

# The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

## Disclose details of MoU on Malaysian recruitment

### Transparency is vital to protect the interests of our workers

WE fully support the call by the Bangladeshi and Malaysian chapters of Transparency International (TI) for disclosure of the contents of the memorandum of understanding (MoU) signed between the two governments on December 19, 2021 on the recruitment of Bangladeshi workers in Malaysia. In a joint press release issued on Tuesday, the two chapters urged the governments to make the details available for public scrutiny and to ensure the recruitment process is not held hostage to the “evil designs of powerful syndicates”. Earlier, we were told that the MoU had outlined how Malaysia would select Bangladeshi recruiting agencies through an online system from the list provided by Bangladesh. But the call for full disclosure has yet to yield results.

The bone of contention here is the potential syndicated capture of the recruitment process by a vested group of Bangladeshi Recruiting Agencies (BRAs) in collaboration with their Malaysian cohorts. The possibility of syndication was raised following a January 14 letter from Malaysia’s human resources minister that had stressed on the involvement of 25 “main” agents and 250 subagents from Bangladesh. Even though Bangladesh’s expatriates’ welfare minister, in his reply, stressed on allowing all authorised recruiting agencies in the hiring process, many suspect that a compromise may be reached for the sake of reopening Malaysia’s labour market for our workers. But we cannot be sure since we don’t have details of what exactly was agreed upon in the December 19 memorandum.

Malaysia banned recruitment from Bangladesh in 2018 against the backdrop of allegations of corruption and irregularities, including the high recruitment costs and forced labour. It has been alleged that the entire process of sending manpower to Malaysia was in the hands of only 10 companies, who eliminated competition from all others and thereby effectively controlled the fate of aspiring migrants. If a similar syndicated capture is allowed now, we might see a repeat of the 2018 scenario somewhere down the line.

It’s natural that Malaysia would like to protect its interests as Bangladesh would like to protect its own. But this doesn’t have to be mutually exclusive. Whatever reasons or fears that may have led to the Malaysian preference for syndication, the best answer to that would be to restore confidence by ensuring greater transparency and accountability at every stage of the recruitment process, which will eventually protect the interests of both workers and employers. We, therefore, urge both governments to disclose the terms and conditions of their memorandum. Their silence, as the TI chapters said, is contradictory to their commitments to control corruption and ensure public access to information. The migration of Bangladeshi workers to Malaysia is in the national interest of both countries, so both should attach highest priority to preventing secrecy and corrupt practices around this mutually beneficial sector.

## Fire survivors left in the lurch

### Provide all help necessary to Sonaichhari fire victims

IT is heart-rending to learn that the survivors of a fire incident at the Sonaichhari fishing village in Sitakunda, Chattogram have been living under the open sky since January 28, when the fire ravaged their houses. It gutted a total of seven houses, where at least 22 families lived, along with all their valuables. An equally tragic development occurred when, after the fire, no one from the local administration came to their aid, except with a measly provision of dry food. Left to fend for themselves, these people are now struggling without food and shelter from the cold weather and are too poor to rebuild their lives on their own.

Our correspondent, after a visit to the spot, described how some of the survivors were sleeping on the unwallied portion of their charred homes, while others were seen living under trees. A victim narrated how he discovered fire in front of his room all of a sudden at the dead of night. It spread rather quickly, according to him, engulfing all the houses in the cluster. Another victim said their main gate was locked from outside and they were lucky to get out through an alternative exit. There are allegations of foul play as the name of a local trader and some anglers came up, who allegedly had a history of rifts with some of the fishing families over the use of a land area. These allegations deserve to be looked into, and we hope police will do that without delay.

If indeed there was any foul play, it would be just another proof of how some people, often politically linked, would go to any length to exploit the vulnerability of the poor, especially the minority population, to grab their land and properties. It has happened many times in the past. We have seen how the collusion of political and business interests brought unimaginable suffering to many minority victims who, not unlike the Sonaichhari survivors, had little power or support to protect themselves.

Our hearts go out to these latest victims, spending nights out in the open with their children and elders. We urge the local administration to manage alternative lodging for them with proper food and treatment if needed. Having lost everything they had, they also need cash assistance to rebuild their lives from the ground up. Meanwhile, the police must thoroughly and impartially investigate the incident and bring potential perpetrators to justice.

# Animals in deadly captivity?



## A CLOSER LOOK

Tasneem Tayeb is a columnist for The Daily Star. Her Twitter handle is @tasneem\_tayeb

TASNEEM TAYEB

ELEVEN zebras, one lioness and a tiger died within a span of weeks recently at the Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Safari Park in Gazipur. The reasons behind their deaths remain unclear as the authorities keep suggesting various possibilities, from anthrax and other bacterial infections to negligence of concerned officials at the park. In order to identify the causes, a five-member investigation committee was formed on January 26 by the environment ministry, which was supposed to have submitted the investigation report within 10 working days, which ended on February 8, 2022. Reportedly, two more animals—a tiger and a lion—are currently ill at the same park.

But the above case is not an outlier. A 12-year-old lioness called Moni died—of a cardiac arrest, allegedly—at the Dhaka National Zoo on January 25, and media reports suggest the incident was kept low-key by the zoo authorities. When asked about why the incident was not made public earlier, the zoo’s curator reportedly said, “We log it in our records, no need to gather the press for it.”

In Rangpur Zoo, its lone tigress, Shaon, died on February 4, after she had been refusing food and water for about two weeks. In one report, the cause of death has been attributed to the cold, while zoo authorities suggested Shaon had died of old age complications.

The recent animal deaths are making headlines due to their sheer number in a short span of time, and the mysterious circumstances under which they occurred. However, over the years, animals old and young have died in our zoos, with the authorities failing to provide convincing information about most of the deaths.

The recent deaths have raised many questions about the efficiency, sincerity and motivations of the safari park officials, the medical support that is provided to the animals there, the competence of their medical staff, and the overall living conditions of the animals.

Unfortunately, on Sunday, Fisheries

and Livestock Minister SM Rezaul Karim ruled out negligence of officials as the issue, rather suggesting that the deaths had been caused by bacterial infection. This statement is problematic for two reasons. First, this suggestion by the minister in the middle of an ongoing investigation is highly irresponsible, as his words might influence the outcome of

ministry’s investigation. Moreover, a three-member investigation committee has also been formed by the Ministry of Fisheries and Livestock. Three of the concerned officials have been suspended to aid a free and fair investigation. These are welcome moves and we hope that the investigation committees will do their work properly and submit impactful reports that will help in



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PHOTO: ABU BAKAR SIDDIQUE AKAND

the probe. Secondly, on what basis is he suggesting that the park officials were not negligent? Is it just another thoughtless, generalised comment—so characteristic of our politicians—or does he have concrete evidence to support his comment? Even if the animals have died of bacterial infection, how did they come into contact with the bacteria in the first place? If the sources of the bacteria are their food or living conditions, are they not a marker of the park officials’ negligence? And why could they not be treated before they succumbed to their illness?

Moreover, the attempt of the safari park authorities to keep under wraps the death of the tiger adds to the case against the officials involved. Why did they not come out with the news of the tiger’s death earlier? Why did the local MP have to visit the park and enquire about rumours about the tiger’s death for the truth to come out?

It has been suggested that the Criminal Investigation Department of the Police is going to help with the environment

averting the threat to animals living at the safari park.

However, the authorities should also look into the living conditions of animals in zoos across the country. We do not want more animals meeting the same grim fate as Heera, Moni and Shaon. Going by the dilapidated condition of our zoos, it is apparent that there is ample room for improvement. However, the system seems to have accepted this sorry state as the standard.

Perhaps a shakeup is now needed for the system to come out of its hibernation state and take meaningful measures to make zoos more habitable for animals. Perhaps we need more officials who are sensitive to the needs of the animals and understand the concept of animal rights. While there is an entire debate over the ethical aspect of keeping animals confined in zoos—perhaps best saved for another day—right now, we have to focus on the fact that we need to make our zoos safer for their inhabitants.

## Bangladesh and Japan: Towards a new horizon of ‘heart to heart’ relationship



Ito Naoki is the ambassador of Japan to Bangladesh.

ITO NAOKI

TODAY marks the 50th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between Bangladesh and Japan. As the ambassador of Japan to Bangladesh, I am honoured to celebrate this memorable day with the people of Bangladesh.

On February 10, 1972, Japan recognised Bangladesh as a sovereign country soon after its independence. In the letter addressed to Mohammed Abdus Samad Azad, then minister of foreign affairs of Bangladesh, Fukuda Takeo, then minister of foreign affairs of Japan, expressed Japan’s wish for the prosperity of Bangladesh and its eagerness to promote friendly relations between the two countries. In his reply, Azad expressed his firm determination to rebuild Bangladesh’s economy from the Liberation War through cooperation with Japan. Now, both countries have fulfilled their wish. The friendship and cooperation between Bangladesh and Japan have become more robust than ever, and the economic development of Bangladesh has been remarkable.

The 50 years of diplomatic relationship between Bangladesh and Japan has always been a “heart to heart” relationship. In January 1972, before Japan recognised Bangladesh, Fukuda emphasised the importance of establishing a “heart to heart” relationship with other countries. Then, it was Hayakawa Takashi, a Diet member of Japan, who made efforts to put the spirit into practice.

In March 1972, Hayakawa visited Bangladesh as goodwill envoy of the Government of Japan. While observing a devastated Bangladesh due to the Liberation War, he felt people’s enthusiasm and talked thoroughly with the Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman about future nation-building. The Jamuna Bridge, raised by Bangabandhu in the discussion, was printed on Bangladesh’s Tk 100 banknote after its construction, which became a symbol of friendship between Japan and Bangladesh. In October 1973, Bangabandhu visited Japan and received an enthusiastic welcome from

the Japanese people amidst the wave of the two countries’ flags, which have a brotherly resemblance. Seeing Japan’s post-war reconstruction, Bangabandhu thought of the recovery and development of Bangladesh. His successful visit paved the way for the subsequent excellent cooperation.

In 1973, the Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteers (JOCV) began coming to Bangladesh. JOCV worked together with the local community for the development of Bangladesh, building trust. In 1974, a high-powered business delegation headed by Nagano Shigeo, chairman of the Japan Chamber of Commerce and Industry, visited Bangladesh. The mission visited every corner of the new Bangladesh, including Chattogram, Cox’s Bazar, Sundarbans, Cumilla, Kaptai, Sirajganj and Khulna. They found great potential in the country through face-to-face interactions with the people of Bangladesh. From the very beginning of our relationship, Japan demonstrated its willingness to contribute to the development of Bangladesh in various fields, ranging from grassroots support and human resource development to infrastructure-building.

A saying goes, “A friend in need is a friend indeed.” As Kishida Fumio, prime minister of Japan, emphasises in his message for the 50th anniversary, Japan has always been a true friend of Bangladesh in difficult times. It has not changed at all, even during the current Covid-19 pandemic. Japan became one of the first countries to start providing vaccines to Bangladesh in July last year. Until today, about 4.5 million doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine and budget support of 75 billion yen have been given to Bangladesh. Japan will continuously cooperate with Bangladesh to overcome this Covid-19 pandemic.

The 50th anniversary of the Japan-Bangladesh diplomatic relationship will elevate the cooperative relationship between the two countries to a new height. JICA’s large-scale infrastructure projects will promote the Bay of Bengal Industrial Growth Belt (BIG-B) initiative, launched by Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and then Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo in 2014. In December this year, Dhaka Mass Rapid Transit (MRT) Line 6 will start its commercial operation, and Bangladesh Special Economic Zone in Araihaazar will be ready for international investment. After that, Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport expansion, Matarbari Deep Sea Port and Bangabandhu Railway

Bridge will be in line.

The completion of these megaprojects will be a game-changer for Bangladesh. Bangladesh’s economic development and prosperity are vital for the stability of the entire Indo-Pacific region, as Bangladesh connects India and Asean. At the celebration ceremony of the 50th anniversary of the independence of Bangladesh and the 100th birth anniversary of Bangabandhu last March, Dhaka played a pivotal role as a centre of regional diplomacy and connectivity under the leadership of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. That showed that Bangladesh owns high stature in the region against the backdrop of its rapid economic growth and political stability. Bangladesh will undoubtedly play an even more significant role in promoting regional cooperation and addressing the global agenda.

In this regard, Bangladesh’s current efforts for providing shelters and humanitarian assistance to the displaced Rohingyas from Myanmar are worthy of our appreciation. On January 28 this year, the Government of Japan has decided as the first donor to fund a total of USD 2 million to UNHCR and WFP for the humanitarian and protection needs of the Rohingya people on Bhasan Char. Japan will continue working towards early repatriation together with the Government of Bangladesh and the international community.

In 2026, Bangladesh will graduate from the least developed countries (LDC) status and aims to become a developed country in 2041 by achieving “Vision 2041.” Japan will continue to stand by Bangladesh in its development journey. Japan will extend practical cooperation to Bangladesh as a partner to realise a “Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP)” vision of peace, stability, and prosperity in the region. Such cooperation includes quality infrastructure, connectivity and maritime safety.

In this milestone year, Japan hopes to improve the business environment. We should build a win-win partnership for expanding trade and investment. Japan will also make the utmost effort to deepen the mutual understanding and exchange of the two peoples. To that end, we look forward to working “hand in hand” with the government and the people of Bangladesh. Let’s further develop our “Comprehensive Partnership” to a more strategic one. Japan will not stop moving forward to further widen the horizon of “heart to heart” relationship between our two countries.

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