

We must protect our migrant workers

OKUP findings deserve critical scrutiny

The scale of the exploitation our migrant workers have faced over the years is truly shocking. A recent study by the Ovivabshi Karmi Unnayan Program (OKUP), based on 114 case studies of workers who sought legal help between January 2023 and October 2024, sheds light on just how systemic and devastating this exploitation has been. While the sample size may be modest, the patterns it reveals are consistent with what has long been reported anecdotally and through media investigations, pointing to a deeply entrenched and institutional neglect of responsibility in protecting our migrant workers.

As per the OKUP study, 36 percent of workers were forced to return home within just three months of migrating, crushing their hopes of a better future and even leaving many in deeper debt. Such abrupt, premature returns are only one side of a much larger problem, however. It includes contract substitution, lack of work permits, extortionate migration costs, etc. For example, 75 percent of workers left Bangladesh without receiving any prior employment contract while, shockingly, not a single female migrant received one before departure. Even among the 25 percent who did receive contracts, most got them just hours before their flight. Upon arrival, 47 percent of all migrants were denied work permits, and among those who received permits, only 24 percent were actually given the jobs they had been promised.

These findings point to a systematic betrayal of workers at every stage of the migration process, both at home and abroad. One revelation that almost all can relate to is that every male worker surveyed was charged migration fees well beyond the legal limits—often double for those heading to Saudi Arabia and six times higher for Malaysia. This is significant because these two countries are key destinations for our workers. Malaysia, in particular, has been in the news of late for exploitation-related cases. For instance, in May, 33 Bangladeshi workers filed a case in a Malaysian court against a recruitment firm and several government officials for alleged fraud. They said they were victims of human trafficking and job scams. In the first four months of 2025, over 3,500 Bangladeshis were also reportedly denied entry and sent back from Kuala Lumpur, many victims of such job scams. Also in May, another company revoked work permits of Bangladeshi workers after they aired concerns about its poor working conditions.

The OKUP study also raises serious questions about the effectiveness of the arbitration system for affected workers. While questioning the role of the Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training (BMET) as being responsible for both issuing recruitment licences and settling disputes—an inherent conflict of interest—it reveals that there is currently no fair mechanism to ensure justice and no clearly defined standards for compensation or remedies. All these issues are interconnected and need to be resolved simultaneously to ensure the whole migration process is above board. OKUP's recommendations in this regard deserve serious consideration.

It is high time the interim government took comprehensive measures together with the authorities of destination countries to clean up this long-neglected process. Our migrant workers deserve dignity, protection, and justice. We must not let them be exploited any longer.

We need long-term climate solutions

Flood relief and rescue operations are not enough

Flash floods, waterlogging, and landslide risks have once again disrupted many lives and livelihoods as heavy rain lashed a number of districts across the country. In Feni, breaches in embankments along the Muhuri, Selonia, and Kohua rivers have reportedly triggered flash floods, marooning thousands and submerging at least 30 villages. Meanwhile, urban areas in Patuakhali, Cox's Bazar, Chattogram, Barishal, Khulna, Noakhali, Bandarban, Khagrachhari, and Rangamati are suffering from severe waterlogging, while crops and vegetable fields in rural areas have been damaged. Landslide warnings have also been issued in the broader region of Chattogram.

While we cannot stop nature from taking its own course, effective preparations could have significantly reduced the extent of the damage. This should have been prioritised especially after last year's devastating floods in the southeast. At the time, political instability and disrupted local governance hampered relief efforts. Now, with a more stable administration in place, timely and efficient flood response is expected. Yet, in places like Feni, locals are dissatisfied with the preventive actions taken so far, particularly the lack of sturdy embankments and the maintenance of existing ones. Though some repairs were carried out since last year, people rightly expect permanent, not piecemeal, solutions. In Noakhali municipality, no substantial initiative to tackle waterlogging has been taken. The local administration cites lack of funds as the reason for not repairing its drainage system since last year's disaster, which is troubling given the recurrent nature of these events.

Though the situation may ease if rainfall subsides, local authorities must remain ready to provide immediate support to affected communities. More importantly, long-term measures are essential to protect people from recurring climate-driven disasters. We are told that at an Advisory Council meeting held on Thursday, discussions were held on building climate-resilient infrastructure and mobilising funds for sustainable solutions. We urge the government to expedite the implementation of these projects. At the same time, we must continue to advocate for a fair share of international climate finance to ease our burdens. That said, the government must also ensure transparency and regular public updates on the use of the domestic flood relief fund launched last year.

Additionally, environmental destruction—such as rampant hill cutting, unchecked sand extraction from rivers, and encroachment on canals—must be stopped to reduce the impact of natural calamities. Climate change is already amplifying the frequency and intensity of these events. Without long-term planning, robust infrastructure, and strong environmental protection, we will continue to suffer the same fate every monsoon.



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MANZUR-AL-MATIN

July has returned! The depth of gratitude I feel for having survived the previous monsoon is difficult, if not impossible, to express in words. I, along with my wife Sara and so many of our friends who found ourselves united in protest in July 2024, could have easily lost our lives during those fateful days. But we were lucky to have witnessed the fall of the autocrat, the victory of the downtrodden.

Not everyone was that lucky. The men, women, boys and girls whose bodies were riddled with bullets, who were hacked to their deaths, have left a vacuum that can never be filled. The emptiness left behind by Farhan, Snigdho or Saikat is unbearable for their families and will forever remain so.

These brave souls sacrificed everything believing that lasting change is possible—a belief shared by everyone who answered the call of their conscience during the July uprising. I guess challenging times bring out the best in us. Faced with a foe like Sheikh Hasina, solidarity came naturally. But when we managed to put that behind us, things became much more complicated.

Some of the students whose participation and leadership in the July movement made this extraordinary feat possible have now formed their own political party—

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the National Citizen Party (NCP). Although rifts between its leadership at times become apparent, the latest programme of the party has received a lot of attention. Starting on July 1 this year, the NCP leadership has started a tour of the country,



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There are stories that make you sick to your stomach, and then there are stories that remind you how little has actually changed in the country regarding women's safety, no matter who holds the reins of power.

The 2024 Subarnachar case is both. Back in February last year, a woman and her 12-year-old daughter were gang-raped in their own home in Noakhali's Subarnachar upazila. Yes, a child—but I suppose by now, it comes as no surprise.

But instead of seeing the accused behind bars, we are now seeing the survivors being forced to leave their home amid death threats. They have been forced to sell everything and run—not because they are guilty, but because they dared to demand justice.

The prime accused is Abul Khair Munshi, a known local Awami League leader, who was arrested after the incident. However, he was released on bail in November and is now roaming free. Even though his party has been ousted, he roams confident enough to threaten his victims, confident enough to walk up to a survivor's face on court premises and threaten to kill them if they don't withdraw



Thousands of people celebrate the ouster of former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in the streets of Dhaka on August 5, 2024.

FILE PHOTO: STAR

reaching out to the very people whose spontaneous participation in the protests last year created history. In my view, leaving the centre and reaching out to the periphery was a long-owed debt. Without lending an ear to the marginalised, the NCP can never find out what the true nature of their politics should be. The fact that, despite being late, they have taken the initiative gives me hope.

There are factions of the students who are far less organised but crave to have their voices heard. These are the students of universities, both public and private, and the students of schools and colleges. As their dreams fade, they still hold on to the hope that someday they will be given the opportunity to be heard. This is not only the responsibility of the government or the National Consensus

future of our country need to pause for a while and take time to listen carefully to what these voices have to say.

The women who left their homes and workplaces during the monsoon revolution were key to its success. Almost all the women who were at the forefront, braving all odds during the uprising, have faced bullying both online and offline in the aftermath. It is unfortunate that these people often feel left out nowadays. Any reform without their participation is bound to be unsustainable.

Finally, there are people who have placed personal gain over their responsibility to the nation. While we dream about finding a new settlement, with the weight of the sacrifices made by the martyrs upon our shoulders, some of us think it profitable to sell out the revolution itself for meagre personal gains.

learn a lot from Sri Lanka, a country which has gone through almost a similar set of events. Lessons must be learnt from the way the liberal and democratic forces there have remained united and secured an impactful political position after the uprising—how they have put their female leadership at the forefront, instead of marginalising them.

Sheikh Hasina failed to realise that the freedom, dignity and aspiration of the people can never be sold. This failure led her, along with the rank and file of the Awami League, to a disgraceful flight on August 5, 2024. Let this be a lesson for those who are treading the same path. I am certain it will not take another 15 years for the people to rise again. Because they know from recent memory that their dreams are NOT for sale. They know how and when to stand up for their freedom, dignity and dreams.

Money and power should never undermine justice

to intimidate survivors, enough arrogance to believe his money will rewrite court verdicts, and to casually threaten families into exile.

What does that say about our so-called “new Bangladesh?”

The answer is obvious. It says that stripping a party of power does not strip the system of its rot.

The names change, the faces rotate, but the old system grinds on—

No political party, disgraced or not, should be able to shield criminals. No amount of money should tip the scales of justice. And no survivor should have to run for their life because the courts, the police, and the system itself refuse to protect them.

fuelled by fear, influence, and political impunity. It just goes to show that no matter which flag someone waves, justice remains optional when money and muscle enter the room.

What makes this case even more dangerous is the silence around it. Where are the fiery speeches from the new champions of justice? Where is the accountability they promised? If the new leadership truly meant to clean house, Munshi would not

dare to make a mockery of the legal system.

This is not about one family or one case. It is about every survivor who dares to stand up, only to be met with more violence, more threats, more reasons to regret speaking out. It is about the culture we breed, where victims flee their homes—just as the Muradnagar rape survivor had to leave due to pressure from so-called journalists—while the abusers flaunt their wealth and political ties, new or old.

The Subarnachar survivor did everything right. She reported the crime, pursued legal action, refused to stay silent. In return, she lost her home, her safety, her peace. Her child, already robbed of innocence, now lives with fear as a constant companion. Meanwhile, Munshi boasts about his influence, his money, and his expectation that verdicts can be bought like cheap commodities.

If the interim government is serious about reform, this is where they prove it. No political party, disgraced or not, should be able to shield criminals. No amount of money should tip the scales of justice. And no survivor should have to run for their life because the courts, the police, and the system itself refuse to protect them.

Until men like Munshi, and the myriad “politically powerful” rapists, are stripped of their influence, their protection, and their arrogance, all our promises of justice, change, and progress will remain exactly what they have always been—lip service full of empty words.