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Two rail projects face uncertainty

China decides not to fund one of them while Chinese contractors say they won't work on the projects as contract costs revised

TUHIN SHUBHRA ADHIKARY

Two major railway expansion projects have plunged into uncertainty as China has decided not to finance one of those and the Chinese contractors for both the projects have refused to work following downward revision of the contract prices.

The Chinese government, through its embassy in Dhaka, said it would not fund the Tk 14,250.61-crore Joydebpur-Ishwardi double-line project for a "lack of in-depth preliminary work and insufficient feasibility study".

Meanwhile, the Chinese contractors for this project and the Tk 16,104.45-crore Akhaura-Sylhet dual gauge project informed Bangladesh Railway that they would not work in the projects following

1 Construction of double line between Joydebpur-Ishwardi
COST: Tk 14,250.61 cr
DEADLINE: December 2024

2 Conversion of meter gauge rail line into dual gauge in Akhaura-Sylhet section
COST: Tk 16,104.44 cr
DEADLINE: June 2025

the downward revision of contract prices by the Prime Minister's Office (PMO).

These two are among the projects for which Dhaka and Beijing signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) during Chinese President Xi Jinping's Dhaka visit in October 2016 for implementing those with Chinese assistance.

Both the projects were approved by the Executive Committee of the National Economic Council (Ecnec) more than two years ago. The Chinese contractors were selected through direct procurement method without any competitive bidding.

The latest developments will result in further delay in the implementation of the two projects and prolong people's wait for better train services from the capital to the

SEE PAGE 2 COL 3



People at this crowded cattle market in Araihaaz, Narayanganj, seem to be completely oblivious to the dangers of contracting and spreading the coronavirus. Hardly anyone is seen wearing a mask here. Many traders buy cattle from farmers well ahead of Eid and raise them for about a month before selling them for a profit just before the festival.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

Funds abundant, but ministry can't spend

Finance ministry official blames health ministry

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Money was never a problem in combatting the public health crisis brought on by the coronavirus pandemic but the health ministry was unable to utilise the funds, said a top bureaucrat yesterday.

"I watched with surprise that the health ministry could not spend a major portion of the funds we gave them amid the pandemic," said Abdur Rouf Talukder, senior secretary to the finance division, at a seminar organised by the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS) styled "Normalising Masks: Health and Economic Implications".

Talukder is in charge of releasing and managing funds for the finance ministry. In fiscal 2020-21, at least Tk 29,247 crore



"We must have the appropriate diplomatic strategy to ensure that we get sufficient vaccines to vaccinate the whole population."

PROF. REHMAN SOBHAN

was allocated for the health ministry, and in the first 10 months, about a quarter of the sum was spent. There was another Tk 10,000 crore in block allocation for the sector, and that too sat idle.

"For the health sector, resource is not a problem, as per the instruction of the prime minister. The problem is management, the problem is in distribution, the problem is in efficiently using the resource."

In the next fiscal year, Tk 32,731 crore has been assigned for the health sector.

"Since the pandemic began, whenever the health ministry or the agricultural ministry asked for funds and whatever amount, we never turned them away. We cut the budget elsewhere and diverted the funds to them."

SEE PAGE 10 COL 1

New cases, positivity rate rising

Khulna, Rajshahi divisions see most deaths, new cases

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Districts along the border in Khulna and Rajshahi divisions have continued to see record-breaking Covid-19 positivity rates and the number of daily deaths.

The administrations in Khulna, Chapainawabganj, Satkhira, Bagerhat and Noakhali districts have enforced strict restrictions of movement.

Health officials said it will be a while before transmission rates begin to fall.

In the 24 hours preceding 8:00am yesterday, 11 people were reported dead with Covid-19 in Rajshahi division and nine in Khulna division, according to a press release from the health directorate.

In the same 24 hours, the confirmed new cases were 641 in Rajshahi and 557 in Khulna divisions.

SEE PAGE 2 COL 6

FEMALE ENTREPRENEURS

Stimulus schemes hardly reach them

CPD study finds 59pc of small entrepreneurs unaware of the support packages

NILIMA JAHAN

Thirty-year-old Dipali Nokrek made a career out of doing one thing -- making people look beautiful.

Starting her career as an apprentice at one of Dhaka's well-known beauty salons, she worked for over 18 years in more than a dozen parlours. All was well until the nationwide shutdown was imposed last year to contain the spread of Covid-19.

She was fired from her job while her husband had his pay cut by half at his job at an RMG factory. Soon, the couple's savings dried up and they fell behind in five months' rent.

Six months after she was fired, she started a makeshift beauty parlour in one room of her neighbour's house, taking loans and help from relatives.

But another lockdown imposed in the wake of the second wave earlier this year, devastated her fledgling venture.

"I could not open my parlour for a month. Pehela Baishakh and Eid are our peak season, but I missed this. Although we can open it for a limited time now, the number of clients has decreased drastically," Dipali said. She is yet to repay her loans or pay the house rent due from last year.

"If this continues, we have to starve with the added burden of loans and the due rent," she added.

A majority of female beauticians in the beauty parlour sector belong to ethnic minority groups.

SEE PAGE 2 COL 1

THE BUSINESS

More low-cost loans for women borrowers

Female borrowers would get at least 25 per cent of the stimulus fund dedicated to the farmers, underprivileged women, professionals and micro-enterprises, said the central bank yesterday. The Tk 3,000-crore fund was rolled out in April last year as part of Bangladesh Bank's efforts to keep the micro-businesses afloat. Microfinance institutions will disburse the loans, and they are allowed to charge a maximum of 9 per cent interest rate.

STORY ON B1

From cop to drug trader

CHAITANYA CHANDRA HALDER and EMRUL HASAN BAPPI

He liked having yaba. And it was cheap too. He knew a lot of people like him were addicted to the crazy pills. He saw the potential of making a lot of money that too very quickly if he started trading the drug instead of just consuming.

And he was in a unique position that would, to the very least, would raise no suspicion, or so he thought.

But 45-year-old sub-inspector Atiqul Islam got caught during a raid on June 15 last year, read a charge sheet, which sub-inspector Golam Kibria of Mohammadpur Police Station filed with the Chief Metropolitan Magistrate's Court of Dhaka on November 29.

The media did not notice anything then. "... police arrested Atiqul and his friend Rezaur Rob from Shahjahan Road area in the capital's Mohammadpur and recovered 11,600 yaba pills and Tk 5.25 lakh from their possession," the charge sheet read.

Even though he was posted in Bandarban, Atiqul frequented Adabar and Mohammadpur areas as he had friends there. He had been the second officer of Mohammadpur Police Station.

According to the case documents, Atiqul, in 2019, got acquainted to Rob, another yaba addict. They became friends. Rob was unemployed and was keen on getting into drug dealing with Atiqul as partner.

SEE PAGE 2 COL 6



People, including women and children, are drenched as they wait in a queue in the pouring rain so that they can buy daily essentials at prices they can afford. The photo was taken in front of a TCB mobile shop on Sachibaloy Link Road yesterday afternoon.

PHOTO: SK ENAMUL HAQ

Tortured abroad, now she fears stigma at home

RASHIDUL HASAN

In yet another instance of female Bangladeshi expatriate workers enduring torture in a Middle East country, a 32-year-old woman returned home from Saudi Arabia with her six-month-old son.

She landed at the Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport in the capital on Tuesday.

In keeping with the editorial policy, The Daily Star is not publishing her name or photograph.

The woman alleged that she had been abused and tortured by the owner of the house where she worked in Saudi Arabia. The owner is also the father of her child, she said.

Worried about how to return home with her child as she might fall victim to social stigma, the woman has taken shelter at the BRAC Learning Center in the capital's Ashkona, said Shariful Hasan, head of BRAC's migration programme.

Sources at HSA said the woman's ancestral home is in Brahmanbaria.

She left the country for Saudi Arabia in November 2019. She was frequently tortured since starting work in the Gulf country. When she was pregnant, she was sent to jail and gave birth to her baby boy there.

"No one in my family knows about it. I can't go back to my family with my child," an official of BRAC's migration programme quoted the woman as saying.

SEE PAGE 2 COL 6