

Sramik League office inside primary school

Students deprived of much needed playground

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Nilphamari

Free Amin Government Primary School in Nilphamari's Saidpur was established in 1952 for the children of railway employees in the area. However, anyone passing by the school field will be confused as to whether it is an educational institution or a labour union office.

It is because of the presence of a signboard at the school field which reads "Bangladesh Railway Sramik League", a pro-Awami League labour organisation.

According to the locals and school authorities, the Railway Sramik League occupied almost half of the school campus after independence, claiming the place is owned by Bangladesh Railway. The labour body has subsequently



established its office inside the school campus and has been running its activities there since then.

Currently, there are 245 students enrolled in the school. Talking to The Daily Star, they expressed disappointment over the fact that they cannot move freely on their campus, let alone play during breaks, as half of the school campus has been taken over by the labour organisation.

The school has a pass rate of almost 100 percent in annual evaluation and became the runners up at the upazila level in Bangabandhu and Bangamata Gold Cup football tournaments in 2022.

Being convinced with the school's overall performance, the education directorate awarded it with a new three-story building in 2007.

SEE PAGE 4 COL 6

Hills cut, marks hidden



PHOTO: STAR

MINTU DESHWARA, Moubibazar

The unabated cutting of two hills -- in Moulvibazar's Baradohar village under Juri upazila -- is posing a serious threat to the environment of the region. But what's astonishing is this -- the perpetrators have found an innovative way to hang tree trunks, spreading them over the hilly areas, to hide the marks left by the hill cutting.

According to assistant commissioner (land) in Juri Upazila, a team of the upazila administration conducted a raid there on Thursday afternoon after receiving the information from this correspondent. However, no one was detained in this connection.

On the afternoon of January 18, two hills of the height of 20 to 25 feet each were seen on the side of the road entering Baradohar village. One hill is owned by resident Syed Abdur Rob and another by Masuk Mia. Abdur Rob's house is on one side of the hill.

The hill was cut on several points in front of Rob's yard. On the opposite side, five workers were cutting the hill owned by Masuk with spades, supervised by Masuk

himself.

When this correspondent reached the spot, they made way for a quick cleanup, by spreading some tree branches on the spots where the hills were being cut. Many of these branches were tied with ropes, hanging downwards.

When asked about the reason for cutting the hill, Masuk said another house will be built at the place of the hill.

When this correspondent paid a visit to Rob's house, his wife Sultana Begum said Jamal, a local driver, cut the hill for road construction work and took the soil away on a truck. These works are mostly done during night, she added.

However, she could not tell why they permitted Jamal to cut the hill. She could not provide any information to contact Jamal either.

According to Section 6 (Kha) of the Bangladesh Environment Conservation Act 1995, cutting and/or razing hills and hillocks are strictly prohibited, and can only be done with the permission of the Department of Environment.

The maximum penalty for illegal hill cutting is 10 years imprisonment and a fine of Tk 10 lakh.

Shah Shaheda of Bangladesh Environmental Lawyers Association (Bela) in Sylhet, said people who are cutting down hills defying the High Court order should face legal action.

According to the upazila administration sources, a team, led by AC (Land) Ratan Kumar, Adhikari conducted a raid there on Thursday afternoon.

Adhikari said two hills have been cut almost completely. However, no one involved was found at the site. A report will be sent to the Department of Environment for taking legal action against the owners, he added.

Abdul Karim Chowdhury, central executive committee member of Bangladesh Parishesh Andolon (Bapa), said, "Hills and hillocks are being levelled in the pretext of making space for constructing buildings. However, the red soil is eventually used to fill up rivers and ponds."

"We are saddened by the indiscriminate cutting of hills in the constituency of the environment minister. The parties concerned need to be more aware in this regard," he added.

Celebrating floral blooms

3-day flower festival underway in Jashore

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Benapole

A three-day flower festival is going on at Gaddhali of Jashore, also known as the flower capital of the country.

The festival, organised by Jhikargacha upazila administration, was inaugurated by the deputy commissioner on Thursday afternoon at Phulkanan Panisara-Haria Phul intersection.

Flower producers, flower traders and flower-related organisations are participating in this festival.

The event includes flower shows, a cultural evening, courtyard meeting with female florists on the development philosophy of the government and a children's drawing competition, group-based training workshop led by women with yard meeting, farmer felicitation and closing ceremony.

Apart from this, agricultural technology exhibition of Greater Kushtia-Jashore Region Agricultural Development Project will be held on

SEE PAGE 4 COL 1

AUW's tenth commencement ceremony today

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, Ctg

After a three-year hiatus due to the pandemic, Asian University for Women (AUW) will host its 10th commencement ceremony today at their campus in the port city's Baizid Bostami area.

Over 1,500 people -- graduating students from the class of 2020, 2021 and 2022; faculty and staff, guests from home and abroad -- will gather in an open air pavilion at the permanent campus site.

Flags of all 19 nations from which AUW draws its students will adorn the pathway to the pavilion. Segments of the national anthem of each country will be sung by the AUW Choir in a symbolic call

SEE PAGE 4 COL 1

Sold as cyber slaves

FROM PAGE 1

the fortified complex. Other victims told him that some were even tortured to death.

Foysal is one of the many victims from Bangladesh and thousands more mainly from other Asian countries who have been lured there only to be trapped in compounds like that in Sihanoukville, Cambodia.

Though human trafficking has long been an endemic problem in Asia, experts say, scam operations proliferated and diversified during the Covid pandemic.

Prof Vinit Muntarhorn, UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Cambodia, compared conditions in scamming compounds in Sihanoukville to a "living hell" in his 2022 report.

Despite Cambodia's recent crackdown on scam centres, the US, in August last year, downgraded the country to the worst level possible in its "Trafficking In Persons" annual report, accusing some officials of being "complicit" in the crime.

According to global media reports, the people running the compounds are so powerful that seeking help from local police results in more torture for the victims.

While the reports point to Cambodia as the alleged hotspot for the scam centres, many have also popped up in border towns in Thailand, Laos and Myanmar.

"The scam centres are mostly run by Chinese nationals, but they also have Taiwanese and Malaysian bosses," Amanda of Global Anti-Scam Org (Gasos), an initiative created by victims of such scams, told this newspaper.

Reports published by the BBC, Al-Jazeera and victims interviewed by The Daily Star also conform to her statement.

"Many Bangladeshis are also trapped in Myanmar's Myawaddy, a town close to the Thailand border," said Amanda.

According to the Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment, around 3,596 Bangladesh migrant workers went to Cambodia through 58 recruiting agencies since 2020. Among them, over 2,200 people went in 2022, while only 86 went in the first 12 days of 2023. The number of workers who went there through unverified channels is unknown.

Abdus Salam, who had to undergo a surgery at a Dhaka hospital on December 21 for a spinal injury he suffered during his captivity in Cambodia between March and September last year, believes there could be hundreds of Bangladeshis enslaved in those compounds.

"A ring of Bangladeshi brokers

in Cambodia, many of whom were victims once, is still trafficking Bangladeshi young people and selling them to these compounds operated by mainly Chinese nationals. In Bangladesh, some local brokers and recruiting agencies are helping them," he told The Daily Star.

There is no data available on how many Bangladeshis are in those prison-like compounds. As Bangladesh has no embassy in Cambodia, its embassy in Bangkok is responsible for dealing with the affairs there. But the embassy has been accused of non-cooperation by the victims. They have also accused an official of profiting from their miseries.

A Bangladeshi can obtain a Cambodia visa either by applying online or through Cambodian embassies in other countries. The agencies usually do all the visa processing jobs.

BETWEEN LIFE AND DEATH Trapped and helpless, Foysal started working at 'The Crown College'.

"I was given six iPhones and a computer. My first task was to send text messages to more than 500 numbers in the USA on WhatsApp every day. When anyone responded, I had to develop a relationship while pretending to be a young lady. If anyone wanted to talk on a video call, there were women to attend," he said.

All the young victims, around 60 people, at that compound were tasked to trick men into investing in the scammers' fake cryptocurrency or to entice the targets into buying a product from fake online shops, he added.

"Achieving the target was impossible and seeking help or talking to coworkers was a crime. As I failed, they punished me by gradually extending my work hours. At one point, I had to work 20 hours a day. In one instance, as I protested, they kept me confined to a toilet without food for seven days," he recalled.

He said a Chinese-speaking Bangladeshi supervisor was tasked with controlling the Bangladeshis and other victims from countries like Nepal, India, China, Taiwan, Thailand and the UK.

As he fared poorly, Foysal was sold on March 24 last year for \$10,000 to another notorious compound called "China Town". There, using US phone numbers, he was told to cheat Nigerian nationals by offering them jobs in the US.

"It was a butcher house. I saw people beaten and tased with electric batons often. Armed guards were there round-the-clock," said a traumatised Foysal.

"Scared to death, I tried my best to comply with their commands and

gradually, I gained their trust."

Nearly two months later, on May 17, Foysal managed to escape when, escorted by two others, he went to a bank pretending to send some money home.

He took refuge in a hotel owned by a Bangladeshi man in Sihanoukville. He pleaded with that man for a job so that he could earn enough to fly back home.

But his misfortunes weren't over yet.

The Bangladeshi man, who turned out to be a broker, sold Foysal again on May 25 to the "Rich World Casino" for \$4,000.

"I had experienced a new array of torture there. They kept me unfed, forced me to work for 20 hours a day, and electrocuted me if I refused to comply with their orders," he said, bursting into tears.

His captors were forced to admit a seriously ill Foysal to a hospital on August 9. Two days later, he escaped from the hospital and joined another casino of his own accord.

"I had no option but to work and earn money. I left home my widowed mother and wife hugely indebted," he said.

However, he lost his job soon after as the casino was shut down during a crackdown by law enforcers on cyber scamming compounds. Foysal along with many others was rescued by the Cambodia Police and sent to the immigration detention centre where he had to stay for 52 days before flying back home on November 18, empty-handed.

UNPAID, STARVED AND CHEATED Twenty-year-old Rubel from Pirojpur said he paid Tk 3.5 lakh to a local broker from his village and went to Cambodia with five others as construction workers, just before the pandemic struck.

"For one and half a years, I worked at different construction sites almost without payment. I met more than 500 Bangladeshi workers during this time. Unpaid, starved and cheated -- they all had similar stories," Rubel told The Daily Star, adding they were promised handsome salaries by the brokers.

He said the brokers, who confiscate the passports of workers upon their arrival in Cambodia, paid them a meagre \$50 a month to survive.

When the pandemic began, he said, they were left in an empty house without food and work.

"We were five people and stayed there for one and a half months. There were days when we survived only on water."

In mid-2021, his broker came back and asked Rubel if he wanted to take a job as a computer operator. Left with no other options, he agreed. However,

the broker sold him to a scamming operator, who was forced to scam Bangladeshis.

Before being rescued in August, he was trapped in six different scamming compounds and suffered all sorts of mental and physical torture.

With the help of an international NGO, Rubel returned home on December 4 last year along with two other victims, Khulna's Prosenjit Sarker and Feni's Amran Hossain Roni.

Rubel said he met many Bangladeshis in those compounds.

"Alamin from Dhaka's Jatrabari was with me in my last compound. He contacted me in early December and sought help. There are still many people who desperately need help."

On December 14, Rubel filed a case with Paltan Police station accusing Masud Khan, 50, who offered him the job first, and three others who were involved in sending him to Cambodia. The accused also include one Jahangir Alam, 55, from Chandpur district and other Bangladeshi brokers in Cambodia who sold him to the scammers.

The Counter Terrorism and Transnational Crime unit is investigating the case.

"We have found several crime rings involving half a dozen recruiting agencies which are trafficking Bangladeshis to Cambodia and trapping them into enslavement there," Tohidul Islam, additional deputy commissioner of the Counter Terrorism and Transnational Crime, told The Daily Star recently.

OFFENDED BY THE DEFENDERS In October last year, eight Bangladeshis including Prosenjit, Roni and Ismail Hossen, rescued from different scamming compounds, were lingering in the immigration detention centre in Cambodia's Phnom Penh for days.

Prosenjit, Roni and Ismail, who had their passports, only needed a request letter from the Bangladesh embassy in Thailand to be released, while Foysal, Rubel and others needed travel permits as their passports were lost.

But non-cooperation from the Bangladesh embassy in Thailand, they said, prolonged their sufferings. The victims also alleged that they had to bribe Abdul Hadi, an administrative officer (labour wing) at Bangladesh Embassy in Bangkok, for obtaining travel permits or request letters.

Prosenjit and Ismail said their relatives in Bangladesh had to pay taka worth \$ 450 to a bKash account provided by Hadi. Foysal and Rubel claimed they got their documents only after paying Hadi Tk 16,500 through bKash.

Salam, who now works as a

survivor empowerment officer at Humanity Research Consultancy (HRC), a UK-based social enterprise that works to rescue victims trapped in Cambodia, termed the embassy's response inhumane.

"In my case, the embassy did not even bother replying to emails from the Gasos. But this is a life and death situation for the victims," he said, suggesting that many desperate for help would respond within a day if the government moves to take action.

Amanda, who contacted the Bangladesh embassy in Bangkok on behalf of Salam, also confirmed the allegation.

She, while acknowledging its limitations in rescuing victims, said, the embassy surely could have pressed the Cambodian authorities by sending representatives.

Contacted over the phone, Abdul Hadi refuted the allegations.

He said that the embassy charges Tk 1,150 for issuing travel permits and other documents. He blamed the Bangladeshi agents in Cambodia for misappropriating money from the victims.

The Daily Star could not get the official statement of the Bangladesh embassy in Bangkok. The ambassador did not receive calls. The embassy is yet to respond to an email sent last Saturday.

However, two officials from the embassy, requesting anonymity, yesterday said the embassy was looking into the allegations. They also claimed that the embassy has warned the ministry of expatriates' welfare several times about the harassment migrant workers face in Cambodia.

When contacted, Khairul Alam, additional secretary (employment) at the expatriate welfare ministry, said the ministry has no information about the enslavement of Bangladeshis in Cambodia.

"We have received no such report from our embassy in Thailand," he added.

Asked, Najmul Huda, director general (Southeast Asia Wing) at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, said he is not aware of the developments in the embassy in Thailand.

"We will definitely look into the allegations against some officials of the embassy."

THE RING OF ORGANISED CRIMINALS

The victims mentioned at least five Bangladeshi recruiting agencies that lured them through their countrywide network of brokers as well as online advertisements.

A lucrative job offer in Cambodia posted on the Facebook page of M/S Right Job, a government-registered recruiting agency in Dhaka's

Dhanmondi area, caught Amran Hossain Roni's attention in June 2022.

The agency offered him a job as a tiles installer, with a minimum wage of \$ 600 a month.

"When I called the phone number on their Facebook page, they asked me to visit their office with my passport and Tk 50,000 to make a payment in advance," Roni said.

The agency's activities didn't raise any alarm, he said. Despite his refusal to make any advance payments, the agency agreed to a deal of Tk 3.5 lakh.

Ziaul Haque, an official at the Right Job, acknowledged that they sent 5-7 workers to Cambodia, but denied they were sold as slaves.

This newspaper found 30 Facebook groups and pages that either used to offer or are still offering jobs in Cambodia. A December 31, 2022 post in a "Facebook group" titled "Visa Bazar" read: "Work Visa for Cambodia is available. Skilled in computer and basic English is mandatory. Salary USD 800-1100."

Victims and NGO workers say people need to be made aware of the dangers in Cambodia.

Amanda said the crime could be prevented to a great extent if the migrants are interviewed thoroughly before giving the immigration clearance.

Migrant workers need the Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training (BMET) certification to travel abroad. A Probashi Desk is there in each international airport to make sure the migrant workers carry BMET cards.

However, Foysal claimed that he crossed the immigration at the Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport despite not having a BMET card.

"As my fingerprints did not match at the Probashi Desk, an official appeared and took me away from the line. He contacted my agency, and then I could board the plane," Foysal said, alleging that officials at the Probashi Desk were also involved in the crime.

This newspaper, however, could not verify the allegation.

Asked, BMET Director General Md Shahidul Alam claimed that he was unaware of the forced slavery of Bangladeshi nationals in Cambodia.

"We have received no such complaints yet. If the allegations are true, we have to think about stopping manpower exports there," he said.

About alleged manipulation at airports, he said, "No expatriate worker can get clearance to fly unless their fingerprints are matched."

Fakhrul Alam, Assistant Director of BMET at the HSIA, echoed the DG.