

The tragedy of a fallen remittance fighter



NAJRUL KHASRU

Najrul Khasru is a British-Bangladeshi barrister and a part-time tribunal judge in England. He sends remittances to Bangladesh on a monthly basis and considers himself a remittance fighter.

"It will not be fair to look at the migrants only as economic actors. They have to be treated as human beings. They should enjoy the same rights and privileges as other citizens."

— Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina

JOHURUL Islam of Gaibandha was a remittance fighter. He was barely 18 when he left Bangladesh to work as a construction worker in Malaysia. In the initial years, he would frequently send money to his family and visit home at regular intervals. There came a time when his parents passed away. This coincided with his legal status in Malaysia coming to an end. Thereafter, he never returned to Bangladesh, afraid that he would not be able to go back to Malaysia. He tried unsuccessfully to regain his legality, did any work that he could find and was still sending remittances whenever he could. It is to be noted that expatriates rarely lose their legal status through their own fault—they are often victims of unscrupulous officials, agents and employers.

Away from family and friends and not having access to proper healthcare, his physical and mental health deteriorated. He last spoke to his niece, Rumana, in early October, 2021. He said he had severe fever and abdominal pain but told her not to worry and that he would recover soon and send some money for her family. That was his last contact with his relatives. On October 21, 2021, he died a lonely death in a hospital in Ipoh, about 200 km north of Kuala Lumpur. A remittance fighter, who sacrificed all his adult life for the economic liberation of his country, fell on the battleground at the age of 55.

Johurul Islam had no proper identification documents when he died. As a result, his relatives in Bangladesh became aware of his death much later when a picture of his dead body circulated on social media. A London-based organisation, Voice for Global Bangladeshis, requested its representative in Malaysia to seek the High Commission's assistance. The High Commission was extremely sympathetic but its position was that, as Johurul Islam had no legal status in Malaysia when he passed away, the government of Bangladesh would not be able to bear the repatriation costs. This was also confirmed in a newspaper report (*Naya Diganta*, November 2, 2021) quoting an anonymous official of the High Commission.

Johurul Islam's relatives unsuccessfully contacted the officials in Bangladesh for financial help to bring back the body. Having no means, they sent a request to the hospital authority in Malaysia to bury him there. Being aware of this sad predicament, the diaspora in Malaysia raised funds for the repatriation costs. While they received support from the High Commission, the bureaucratic process in Bangladesh took a painfully long time for the preparation of the relevant paperwork. Finally, on January 1 this year, his body arrived at Dhaka. The government offered BDT 35,000 which was gratefully received by the bereaved relatives. His janaza was attended by hundreds of villagers.

The Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment has come a long way since its inception in 2001. It is committed to ensuring the welfare and rights of over one crore expatriates in 174 countries of the world. The ever-growing remittance flow in the country even in difficult times—USD 25 billion in the year 2020/2021—is an indictment of not only the hard work and patriotism of the remittance fighters worldwide, but also the visionary policies of the ministry. Indeed, Minister Imran Ahmed and his team have gained widespread respect, especially for their empathy and helpful policies during the difficulties of the Covid-19 pandemic.

While this article applauds the ministry and, indeed, acknowledges it as one of the most successful ministries of the current government, it highlights the case of Johurul Islam to illustrate a grave concern that the ministry should consider addressing urgently.

The Overseas Employment and Migrants Act is the primary legislation that deals with migration and related issues. However, neither the legislation nor any relevant rules directly addresses the issues of the duty of the ministry regarding the death of an expatriate worker. There appears to be a policy, narrated in the annual report of 2020/21, indicating that the ministry ensures that the employer of the deceased pays for the repatriation of the body, subject to the wishes of the relatives. It also states that where such an employer is not found, the Wage Earners' Welfare Board, a branch of the ministry, takes the responsibility for such expenses.

A worker, illegal at the time of his death, would unlikely have an employer willing to financially assist in any way. These workers are also unlikely to have family back home who would be able to bear the cost of their body being sent home. It also seems that the Board provides assistance regarding body repatriation only to those with legal status.

This situation appears to be morally and legally unsustainable. The legality issue of an individual abroad should not affect their rights as a citizen of



ILLUSTRATION: SUSHMITA S PREETHA

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Bangladesh. Discriminating between two citizens abroad on such grounds breaches the equal treatment rights guaranteed by the constitution. It could be the case that the ministry is failing in its statutory duty by denying responsibility in relation to such deceased persons. Furthermore, from a moral point of view, this particular group of remittance fighters is the most vulnerable and, therefore, deserving of extra help and respect from the state.

It is hoped that the ministry would look into this carefully and rectify its policy so that hundreds of families each year, like Johurul Islam's, do not have to

go through the trauma of uncertainties. Indeed, as I pen this article, I receive the news of another fallen remittance fighter with "irregular documentation". Salim Bhuiya died in late January 2022, following a heart attack in Maldives. His body lies in the hospital morgue, while his family appeals for help to the Bangladeshi diaspora, who are trying to raise the money to return Salim Bhuiya's body to Bangladesh. These fallen remittance fighters and their families deserve to be treated with more dignity and respect by the government of Bangladesh.

Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh

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Joydeb Chandra Saha
20/02/2022
Principal
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GD-334

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Chattogram-4349

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