

Migrant workers in Greece face abuses

STAR REPORT

Around 12,000 Bangladeshis working in the strawberry farms in Greece are facing various forms of labour abuses, including low wages, long working hours and sub-standard living conditions with little amenities.

The employers, who earn huge profits out of the cheap migrant labour, also threaten them of deportation as they are undocumented in Greece, the country which the workers consider a transit point to other European countries.

“We earn huge profits for farmers who treat us worse than animals. We want people to learn how we live a rough life in Barangas [small shanties built for workers],” a group of 25 Bangladeshi farm workers in Nea Manolada, a village of southwestern Greece, said in a statement.

Reena Kukreja, assistant Professor of Global Development Studies at the Queen’s University in Ontario, wrote an article based on her research on the migrant workers. It was published in The Conversation, an Australia-based news magazine, yesterday.

“Look how they live in comfort -- all due to our hard work. What do we get in return? Discarded plastic sheets as our roof,” a Bangladeshi migrant in his early 20s told the researcher when she visited them in last summer in Nea Manolada.

“Strawberry farmers give the migrants long work hours, high targeted outputs and depressed wages. The conditions of work can be described as forced or unfree labour. Withholding of wages is a common practice here and tie the workers to the farmers,” writes Kukreja.

In 2013, protests by Bangladeshi workers against delayed wages led to Greek farmers shooting at them. Later, the workers won a landmark human rights case, and Greece was forced to pay more than US\$648,000 to 42 of them.

According to the article, each growing season of strawberry, from October to May, as many as 12,000 undocumented Bangladeshi migrants work in the farms in Greece, the 10th biggest exporter of strawberries in the world.

The workers are forced to rent unused farmland and build highly inflammable makeshift shacks called barangas -- built out of salvaged plastic sheets, cardboard and reeds. They offer no running water, electricity or sanitation facilities.

“These structures are human tragedies waiting to happen. The danger of the inflammable construction material is heightened with cooking done inside in crude partitioned kitchens, with propane gas cylinders, and lighting provided by candles,” the researcher added.

In June 2018, a massive fire broke out in a migrant settlement in Nea Manolada. More than 340 Bangladeshi workers lose everything they had, including identification papers, passports, work permits, proof of stay and saved wages.

In 2019, seven fires, fueled by strong winds, charred entire sets of Barangas in the same region in a matter of minutes. So far, no one has died, but the migrants worry about what might happen if a fire breaks out at night, when everyone is sleeping. Blazes in similar migrant housing have resulted in fatalities, the article said.

Kukreja wrote there’s no electricity, no fans or heaters in the housing facilities. The workers are also unable to charge their cell phones, a vital link to their families. The only place to charge phones is at ethnic grocery stores or cafes with long queues to do so.

The inadequate sanitation, waste-disposal facilities and drainage create ripe conditions for infectious diseases. Frequent diarrhoea, fever, asthma and respiratory problems appear widespread, the researcher said.

The workers are deterred from demanding better living conditions because they are undocumented. The ever-present threat of potential deportation scares undocumented migrant workers who then discipline themselves as efficient but invisible workers.

Local authorities, aware of their plight, have turned a blind eye to improving migrant housing, leaving the men with little recourse.

“Everyone exploits our desperation to earn wages while profiting from our labour,” said a labourer in his mid-30s who has been working in the farms for the last seven years.



Kazi Anisur Rahman

Call for change

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Rab members arrested the two from Cumilla on the same day.

Earlier, the organisation expelled its Dhaka South unit Organising Secretary Khaled Mahmud Bhuiyan, who was arrested for running an illegal casino, for breaching the organisation’s discipline and his involvement in anti-social activities.

Ethiopia PM

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violence ahead of a parliamentary election in May 2020.

“I was so humbled and thrilled when I just heard the news,” Abiy told the Nobel Committee in a phone call posted online on the Nobel Prize website.

“It is a prize given to Africa, given to Ethiopia.”

Abiy also said he hoped it would inspire other African leaders to “think it possible to work on peace-building processes”.

Since taking office in April 2018, the 43-year-old has aggressively pursued policies that have the potential to upend society in the Horn of Africa nation and reshape dynamics beyond its borders, after years of civil unrest.

On July 9, 2018, following a historic meeting in Eritrea’s capital Asmara, Abiy and Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki formally ended a 20-year-old stalemate between the countries in the wake of the 1998-2000 border conflict.

Abiy swiftly released dissidents from jail, apologised for state brutality, and welcomed home exiled armed groups.

‘WINDS OF HOPE’

His actions have sparked optimism in a region of Africa marred by violence.

“I have said often that winds of hope are blowing ever stronger across Africa. Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed is one of the main reasons why,” UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres said.

The peace agreement with Eritrea has “opened up new opportunities for the region to enjoy security and stability,” and Abiy’s “leadership has set a wonderful example for others in and beyond Africa looking to overcome resistance from the past and put people first.”

The Nobel jury stressed that the Peace Prize was “also meant to recognise all the stakeholders working for peace and reconciliation in Ethiopia and in the East and Northeast African regions.”

It singled out the Eritrean leader for praise, noting that “peace does not arise from the actions of one party alone.”

“When Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed reached out his hand, President Afwerki grabbed it, and helped to formalise the peace process between the two countries.”

However, analysts believe there is still some way to go before a lasting peace, and the enthusiasm has been

mixed with frustration.

The border between the two countries has once again been closed, the countries still lack trade agreements and Ethiopia -- a land-locked country -- still has no access to Eritrean ports.

And last June, Abiy faced the greatest threat yet to his hold on power when gunmen assassinated high-ranking officials including a prominent regional president and the army chief.

Amnesty International said the prize should spur Abiy to enhance reforms on human rights.

“This award should push and motivate him to tackle the outstanding human rights challenges that threaten to reverse the gains made so far,” the group said, pointing to “ongoing ethnic tensions that threaten instability and further human rights abuses”.

Ethnic violence has been on the rise in recent years, causing Ethiopia to record more internally displaced people last year than any other country.

PUSH IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION

Recognising that some would consider the prize premature, the Nobel Committee said that while much remained to be done, the award should serve as encouragement, and pointed to the criteria set by prize creator Alfred Nobel -- namely that the award should go to one “who has made the most significant contribution to peace within the past year”.

“We are confident that by far this is Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, and we are also hopeful that the peace prize could perhaps be a push on the peace initiatives in the right direction,” Berit Reiss-Andersen, chair of the Norwegian Nobel Committee, told AFP.

The committee had to choose from more than 300 nominations this year.

Online betting sites had put Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg -- who has already received Amnesty’s top honour and the Right Livelihood Award, sometimes dubbed the “alternative Nobel” -- as the one to beat.

This year’s prize will be presented at a ceremony in Oslo on December 10, the anniversary of the 1896 death of Alfred Nobel, who was a Swedish philanthropist and scientist.

The award consists of a gold medal, a diploma, and nine million Swedish kronor (around \$912,000 or 828,000 euros).



A bus carrying 40 picnickers flipped on its side on Chattogram-Rangamati road in the hill district's Manikchhari area yesterday morning after its driver lost control. Police said the accident left 16 bus passengers injured. They received primary treatment at Rangamati General Hospital.

PHOTO: STAR

Political activities banned at Buet

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Law enforcers suspect Abrar was attacked because of one of his recent Facebook posts, which seemed critical of some recent deals with India.

THE MEETING

Since Abrar was murdered, Buet Alumni Association and Teachers’ Association has been demanding removal of the VC for his “failure to ensure security” on the campus.

Prof Saiful also faced the protesters’ wrath when he went to the campus about 38 hours after the killing. The demonstrators also laid a siege to his office for over four hours.

He organised yesterday’s meeting at Buet auditorium to discuss the protesters’ 10-point demand, including banning politics on the campus and expelling the accused students. Media personnel were also present.

Soon after the meeting started around 5:00pm, Prof Saiful read out the demands of the students and talked about his stance on them.

At one point, he said, “I, with my own authority, am announcing that all political organisations and their activities are banned at Buet.”

About the demand for highest punishment for the killers, he said he discussed the matter with the top tier of the government and that the government has assured all sorts of assistance in this regard.

On expelling the suspects, he said the university authorities, on many occasions in the past, expelled students, but the expellees return to class with stay order from the courts.

“Based on those experiences, we have formed a probe committee to investigate Abrar’s murder. We are now suspending studentship of the 19 accused and further action will be taken based on the [committee’s] inquiry report.”

About compensating Abrar’s family

and running the legal battle over the murder, Prof Saiful said the university authorities would assist the family in these matters.

He then said the authorities would soon install CCTV cameras on both sides of every wing of the dormitories. The VC said they would write to the government so that the case over Abrar’s murder is tried under a speedy trial tribunal.

He also assured that there would be no ragging at Buet.

About the allegation of his failure to take prompt action after the brutal murder of Abrar, the VC admitted having some lacking on his part in acting swiftly.

“I had some lacking. As a father figure, I offer my apologies to you,” he said.

Later, some of the protesters said they would not budge until the university authorities fulfilled all the demands that fall under their jurisdiction.

They also threatened to thwart the upcoming admission tests.

At this, Director of Student Welfare Mizanur Rahman urged the protesters not to hold the admission seekers hostage to fulfil the demands.

Admission Test Committee Chief and Electrical & Electronic Engineering Faculty Dean Pran Kanai Saha also requested the protesters to allow the examination to take place.

Later, the students went the Shaheed Minar area on the campus and resumed their sit-in around 8:30pm.

They said they would continue their demo.

FIFTH DAY OF DEMO

Earlier in the morning, the agitating students continued their protests for the fifth straight day.

Several hundred students took to the streets demanding justice for Abrar. Holding placards, they

chanted slogans calling for highest punishment for the killers.

Talking to the media around 11:00am, one of the protesters said, “We have not seen any visible progress towards the implementation of our 10-point demand.”

They brought out a procession from in front of the Buet’s Shaheed Minar and later staged a sit-in. After a break for Jumma prayers, they drew graffiti and performed a street play and a mock debate protesting the murder of their fellow student.

On Thursday, the protesters had given the VC until 2:00pm yesterday to make his stance clear on their demands.

MEFTAHUL CONFESSES; TWO MORE ARRESTED

BCL leader Meftahul Islam Zion of naval architecture and marine engineering batch-15, also the sports secretary of the Buet unit, yesterday confessed to his links to Abrar’s killing.

Earlier on Thursday, another accused Ifi Mosharraf Shakal confessed that he along with other Chhatra League leaders beat up Abrar.

Detectives yesterday arrested two more FIR-listed accused -- Majedul Islam, 21, a 17th batch student of materials and metallurgical engineering, and Shamim Billah, 20, 17th batch student of naval architecture and marine engineering, from Sylhet and Satkhira.

With the arrest of the duo, the number of arrestees in the case stood at 18.

Meanwhile, two suspects, Buet BCL leader Amit Saha and Hossain Mohammad Toha, were placed on five-day remand each yesterday in connection with the murder.

The court also sent Abrar’s roommate Mizanur Rahman Mizan to jail.

Sinking into the depths of despair

Rickshaw-van puller father devastated as his Buet student son held in Abrar murder case

MOHAMMAD AL-MASUM MOLLA

In a remote village of Joypurhat, Atiqul Islam drives a rickshaw van to make ends meet. A father of three, it was always difficult for him and his wife Nazma Begum to get by on the meagre income. But the family was close to a dream come true.

Their eldest son, a student of the Bangladesh University and Engineering and Technology (Buet), would soon take on the family responsibility.

“We practically starved for days on end just to make sure that our son gets a good education,” said the middle-aged rickshaw-puller.

He had thought his days of hardship would be over soon. “My son would graduate in two years and get a job and then look after the family,” he said.

“I could never spend a penny for private tuition, and yet my son managed to ace all his exams and get into Buet. He really made me proud. I could stand with my head held high anywhere.”

Atiqul’s dream has fallen apart. His son Akash Hossain is among those arrested for murdering Abrar Fahad, a second-year student of Buet.

The poor man said it feels like the sky has crashed down upon him. “I had thought my son would take the burden off my tired, old shoulders. But now it seems I have to take even more burden for him.”

With anguish, he said that if the charges are proven, his son must be punished. “And I will tell myself that somewhere I must have gone wrong in his upbringing.”

His wife Nazma Begum said, “That other kid who was killed, was my son too. The only thing I ask is that such a brutal incident does not happen again.”

Nazma said she had talked to Akash on Sunday evening. But in the early morning of Tuesday, Akash’s grandfather called her and told that violence broke out at Buet.

Nazma phoned her son and queried about his involvement. “My son said he was not involved with the incident and that he is innocent.”

Akash’s grandfather came to Atiqul’s house by the time, and then they come to Gazipur where Akash’s maternal uncle lives.

Akash came to Gazipur and he was arrested there, said Atiqul. “We are very poor and never engaged in politics. We do not understand politics, and my son was also not involved with politics.”

Md Jahuru Islam, chairman of Dogachhi Union Parishad, said Atiqul’s family is very poor, and they have no bad reputation in the area.

“Akash is a very good and polite boy. Even I helped him during his admission to Buet. We are shocked and surprised at his arrest. The whole area is saddened,” said Jahurul, also general secretary of Joypurhat Sadar Upazila Awami League.

He said their only demand is that the perpetrators must be punished but no innocent people should be victimised.

Born in 1998, Akash passed SSC examination from Dogachhi High School in 2014 with golden GPA-5 and HSC from Joypurhat Government College in 2016 with the top grade.

California on high alert as fires destroy dozens of homes

AFP, Los Angeles

Much of California was on high alert yesterday as fires tore through the state’s south, destroying dozens of buildings, officials said, with many neighborhoods left without electricity.

A blaze 70 miles (115 kilometers) east of Los Angeles swept through a mobile home park in hot, windy conditions.

A truck driver dumped the rubbish in his vehicle on the side of the road after it caught fire, sparking the blaze, Riverside County Fire Department

spokeswoman April Newman told the Los Angeles Times.

A helicopter and more than 200 firefighters were fighting the flames, the department said on its website, adding that 74 buildings had been destroyed.

4 Ansar al Islam men arrested

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“They recently gathered in the capital to carry out an act of sabotage as part of their organisational plan and target,” Monirul told a press briefing at the DMP’s Media Centre yesterday.

He said the militants used to carry out their activities in the hilly area in the guise of running a coffee shop. They communicated with each

other by using different social media platforms, including the Facebook Messenger.

The CTC chief said Ansar al Islam operatives usually stab their targeted victims to death and carry firearms only to ensure easy escapes after carrying out attacks.

According to counterterrorism officials, Shahin, student of a South Korean university, opened a Facebook

intimidation. There are complaints of extortion, threatening false allegations, violent attacks around elections, and even acting as vigilante law enforcers during the 2018 student protests,” said Adams, adding, “Bangladesh should not be a Room 2011.”

Meanwhile, Switzerland has expressed deep sadness over the tragic death of Abrar.

“Switzerland strongly stands by every person’s right to life and freedom of expression,” Swiss embassy in Bangladesh said in a recent Facebook post.

“Those who encroach on these fundamental tenets of human rights

need to be held accountable within the framework of international principles of criminal justice and human rights.”

Earlier, Germany, France, the UN and the UK also expressed concern over the death and called for an end to impunity.

Rab arrests

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Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina on recent occasions repeatedly said an anti-graft drive that had started weeks ago would continue.

Many ruling party leaders have already been arrested.