha was taken to Rajapur Health complex when she began to feel unwell.

She was referred to Barishal for some tests and treatment as her condition was critical, said Kazi Jashim Uddin, Rusha's uncle.

At first, she was taken to Sher-e-Bangla Medical College Hospital, but she couldn't be admitted due to the excessive number of patients.

Rusha was then admitted to a private hospital in Barishal city on Friday morning and shifted to the intensive care unit of Sher-E-Bangla Medical College and Hospital. She breathed her last yesterday morning.

(Our Jhalakath, Tangail and Barishal correspondents also contributed to the report.)



An overcrowded launch is seen on its way to Hatia from Sadarghat Launch Terminal in Dhaka yesterday, a day before the Eid holidays begin. The photo was taken from a bridge at Postagola.

PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

Homegoers' plight just won't let up

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microbuses in Rabna bypass area in Tangail Sadar upazila around 10:45am.

On the last day of home rush for Eid-ul-Fitr earlier this year, passengers staged a similar demonstration on the highway.

Thousands of passengers, including women and children, suffered since yesterday morning as vehicular movement came to a halt on 40km of the road from Mirzapur to the approach road of the Bangabandhu bridge.

After 11:00am, the vehicles started moving at a snail's pace on Mirzapur-Bangabandhu bridge approach road, police said.

The tailback had appeared when the bridge authorities suspended toll collection for one-and-a-half-hours from 7:10am, said Shafiqul Islam, additional superintendent of police in Tangail.

The authorities suspended the toll collection as a huge number of vehicles got stuck from the western side of the bridge to Hatikumrul point in Sirajganj mainly because of excessive pressure of vehicles and a narrow bridge at Nokla, Shafiqul said.

Toll collection remained suspended for another two hours since 6:00pm, causing a 30km tailback again.

Shamim Rahman, a private service holder, started at 11:00pm on Friday from the capital's Mazar Road area to go to his Thakurgaon home and could reach till Sherpur of Bogura at 7:15pm yesterday. It might take at least another five hours to reach Thakurgaon.

"I already passed 20 hours with some dry food. It's a nightmare," he said over the phone, adding that he had faced a similar situation last year.

Sanjit Kumar Roy, superintendent of police in Tangail, told journalists that operation of heavy and rundown

trucks on the highway was banned for three days before Eid, but still the pressure of vehicles was high.

Md Shahidul Islam, deputy commissioner in Tangail, said at least 35,000 vehicles were plying on the highway everyday due to Eid rush.

TRAIN

Around 8:30pm on Friday, garment worker Moyna Akter went to Gazipur's Joydevpur Rail Station to go to her village in Bagerhat.

But the crowd was so intense that she could not board a train. She was at the station till yesterday noon and came to Dhaka's Kamalapur station in Sundarban Express.

"I had no other option than to come to Dhaka this way and take the same train to go to Khulna. I need to get home to my children who live with my mother," she told The Daily Star.

Sundarban Express left the station around 2:15pm, although it was originally scheduled to do so at 6:20am.

Like Moyna, several thousand other passengers spent hours at the station waiting for their trains. Some were sleeping on platform while many were busy feeding their children.

Till 2:15pm, only two trains -- Sundarban and Panchagarh-bound Ekata Express -- left Kamalapur with many on roofs.

Most of the trains heading for north-western and southern districts have been running behind schedule since the beginning of the Eid journey on August 7.

But the schedule totally collapsed on Friday after a coach of Sundarban Express derailed near Bangabandhu Bridge halting train movement for three hours.

As per the rescheduled timing, Dhumketu Express, Nilsagar Express,

Rangpur Express, Lalmonirhat Eid Special and Silkcity Express were running nine to 15 hours late.

Meanwhile, the railways ministry said passengers could take refunds for tickets if they chose not to travel in line with the new timing.

FERRY TERMINALS

Mohna Azam, a student of Eden Mohila College, and her family members were supposed to start for Satkhira home from Shyamoli at 3:00pm on Friday. However, the bus authorities called her at the last moment and said the vehicle will arrive at 6:00pm.

The bus came at 9:30pm and left the counter there half-an-hour later.

They crossed the Padma through Paturia-Dauladia ferry terminal at 8:00am yesterday after remaining stuck in an agonising jam for hours near the ghat.

The bus finally arrived in Kolaroa in Satkhira at 1:00pm, she said over phone.

On Friday, huge pressure of vehicles led to a 20-km long queue on Dhaka-Aricha highway ahead of the Paturia-Daulatdia ferry terminal, causing people to suffer badly.

However, the situation improved a little yesterday morning and the tailback reduced to around three kilometres in the afternoon.

Zillur Rahman, assistant general manager of BIWTC at Aricha Ghat, said they were trying to handle the situation with 20 ferries, but strong currents of the Padma and huge pressure of vehicles were causing trouble.

The situation at Shimulia and Kathalbari ferry terminals were comparatively better, said sources there.

[Our Manikganj and Munshiganj correspondents contributed to the report]

Quader sees no tailbacks

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on Dhaka-Mymensingh highway, especially between Tongi and Gazipur Chowrastha, was better than expected.

On Friday, vehicles remained stuck in a 64km tailback stretching from Chandra intersection in Gazipur to the approach road of the Bangabandhu bridge.

Vehicles were also stuck for hours in a 25km stretch of road from Bangabandhu bridge to Sirajganj's Hatikumrul.

Besides, a 20km queue of vehicles formed from Paturia ferry terminal on Dhaka-Aricha highway on Friday.

There was a 40km tailback on Dhaka-Tangail highway yesterday morning.

But Quader yesterday said Dhaka-Tangail highway had faced serious pressure of vehicles on Friday due to Thursday's bad weather and a huge

number of cattle-laden trucks.

He also said that some issues at the toll plaza near Bangabandhu bridge were causing the vehicles to slow down.

"As vehicles are moving slowly, many vehicles are failing to reach the terminals on time. This is the reality.

"So many passengers have been waiting here for a long time. Many of them asked me about the delayed arrival of buses as they have been waiting with their children at the terminal."

When a reporter asked him whether he would say the holidaymakers' journey yesterday was smooth, the minister said, "People's departure [from Dhaka] have been by and large comfortable. Vehicles are reaching [their destinations] late. I mentioned this earlier."

People usually suffer during Eid rush, but they accept it considering the festivities, he said.

On the allegations of additional fares charged from home goers, Quader said, "You have to provide specific information about who is charging the additional fare and where."

Asked whether the ministry doesn't have ways to know about the allegations, he said, "He who raises the complaint will have to provide the information."

However, he admitted that there were some irregularities despite the vigilance.

BRTA Chairman Moshir Rahman, Bangladesh Road Transport Owners Association Secretary General Khondaker Enayet Ullah accompanied him.

Trump defends immigration raids as 'good deterrent'

AFP, Washington

President Donald Trump on Friday defended controversial mass raids that led to the arrest of 680 undocumented migrants in the southeastern United States, saying they were an effective way to thwart illegal entry into the country.

The raids, which took place at seven chicken processing plants scattered across six Mississippi cities, were the largest in a single state in US history.

"I want people to know if they're coming into the US illegally, they're getting out," Trump told reporters.

"And this serves as a very good deterrent."

He added that when "people see what they saw (Wednesday), like they will see for a long time, they know that they're not staying here."

Local media showed images of confused children crying after coming home from school and finding themselves with nowhere to go and nothing to eat after their parents had been detained.

Mississippi Attorney General Mike Hurst, who was in charge of the operation, has also defended the raids, assuring that officers had been

concerned about the children's ability to reconnect with their parents.

"We are unaware of any child presently w/o (without) a parent as a result of this operation," he wrote Thursday on Twitter.

Meanwhile, area chicken processing plants found themselves with drastically reduced staffs.

Koch Foods, a \$3.2 billion business, posted on Facebook that it would hold a job fair Monday, while another plant belonging to PH Food had closed its doors on Thursday after 70 to 80 of its 100 workers were arrested, according to local media.

Iran unveils 'overhauled' air defence system

AFP, Tehran

Iran unveiled a new air defence system on Saturday it says is capable of detecting missiles and drones at a range of 400 kilometres (250 miles), ISNA news agency reported.

The "Falagh" is a locally overhauled version of the imported "Gamma" surveillance radar, the semi-official news agency said, in an apparent reference to a Russian-made system of that name.

It had been inoperable due to "sanctions, lack of spare parts and the inability of foreign engineers to carry out repairs", it added.

The unveiling comes at a time of rising tensions with the United States, which have escalated ever since US President Donald Trump withdrew from a 2015 nuclear deal with Iran and reimposed sanctions.

Iran shot down a US Global Hawk drone with a surface-to-air missile in June for allegedly violating its airspace, which the United States denies.

"This radar is capable of identifying and finding all types of cruise missiles, stealth aircraft, drone systems and also ballistic missiles within a 400-kilometre range," ISNA quoted army air defence force chief Brigadier General Alireza Sabahi-Fard as saying during the unveiling ceremony.

The Falagh was also capable of connecting to the Islamic republic's air defence network and completing the coverage of the S-300 missile system it acquired from Russia, the news agency said.

Iran installed the S-300 system in March 2016 following several years of delay after a nuclear agreement reached with world powers allowed the lifting of international sanctions.

Libya govt ready for conditional Eid truce

AFP, Tripoli

Libya's government has said it is willing to accept a truce in fighting around Tripoli for the Muslim festival of Eid al-Adha that starts Sunday but on four conditions.

The United Nations had called on the UN-recognised Government of National Accord and Forces of strongman Khalifa Haftar to commit to a humanitarian truce by midnight on Friday.

Late Friday, the GNA said it was keen to "ease the suffering of the citizens and allow rescue workers to accomplish their mission".

Therefore it said it "accepted a humanitarian truce for Eid al-Adha," which will be celebrated in Libya on Sunday, Monday and Tuesday.

But it listed "four conditions". It said the ceasefire must be observed "in all combat zones, with a cessation of direct and indirect fire and movement of troops".

It said the truce must include "a ban on flights and reconnaissance overflights across the entire (Libyan) airspace as well as a halt to flights from airbases".

Haftar's self-styled Libyan National Army launched an offensive against Tripoli - seat of the GNA - in early April.

Over the past four months, 1,093 people have been killed in the fighting and 5,752 wounded, according to the World Health Organization (WHO), while more than 120,000 people have been displaced.