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## Bangladesh should raise voice for unpaid returnee migrant workers: experts

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Staff Correspondent

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As a major labour-exporting country, Bangladesh should raise its voice to realise unpaid dues of migrant workers, since many of them were repatriated arbitrarily in the wake of coronavirus pandemic, migration experts and advocacy groups said yesterday.

A global campaign called "wage theft" has been taking shape for quite some time, and Bangladesh should raise its demands there. For this, comprehensive documentation on migrant workers' grievances is required, they told a webinar.

Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit (RMMRU) organised the webinar on "The other face of globalisation: Arbitrary return of Bangladeshi migrants and their unpaid dues", the first installment of a series.

Migration expert Prof CR Abrar said civil societies across Asia vehemently started the "wage theft" campaign. "We need to be part of it," he said, terming unpaid dues of migrant workers "lost remittance".



Many Bangladeshi migrant workers have been repatriated arbitrarily during the coronavirus pandemic, who have remained deprived of their due payments, he added.

William Gois, coordinator of regional civil society group Migrant Forum in Asia, said states were unfortunately not documenting their learning of the Covid-19 pandemic.

As countries of origin began repatriation processes, it is important that they document grievances of repatriated migrant workers, he said.

The embassy should seek the power of attorney from migrant workers so that they can follow up with these cases even after the worker has returned to their home country, he added.

This is something that is possible in Gulf countries, he said, adding "All that is required for the mission is to document and then follow up."

He said grievances can be documented during the quarantine stage upon workers' return to the country of origin.

Bangladesh, through its bilateral agreements and relationship with labour destination countries, should insist that they do not repatriate Bangladeshi migrant workers without giving them the opportunity to file any labour complaint, William said.

Rights activist and reserved seat lawmaker Aroma Dutta said formal letters from ministries concerned should be issued regarding workers' unpaid wages, especially addressing the "lost remittance" and a previously made proposal of getting six months' wage for workers who will be terminated.

She said an in-depth mapping was required on how and from what region migrant workers were going overseas and subsequently losing everything.

The ministry concerned should collect strong evidence to realise unpaid dues of migrant workers, said Syed Saiful Haque, executive director of WARBE Development Foundation.

Documentation is important for such negotiation, he said.

RMMRU Chair Prof Tasneem Siddiqui said recently they and Manusher Jonno Foundation (MJF) interviewed 50 migrants who returned because of the pandemic from Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Qatar and Malaysia.



Those who returned from Saudi Arabia, UAE and Qatar alleged they had unpaid dues ranging from Tk 9,500 to Tk 5 lakh, she said, presenting the outcome of the survey.

Prof Tasneem said 39 out of the 50 respondents said they were picked up by police during the pandemic and later repatriated.

Five migrants returned voluntarily, while three returned on leave and three with help from their employers, she said.

Every migrant worker deserves respect because the country's economy depends on their hard-earned remittance, said MJF Executive Director Shaheen Anam.

She stressed for sending more skilled workers overseas to avoid exploitation.

Nazrul Islam, director general at the Foreign Affairs Ministry, said as of Saturday, some 16,484 migrant workers returned home during the pandemic.

Ahmed Munirus Saleheen, secretary to the Expatriates' Welfare Ministry, said repatriation of migrant workers during Covid-19 pandemic is a global phenomenon. "Many workers travel with 'free visa' for their jobs overseas. As a result, it becomes difficult to realise compensation for such workers," he said.

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