

Dream of a better life ends in nightmare

Traffickers use offers of marriage, job to lure Rohingya women, girls into sex slavery abroad; rescued overseas, many now trapped behind wall of red tape



Violence at home, insecurity here and uncertainty ahead -- the plight of Rohingya women and girls continues unabated. They are also becoming easier prey for human traffickers and being exploited.

PHOTO: STAR FILE

SHUPROVA TASNEEM

For 29-year-old Taiyyaba Khatun, a Rohingya woman living in Kutupalong refugee camp in Bangladesh, providing food for her children became an everyday struggle after she had a fall out with her husband.

"He moved to Cox's Bazar and left me all alone to look after our five children. A friend of mine told me she can find me work as a maid in India. She put me in touch with a trafficker who first took me to Dhaka, and then across the border to India. But when I got there, he sold me to a man for Tk 30,000," she said.

"He took me on a train and I ended up in New Delhi, where I was sold to a brothel. I cannot describe what I went through for the next few months there. I begged one of my customers to let me use his phone, but I couldn't reach anyone. Then one day, I managed to escape."

Taiyyaba wandered the streets of New Delhi, not being able to communicate with her broken Hindi, and ended up outside a roadside restaurant, exhausted and in tears.

Eventually, locals helped her reach a police station.

"From there, they moved me to a shelter with other women who had been trafficked from Bangladesh to India. There were some Rohingya girls there too."

At the shelter, Taiyyaba found herself trapped behind a wall of red tape. Although she was trafficked to India in 2015, it took her almost four years to return to the refugee camps in Bangladesh, and even this was only possible via illegal channels, she told this correspondent recently.

"They kept saying they are

working on my application, but I could not go back if my address in Bangladesh could not be verified. I am a refugee, how do I show any address other than that of the refugee camp?"

"I had left my children with my mother, and I was worried sick about them. In the end, she managed to raise enough money to pay another trafficker, who brought me back to the camps in Bangladesh."

In January, Rab rescued 13 Rohingya women from a house in the capital's Aftabnagar and arrested two members of a human trafficking gang.

According to an official statement, these men were connected to sex slavery rings and were planning on trafficking the girls to India and Malaysia.

"There is no clear data on the number of Rohingya girls being trafficked abroad from the refugee camps in Bangladesh, but there are definitely many girls who are ending up as prostitutes in India, Nepal, and even the UK. Once they leave the country, it is almost impossible to reunite them with their family members who are also refugees, even after they are rescued from sex slavery," said human rights lawyer Razia Sultana.

Pinaki Sinha, executive director of Saanlap, an Indian NGO which runs shelters for victims of trafficking rescued within the country, added, "Even in the case of Bangladeshi victims of trafficking who are rescued in India, it can take two to three years to cut through the administrative red tape and arrange for their return."

"When the person in question is a refugee, it becomes a more complicated issue for the two countries to resolve based on each

case," he added.

Asked, Additional Secretary Abu Bakr Siddique, who heads the anti-trafficking cell at the Ministry of Home Affairs, said he has not come across any requests of repatriation back to the refugee camps from trafficked Rohingya women.

"I cannot tell you about what happens in this scenario practically," he said, adding, "But even in terms of Bangladeshi victims of trafficking, it can take time to verify their addresses and bring them back through the official channels. Without this verification process, we cannot bring anyone back, so how can we do it with refugees?"

This inflexibility over the verification of proof of address, which is a necessary condition for trafficking victims to be reunited with their families, means that refugees who cannot provide this can become trapped in the countries they have been trafficked to indefinitely.

This is the case for 17-year-old Hafiza, who was taken to India two years ago by a "family friend".

Although her parents were at first reluctant to discuss the real reasons, her mother later confided that they were hoping to find a prospective groom for her.

"We trusted our contacts and found a good Rohingya man living in India," she shared. "We did not even dream such a thing would happen. Once she went across the border, she disappeared. We didn't hear from her for almost a year."

"I cried for my daughter every day. How could this happen to her? Then one day, I got a phone call saying she was in a shelter in India. She had fallen into bad hands and had to be rescued from them."

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Myanmar must accept int'l solution for safe return of Rohingyas

HRW says on third anniversary of exodus

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The Myanmar government has failed to ensure that nearly one million Rohingya refugees can safely return home three years since fleeing their country, Human Rights Watch said in a statement circulated yesterday.

"Myanmar's government should recognise that the terrible suffering it has caused the Rohingyas won't disappear even amid a global pandemic," said the statement quoting Brad Adams, its Asia director.

"Myanmar needs to accept an international solution that provides for the safe, voluntary return of Rohingya refugees, while an understandably stretched Bangladesh should not make conditions inhospitable for refugees who have nowhere to go," Adams said, as per the statement.

The statement pointed out that the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in January imposed provisional measures on Myanmar to prevent genocide while it adjudicates alleged violations of the Genocide Convention, and the International Criminal Court (ICC) in November 2019 began an investigation into Myanmar's forced deportation of Rohingya and related crimes against humanity.

"[But] Myanmar has not complied with these international justice measures, has not permitted the United Nations to investigate grave crimes inside the country, nor conducted credible criminal investigations of its own into military atrocities," the statement concluded.

In addition, the 600,000 Rohingya remaining in Myanmar's Rakhine State face severe repression and violence, with no freedom of movement or other basic rights.

The statement also added that desperate Rohingya seeking refuge in other countries in the region faced multiple levels of persecution.

"Some have been stranded at sea for weeks or months, with hundreds feared dead on boats that disappeared after Malaysia and Thailand illegally pushed them back using the Covid-19 pandemic as justification. Malaysia has detained arriving Rohingya refugees, denied them access to the UN refugee agency, and prosecuted some for illegal entry," it said.

The Myanmar government needs to amend the citizenship law in line with international standards, lift restrictions on freedom of movement, repeal discriminatory regulations and local orders, and cease all official and unofficial practices that restrict the movement of the Rohingya populations, noted the statement.

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THREE BY-POLLS JP to start nomination process today

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Jatiya Party (JP) will start distributing nomination forms among prospective candidates in the by-election of Dhaka-5, Pabna-4 and Naogaon-6 from today.

Forms will be distributed daily from 10am to 5pm from the party chairperson's office at city's Banani.

Prospective candidates have been requested to collect nomination forms following health guidelines and without crowding.

Nomination forms will be accepted till August 29.

Interview of prospective candidates will be taken at the Jatiya Party Chairman's Banani office from August 31, JP said in a release.

Meanwhile, JP chairman GM Quader yesterday said as a democratic party JP will participate in all elections.

He also said JP has also prepared to participate in all the upcoming by-elections as a strong political party.

"We've already started working to finalise strong candidates to contest in the upcoming by-elections," GM Quader said at a tree plantation programme on the occasion of Mujib Borsho, birth centenary of Bangabandhu.

PKSF launches project to 'transform rural microenterprise'

CITY DESK

In a boost to the Bangladesh's microenterprise sector, Palli Karma-Sahayak Foundation (PKSF), an apex development agency of the country, has floated a new project titled 'Rural Microenterprise Transformation Project (RMTP)'. The six-year project, jointly financed by PKSF, the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), the Danish government was launched on Sunday, according to a press release.

Md Ashadul Islam, senior secretary of Financial Institutions Division, Ministry of Finance was chief guest at the RMTP's virtual launching ceremony presided over by PKSF Chairman Dr Qazi Kholiquzzaman Ahmad.

Describing RMTP as a time-befitting project, Md Ashadul Islam said that development of microenterprise is very important for the country's overall economy. "Ensuring adequate financing for marginal producers and micro-entrepreneurs is a big challenge. In line with the government's development strategy, this project will help address this challenge," he said.

Terming PKSF 'an iconic institution' in development operations in Bangladesh, he said the organisation has proven their efficiency in implementing projects like RMTP.

PKSF Chairman Dr Qazi Kholiquzzaman Ahmad said Bangladesh's economy is still largely rural and agri-based, and 80 percent people are working in the informal sector.

To transform this situation, appropriate financing along with technology transfer, training, market expansion, and forwards and backward linkage are required, he added.

In his presentation, PKSF Deputy Managing Director Md Fazlul Kader said that value chain development, financial services, and institutional capacity development support will be provided for the promotion of agricultural products under three major farm sectors -- livestock and poultry, crops and horticulture, and fisheries and aquaculture.

He said the total project fund, which will directly benefit 50,000 micro-entrepreneurs across the country, stands at \$200 million, in which IFAD's contribution is \$81 million and DANIDA, a co-financier, will provide \$8.30 million.

Mohammad Moinuddin Abdullah, managing director of PKSF; Winnie Estrup Petersen, ambassador of the Royal Danish Embassy to Bangladesh, and IFAD's Country Director Omer Zafar also spoke at the event.

ROHINGYA CRISIS NGOs call for peaceful coexistence until repatriation

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Cox's Bazar CSO NGO Forum (CCNF) yesterday called for peaceful coexistence for Rohingya response until their dignified repatriation to Myanmar.

Issuing a statement on the eve of Rohingya influx's third year, the forum said political process for dignified repatriation of Myanmar nationals who fled persecution should be prioritised.

Besides, authorities concerned should ensure transparency in aid management, said the forum, a network of 50 local and national NGOs working in Cox's Bazar.

CCNF reiterated its demands for all-out efforts from the United Nations, international NGOs and government to expedite dignified repatriation.

If repatriation of more than one million Rohingya refugees starts tomorrow, it will take over one decade, it said.

"So, they should not be kept sitting idle. They should be given pre-fabricated shelter, education and income-generating training to facilitate their human dignity," it added.

All sub-offices of intentional agencies should be shifted to Dhaka or Ukhiya to reduce journey costs to camps and reduce pressure on Cox's Bazar town, the forum said.

It said humanitarian workers should be given 24-hour access to refugee camps, so they can carry out activities against drug dealing, human trafficking, gender violence, and especially extremism, in the evening.

There should be aid transparency with disaggregated figures periodically, so there can be public monitoring of management costs and direct input costs centring refugees and host communities, it added.

Akij Footwear MD Sheikh Momin dies

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Benapole

Sheikh Momin Uddin, managing director of Akij Footwear and SAF Industries Ltd, died of Covid-19 while undergoing treatment at Ad-Din Hospital in Dhaka yesterday. He was 63 years old.

Momin was the second son of the group's founder late Sheikh Akij Uddin. He was admitted to the hospital in Moghbazar on August 12 after being infected with the virus, confirmed Shikh Afluddin, Jashore-1 MP and younger brother of the deceased.

In the 1980s, Momin took charge of the abandoned SAF leather factory in Abhaynagar of Jashore and modernised it to become one of the largest leather factories in the country.

He won the National Export Trophy (Gold) for three consecutive years in 2009, 2010, and 2011. His first janaza was held at the hospital premises. His second namaz-e-zanaza will be held at ASF Industries premises today, followed by another one at his ancestral home in Bejerdanga area of Jashore. He will be laid to rest beside his father.



11 of 'mugger gang' arrested in capital

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

They formed a group of 11, and every evening, used to meet and discuss where and how to mug people. As part of their plans, the gang used to position themselves in an area of the capital and cautiously follow their target.

According to police, one day, they even posed as detectives to mug a person.

Their series of muggings finally ended after police arrested them all in the last few days, while investigating a case filed with Kotwali Police Station, said Saiful Alam Muzahid, assistant commissioner (Kotwali zone) of Dhaka Metropolitan Police.

The official said they came to know about the gang during investigation of a mugging incident that happened in Kotwali area on August 17.

On that day, the gang -- impersonating detectives -- mugged Tk 55,000 from a fabric trader.

The arrestees are Sarwar Hossain, Dulal, Anwar Gulda, Ameer, Nasir Hawlader, Emon alias Kajol Kumar Dey, Iqbal, Sohag Khan, Jakir Hossain, Sumon and Ramzan.

They were arrested from different areas at various times. Of the arrestees, Sohag, Iqbal and Dulal have already given confessional statements before magistrates, while the rest were on four-day remand, said Saiful.

Police seized a pair of handcuffs and two jackets with inscriptions of detectives from their possession, the officer said.

They are all accused in cases with different police stations.



Dhaka Medical College Hospital's outpatient department is back to its usual condition, as crowds gather to see physicians in the morning. While everyone showed up wearing face masks, social distancing remained a far cry amid the chaos. The photo was taken yesterday.

PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

Jute workers demand reopening of mills

Block roads in Khulna, Tangail

STAR REPORT

Hundreds of workers and different organisations took to the streets in Khulna and Tangail yesterday, demanding immediate reopening of jute mills under government arrangement and declaration of jute as a national asset.

In Khulna, under the banner of "Paatkol Rokkhaiy Sommilito Nagorik Parishad", they held a sit-in programme, blocking the BDC Road near Notun Rasta intersection. Workers of nine jute mills participated in the programme that began around noon, reports our Khulna correspondent.

Kudrat-e-Khuda, convener of the Parishad, said this movement is not a matter of a day but a lengthy process. "Through our movement, we want the government to reopen the mills under its own arrangement instead of shutting those down or handing over to public-private partnership," he said.

On August 16 and 17, the Parishad brought out processions in the city in order to press home their demands.

In Tangail, different organisations formed a human chain in front of Tangail Press Club around 11am over similar demands, reports our correspondent. They also placed a 15-point proposal in this regard.

The programme was organised under the banner of "Jatiya Krishak Samity" and "Bangladesh Khet Mojur Union". Later, they submitted a memorandum along with their demands to the prime minister through the deputy commissioner.

Their demands include protecting jute farmers, ensuring right price for jute, restarting state-owned jute mills and forming social movements for saving jute industry.