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People take the hit as workers' strike halts trains

Officials, union leaders hold several meetings, fail to end impasse

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Thousands of railway passengers suffered yesterday as train staffers continued their nationwide strike.

After negotiations between workers' union leaders and the government failed to bear fruit, Bangladesh Railway cancelled all trains until 9:00am today.

A meeting between railway-assigned labour leaders and protesting workers was held at the Kamalapur Railway Station last night.

Shamsur Rahman Shimul Biswas, special assistance to BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia and also the chief coordinator of Jatiyatabadi Shramik Dal, played the role of a mediator.

After the meeting, Saidur Rahman, acting president of Bangladesh Railway Running Staff and Sramik Karmachari Union, said Shimul Biswas requested them to call off the strike for some days as the government would meet their demands gradually.

"But we told him clearly that our programme will continue until our demands are met," Saidur told The Daily Star at 10:20pm.

Mojibur Rahman, general secretary of the union, told this correspondent at 11:00pm that their strike would continue until they get the assurance of meeting their demands in writing.

Replying to a question, he said, "We will talk to the railway authorities if invited tomorrow [today]."

Earlier in the day, thousands of train passengers suffered as top officials of the railways ministry and Bangladesh Railway failed to convince the workers to call off their strike.

Railways Ministry Adviser Muhammad Fouzul Kabir Khan held a meeting with union leaders at the Rail Bhaban yesterday afternoon where he made assurances that the workers' demands would be met gradually after talks with the finance adviser.

The rail adviser said he would try to have the ceiling removed on the special remuneration newly recruited assistant locomasters (assistant train drivers) get for their extra work, rail secretary Fahimul Islam told The Daily Star.

He said he believes it would be possible to do so.

Shimul and several student coordinators were present at the meeting.

After the Rail Bhaban meeting, the union leaders and others sat for another meeting at the Kamalapur Railway Station.

The Daily Star could not reach Shimul Biswas for comments.

The union, a platform of over 2,000 train staffers including locomasters (train drivers), assistant locomasters, guards, and ticket checkers, enforced the nationwide indefinite work abstention from 12:00am yesterday.

They are demanding that all train staffers get the same benefits for additional work during their service and when they retire.

BR transports over 2 lakh passengers in more than 350 trains, including over 100 intercity trains, every day. It also transports over 7,500 tonnes of goods on an average.

PEOPLE SUFFER

Shefa Begum, a factory worker, went to the Kamalapur Railway Station along with her child and husband at 9:00am yesterday. They went there from Kanchpur of Narayanganj and were supposed to go to Gazipur's Tongi.

"We were unaware of the strike. And now, we have been waiting at the station," she told The Daily Star at 10:30am.

Nila Chowdhury, a homemaker, went to the station at 9:45am to catch the Kishoreganj Express. She along with her 11-year-old boy were also seen waiting.

"We heard about the strike on Facebook. We thought it won't be effective. But we are stranded now," she said.

Shefa and Nila had gotten their tickets in advance.

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PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN, HABIBUR RAHMAN

A deserted platform of Kamalapur Railway Station around 9:30am yesterday. Inset, people hire a pickup in front of Khulna Railway Station to reach their destinations as there were no trains. Nationwide indefinite work abstention by train drivers and their support staff brought rail services to a halt.

Bring in swift reforms to stop future repression

HRW report details past and present abuse of power, rights violations

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The interim government is contending with powerful and politicised law enforcement and security forces that have long benefited from a system of impunity, the Human Rights Watch said in a report released yesterday.

"Nearly 1,000 Bangladeshis lost their lives fighting for democracy, ushering in a landmark opportunity to build a rights-respecting future in Bangladesh," Elaine Pearson, Asia director at Human Rights Watch, said in the report. "This hard-won progress could all be lost if the interim government does not create swift and structural reforms that can withstand any repression by future governments."

The report was handed over to interim government Chief Adviser Dr Muhammad Yunus yesterday.

The report titled "After the Monsoon Revolution: A Roadmap to Lasting Security Sector Reform in Bangladesh" detailed how the law enforcement agencies and security forces have been used to serve the political agenda of the Awami League and solidify a rule of terror.

It also talked about how law enforcement continues to pander to vested political interests, post-August 5, and attacks on minorities, particularly those from Hindu and Ahmadiyya communities.

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HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH

RECOMMENDS

Disband Rapid Action Battalion

Probe excessive use of police force

Create oversight body to record, review force

Stop interference in hiring, promotion of judges/prosecutors

Suspend and then eliminate death penalty

Star INTERVIEW

'Economy was more dire than people thought'

Finance adviser talks about gov't's 3 strategies to ease economic strain

REJAUL KARIM BYRON and AHSAN HABIB

The interim government has an uphill task of fixing the economy it inherited from the Awami League government of 15 years, said Finance Adviser Salehuddin Ahmed.

"When the interim government assumed power, it inherited a problem-driven economy -- the situation was more dire than people thought," he told The Daily Star in an interview on Monday.

There were external problems, but the underlying domestic issues were even more acute: the foreign exchange reserves were depleting rapidly, inflation was stubbornly high and the balance of payments was negative.

"Even though we are not in the situation where we want to be, things are improving."

The new government inherited another big problem: outstanding letters of credit dues of upwards of \$4.5 billion.

"Without touching the foreign exchange reserves, the new government repaid it, and the outstanding amount dropped to \$400-500 million."

The foreign reserves are stable now, said Ahmed, also a former governor of Bangladesh Bank.

The interim government has adopted a three-pronged approach to steadying the ship: raising the buffer stock of food, ensuring steady

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EC preparing to hold polls with year-end on mind

Says Election Commissioner Abul Fazal Md Sanauallah

STAR REPORT

The Election Commission is preparing with an aim to hold the next national election in December, said Brig Gen (ret) Abul Fazal Md Sanauallah, an election commissioner, yesterday.

"The chief adviser in his speech has already indicated that it might be possible to conduct the national election at the end of this year or the first half of 2026. So, we are taking preparation targeting to hold the polls in December," he said.

"But it's a matter of [political] consensus as to when the election will be held," the election commissioner said while talking to reporters after a meeting on updating the voter list at the Thakurgaon Road Degree College.

When the polls will be held lies with the government, not the EC, Sanauallah said.

"But we will ensure that those performing election duties at the grassroots level act professionally and impartially," he said, adding, "Our aim is to hold a free, fair, and credible election."

The election commissioner also hoped that the task of updating the voter list would be completed in March.

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Farmer Abul Kalam won't be taking his harvest of radish to the local market. He said there was no point in selling the produce in the local market since he has to pay Tk 150 for transporting two baskets of the vegetable that he has to sell for just Tk 200, leaving him no scope for recovering the cost of agricultural inputs and labour. Kalam said the radishes would end up in the Sangu river nearby. The photo was taken in Dohazari of Chattogram's Chandnaish yesterday.

PHOTO: RAJIB RAIHAN

BEXIMCO GROUP LAY-OFFS

Shinepukur, Beximco Pharma shares to be sold off to clear dues

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The government will sell shares of Beximco Group's two running companies to pay the salaries of 13 laid-off companies owned by the conglomerate.

If the proceeds from the sale of shares of the two profitable companies -- Beximco Pharmaceuticals and Shinepukur Ceramics -- do not cover the salaries of the workers, the government will take steps in line with labour law.

The amount needed to pay the salaries could be between Tk 500 crore and Tk 550 crore, Labour and Employment Adviser M Sakhawat Hossain told a press briefing yesterday.

He held the briefing after a meeting with Finance Adviser Salehuddin Ahmed, Commerce Adviser Sk Bashir Uddin, Industries Adviser Adilur Rahman Khan, Labour Secretary AHM Shafiquzzaman, Finance Secretary Khairuzzaman Mozumder, Financial Institutions Division Secretary Nazma Mobarek, and senior officials of the securities and exchange commission, banks and financial institutions.

The Bangladesh Securities and Exchange Commission and Financial Institutions Division (FID) will take steps to sell the shares. On February 2, officials of the two organisations and several banks concerned will meet to discuss the sale of the two companies.

Factories of the conglomerate that have been closed will be shuttered for good, he said.

The disclosure comes at a time when workers of

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