

COVID-19 FALLOUT

Hundreds of migrant workers inch towards starvation in Faridpur

Without getting farm work during lockdown, they have been living in the open

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Faridpur

They came all the way from the north to find jobs to earn a livelihood. But due to the ongoing lockdown, they now hardly find any work. Without any money to even buy food, they now cannot afford to go home either.

About 1,200 migrant agricultural workers -- from at least ten different northern districts -- are now living under inhumane conditions on the streets of Faridpur town after they got stuck due to the nationwide lockdown.

Every year, especially during the monsoon season, they come to one of the region's largest farm worker marketplaces, locally known as 'Jon Haat', where farm owners from surrounding upazilas and districts come to hire them to harvest jute and other crops.

While visiting the marketplace -- located off of Dhaka-Barishal highway in Goalchamat area beside the town water treatment plant -- last Saturday morning, more or less one thousand migrant workers were seen waiting on a prospective client.

While only a handful of them found work at nearby crop fields, the rest had to linger in the area with uncertainty.

Most workers this correspondent spoke with said they come to Jon Haat in Faridpur town every year, as they can earn a bit better by working for similar jobs at their home villages.

Since monsoon is the jute harvesting time and the pay is usually good in Faridpur or the districts surrounding it, most of the migrant jobseekers had arrived at the marketplace in the last part of June.

After the lockdown was imposed this month, they got stuck in the town, with most of them already used up all the money they brought with them from home.

Unable to afford any lodging facilities, they have been spending the night at storefronts, bus stations or school grounds near Jon Haat, they also said.

One of the, Billal Mollah, said he came to Faridpur town on June 25 from Mithuani village in Chauhali upazila of Sirajganj.

"I had the chance to work for five days and make Tk 2,500 after working at a crop field in Saltha upazila. But now I am spending Tk 150 of the money on meals every day.

"I don't know when I'll get another job as no one is able to reach this haat and hire us amid the lockdown. But my wife and two sons need me to send money for their survival," Billal said helplessly.

Moslem Bepari, from Ghugri Pantapur village in Jhenidah's Maheshpur upazila, said he came to Faridpur 10 days ago and he worked at a job



'Jon Haat' in Goalchamat area of Faridpur town where around 1,200 migrant workers have been stranded without food, work and a place to stay. The photo was taken on Saturday.

for two days only.

"I came here as there's no work in our area during the rainy season. There's a lot of work in Faridpur region, but I can't get any of those jobs due to the lockdown now," he added.

Another of the workers, Ashrafal of Lalmonirhat, said, "I've been coming to Faridpur during the jute harvesting season for 12 years now. I had gotten many jobs here before and made good money. But this year, my earnings have stopped due to the lockdown."

Now my wife is asking me to go back home, but I can't, as I don't have much money left."

Sattar Sardar, a resident of Hatbaira village in Shahjampur upazila of Sirajganj, said after losing about 85 bighas of arable land to the Jumuna river, he and his wife had been living with their two daughters on someone else's land.

Until farmers stopped coming to Jon Haat for labourers due to the lockdown, the marketplace had been the source of his livelihood for years, he also said.

Babu Sheikh, a resident of Khodoboksh Road area in Faridpur town and also the organiser of Jon Haat, said hundreds of labourers from Rangpur, Naogaon, Lalmonirhat, Pabna,

Sirajganj, Rajshahi, Chapainawabganj, Chuadanga, Jhenidah and Meherpur come to the marketplace.

"On the other hand, a good number of farm owners from different upazilas in Faridpur, Shariatpur, Madaripur, Gopalganj and Barishal come here to hire workers for their crop fields. We charge each farm owner Tk 10 for each worker hired from here.

"Near about 500 to 600 workers are being left without jobs every day here since the lockdown was enforced. They have been sleeping at different places including the bus terminal, schools and in front of different shops."

During lockdown last year, the police as well as different voluntary organisations distributed food relief to migrant workers stranded in Faridpur town. But no one came to help them out this time, added Babu.

Asked, Faridpur Sadar Upazila Nirbahi Officer Masum Raza said, "No one told me about the situation of these day labourers. I will contact the haat management authority and take urgent steps so the day labourers can get jobs and go to their workplaces."

Husband stabs migrant worker dead in Habiganj

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Moulvibazar

A Saudi expatriate woman was killed allegedly by her husband in Madhabpur upazila of Habiganj yesterday.

The deceased Parveen Akter was the wife of suspect Taqdir Hossain of Bulla union.

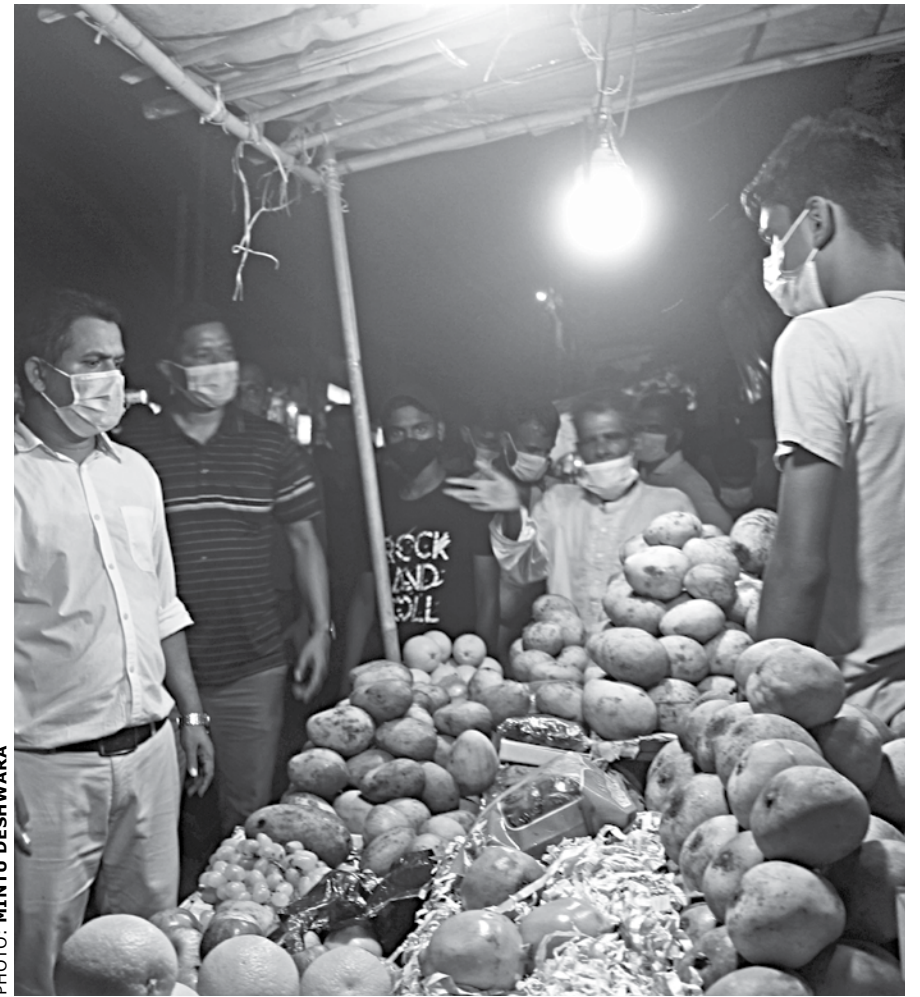
Quoting locals, Officer-in-Charge (investigation) Aminul Islam of Madhabpur Police Station said

Parveen used to work as a house help in Saudi Arabia. She returned to Bangladesh a month ago and was preparing to return.

Taqdir did not want her to leave, said the OC, adding that yesterday morning they had a heated argument.

At one point he stabbed his wife to death and fled the scene, the OC said.

Police recovered the body and sent it to Habiganj Sadar Hospital for autopsy.



The upazila nirbahi officer of Kulaura in Moulvibazar asks a fruit stand man to close his shop. The trader had kept his stand open way into the evening on Tuesday even though the lockdown rules allow shops to stay open until 5:00pm.

A sly trick, indeed

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was produced before a court the next day and placed on a one-day remand.

He was sent to jail on June 21 and the case was handed over to the Counter Terrorism and Transnational Crime (CTTC) unit for investigation on June 29.

The CTTC has appealed to the court to place Emon on a 10-day police remand. The hearing is currently pending.

Sources said investigators have already found the involvement of several travel agencies, including that of Emon's, behind this racket.

Emon is the proprietor of a travel agency called "Helpline Travel and Consultancy (HTC)".

The racket has been active for the past two months and have already trafficked several dozens of people, investigators said.

Touhidul Islam, additional deputy commissioner of the CTTC, yesterday told The Daily Star that they are investigating the case and trying to gather information about those trafficked so far and how many of them were able to return.

"We are also trying to locate all those involved in the syndicate."

TRAVEL PACKAGE, VICTIMS

Md Habib, an executive of HTC, told this newspaper that they have three packages, to visit Russia, starting from Tk 2.70 lakh to 3.50 lakh.

"If you pay Tk 3.50 lakh, then we will make all the arrangements, including airport settlement so that immigration officials do not stop you," he said, adding, "For the journey, you do not need any travel history, we will manage the airport."

Habib, however, refused to disclose further details as the package is not valid anymore.

This correspondent spoke to five of the 18 who were stopped by immigration police on June 12.

"We were around 29 people in the group. Before us, 11 already gone to Russia using the Fan ID. When the police stopped us, we learned that the travel agency failed to 'manage immigration'," says Taslim Ud Doula.

"We have come to know that around Tk 40 thousand to sometimes even Tk one lakh to 'manage the airport... We bought our tickets for around Tk 1.60 lakh."

Another detainee, Naimul Alam, said he worked as an office assistant and was going to Russia to watch a football match. He, however, could not give an answer when asked how he managed to get a plane ticket to Russia during the pandemic when he has not travel history.

Naimul sai he used to work for Emon and just needed to pay Tk one lakh.

About "managing the airport", CTTC ADC Touhidul said they are yet to learn about this.

Monirul Islam, SB deputy inspector general (immigration), said immigration is not involved with the irregularities. "It is the brokers who collect extra money in the name of immigration."

The Criminal Investigation Department of police said around 2,324 people have been trafficked from 2004 till date. Around 27, 363 people were made accused in trafficking cases and law enforcers have able to take action against 12, 282 people so far.

Saidur Rahman Khan, special superintendent (human trafficking) of the CID, said they have so far found people who trafficked victims from Bangladesh to middle eastern countries, India, the United Kingdom, Malaysia, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Iran and Libya.

Emission of carbon

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The minister was speaking at a virtual press briefing ahead of an international conference on environment scheduled for today.

Asked if the government lacked foresight as it has now dropped some coal-based power plants from its master plan, Kamal said, "There was no shortcoming in the government's plan."

Amid protests by environmentalists, Bangladesh-India Friendship Company Ltd has almost completed the construction of the first unit of Maitree Super Thermal Power Plant in Rampal, around 14 kilometres off the Sundarbans.

Kazi Absar Uddin Ahmed, managing director of the company, on Sunday said they were hoping to start generating electricity in December and add it to the national grid.

Voicing concern over the development, environmentalists said the government was supposed to complete the Strategic Environmental Assessment, not the plant, as per the conditions set by the World Heritage Committee (WHC) of Unesco to keep the World Heritage status of the Sundarbans.

The WHC is going to review the overall situation at a meeting slated for July 20.

Freeze accounts

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of monitoring two central bank departments for his alleged connection with Halder following the confessional statement.

In March this year, Bangladesh Financial Intelligence Unit (BFIU) sought the bank details of SK Sur Chowdhury, his spouse and BB Executive Director Shah Alam and his spouses.

In June, a Bangladesh Bank fact-finding committee on recent scandals in financial institutions summoned Sur Chowdhury for a hearing. Chowdhury denied the allegations raised against him.

Modi 'overhauls'

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But what made bigger news today was the sacking of IT and Law Minister Ravi Shankar Prasad, Health Minister Harsh Vardhan and Environment and Information and Broadcasting Minister Prakash Javadekar.

Vardhan's removal follows the severe criticism of the Indian government's handling of the second surge of Covid-19 that exposed the country's inadequate health infrastructure.

Javadekar was among the chief spokespersons of the Modi government since 2014.

Ravi Shankar Prasad's ouster from the cabinet followed weeks of the IT Ministry's running feud with global tech companies like Twitter and Facebook over a range of issues, including new IT rules.

This was the first reshuffle in the Council of Ministers by Modi since he assumed charge for a second term in May 2019.

The reshuffle saw the induction of younger faces giving representation to various social groups and regions in the reshuffle keeping in view the assembly elections scheduled next year in several states, including electorally the most important Uttar Pradesh, and to balance the alliance arithmetic. As

Road work suspended due to BSF

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the work two weeks ago.

The Roads and Highways Department of Kurigram says it has started widening 19km of the road from Sheikh Hasina Dharla Bridge intersection of Shimulbari union in Phulbari upazila to Nageshwari municipality's college intersection at a cost of Tk 55 crore.

Construction firm OTBL won the work order.

Rasel Islam, sub-divisional engineer of the firm, told The Daily Star that they suspended work on the 750 metres stretch due to opposition from the BSF.

However, work is going on on the rest of 19km road.

The work on the 750 metres will be completed soon with permission from the authorities concerned, he said.

Zahirul Islam, RHD executive engineer in Kurigram, told this correspondent that

higher authorities have been informed of the matter. If the authorities of Border Guard Bangladesh give permission, the contractor will be allowed to work there. The BGB is being contacted regularly about it, he said.

According to the international border law, no infrastructures can be built within 150 yards of the border. Since the 750 metres of the road are within 150 yards of the border, the BSF opposed the widening work of the road, said Lt Col SM Touhidul Alam, commanding officer of BGB 15 Battalion in Lalmonirhat.

He, however, said construction of infrastructures can be allowed if both sides agree.

The BGB official added that meetings and discussions were underway with BSF. It will be resolved soon, he hoped.

Local Nazim Ali, 65, said they were suffering as the work stopped midway. He demanded completion of the work fast.

Thousands flock to see dwarf cow

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deaths, people are flocking in rickshaws to the farm in Charigram, 30 kilometres (19 miles) southwest of Dhaka.

"I have never seen anything like this in my life. Never," said Rina Begum, 30, who came from a neighbouring town.

Rani is 66 centimetres (26 inches) long and weighs only 26 kilograms (57 pounds) but the owners say it is 10 centimetres shorter than the smallest cow in Guinness World Records.

M A Hasan Howlader, manager of Shikor Agro farm, used a tape measure to show dozens of onlookers how Rani dwarfs her closest rival Manikyam, a cow in the Indian state Kerala that currently holds the world record.

"People come long distances despite the coronavirus lockdown. Most want to take selfies with Rani," Howlader told AFP, adding Guinness World Records had promised a decision in three months.

"More than 15,000 people have come to

see Rani in the past three days alone," he said.

"Honestly speaking, we are tired."

Guinness World Records said Manikyam, from the Vechur breed, was 61 centimetres high in June 2014.

Rani is a Bhutti, or Bhutanese, cow which is prized for its meat in Bangladesh. The other Bhuttis on the farm are twice Rani's size.

"We did not expect such huge interest. We did not think people would leave their homes because of the worsening virus situation. But they have come here in droves," the manager said.

Sajedul Islam, the government's chief vet for the region, said Rani is a product of "genetic inbreeding" and was unlikely to become any bigger.

Islam said he had told the farm to restrict the tourist influx.

"I told them they should not allow so many people to crowd the farm. They may carry diseases here that threaten Rani's health," he said.

EU to give 1m doses

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The deadly Delta Covid-19 variant is spreading fast in urban and rural areas across Bangladesh stretching the entire health sector beyond its limits. Hospitals in areas bordering India are experiencing a sharp rise in infections and deaths, IFRC said in a statement yesterday.

In the capital Dhaka, around 78 percent of infections have been identified as caused by the Delta strain. Nearly one in three people (29 percent) tested positive for Covid, pointing to much higher infection rates across the country.

However, only around 3 percent of people in Bangladesh is fully vaccinated compared with half the population of countries such as the UK and the US.

Feroz Salah Uddin, secretary general of Bangladesh Red Crescent Society, said they have ramped up ambulance services and

efforts to help reduce death and suffering due to this dangerous virus.

"Our volunteers are working alongside health authorities to accelerate vaccinations, but a crippling shortage in supply is hurting the progress," he said.

Sanjeev Kafey, head of IFRC Bangladesh Delegation, said: "It's critical that richer countries share more vaccines with Bangladesh in the coming days and weeks to help avoid the horrors caused by Covid-19 in India."

"Covid-19 is having devastating impacts on millions of people in Bangladesh, with many losing their incomes and livelihoods. Mass vaccination is the key to ending the spiralling deaths, infections and hardships caused by this virus in Bangladesh and everywhere around the world," he said, seeking vital funding for its global emergency Covid-19 appeal.

Pakistani propaganda in USA

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the big powers to force the West Pakistan military junta to release Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and his family.

The meeting also condemned US arms supplies to Pakistan.

Those who addressed the conference included Tajuddin Ahmad, Khandaker Mushtaque Ahmed, besides a number of prominent Awami League leaders.

NO TRUTH IN STORY OF KILLING OF NON-BANGALEES

Dr AR Mallick, former VC of Chittagong University, told newsmen today in India that he was extremely sorry to learn that propaganda was carried on in India, particularly among the Urdu press, about the so-called mass killings of non-Bangalee Muslims by Bangalees in Bangladesh during the last few months.

Replying to questions of Urdu journalists, he said all such stories generally emanated from Karachi and the Urdu press was fed on such propaganda in India. This was Pakistan President Yahya Khan's nefarious game, he added.

Dr Mallick asked newsmen to scan all national and international papers to find out whether there was any riot or killing among civilians from the first of March to the fateful March 25 when Pakistani troops cracked down on poor helpless Bangalees.

CURFEW IN DHAKA

A curfew had been imposed on Dhaka since July 5 to check the movement and actions of Bangladeshi freedom fighters, following hand grenade attacks in New Market area of the city.

TWO BANGALEE ENVOYS ASK FOR ASYLUM IN FRANCE

Two Bangalee diplomats at the Pakistan embassy in Paris -- Mosharaf Hussain and Shaouq Ali -- asked the French government for political asylum. They informed that they were ordered to return to West Pakistan.

The diplomatic representative of the Bangladesh government in New Delhi Shehabuddin congratulated them on their "right and courageous decision".

In Calcutta, a spokesman of the foreign office of the Bangladesh government also praised them for their "choice of freedom from the fascist warlords of the West Pakistan" and "allegiance to the Bangladesh government".

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President of Haiti

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Moise had ruled Haiti, the poorest country in the Americas, by decree, after legislative elections due in 2018 were delayed in the wake of disputes, including on when his own term ends.

In addition to the political crisis, kidnappings for ransom have surged in recent months, reflecting the growing influence of armed gangs in the Caribbean nation.

Haiti also faces chronic poverty and recurrent natural disasters.