

Labour leader Ruhul Amin

FROM PAGE 12
Ahmed Kabir Kishore in Goalkhali area of Khulna.

Dolan was released the next day. Detective Branch (DB) Inspector Mohammad Nahid Hasan then accused Ruhul in a case filed under the DSA. The complaint said Ruhul used his Facebook account to spread misinformation, tarnish the image of the state and the government, and create animosity, instability and chaos among the people in order to destabilise law and order.

Ruhul has been organising jute mill workers in Khalishpur, Khulna, since 2017, raising demand for better work conditions and regular payment of salaries.

He was denied bail twice on March 2 and 14.

Ruhul was arrested the first time in 2018. Last year, he was arrested in July while handing out flyers, and in October while marching in a "coffin procession" demanding reopening of closed mills in Khalishpur.

He said he was often pressured to quit working on labour issues in the

area and in December, 2019, he was assaulted by Jubo League and Chhatra League activists.

In remote Naikhyangchhari, Bandarban, Oli Ahmed, 30, and Hamidur Rahman, 29, were arrested under the DSA over their Facebook posts, said Mohammed Alamgir Hossain, officer-in-charge of Naikhyangchhari Police Station.

Oli was arrested around 2:00am and Hamidur around 9:00am yesterday, said the OC.

"They were spreading anti-state posts in social media for a long time and making defamatory remarks about Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi," the officer added.

"Hamidur is a supporter of Hefajate-Islam and Oli a Shibir man," he said.

On Saturday, police arrested another man in Bandarban town in a case filed under the DSA for allegedly criticising the "lockdown" on Facebook.

Besides, a young man in Khagrachhari landed in jail on Sunday in a case filed under the DSA over his Facebook comments.

Valid passports so dear

FROM PAGE 12
hardships for them. Failing to renew passports, they cannot return home, get their emergency works done, and renew their visa, Akama (work permit) or Resident Permit Card, ATM card, and driving licence.

Expatriates said amid the Covid-19 pandemic, the necessity for a resident card has increased manifold to avail medical, educational and various other services, and also to avoid legal troubles. But they are in a fix as the renewal of passport is delayed.

Md Parsul Alam, a Bangladeshi sales worker in Salala, said a money exchange firm in the last three months told him time and again that his passport was under printing process.

But neither the firm nor the embassy could tell when it would be printed, Parsul said over the phone.

"Without my passport, I cannot travel to Bangladesh. I even cannot withdraw my salary abroad. My salary is deposited into a bank account and it can only be withdrawn using my ATM card. The passport is required to renew my expired ATM card," he told this correspondent recently.

He completed filing the application for renewing the passport through the money exchange firm, approved by the Bangladesh embassy, six months ago.

Another Bangladeshi worker in Sohar, Mehedi Hasan, cannot renew his visa and Akama as he has yet to get his passport renewed.

"I have been here for two months without a visa, meaning I am an undocumented migrant now. It is becoming difficult for me to avail the usual benefits as an expatriate," he lamented.

Although there are concessions due to the pandemic, a monthly penalty is applicable if the Akama is not renewed. However, the big problem is Omani companies are developing a negative attitude towards Bangladeshi workers due to this delay, said Mohammad Yasin Chowdhury, president of Chattogram Samity in Oman.

If the visas are not renewed in time, the employer companies have to give an explanation to the labour

department and in some cases they get blacklisted, he said.

Yasin Chowdhury, who availed the NRB-CIP status by sending the highest amount of remittances to the country, said: "Expatriates are frustrated over an uncertain future due to the pandemic and the passport crisis aggravated their sufferings."

It is hard to explain the difficulties they are facing every day, he said.

According to the latest data from the Oman government, Bangladeshis are the largest expatriate community in the country with about 5.47 lakh workers. The total number of Bangladeshis in Oman is over 7 lakh as there are also family members and workers without Akama.

The passport section under a counselor at the Bangladesh embassy in Muscat provides services to expatriates. They receive applications for renewal or new passport and send those to the DIP in Dhaka.

The passports are distributed among the applicants once those are sent to Muscat. However, there is no previous record of such a long delay.

Expatriates said they could usually obtain a passport within 45 days, but during the pandemic the time almost doubled.

However, availing the service has become much easier as two Bangladeshi money exchange firms were tasked with receiving applications and distributing passports. But in November last year, the distribution of passports almost came to a halt and the delay reached its peak in February-March this year.

Money exchange firm sources said up to 10,000 passports used to be distributed per month previously, but the figure has now come down to between 1,000 and 1,200.

Iftakher Hasan Chowdhury, CEO of Golf Overseas Exchange, said being given the responsibility in June last year, they were providing services to expatriates in coordination with the passport section of the Bangladesh embassy amid the pandemic.

An unexpected backlog of passport renewal applications grew at the end

of last year and it became even more complicated early this year, he said.

Iftakher also said they faced embarrassment after failing to deliver passports to service seekers on time.

Abu Sayeed, counselor (passport) at the Bangladesh embassy, said about 30,000 passports were stuck in Dhaka for printing in March. "We repeatedly reminded the DIP of the job, but it failed to issue passports on time due to a shortage of MRP booklets."

He said Bangladesh Ambassador in Oman Mizanur Rahman took an initiative to resolve the crisis by communicating with the DIP through sending letters and over the phone.

"The crisis is easing with an increased supply of passports over the last two weeks. Meantime, we have received 10,000 passports and started distributing those quickly."

Another 20,000 passports are under printing process in Dhaka, Sayeed added.

He hoped the passport services would be normal within this month if there is no new obstacle to the process due to the worsening pandemic situation.

Saidul Islam, director (passport and justice) of the DIP, said expatriates are being given top priority.

"Even during the difficult times of pandemic last year, we continued our regular activities only for expatriates."

He said there was a temporary crisis in the distribution of MRPs at the end of last year and beginning of this year due to systematic and tactical issues which arose over entering the e-passport era.

"The crisis is being resolved and the supply of passports to the foreign missions in Oman and other countries is becoming normal gradually."

Yasin Chowdhury said it is unlikely that all applicants would get their passports this month if the distribution went on at current pace.

He said the DIP should make special arrangements to print passports quickly and send those to Oman to keep the effects of the crisis within tolerable limits.

[The writer is a freelance journalist.]

Suspension

FROM PAGE 12
with a government decision have strict "lockdown" for one more week.

On April 15, the government decided to operate around 100 special flights to Saudi Arabia, Oman, Qatar, UAE and Singapore in a week from April 17 so that migrants could return to work despite suspension of all international flights.

CAAB on April 11 suspended operation of all international passenger flights to and from Bangladesh for a week from April 14.

This put around 20,000 to 25,000 Bangladeshi migrants in trouble, according to an estimate of Baira and Atab.

Fakhrul Islam, former finance secretary of Baira and president of Recruiting Agency Welfare Organization of Bangladesh, yesterday told The Daily Star that ticket prices for Middle East countries increased a lot, which was a huge financial burden on the migrants.

He said air fare of Middle East countries, specially Saudi Arabia, UAE, Oman and Qatar, has increased by Tk 40,000 to Tk 70,000.

Mohammad Halim, a Saudi-bound migrant worker, said different airlines were demanding extra for re-issuing their return tickets.

Anisur Rahman, another Saudi-bound migrant, said many of them were not getting enough time to get tested for Covid-19 due to the tight flight schedule.

7 cops hurt

FROM PAGE 12
Mohammad Shahidul Islam.

Biplob Kanti Biswas, Mollahat upazila health and family planning officer, said the injured policemen took treatment at the health complex. The OC needed stitches on his right leg, he added.

A local reporter told The Daily Star that students and teachers of some madrasas of the area went to the health complex area to demonstrate. When police went there, they threw brick chunks at them, the journalist added.

Mir Shafin Mahmud, additional superintendent of Bagerhat police, said, "We have visited the spot. Police have been deployed near the health complex and other important places in Mollahat. Now the situation is under control. Preparations are underway to file a case in connection with the attack."

Bhashani writes to Mao

FROM PAGE 12
country was precluded by law from using force to evict anyone.

In presenting his government's demands to India, the Pakistani high commissioner in New Delhi announced that a new deputy high commissioner had been appointed to head the regional office at Calcutta.

The Pakistani note requested that the commission "be cleared of persons who might have taken unlawful possession of it."

"Any failure on the part of the Government of India in this regard would be a violation of international conventions and would be interpreted by the Government of Pakistan as an unfriendly act," the note added.

AK Ray, a foreign ministry official of India, told the Pakistani high commissioner that while India would

not evict the dissident East Pakistanis, the country would extend protection and facilities to the new appointee for the Calcutta post.

COMMUNISTS PLEDGE SUPPORT TO BANGLADESH GOVT

The question of Soviet recognition to the independent Bangladesh government had assumed a special significance after the central committee of the pro-Moscow Communist Party of East Pakistan, headed by Moni Singh and Khoka Ray, today expressed unequivocal support to the democratic republic of Bangladesh headed by Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and appealed for its recognition by all progressive and Communist countries of the world.

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Hidden 'embassy'

FROM PAGE 12
on good terms with its rival to build a diplomatic base there.

In 2018, researchers with the Foundation for Maya Cultural and Natural Heritage (PACUNAM) scanned the region around Tikal from the sky using Light Detection And Ranging, or LiDAR, technology.

LiDAR is able to pierce the dense forest canopy that has grown in the centuries since Tikal fell and find the

remains of buildings hidden by trees and soil.

Archaeologists were able to determine Tikal was much larger than previously presumed, with millions more inhabitants.

One image from the southern part of the city clearly showed a pyramid with an enclosed courtyard lined with smaller structures under mounds originally believed to just be hills.

US hits vaccine milestone

FROM PAGE 12
tested positive for coronavirus and was admitted to the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS) in New Delhi.

The UK government said yesterday Prime Minister Boris Johnson's visit to India has been cancelled over the Covid-19 surge there.

The surge has overwhelmed the healthcare infrastructure in many

parts of India, and authorities are scrambling to free up hospital beds and secure additional supplies of oxygen and treatment drugs.

India has the world's second-highest caseload with more than 15 million known infections.

Many Indians are pillorying Prime Minister Narendra Modi over his response to the scary surge in cases, sickened by him addressing tens of

thousands of people at state election rallies and letting Hindu devotees congregate for a festival, reports Reuters.

Tags like #ResignModi and #SuperSpreaderModi have trended on Twitter in the past two days, as bodies piled up in mortuaries and crematoriums, and desperate cries for hospital beds, medical oxygen and coronavirus tests flooded social media.

PROMOTING SAFE MIGRATION FOR THE WOMEN OF BANGLADESH

The Daily Star and CARE Bangladesh jointly organised a roundtable dialogue titled "Case-story and Desk study findings with key stakeholders" on March 31, 2021. The dialogue was organised under the project 'Promoting Safe Migration for the Women of Bangladesh' funded through the Silk Routes Facility. The Silk Routes Facility is a component of the larger project, "Improving Migration Management in the Silk Routes Countries", funded by the European Union and implemented by The International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD). Here we publish a summary of the discussion.

Syed Saiful Haque, Chairman and Founding Member, WARBE Development Foundation

In 2016, there was a rise in the migration of female workers due to an agreement between Saudi Arabia and Bangladesh which stated that if Bangladesh allowed female workers to work in Saudi Arabia, particularly domestic help, they would consider opening up the market to male workers. Saudi Arabia gave the condition that Bangladesh would have to send 10,000 female workers. Sufficient preparation was not taken in regards to the training and grooming of the female workers who would be sent there.

The rate of migration has fallen now because of COVID-19 but still nearly 22,000 women have left the country during the pandemic. What this suggests is the movement of female labour cannot be stopped. However, what needs to be ensured is their security and protection of their rights, particularly in a country where female workers are often seen as commodities. We need to see to it that our female workers are able to reach safely, aren't exploited when there, and that they receive all the necessary support.

In the aforementioned agreement, it was decided that the employers would pay USD 2,000-USD 2,500 in advance to cover all the costs of training, grooming, and attire of female workers. However, the female workers end up having to pay the middlemen, and they themselves bear the cost of their passports, medical costs, and even the training they receive.

Captain Md. Ikram Hossain Retd., Country Coordinator, International Center for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD), Bangladesh

ICMPD works with migration and border management. Through our Migration Resource Centres in Dhaka and Cumilla, we are working in five districts including Dhaka, Gazipur, Narayanganj, Cumilla, and Brahmanbaria to raise awareness regarding safe migration, with significant attention being paid to women's issues.

The remittance sent by Bangladeshi workers contributes significantly to the foreign reserves in our banks. We can further strengthen this through the enhancement of skills by the various government projects already at work and through upgraded directions given to Technical Training Centres (TTCs) to ensure that our workers receive international recognition and accreditation for the training they receive.

ICMPD has also created a source of information for 12 countries which helps inform workers about various parts of working



abroad ranging from what needs to be done to go to a country to where they can go if they require help.

Gloria Jharna Sarker, Honourable Member of Parliament, Member of the Parliamentarians Caucus on Migration and Development

Learning the language of the country a person will be working in is of primary importance, and attaining skills can come afterward. If a person is unable to communicate with or understand a language, they endure suffering and abuse in silence. Knowing the language allows one to be able to choose the profession they prefer according to their abilities.

Monitoring of migrant workers is crucial and a monitoring committee needs to be formed.

Jasiya Khatoun, Director, WARBE DF

Our plan is to enable safe migration for Bangladeshi women, in the context of the social, political and economic situation.

From the social angle, we wanted to see what area we needed to work on to make women's migration more orderly and secure.

On the political front, we have laws and policies, but they need to be more accessible and inclusive of the issues of women's migration, especially gender responsive migration.

From the economic side too, we see women suffering from financial ruin as they are often victims of fraud committed by the middlemen and employers alike. Though they are supposed to go abroad free of cost, they still spend money to reach the other country.

We have two specific objectives. One is to assist with the capacity building and modernisation of government institutions. The second is to empower women to think for themselves and make an informed choice about migration.

Md. Mostafa Sorower, Programme Manager, CARE Bangladesh

CARE Bangladesh had conducted a desk study from October 2020 to January 2021 using secondary resources to develop a comparative analysis of the South Asian nations which send female migrant workers abroad.

One of our findings was that even though female migrant workers earn less than male migrant workers, they still send an equivalent or higher percentage of their wages to their families. With fair pay and equal opportunities, women have the potential to register higher remittances for their countries of origin.

Some policy recommendations include ratifying the relevant international policy legislature, increasing coordination between state and non-state level agencies in the migration cycle process, decreasing irregular migration among female migrants, adopting gender-responsive policies, making the pre-departure orientation models gender-responsive, adopting better integration programmes and increasing the accessibility of services at both the state and non-state levels, decentralising resource and information dissemination at the grassroots level, and increasing budget and technical and non-technical resources at specific destination countries at the state level.

Sufia Begum, Migrant Worker

I had to pay 30,000 taka to migrate to Jordan. I had no idea that I didn't need to pay to go to the destination country. I'm familiar with my middleman but not my recruiting agency. I was in training for one month.

My employer's son, a 30-year-old man, lit me on fire. When I complained, my employers did nothing. Since my contract of two years was over, I said that I would return to Bangladesh, but they didn't let me leave. They said that my agency wouldn't pay for

my plane ticket to Bangladesh and the only way I could return was by paying for the ticket myself. I stopped sending money home and had to work an additional three months. They didn't compensate me for the extra work. I later used my own money to buy a plane ticket and return to Bangladesh.

Sweetie Akter, Migrant Worker

I returned from Saudi Arabia after staying there for two years and two months. I was trained beforehand. I had to pay 55,000 taka to my middleman to go to the destination country. I was handed a contract that contained false information since it didn't state that the family would have nine children. Even though the family was nice, the children were difficult to manage. I worked day and night. Three months before leaving, I asked my employer to take me to Makkah since they visit there every year. They stopped paying my salary for three months, saying they would use that money to take me to Makkah. I was hopeful, but they never took me there. I was never paid my three months' salary either.

Sultana Akter, Migrant Worker

I returned from Saudi Arabia after living there for nine months. I didn't have to spend any money to go there since my agency paid all expenses. I was also given training. My employer was friendly and paid me well. But I came back because I became physically unwell due to overworking. I wasn't offered any medical treatment. As soon as I wanted to return home, I was beaten up and locked up in jail for 15 days. The days spent in prison were horrifying since women are brutally tortured there by different gang members.

Farida Yeasmin, Director, Bangladeshi Ovhibashi Mohila Sramik Association (BOMSA)

There exists a considerable information gap. Female migrant workers are still unaware of what recruiting agencies are or what

government services are available to them. There are many laws for the pre-migration stage, but the issue lies in implementation.

The embassies need to perform their roles properly. They neglect female migrant workers and deny them services. They are supposed to carry out house visits of the workers and write reports to send to NGOs. But none of this is implemented.

After month-long training, workers aren't even provided the contact information of the destination country embassies. People can also forgo training and get forged certificates.

Although the punishment for migrant issues is stated clearly in the migrant laws, the cases are not filed against these laws. There should be a separate court to try migrant cases.

Md. Nazmul Ahsan, Chairman, Bangladesh Ovhibashi Adhikar Forum (BOAF)

The people who want to become migrant workers are not Dhaka city dwellers. No matter where they live, we must have initiatives to go door-to-door to give them the correct information. Our forum does just that at the district level, upazila level, union level, and village level. Safe migration is impossible without awareness building.

One issue is that embassies or shelter homes never take responsibility for checking up on the migrant workers. The workers have to contact them themselves to avail any of their services.

The month-long training that workers receive is not up to the mark. The trainers should receive further training and be allowed to provide training only when they reach the international standards.

Murshida Akter Naher, General Secretary, Jatiya Garhasthya Nari Sramik Union

We work with domestic workers in various districts of Bangladesh. We have been fighting for their rights since 2000. We still have a long way to go before we can ensure full respect for our domestic workers. The domestic workers here have similar experiences as the migrant workers, i.e. torture and oppression. The employers responsible for these crimes always get away because of a lack of a strong legal system.

Syed Mahbub Elahi, Chairman, OKKAF

The embassy needs to strengthen monitoring of the agreement between the employers and the employees and ensure that the discussed agreement is not broken. There needs to be a database accounting for the number of returning migrant workers. Currently, we only keep track of how many workers we are sending abroad. Social media can be a great tool for awareness-raising on safe migration.