

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

ACC must not lose public confidence

Its recent conduct to a sacked official raises a lot of questions

WE are surprised at the way the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) has acted in the case of its deputy assistant director Sharif Uddin. Instead of following up on the allegations of graft and recommendations made by him over the last three years, the ACC has opted to sack him on the basis of some complaints reportedly made by the same people against whom he had filed reports—in this case, land acquisition syndicates. Sharif Uddin investigated graft allegations against various individuals in Chattogram and Cox's Bazar in the past three years—including the rich and powerful involving a ruling party mayor and the son of a former minister—and recommended that the commission file 22 graft cases against the parties he had investigated.

However, instead of filing any cases, the commission ordered reinvestigations into those allegations. What prompted the graft watchdog body to re-launch these reinvestigations is not clear to anyone familiar with these reports, and certainly not to the public and the media. The ACC needs to explain its conduct here.

In 2019, Sharif Uddin submitted three separate charge sheets to the ACC against 155 people in Cox's Bazar over land acquisition scams. The graft watchdog, however, did not approve the charge sheets. The question is, why? Did his reports have factual or legal lacunae? Or did the powerful quarters, against whom the allegations of corruption were brought, have any role to play here? Here again, the ACC owes the public an explanation.

Regarding the official who has been sacked by the commission, we think due procedure for termination was not followed. He was neither given any show cause notice nor asked to give any explanation about the allegations made against him. It is not often that government employees take to the street in support of a sacked colleague. In our view, it is a testimony to his reputation, integrity and honesty.

We think the ACC now faces a huge credibility gap in people's minds and it needs to come clean about the issues we have raised above. It must provide proper explanations for the actions it has taken regarding the graft issues as well as the sacking of its official. The ACC must do this to prove its integrity and strengthen its position as an anti-corruption body that the public can trust.

Why are e-gates at Dhaka airport not operational yet?

A typical example of lack of coordination among public agencies

HERE is another classic example of the blame game so often seen among different agencies in the public sector. This time, its place of occurrence is Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport (HSIA) in Dhaka, where the Department of Immigration and Passports (DIP) and the Special Branch (SB) of police are blaming each other for their inability to make the e-gates there operational although seven months have elapsed since their inauguration. The e-gates were installed to make the immigration process easier and enhance the international ratings of Bangladeshi passports.

It is quite disconcerting to learn that while this expensive digital machinery sits idle at the main international airport of the country, the DIP is blaming the SB for the stalemate whereas the latter alleges that it did not get the required server link from the former to make the e-gates functional. And as the tussle between the two offices drags on, the immigration work of the inbound and outbound passengers is being carried out manually.

The features of e-gates look attractive on paper. It has been said that once the e-gates are in operation, the camera attached to the gate will identify the passenger automatically after scanning and analysing information from the e-passport chips. The e-passports add a layer of security to traditional non-electronic passports by embedding an electronic chip in the passport booklet, which stores the biographical information visible on page 2 of the passport, as well as a digital security feature.

As novel as all this sounds, the reality is that the machinery could not be made functional merely for the lack of a link between the e-passport server and the e-gates. This speaks volumes about the lack of coordination so typical among the collaborating agencies of the government, and the lack of preparation on the part of the offices involved before the inauguration of this important machinery.

The entire story smacks of departmental lack of coordination and wastage of public funds. The two departments in question belong to the same ministry and the same minister had inaugurated the project. Therefore, any delay caused by lack of coordination is totally unacceptable. The pertinent question is: why do we inaugurate projects that are not ready to operate? This no doubt reduces public confidence in the way things are run in these institutions. We hope the home minister will resolve this impasse immediately.

Surviving re-entry to Malaysian labour market is key

Will factors that caused the market to shut in 2018 resurface?



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IT has been two months since a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between Bangladesh and Malaysia on the employment of Bangladeshi workers was signed, marking the end of a suspension on their entry to the Malaysian labour market which had been in force since 2018. The agreement came as a welcome relief as it created an opportunity for the employment of hundreds of thousands of Bangladeshi workers for the next five years. However, with little sign of progress in the movement of labour, the initial upbeat cadence has been replaced by anxiety and scepticism. It appears that despite the government's declared commitment to fair recruitment practices, the forces that were responsible for undermining earlier efforts in gaining access to this important labour market are again flexing their muscles to further their vested interest. This, in turn, has led to uncertainty, threatening the entire arrangement.

At a time when stakeholders were looking forward to the re-opening of the Malaysian labour market, apprehension about the revival of a cartel of recruiting agencies began to gain ground. Various groups of recruiting agencies—all members of Bangladesh Association of International Recruiting Agencies (BAIRA)—expressed their concern about the incipient cartel that is reportedly being masterminded by a Malaysian entrepreneur of Bangladeshi origin, actively aided by a few recruiting agencies of Bangladesh. In response, senior functionaries of the concerned ministry of Bangladesh declared on a number of occasions that the government is committed to providing equal opportunity for all registered agencies to facilitate the migration of workers to Malaysia. Needless to say, the debacle of the G2G-plus arrangement which led to the cessation of workers' movement to Malaysia, after the fall of the Najib Razak government, was perhaps fresh in their mind.

The G2G-plus system was introduced at the behest of 10 recruiting agencies of Bangladesh. The restricted arrangement that was worked out at the time contributed to a spike in migration cost. Despite the government stipulated maximum threshold of Tk 37,500, workers had to pay an amount between Tk 300,000 and Tk 400,000. In the process, Tk 5,500 crore was allegedly pocketed by the syndicate (*Daily Observer*, 13.02.22). After the fall of the Najib regime in Kuala Lumpur, the new government imposed a suspension on further labour migration from Bangladesh on grounds of gross irregularities in the recruitment process. It also charged senior government officials for engaging in corrupt practices in this regard. Bangladeshi recruiting agencies have alleged that the same vested quarter, being unable to make any headway at the Bangladesh end, has now managed to establish their hold at the Malaysian end and is exerting pressure on Bangladesh.

The anxiety of the general recruitment agencies is not unfounded. Over the last several months, media outlets in Kuala Lumpur carried a number of reports about the group's activities to unfairly control labour migration from Bangladesh (*Malaysiakini*, 10.01.22). Reports in some online news portals and social media have underscored the group's access to the corridors of power in Putrajaya. The matter attracted further attention when the Malaysian human resources minister, in a letter on January 14, urged Bangladesh's minister for expatriates' welfare and overseas employment to initiate the process of sending workers to Malaysia by involving "25 main Bangladesh Recruiting

Agencies (BRAs) with 10 associate BRAs respectively under each main BRA..." In his reply on January 18, the Bangladeshi minister informed his Malaysian counterpart that as per ILO charters and Bangladesh's own Competition Act, 2012 endorsing "transparent, fair and safe migration", his government was obliged "to keep the opportunities open

including Bangladesh" (*The Business Standard*, 10.01.22).

The recruitment agencies' stand against the syndication move has garnered the support of not only their Malaysian counterparts but also of others outside the sector. For example, the Standing Committee on Manpower and Skill Development of the Federation of



A fair recruitment process will not only lead to reduced migration costs, but also to a reduction in the number of migrants with irregular status—a phenomenon intrinsically associated with high migration costs.

ILLUSTRATION: BIPOB CHAKROBORTY

to all valid, licensed BRAs."

The latest move for "syndication" of workers' recruitment for the Malaysian market has generated deep concern among the stakeholders, particularly the recruiting agencies. The BRAs have organised a series of meetings, rallies, human chains, and press conferences, and submitted memorandums including one to the prime minister. At a meeting held on January 24 under the banner of General Recruiting Agencies, jointly organised by at least seven groups of recruiting agencies, they termed the Malaysian minister's call for restricted opportunity for BRAs as not only unfair and biased, but also an "interference in Bangladesh's own affairs". The BRAs raised the question that if no restriction is imposed on the Malaysian companies to participate in the recruitment process, why is the country insisting this for Bangladeshi agencies?

They noted that making a distinction between "main BRA" and "associate BRA" is "immoral and degrading", and that all BRAs have equal qualifications and acquired their license by meeting the same criteria set by the government, including payment of deposit. The BRAs also reminded the authorities of the 2018 High Court order for not allowing any syndicate to operate in the recruitment of workers (*Prothom Alo*, 24.01.22).

News reports also say the BRAs are concerned that instead of remaining firmly committed to staving off any move towards syndication, the ministry responsible for overseas employment is considering allowing Malaysia to choose the said 25 agencies (*Prothom Alo*, 24.01.22). The Recruitment Agency Oikkyo Parishad has expressed its opposition to allowing Malaysia any say about who should be granted the authority to recruit workers from Bangladesh. It argued that such concessions would only facilitate the syndication process.

The rejection of the syndication effort by the BRAs has struck a sympathetic chord in the host country's recruitment sector as well. The secretary of the National Association of Private Employment Agencies of Malaysia has stated, "We do not want any syndication or monopoly of special privileges in the recruitment of foreign workers," adding that "we want [a] similar system to hire workers from all fourteen countries

Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industry expressed its concern in this regard, posing the question that if all the recruiting agencies of countries such as Nepal, India and Pakistan can send workers to Malaysia, why should the system be any different for Bangladeshi agencies? In a joint press statement, the Bangladeshi and Malaysian chapters of Transparency International also expressed their concern about the "evil designs of the powerful syndicates". The organisations demanded transparency and accountability at every stage of the migration process, and concrete action to curtail corruption and ensure access to public information.

The developments centring the re-opening of the Malaysian market for Bangladeshi workers have brought into the open the depth of malpractices that are associated with the short-term temporary labour recruitment process. These also revealed the long arm of the unscrupulous and powerful recruiting agencies, as well as the nature of cross-national collaboration of the crooked. The episode has exposed the impudence of some agencies that not only dared to challenge the policy and authority of the state, but also to collude extraterritorially to subvert those. The time has come for the government to act decisively and take punitive action against these elements. The actions of such agencies should be deemed as nothing less than an economic sabotage against the state.

The experience has prompted the BRAs to act collectively against their errant peers. This has also created an opportunity for the BAIRA to harness the support of—and establish accountability of—its members. Putting in place a system of self-regulation will go a long way in enhancing the image of the association in the public eye.

It is, however, unfortunate that the Putrajaya authorities are insisting on having a system that they themselves had identified in the past as the prime reason plaguing labour recruitment from Bangladesh. One hopes that they will review their current stance and soon set up a level playing field for all actors engaged in the recruitment process in both countries. Needless to say, along with bringing benefits to the migrant workers in the form of reduced migration costs, this will also lead to a reduction in the number of migrants with irregular status in the destination country—a phenomenon intrinsically associated with the high migration cost.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Implement law banning polythene

Widespread and irresponsible usage of polythene is poisoning our rivers, canals and oceans. Surprisingly, Bangladesh was the first country in the world to ban the production, marketing and use of polythene by enacting a law on March 1, 2002.

It has been 20 years since but the usage of polythene has not decreased at all. As a result, the environment and the health of humans and animals are all being affected.

I think this dangerous and heavy usage of polythene should be dealt with immediately. Effective measures have to be taken by implementing the law banning polythene products. The use of eco-friendly jute products should be increased and people should be encouraged to use this healthy alternative.

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