

Abandoned in a Malaysian hostel

Save exploited migrants, take action against those involved

We are alarmed to learn details of the exploitation of around 100 Bangladeshi workers who migrated to Malaysia in pursuit of a better life. They were promised jobs with a basic salary of 1,500 Malaysian ringgit (Tk 37,500) with Petrazehra Berhad, a Johor Bahru-based company. However, once they reached their destination, having taken out huge loans or sold off properties at home, they found themselves thrust into a nightmarish existence devoid of dignity and hope.

According to a report by this daily, around 300 workers were hired by Petrazehra Berhad in October last year, but none of them were given jobs or granted work permits. With their passports confiscated, the company placed—and essentially trapped—them in a seedy hostel in the Sepang district of Selangor. Cramped into overcrowded rooms, with up to 25 men sharing a single space, these workers are now forced to endure appalling living conditions, deprived of even the most basic necessities. Workers say they received around Tk 5,000 for food over the past few months, with no money left for healthcare or other necessities to survive, much less send back home to pay off their debts.

While 200 workers later managed to find employment elsewhere, or an alternative place to stay, at least a hundred still remain trapped in the rundown hostel. They cannot leave it for fear of arrests or forced deportation. Many of them have fallen sick but cannot seek medical treatment as they do not have passports or work permits. The situation is so dire that one of them, Shafiqul Islam, suffered a stroke and died on February 29.

This is not the first time that we have heard such gory details of workers' sufferings in Malaysia. As per the Bureau of Manpower Employment and Training (BMET), over 400,000 Bangladeshis have gone to Malaysia since late 2022 when the Southeast Asian country reopened the labour market for Bangladesh after four years. Researchers estimate that out of approximately 800,000 Bangladeshis in Malaysia, 100,000-200,000 workers remain jobless, unpaid and in debt. Yet, we have not seen any decisive action from Bangladeshi or Malaysian authorities to identify errant employers and rehabilitate the abandoned migrant workers.

Now that the abuse by Petrazehra Berhad has been documented, the Bangladesh government must urge Malaysian authorities to take swift action against the company. Workers must be paid what they were initially promised in their contracts and compensated for the mental and physical abuse they were subjected to all these months. The imminent closure of the Malaysian market should not get in the way of justice for exploited workers. The recruiting agency that had vouched for Petrazehra Berhad must also be held accountable, so that no other Bangladeshi has to face such horrific treatment in the hands of their employers anywhere in the world.

No country for old trees

Mindless felling of trees is not progress

We are disturbed by the Chattogram Development Authority's (CDA) decision to fell 46 trees—including two century-old rain trees—in the Central Railway Building (CRB) area to construct a ramp of the Chattogram elevated expressway. Through this decision, the CDA is essentially defying its own policy, as according to a Detailed Area Plan (DAP) prepared by it earlier, the CRB is designated as a cultural heritage site. As such, no part of the area can be used for commercial purpose and no high rise building can be constructed there. Yet, the CDA has decided to construct the ramp there, which is unacceptable.

The railway area, according to an estimate, is home to 225 rare plant species. Cutting down 46 trees will surely have a harmful impact on the ecology. Did the CDA take that into consideration? And what about the fact that two out of the 11 rain trees that it plans to cut down have been standing there for around two centuries? Doesn't that have any value? The Chattogram expressway authorities have claimed that ramp construction is not possible without cutting down the trees. However, as an expert has pointed out, there is a chance to access the elevated expressway from the GEC intersection and Agrabad. So, there is no need to construct the ramp at Tigerpass between these two places.

The land in question is owned by Bangladesh Railway. Even though the Forest Department has given the CDA permission to go ahead with its disastrous plan, the railway authorities can still step in and stop the destruction. And we call on them to do just that.

While development is important, the tendency to design developmental plans without any consideration for the environment seems to be becoming the norm. For example, at Jahangirnagar University, 1,000 trees have recently been cut down to build residential halls. Was the razing of so many trees truly necessary? Did the authorities consider any other alternatives beforehand? According to university insiders, they did not, and more such plans are reportedly in the pipeline. This is really worrying. We call on the authorities to stop mindless destruction of our environment in the name of progress.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Unprotected drains in Ctg

I was glad to see this newspaper covering the issue of open drains in Chattogram, as this remains a persistent issue for us locals. Especially in places like Muradpur and Bahaddarhat, the drains are so big that it could almost be a small canal. It's not just a safety issue that the drains are uncovered, the problems go far beyond. Firstly, all the locals end up dumping their waste here, leading to terrible stench across the area. Secondly, all the waste end up in the river, having a terrible impact on the riverine communities. It is high time the authorities put slabs on these drains.

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Why do so many migrant workers die abroad?



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As much as the government is interested in using the billions of remittance dollars sent by migrant workers, it shows little interest in ensuring their safety and well-being abroad. The government does not have to spend for the workers migrating abroad—they arrange the money by themselves, often taking loans or selling properties, or contact brokers to go abroad and send money back to the country through hard work. Far from taking appropriate measures to protect them from deprivation and fraud, there is no government action to investigate and prevent the unusual deaths of migrant workers in the destination countries.

According to the Wage Earners' Welfare Board (WEWB) data, 4,552 migrant workers returned home as corpses in 2023—the highest figure in a decade. In 2022, as many as 3,904 migrants returned as corpses. Since 1993, Bangladesh has received 51,956 corpses of migrant workers, of which 34,323 arrived over the last 10 years. Between July 2017 and June 2022, 17,871 dead bodies of migrant workers returned to the country, 67.4 percent of which came from the six Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries: Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Oman, Kuwait, Qatar, and Bahrain.

In many cases, the causes of death of migrant workers every year remains unexplained. Stroke or heart attack is cited as the cause of death of most migrant workers from the destination countries. Bangladesh accepts the death certificates from the destination

countries and does not verify their accuracy. These migrant workers are allowed to go abroad only if they prove themselves completely healthy after undergoing various health tests. Why, then, are these young people dying prematurely of heart disease or stroke after going abroad? It is crucial to investigate whether these unusual deaths have anything to do with unsafe working environments, heat and humidity, overwork, pollution, psychosocial stress, and the workers' lack of access to healthcare.

According to a report titled "The Deaths of Migrants in the Gulf," produced by Vital Signs, an



FILE ILLUSTRATION: BIPLOB CHAKROBORTY

international organisation working on the deaths of migrant workers in the Middle East, around 10,000 migrant workers from South and Southeast Asia die in the six GCC countries every year. The information provided by the governments of these countries regarding these deaths is fragmented, incomplete and inconsistent. As a result, more than half of these deaths remain unexplained. Death certificates list the causes of death in general terms such as "natural causes" or "cardiac arrest," not specifying the exact reasons.

Most migrant workers in the Middle East work in the infrastructure sector where they have to work amid extreme

burden of compensating families does not fall on the Gulf countries, but on low-wage workers.

Generally, in countries where citizens' lives are valued and respected, if a citizen dies abnormally abroad, the country investigates the death. Its purpose is not only to identify the real cause of death, but also to send a message to the host country that the life of each of its citizens is important, and no injustice or negligence will be tolerated. As a result, destination countries and recruiting agencies are forced to be cautious. If there was an on-site investigation for each unusual death of a migrant worker initiated by the Bangladesh

mission in the destination country, if the migrant worker's workplace, residence, hospital, etc were visited to find out if there were any incidents of negligence or oppression, if the destination country was asked for justification of the death and also proper compensation, the destination country and the employers would be forced to be cautious.

But we see our migrant workers being treated as mere "remittance machines." The difference between a remittance machine and other export products is that this machine is not housed in a beautiful air-conditioned showroom, it has no warranty or guarantee, and there is no service centre for maintenance. This machine sells land and houses and exports itself. The government takes no responsibility for ensuring the life and livelihood of the remittance machines, but does not hesitate to utilise the remittances they send. Who cares if these "remittance machines" are "damaged"?

However, both Bangladesh and the destination countries are heavily dependent on migrant workers. Migrant workers fill the labour force shortages in the destination countries, otherwise these countries would not be able to continue many important jobs for the development of their economies, including infrastructure development. On the other hand, without the remittances sent by migrant workers, Bangladesh would not be able to import vital items like industrial raw materials, food, fuels, etc. Therefore, both origin and destination countries have a responsibility to ensure a safe working environment for migrant workers.

It is the duty of the destination countries to enact and implement appropriate laws to ensure a safe working environment for migrant workers, properly investigate workers' deaths, and identify any link between workers' deaths and unsafe working and living conditions. To do this, the destination countries need to make available comprehensive statistics on migrant worker deaths so that public health experts can do research and uncover the underlying causes of death. On the other hand, the responsibility of an origin country like Bangladesh is to put pressure on the destination countries to ensure a safe working environment for migrant workers, and also demand proper investigation and complete statistics on the deaths. At the same time, Bangladesh needs to take initiative to investigate migrant workers' deaths and ensure proper compensation from the destination countries.

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In the era of social media, legacy media is indispensable



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In the current digital age, social media has emerged as an unstoppable force, reshaping societies and revolutionising communication. However, despite its widespread presence, social media is not a panacea for all our information needs. It will never replace legacy media, the cornerstone of our information ecosystem, for a multitude of reasons.

Legacy media, encompassing print, radio and television, are institutions that have served society for centuries. They have a responsibility to uphold the principles of journalistic integrity, accuracy and fairness. This is not to say that legacy media is infallible; it is, however, accountable to the public and subject to checks and balances.

Social media, on the other hand, operates under a different paradigm. Its primary goal is not to disseminate accurate information but to engage users and generate content that goes viral. The viral mentality of social media can lead to the spread of misinformation and disinformation,

which can have serious consequences, particularly in times of crisis.

One of the key strengths of legacy media is its editorial control. Legacy media outlets have editors and fact-checkers who scrutinise content before it is published. This process ensures that the information disseminated is reliable and trustworthy. Social media platforms, however, do not have the same level of editorial control. A post can go viral without any fact-checking, leading to the spread of misinformation.

In Bangladesh, the role of legacy media in disseminating accurate information during the height of Covid-19 pandemic was crucial. These media outlets provided reliable and accurate information about the virus, vaccines, and preventive measures, helping to curb the spread of misinformation.

However, this is not to say that social media does not have its merits. It provides a platform for everyone to express their views and opinions,

fostering a sense of community and engagement. It also allows for instantaneous communication and interaction, making it a powerful tool for mobilising public opinion and driving social change.

Moreover, social media has the potential to complement legacy media. For example, it can be used

However, the rise of social media has also brought new challenges, particularly in terms of preserving communal harmony. Social media, with its "viral culture" and rapid spread of content, can amplify divisive narratives and fuel conflicts. Recent incidents of communal violence in Bangladesh have been linked to the misuse of social media.

In this context, the need for enhancing media literacy among citizens cannot be overstated. With a better understanding of the role and limitations of different media platforms, citizens can become more discerning consumers of information, helping to mitigate the spread of misinformation and disinformation.

Moreover, a collaborative approach between the state, legacy media, and citizens can further strengthen our information ecosystem. By fostering a culture of dialogue and mutual respect, we can work towards solidifying relations rather than creating tripartite divisions.

The key to a healthy information ecosystem lies not in pitting legacy media against social media, but in recognising their complementary roles and harnessing their collective potential. As we move forward in the digital age, it is essential that we continue to evolve and adapt, ensuring that our media landscape remains vibrant, diverse, and democratic.

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to amplify the reach of legacy media outlets, providing a wider audience for their content. Similarly, social media can be leveraged to engage audiences in discussions around the content published by legacy media, promoting a deeper understanding and engagement with the material.