

# Aim is to reopen labour market, lower cost

## Expatriates' welfare minister on sending workers to Malaysia

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Expatriates' Welfare Minister Imran Ahmad yesterday said he has been waiting for Malaysia's response to initiate talks over sending Bangladeshi migrant workers to the country.

"We have signed an MoU and our goal is to make it effective," he told reporters during a programme at BIAM auditorium in the capital.

Responding to a query, Imran said his priority is reopening the Malaysian market for Bangladeshi workers and lowering the costs of migration. He mentioned that Malaysia has issued a letter in this regard, while the expatriates' ministry already responded to it.

His remarks came as both countries await the resumption of new Bangladeshi workers' recruitment in Malaysia, although the MoU was signed in Kuala Lumpur in December last year.

This MoU was signed after a three-year market suspension imposed by Malaysia in 2018.

He said there is a need for prior talks to "clarify matters". He also said he plans to form a "system" that would protect Bangladeshi workers from fraudulence.

Earlier in the day, the minister attended a ceremony at BIAM auditorium, where the public administration ministry handed over a hundred used vehicles to Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training, to provide driving training to migration aspirants.



PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON

On the crowded footpath at Science Lab intersection, pedestrians have to duck when they approach this ill-planned footbridge. Meant to help pedestrians cross the road safely, this bridge in turn has turned into a hazard, as anyone who is not looking straight ahead may very well injure themselves. This photo was taken yesterday.

# We have 'sweet' ties with US: Momen

DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENT

Bangladesh has a "sweet" relationship with the US, said Foreign Minister AK Abdul Momen yesterday, as he looks to deepen US-Bangladesh ties in the coming days.

"We have a sweet relationship with the US. They are number one in terms of trade and investment. They are with us both on good and bad days. The relations will deepen because we have shared values of democracy," he said.

He made the remarks at a press conference at the foreign ministry, ahead of BIMSTEC summit in Sri Lanka, to be held on March 30.

The comment comes just three days after the US-Bangladesh Partnership Dialogue in Dhaka, and a few days ahead of a meeting between US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Momen in Washington on April 4. Momen said Bangladesh strongly demanded that the US withdraw the sanctions on Rab, detailing the remedial measures Dhaka has taken to improve Rab's performance during the visit of US Undersecretary for Political Affairs Victoria Nuland on March 20.

"There were no deaths in the last three months. They [US] are very happy. We said we are taking remedial measures."

# The dreaded phone call

## Bangladeshi expatriates in Iraq confined, tortured, extorted by syndicate

MOHAMMAD JAMIL KHAN

Inside the torture cell, when there was no water, urine was offered as a substitute. No one was allowed to go to the toilet. There wasn't any food. Torture came in phases every day. Bodies left on the floor with their limbs tied was a constant, and so were electric shocks.

With tears rolling down his eyes, Kurigram's Rafiqul Islam narrated the ordeal of his younger brother Nazrul Islam, at the hands of a "human trafficking syndicate" in Iraq. Nazrul was in their "torture cell" for over a month.

Rafiq said he only managed to free his brother after paying Tk 2.20 lakh to the traffickers, for which he had to sell land in his village.

The story began four years ago, when Nazrul set out for Iraq, paying Tk 4.6 lakh. Once there, he started working as a restaurant staffer in Baghdad.

Recently, Nazrul got in touch with some Bangladeshis living in Iraq, who told him that they can arrange for the lucrative "Akama" (work permit) and a job in a madrasa, but only if he accompanies them. In January this year, he finally went with them.

"For two days, we found his cell phone switched off," said Rafiqul. "Finally, there was the dreaded phone call on my 'Imo' app. On the other side, my brother was crying," he told The Daily Star yesterday.

"Save me brother," Nazrul cried out. At first, his captors asked for Tk 15 lakh for Nazrul's release, Rafiqul said.

Fortunately, the family managed to negotiate a lower amount. "They released Nazrul after we sent them the agreed amount on a mobile financial service number in Bangladesh," he said.

Released from captivity, Nazrul informed his brother there were around five more Bangladeshis confined in that room of terror in Iraq.

On Monday night, using the transaction link, police's detective branch (Gulshan division) arrested two members of the syndicate, including an incumbent Union Parishad member from Dhaka and Faridpur.

**They first send people illegally to Iraq, charging around Tk 4.60 lakh, before imprisoning and extorting money from them. To send people there from Bangladesh, they resort to obtaining visiting visas. First, they send people to India then Dubai then Iran, and finally to Iraq.**

The arrestees are Jashim Fakir (43), member of Faridpur's Ramkrishnapur Union Ward-6, and his brother-in-law Mahbub Hossain (23).

The arrestees and detectives said it was Jashim's younger brother Jahirul Islam, nephew Shah Alam, cousin Sultan and Rajbari resident Md Sihab who were running the torture cell in Iraq, trapping Bangladeshi expatriates by offering Iraqi work permits. They worked in co-ordination with Jashim and Mahbub in Bangladesh, who were tasked with collecting the money.

This newspaper compiled the info after talking to victims, arrestees when they were on their way to court and investigators.

INVOLVEMENT OF LOCALS IN IRAQ

Detectives said along with the four Bangladeshis leading the syndicate from Iraq, the syndicate also has local members.

To confine the victims, the syndicate rents out small rooms in the middle of the desert, under Kirkuk. However, though such rooms only cost around 20 dirham, they pay the owners over 100 dirham per month.

"We started our investigation after the Bangladesh embassy in Iraq forwarded a complaint to us. A single family is leading the torture cell, raking in a huge sum of money," Khalilur Rahman, assistant commissioner of DB police, told The Daily Star.

"We have found transaction details of Tk 31 lakh for the last one month by analysing the account history of the arrestees," said AC Khalilur. **TRAFFICKERS USE SPECIAL VEHICLES, NUMBERS FOR COMMUNICATION** Talking to The Daily Star, wife of another victim, Md Mainuddin, said his husband was lured in by the promise of a madrasa job and work permit.

Mainuddin was in Iraq since 2017. "My husband first called me on January 6 and asked me to pay Tk 4 lakh. But he didn't make a video call," she told The Daily Star. This continued for three days. The captors never spoke to Farzana themselves.

"At one point, I told him I'll only send the money if you make a video call, which is when his captors allowed him to appear on camera for a 30-second call."

"When I saw him, he had injury marks on his eyes," she said.

"I paid around Tk 4.90 lakh to around a dozen mobile financing accounts, and

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# Tk 24cr project to explore electric train service

## Railway to carry out feasibility study on Dhaka-Rajshahi route

TUHIN SHUBHIRA ADHIKARY

Bangladesh Railway (BR) has decided to carry out feasibility study on another railway route to explore whether electric train services can be introduced there.

A project evaluation committee, with Railways Ministry Secretary Humayun Kabir in the chair, green-lighted the Tk 24-crore project on Dhaka-Rajshahi route yesterday.

The time frame of the study has been set from January 2022 to June 2023.

Now, BR will recast the Development Project Proposal (DPP), following the decisions of yesterday's meeting, and will send it to the planning ministry for approval, participants of the meeting said.

However, BR's proposals to carry out feasibility studies on two more routes – Akhaura-Sylhet and Joydebpur-Mymensingh-Jamalpur – for electrification, did not get approval.

The committee in an earlier meeting kept the two separate proposals pending, sources said.

BR took up the first project in October last year to carry out a feasibility study on Narayanganj-Dhaka-Chattogram route. BR sources said the process for hiring consultants for the project is ongoing.

The project was initiated more than six years back. Besides, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina gave out directives to introduce the cost-effective and environment-friendly electrification system over five years ago.

**WHY ELECTRIFICATION IS NECESSARY?**

Under the system, a railway electric traction system supplies electric power to locomotives, which means the trains don't require any onboard fuel. An overhead electricity line has to be installed along the railway track to transmit energy this way.

Currently, BR operates diesel-powered trains on its 3,019-kilometre railway network.

Experts said although initial investment for electric trains is relatively high, its operational and maintenance costs are much lower. The system is also environment-friendly and more reliable.

Currently, Bangladesh produces sufficient electricity, with more power-plants in the pipeline, for such systems to work, the experts added.

These developments are taking place at a time when BR is lagging far behind in electrification of railways compared to other countries, including neighbouring India.

India's first passenger train started operating in 1853, while rail transport in Bangladeshi land began in 1862.

The first electric passenger train in India started operation in February 1925. From there, the Indian Railway gradually electrified 45,881 km of its rail lines, about 71 percent of its total broad-gauge network, by March last year, according to the website of Central Organisation for Railway

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# Rights, not charity

## Speakers tell seminar on ensuring human rights

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Ensuring basic amenities should not be a state charity, rather it should be about ensuring the rights of citizens, said Prof Mizanur Rahman, former head of National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) yesterday.

He made the remarks at a seminar organised by Bangladesh Institute of International Strategic Studies.

"We don't want to live on charity. It should be the government's prime responsibility to turn their acts of charity into routine rights, which can be exercised by citizens," said Prof Mizan.

Shirin Sharmin Chaudhury, speaker of the national parliament, while speaking as chief guest, said respect for human rights is an essential condition for maintaining a peaceful global order. "We don't create human rights; they just exist. We only can recognise them. This is the crux of the issue," she said.

Aroma Dutta, member of the parliament, said from a rickshaw-puller to the president, all received the Covid-19 vaccine, which is a rare example of equality. "We must think of how to safeguard the rights of religious minorities and ethnic minorities."

Maj Gen Mohammad Maksudur Rahman, director general of BIIS, Chairperson Kazi Imtiaz Hossain, Nasima Begum, chairperson of NHRC, and Shubhash Wostey, senior protection officer of UNHCR, also spoke.



Holding placards and banners, a group of women gather at Manik Mia avenue yesterday, demanding a stop to harassment, punishment for rapists and gender equality.

PHOTO: STAR

PRAYER  
TIMING  
MAR 24



	Fazr	Zohr	Asr	Maghrib	Esha
Azan	4-55	12-45	4-45	6-16	7-45
Jamaat	5-30	1-15	5-00	6-20	8-15

SOURCE: ISLAMIC FOUNDATION