

BANGLADESHI EXPATRIATES IN ITALY 90 bodies flown home in last 10 months

Most died from Covid, heart attack: officials

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

As many as 90 dead bodies of Bangladeshi expatriates have been sent home from Italy between July 2020 and April this year, according to the Bangladesh Embassy in Rome.

The number was 51 between July 2019 and June 2020, as per the data of Wage Earners' Welfare Board (WEWB).

The embassy's Labour Welfare Counsellor Arfanul Haque yesterday said most of the 90 expatriates died from Covid-19 and heart failure.

Since March last year, 39 Bangladeshis have died after being infected by the deadly virus in the European country, he said, citing an unofficial account.

He added that the Italian government had not released the data on the

nationality of those who died there from Covid-19. The Bangladesh mission paid Tk 40

lakh in air fare to fly 40 bodies back home since July last year, Arfanul told The Daily Star over a WhatsApp call. Such support is usually extended when the deceased wage earner's family members apply for the assistance given the deceased was a member of the WEWB.

The total cost of sending a corpse from Italy to Bangladesh is about $\in 2,600$, and affluent Bangladeshis sometimes help the poor families carry the bodies of their dear ones back home. Italy is home to about 1.45 lakh

Bangladeshis registered with the Italian authorities. A significant number of undocumented Bangladeshis also live there.



A worker loading a boat with plastic drums in Kamrangirchar of Dhaka. Produced in a local factory, the drums would be carried to Khulna to be sold for Tk 250 to Tk 350 each. The photo was taken on Tuesday.

Ponds eating up crop fields

FROM PAGE 1

Mohonpur),

lawmaker.

Ravaged by job loss, pay cut FROM PAGE 1

The report was brought out by the Institute for Human Rights and Business

and the Subir and Malini Chowdhury Centre for Bangladesh Studies at the University of California, Berkeley, with support from UNDP Bangladesh and the Swedish government.

Many of these workers are still unemployed or are working as day labourers as RMG factories are at present barely recruiting workers.

This correspondent spoke to 35 workers and former workers of various factories in Dhaka and Narayanganj, who have suffered job loss or salary cuts since the pandemic struck last year.

All 35 workers said that they did not receive full wages during last year's shutdown when their factories were closed.

Shahana (not her real name), a worker at a factory in Narayanganj, said, "I was paid 50 percent of my salary for three months last year when the factory was closed due to the national shutdown. Some senior workers protested against this decision and were summarily sacked."

She added that overtime has been cut down too.

"I used to do more than 200 hours of overtime per month in 2019. Now, I cannot do any overtime due to cancellation of orders."

She estimated that she earned around Tk 17,000-18,000 per month, including bonus and overtime, in 2019.

"Now, I can earn only Tk 10,000 per month in total," she added.

Other workers echoed her experience, saying they received between 50 to 65 percent of their salaries during the months of the shutdown last year and have been earning around 50 percent

Sramik League and a member of the parliamentary standing committee on the Ministry of Labour and Employment, said, "We have already asked the industrialists to pay salaries and festival bonuses by May 10. They are again demanding an additional Tk 10,000 crore stimulus package from the government to pay the salary and festival bonus.

"I have suggested the government form a database of RMG workers and this time to pay the funds directly to the workers who lost their jobs and who are in need."

Arshad Jamal, a director of Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA), said, "It is true that mostly large factories benefitted from the stimulus package last year as its disbursement depends on export quantity and bankclient relationship."

Arshad claimed as large-scale factories employ most of the four million RMG workers in the country, "layoffs by small and medium-scale factories did not have any significant impact on the industry".

Regarding BGMEA's repeated demand for another stimulus package, Arshad said, "Our buyers still consider us an importing sourcing country due to the economic collapse in neighbouring countries. So, we should keep our industry alive for a better future."

"Last year, we got this stimulus package in two phases as loans with initially two percent and 4.5 percent interest for the second phase which incurred additional expenditure for us. Nevertheless, we are yet to recover from pandemic-inflicted losses and the Covid-19 situation may worsen this Md Ayeen Uddin, lawmaker from Rajshahi-3 constituency (Paba-Mohonpur), admitted to this correspondent that he had been running at least three ponds on 150 bighas of

Fisheries and agriculture officials, cultivation. Besides, no proper survey has been conducted in recent times.

more than 36,000 in the last 20 years.

director at Department of Fisheries.

ponds. We discourage it," he said. CROP FIELDS CONVERTED

Rajshahi regional office.

The Daily Star spoke to in these areas. Nawshad Ali, of Beel Nepalpara, is

for longer than normal. per bigha a year.

offered more than Tk 50,000 for a bigha. The lease money comes easily whereas farming paddy involves investment and labour and no guarantee of profit," he said. Nawshad leased out one bigha, of his three bighas in the beel, for a pond to be dug three years ago. That one bigha in the pond fetches me annual lease money, which is half the price of what I used to get cultivating paddy on three bighas," he said. Farmer Rohidul Islam said, "The recent increase in paddy prices have made us enthusiastic, but we have no cropland left. Some crop fields were converted and other fields remain waterlogged for the whole period of Aman paddy and mustard cultivation." He alleged that pond diggers are "tricking" villagers by digging ponds at the lower corners of beels, causing waterlogging on adjacent land and then forcing the owners of the waterlogged land to lease it out for ponds. "When farmers see their land becomes one or no-crop yielding from three-crop, they find no way out but to lease it to pond diggers," Rohidul said. Local farmers said Boro Beel, Nepalpara, Faliar, Anulia, Piarpur, Dhuroil, Kantar, Ratoal, Pompara, and Fariar in Rajshahi's Paba, Mohonpur and Durgapur upazilas, as well as Chakoler Beel, Beel Dhahar, and Chinidanga Beel barely have any farmland left. Most fields in seven mouzas

May Day today

FROM PAGE 1

employers will join hands to build the country in the Mujib Year).

President Abdul Hamid and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina issued separate messages ahead of the day.

Hamid called upon the owners of mills and factories to assist the government in standing by the vulnerable workers bearing the brunt of the pandemic.

Ĥe paid gratitude to Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman for his lifelong struggle for the underprivileged people. "Bangladesh received ILO

"Bangladesh membership soon after independence in 1972 under the bold leadership of the Father of the Nation and ratified 29 conventions, including six core conventions of ILO," he added.

The prime minister also remembered the role of Bangabandhu in establishing the rights of the exploited and working class people.

"Bangabandhu had formulated labour policy in 1972 in order to establish an exploitation-free and equal society. He nationalised the mills and factories to strengthen the economy while ensuring the rights of the workers.

Hasina said her government was working relentlessly to establish the rights of workers.

She said the government has allocated Fk 50 crore to the labour directorate to implement the social safety net programme for the unemployed and distressed workers.

Ten workers were killed in Chicago on May 1, 1886 when police opened fire on a demonstration demanding an eight-hour working day instead of a 12-hour shift.

The authorities were eventually forced to accept the workers' demand which resulted in an eight-hour working day universally.

On July 14, 1889, an international workers' rally in Paris declared May 1 as the International Workers' Solidarity Day in recognition of the workers' sacrifice in Chicago.

Like every year, newspapers have published supplements while radio and television channels are airing special programmes highlighting the significance of the day.

Man dies

FROM PAGE 1

but was not involved in any drug trading.

AHM Abdur Rakib, superintendent of police of the district, said Sanaul was wanted in a narcotics case.

The SP denied allegations of torture and said they primarily suspect Sanaul died of a heart attack.

Police recovered 160 bottles of Phensedyl from his house on April 14 and filed a narcotics case against him that very day.

After the case, he fled the area. Later, on information, a team of Detective Branch (DB) of police conducted a drive in Chanshikari village on Thursday night, the SP said.

Sensing the presence of DB officials, Sanaul tried to run away but police managed to arrest him, the police officer added.

After the arrest, the accused complained of chest pain. Police then

The MP, in February, claimed that his onds were not affecting anyone. till 2018-19. However, several locals in Paba, equesting not to be named, recently told this newspaper that the lawmaker's ponds cause waterlogging on their cropland and homesteads every year.

We hear about an understanding between the local administration and investors in ponds," said SM Mizanur Rahman, member secretary of the Chalan Beel Protection Movement in

Sirajganj. Though affected villagers staged protests from time to time, the local administration kept silent in the end and influentials continued to dig ponds, he said.

admitted

leased land for the last five years.

Ponds have scarred Chalan Beel, which is divided into around small 100 beels, by converting previously three-crop offering land to lone-crop one, he added.

Contacted on April 12, Rajshahi Divisional Commissioner Dr Md Humyun Kabir said, "There is no specific law against pond digging."

He, however, agreed that causing waterlogging on someone else's land or blocking natural water flow is an offence.

"We are conducting drives but the practice is so widespread that it has become difficult to check when the ponds are being dug overnight," he added.

The divisional administrative boss added that they wrote to the land ministry for issuing an executive order against the practice. The ministry is likely to respond soon.

A local of Moharajpur in Gurudaspur increase in the number of ponds dug upazila said he and many others have to for lucrative fish cultivation. During a visit to these areas five years In Rajshahi division, the Department move to their relatives' houses in higher ago, this correspondent first observed of Fisheries recorded an increase of areas or to the city during the monsoon as their homes get filled with water. ponds being dug on crop fields, which villagers said were leased by the local 24,651 hectares of pond areas since "Those who don't have anywhere to go, make a macha [an elevated bamboo 2001-02.

however, said the official data does not reflect the actual picture as ponds elsewhere have also been filled up and river chars brought under crop

They roughly estimated the number of new ponds in the five districts to be New ponds are necessary for fulfilling

the growing demand for fish, said Md Tofazuddin Ahamed, divisional deputy

"But that doesn't mean we have to turn three-crop yielding land into

profitable for fish farmers as demand for fish remains high and rising. "Unplanned digging of ponds is affecting agriculture," said Md Sirajul can fetch a tidy profit of at least Tk 5 lakh against a Tk 10 lakh investment on Islam, additional director of the Department of Agricultural Extension

This is echoed by local farmers who

one of the farmers planting Boro paddy late as his land remained waterlogged

He said farmers lease out their cropland for ponds when they suffer losses in their yearly crops. Pond diggers offer them around Tk 20,000-Tk 30,000

Mainul Islam and his three brothers In the initial years, the farmers were used to earn from three crops a year cultivated on their four-bigha land in he said. local farmers. Paba upazila.

districts in the last ten years, according to -- Moharajpur, Achariya Chapila, Gozendra Chapila, Paikpara, Chapila, data from the Department of Fisheries. At least 17 upazilas in five districts Bripathuria, and Sadhupara -- out of 27 Rajshahi, Natore, Bogura, Pabna, mouzas of Natore's Gurudaspur have and Sirajganj -- witnessed the greatest been turned into ponds.

Its data also showed around 12,000 new ponds were dug in the nine years

less than what they made in 2019 with overtime and benefits.

Such significant cuts to their income have had a significantly detrimental impact on their living conditions.

Roksana, working at a factory in Savar, used to live with her husband - an auto-rickshaw driver -- and two children in a rented apartment nearby. She had to let it go in January this year as they could not afford to live in Savar anymore on her nearly-halved salary of Tk 10,000.

Her husband and two children had to return to the village in search of work while she is living in a shared room with several other workers.

"I can hardly bear my family's expenses," Roksana said, adding, "The most unfortunate fact is that with this income I don't think I will be able to pay for my children's schools anymore. if my husband cannot get a decent job, as I also have to send money to my elderly parents."

Sakina, another worker who works at a factory in Ashulia, said, "The factory owners have reduced our salary but they don't consider that our house rent and the price of commodities have not decreased.'

For her, this has meant sacrificing food and nutrition for her family.

"With this income, we can hardly afford rice, fish, and vegetables. I have forgotten the taste of beef, mutton, and chicken. We cannot even afford milk and fruits for our children.

FACTORY OWNERS, BRANDS 'INDIFFERENT'

Labour leader and BCWS Executive Director Kalpona Akter said, "In most cases, very rich industrialists who can pay their workers for months without running their factories received the stimulus package last year. Small and medium scale factories who are mostly sub-contractors for bigger factories did not get any assistance and had to close their operations or minimise their production costs."

Kalpona also accused buyers of not acting responsibly.

"According to our estimation, more than 50 percent of suppliers had to accept orders below average cost and many brands cancelled orders last year. The apathy of brands and industrialists' indifference towards workers' rights resulted in mass layoff of workers and massive salary cuts in this sector," she said.

Also at stake are workers' salaries and Eid bonus before the festival.

Begum Shamsunnahar Bhuiyan MP, executive president of Mahila

year," he added.

"We are also developing a complete database of all the RMG workers to ensure that funds from the stimulus package reach the right person." **NO EFFECTIVE COVID-19** PRECAUTIONS

Workers said they are also very worried about the worsening Covid-19 situation as they cannot hope for medical assistance from their employers if they are infected.

This time around, garments and other factories have been told they can stay open during the lockdown from April 14.

The workers also alleged that most factories did not take any effective measures to ensure hygiene rules and social distancing, and did not arrange workers' transportation to and from the factory during the ongoing lockdown despite government's instructions regarding this.

Shumon, a worker of a factory in Savar, said, "Our factory authorities installed hand-washing booths and provided hand sanitisers and masks in the beginning. Now, most of the workers do not care about maintaining hygiene and our bosses also do not bother about it. Maintaining social distancing is impossible in the factory.

Roksana concurred, saying, "Every day I go to the factory with 15 of my colleagues crammed in a small laguna as there is no other public transport currently. How can we maintain hygiene and social distance?'

Many workers said they do not even inform their supervisors about sickness as they tend to be sanctioned with 14 days leave without payment.

Azahar*, a worker from Ashulia, said, "One of my colleagues informed the factory physician about his fever. He was prescribed a Covid-19 test and some medicines which cost around Tk 2,000.

"He could not afford the test and medicines and joined work with fever. The next day, he was given 14 days of leave without pay."

Azahar said workers cannot bear these costs and the travel to Dhaka on their current income, or to go unpaid for so long.

Shumon said, "At present, our biggest fear is losing our job. If we get infected, there is no doubt that we shall lose our job.

"And if we lose our job, we shall not get any job in the near future as none of the factories are taking new workers."

*RMG workers names' have been changed to protect their identities

Conversion of land types are prohibited by land and environment protection laws and in addition, the Bangladesh Water Act of 2013 strictly prohibits hindering natural water flow, said Tanmay Sanyal, Rajshahi regional coordinator of Bangladesh Environmental Lawyers' Association (Bela).

The draft of the Agricultural Land Protection and Land Use Act which prohibits the conversion of agricultural land in clearer terms is yet to be finalised, he added.

PONDS TAKING OVER

On visits to Natore and Rajshahi from December till last month, this correspondent saw tractors busily breaking the silence of the otherwise tranquil rural roads, carrying earth from the newly dug ponds to brick kilns.

In mid-February, farmers in Natore's Boraigram and Rajshahi's Paba, Mohonpur and Tanore upazilas were seen planting Boro seedlings when the sowing season was nearing its end. They said it should have been done earlier but they had to wait for water to recede after their land was waterlogged because of the unplanned ponds.

The trend of digging ponds began in Chalan Beel areas in Natore district in the early 2000s. It spread to other

Workers to stage demo tomorrow

FROM PAGE 1

Meanwhile, Bangladesh Road Transport Owners Association also demanded resumption of public transport during the "lockdown", according to a press statement from the platform.

Operations of public transport, mainly those of bus and minibus, have remained suspended since April 5 when the government imposed restrictions on the people's movement and public transport to contain the spread of Covid-19.

However, buses were allowed to operate in 11 cities for a week from April at half capacity.

The demands came at a time when authorities and experts fear that tens of thousands people may leave Dhaka before Eid to celebrate the festival at home and that the mad-rush may further spread the Covid-19 infection.

Many of the experts recommended checking the mad rush as the country is now battling the second wave of the viral disease, which is taking a heavy toll on human lives.

In his written speech at the press conference, Osman Ali, general secretary of the Road Transport Workers Federation, said around 50 lakh workers became jobless and their livelihood became uncertain ahead of the Eid-ul-Fitr.

"They are leading a miserable life along with their family members. In this given situation, if road transport workers take to the street, the Road Transport Workers Federation will not take any responsibility for it," he said.

Osman said in the absence of buses and minibuses, people are boarding auto-rickshaws, three-wheelers and other small vehicles, spending extra and also exposing themselves to the risk of Covid-19 infection.

So, the government should allow operations of buses and minibuses at 50 percent capacity. The operations should continue maintaining all types of health safety guidelines, he said.

Citing almost similar grounds, in a press statement, signed by its Secretary General Khondaker Enayet Ullah, Bangladesh Road Transport Owners Association demanded the government give food aid to the workers and allow public transport operations.

On Thursday, Bangladesh Road Truck Owners Association, another major association of transport owners, urged the government to resume public transport from yesterday considering the plight of transport owners and workers.

Paschim Beel in Paba upazila.

Their land has been yielding only one crop, Boro paddy, since ponds were dug around it three years ago.

PHOTO:

platform] to take shelter," he said.

the Nolkhola-Digori beel.

crops till a month ago.

During a visit to Harian union in Paba

Locals said the land where the pond

upazila on April 12, this correspondent

saw one pond was already dug while

four excavators were digging another in

was dug has been laying fallow for five

years because of ensuing waterlogging while the land where the new pond

is being dug yielded paddy and other

have dotted the beel stretching four

kilometres to Parila from Nolkhola.

They added hundreds of ponds

Although ponds have become a

Fish farming on a pond of ten bighas

land lease and fish cultivation, Amjad

expressed his anxiety that these new

ponds will bring fish prices down. He said the number of ponds

being dug this year is higher than that in previous years. "Pond diggers are

taking the opportunity of coronavirus

outbreak when the administration is

very busy and has other priorities."

LOSS OF LIVELIHOOD

But Md Belal Hossain, a fish trader,

Hossain, a fish farmer in Mohonpur.

major cause of woe for farmers, the

upside is that these have been hugely

PALASH KHAN

The family's financial situation has accordingly deteriorated.

"We have to move to towns looking for jobs to survive the crop-less period,⁷

Farm labourers are losing their livelihood with crop fields decreasing as ponds don't need as many labourers. The entire process of producing crops on a bigha of land, he said, requires around 30 labourers. But two caretakers are sufficient for a pond, be it on 10 or 50 bighas of land, according to

The number of jobless farm labourers is increasing, and jobs in towns have become scarce too, said Habibur Rahman of Parila village in

Habibur is one of hundreds of farm labourers who brave cold, rains, and summer heat travelling to Rajshahi city seven days a week for work.

This correspondent met him at the Qamaruzzaman square in the city one morning recently.

"I didn't find any job today. Usually, get a job twice or thrice a week. Sometimes, I go through two weeks without a job," he said.

"My family and I have to endure half-fed days in those weeks."

They also demanded allocation of Tk 5,000 crore as special incentive at a low interest rate for the sector so that they could give salary and bonus to their staffers ahead of the Eid and repair vehicles.

Country sees

FROM PAGE 1

rose to 10.45 percent the following day. Since then, the infection rate began an upward march.

The country recorded 52 coronavirusrelated deaths on April 5, 78 on April 27, and 77 on April 28, showing a downtrend. It witnessed over 100 deaths during April 16-19 and on April 25.

With the latest figure, 759,132 cases have been detected so far in Bangladesh.

The number of recoveries now stands at 681,426, meaning 89.76 percent of the patients have recovered till now, the DGHS said.

Bangladesh has so far tested 5,469,704 samples, including 21,046 in the past 24 hours.

The country reported its first coronavirus cases on March 8 last year and the first death on the 18th of that month.

ook him to Bholahat Upazila Health Complex, the SP added.

The doctors of the hospital referred Sanaul to Sadar hospital after providing him primary treatment. He was admitted to the hospital, where he died, the SP added.

After completion of autopsy, police handed his body to his brother around 3:45pm, he said.

Jahangir Alam, resident medical office of Sadar hospital, said they primarily suspect that Sanaul died of a ardiac arrest

Family members FROM PAGE 1

(Gulshan division) of Dhaka Metropolitan Police, had earlier said that the victim wrote in her diary about her relationship, the social barriers to recognition of the relationship, her expectation of a happy life with the accused and the restrictions from his family.

She detailed her serious frustration in her diaries and these will be the key to establishing the case, he told reporters as the case caused a stir in the country.

Police will consider arresting the accused once the necessary evidence is there, he said.

But a police official said wishing anonymity that the arrest will depend on the decision of government highups.

Meanwhile, Human Rights Forum Bangladesh (HRBF) in a statement yesterday demanded fair investigation and justice for the death of the woman.

It said the general public doubts whether there will be a proper investigation in the case since the accused is a very wealthy person.

The forum, a coalition of 20 human rights and development organisations, fears that the investigation and trial may be swayed as the accused is immensely influential.

Judging by past experiences, influential people often manage to evade justice by manipulating the loopholes in laws and the justice system, it said, adding that this case should not turn out that way.

"There is no evidence that Anvir left he country, but police have not arrested him. The concern over justice is getting more serious," it read.

Referring to reports that the victim's family members were being intimidated, the HRBF urged the authorities to ensure the family's safety.

The forum called for appointment of an experienced, skilled and honest officer for the investigation and urged the media to abide by the laws and to follow the standards when covering news.