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Empower women-led green SMEs

Speakers tell roundtable

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Innovative financing and collaboration with financial institutions is needed to support climate-resilient small and medium enterprises (SMEs), particularly those led by women in vulnerable communities, said speakers at a roundtable yesterday.

The event, titled “Climate-Resilient Cooperatives to Green SMEs: Enabling Resilience for Climate Vulnerable Women,” was jointly organised by UNDP’s LoGIC project and The Daily Star at the newspaper’s office.

Presenting the keynote, AKM Azad Rahman, project coordinator of LoGIC, highlighted the role of collaborations in fostering socio-economic empowerment and climate action.

“Under this project, 247 Climate Resilient Cooperatives have been formed across seven districts, pooling capital through shares and savings to start green businesses,” he said.

“Of these, 99 cooperatives have invested in green businesses, 219 have developed green business plans, and 55 green enterprises are operational. In total, Tk 30 million has been invested in green

businesses, with 14 cooperatives currently generating BDT 500,000 in revenue.”

Maliha Mujammel, climate change specialist at UNDP Bangladesh, said UNDP is working closely with the SME Foundation, Bangladesh Bank, and the Securities and Exchange Commission to identify financial barriers and design an innovative blended finance facility to support resilient green SMEs in vulnerable areas.

Sonali Dayaratne, UNDP Bangladesh’s deputy resident representative, stressed the importance of involving youth in sustainability efforts, which she said are critical for the long-term success of climate-resilient enterprises.

She also called for support from international financial institutions such as the Asian Development Bank, World Bank, and Islamic Development Bank to scale proven models through concessional loans.

Nayoka Martinez Backstrom, first secretary at the Embassy of Sweden, highlighted the transformative impact of the LoGIC project and suggested collaboration with government sectors like Agriculture and Fisheries, which are



Speakers at the event, titled “Climate-Resilient Cooperatives to Green SMEs: Enabling Resilience for Climate Vulnerable Women” yesterday. The discussion was jointly organised by UNDP’s LoGIC project and The Daily Star at the newspaper’s office.

PHOTO: STAR

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Child labour, wage discrepancies, and serious health risks -- these are the issues our team observed during a visit to the biri factories (hand-made cigarettes) in Barishal earlier this year. In the last report of this two-part series, we focus on health hazard and wage discrepancies these workers face.

Toiling their lives away in SMOKE AND SHADOWS

The plight of Barishal’s biri workers



PHOTO: TITU DAS

MOHAMMAD JAMIL KHAN

Dalia Begum, 65, has spent decades rolling biri at a factory in the Kashipur area of Barishal.

Her late husband, Jalal Howlader, also worked in the same industry until he died of tuberculosis a few years ago.

Today, Dalia often feels feverish, relying on tablets her son brings from a nearby store. “My husband died of tuberculosis, and now I feel sick, too,” she said.

“We live from hand to mouth and can barely afford three square meals a day, so, undergoing medical tests is a luxury we can’t simply afford,” she added.

Dalia’s story is far from unique; the biri factories in Barishal have seen numerous cases of illness among workers.

Rahima Begum, another worker, was found at the factory with her two young children. She has been coughing up blood for months. “I don’t know what’s happening to me, but I’m taking medicine as the doctor advised,” she said.

Barishal division became a hub for handmade biri production over 45 years ago, with Barishal city housing three factories and Jhalakathi district home to four more.

Together, these factories employ between 5,000 and 6,000 workers.

Despite the serious health risks, factory conditions go unmonitored, and there is little accountability from owners.

During a week-long investigation early this year, The Daily Star interviewed over a dozen workers at a Barishal biri factory.

INSIDE A BIRI FACTORY

Child labour, constant coughing, cramped spaces and the smell of tobacco -- overall, the inner walls of a tobacco factory portrays a picture of an unforgiving environment where even basic facilities are a distant dream.

The Daily Star has already covered how children are exploited inside these factories. But this doesn’t mean the women or men working inside have it easier.

Karikor Biri, the oldest among seven biri factories in Barishal division, epitomises the traditional, labour-intensive process of handmade biri production.

Stepping inside one of its branch factories in Sadhur Battala area, this correspondent was immediately struck by the acrid stench of tobacco that filled the air.

The smell was overpowering, creating a feeling of suffocation that made breathing a conscious effort.

Under the dim light, hundreds of workers, mostly women, moved quietly, filling and packing biri sticks by hand.

During short breaks, the silence was pierced by the sound of persistent coughing.

Ventilation in this 10,000-square-foot shed is minimal: only four small windows and a single entrance allow fresh air to enter, leaving the cramped space damp, and dark.

Light barely filters in, and the artificial bulbs are too dim to ease the atmosphere.

The factory’s sanitary conditions are equally alarming. Of the two washrooms, neither is maintained adequately; they are



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CONSTITUTION Reform commission meets eminent citizens

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The second meeting of the Constitutional Reform Commission was held yesterday with the country’s eminent citizens on reforming the constitution.

The meeting was held at the cabinet room of Jatiya Sangsad Bhaban.

During the meeting, discussions were held regarding different aspects of the reformation, said a press release.

Prof Ali Riaz chaired the meeting while Prof Tofail Ahmed, Prof Mahbub Ullah, Mufti Muhammad Abdul Malek (Khatib of Baitul Mukarram National Mosque), Khushi Kabir, Subrata Chowdhury, Musa Al Hafeez, Shaheen Anam, Shahidul Alam, and Mufti Sakhawat Hussain Razi shared their views.

Constitutional Reform Commission members Prof Sumaiya Khair, Imran Siddiq, Prof Muhammad Ekramul Haque, Sharif Bhuyan, M Moyeen Alam Firoze, Firoz Ahmed also attended the meeting.

Controversial people shouldn’t be given charge

Says Fakhrul; Rizvi regrets comment on Bangabandhu’s portrait removal

STAR REPORT

BNP Secretary General Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir yesterday urged the government to refrain from appointing those whose actions may provoke controversies.

“We must remember that the opportunity created through the recent student-led mass movement towards reforming the state must not be missed. Missing this opportunity will endanger our identity as a nation,” he said.

Fakhrul made the remarks at the inauguration of the Shaheed Zia Memorial Football Tournament, organised by the Lalmonirhat district BNP at Borobari College.

He called for a strong movement if necessary, noting that the current government, which came to power during a crucial phase following the uprising, is not like previous caretaker administrations.

Fakhrul stressed the importance of both elections and reforms across various sectors.

“The government should be given time, and we must demonstrate patience while cooperating with them,” he added.

Meanwhile, hours after stating that Bangabandhu’s photo should not have been removed from Bangabhaban, BNP Senior Joint Secretary General Ruhul Kabir Rizvi reversed his



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DHAKA-CUMILLA CHORD LINE Hope revives as BR resumes studies, designs

TUHIN SHUBHRA ADHIKARY

Bangladesh Railway (BR) has resumed the feasibility study and detailed design for a chord line from Dhaka to Cumilla via Narayanganj.

The line will reduce the distance between Dhaka and Chattogram by 90 kilometres and travel time by two hours, say BR officials.

The authority also resumed the study and designing for a bridge parallel to the existing century-old Hardinge Bridge over the Padma river.

“We have resumed the studies following the ministry’s directive,” Project Director Abidur Rahman told The Daily Star yesterday.

The development came around six months after the railway authorities halted the study following the directive of the previous government reportedly over a financial crisis.

The previous government in June 2020 approved a Tk 235.37-crore Technical

Assistance Project, with the Asian Development Bank providing Tk 167.14 as a loan for feasibility studies and designs of 11 potential projects.

In February last year, a joint venture firm was hired to carry out preparatory works for upcoming projects, including the chord line and second Hardinge Bridge.

After carrying out some work, the firm proposed four possible alignments for building the chord line.

In March this year, the then prime minister directed to postpone the study for the chord line and second Hardinge Bridge, citing financial crisis, BR sources said.

On March 12, the railways ministry directed the project director to suspend the study and detailed design of the two components.

After the political changeover on August 5, discussion for resuming the studies for both

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