

Free primary schools for sacked underaged garments workers

A garment workers' union has launched two free primary schools in the capital, mainly for the children being terminated following an accord to free the country's garment industry from underaged workers, says UNB.

Bangladesh Independent Garment Workers' Union (BIGU) set up the schools—one at Malibagh and the other at Mirpur—with assistance from Asian-American Free Labour Institute (AAFLI), a Washington-based organisation.

Formal inauguration of the Malibagh free primary school was held Saturday at a rented house at Shantibagh while the first school was opened in Mirpur in last September.

More than a hundred children, recently terminated from different garment factories and also the children of garment workers, have been enrolled at the schools where they are being provided free education.

On July 4 this year, Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA), International Labour Organisation (ILO) and the United Nations Children Fund (UNICEF) signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) providing for stipends and education for child workers of the garment sector.

According to the MOU, the three parties, with the help of the government, are to arrange schooling programme for the child workers, scheduled to be retrenched from October 31, 1995.

But BGMEA is yet to complete its survey to ascertain the number of Under-14 child workers in the factories of its member units, pending the arrangement of schooling for the terminated children.

AAFLI, which was a party in negotiating the MOU and later withdrew itself from the talks because of the opposition from BGMEA, is funding the two school and providing a meal during the schooling hours as well as book and other materials free of cost.

"Our goal is to put these children in the school... We are happy to put them in the school," AAFLI Country Director Terry Collingsworth told UNB after the inauguration of the Malibagh school.

The AAFLI official also informed that they have plans to open more schools after seeing what happens to the BGMEA schooling programme. He also hoped that the three parties would soon start their schooling programme and offered supports in this respect.

Apart from traditional textbook curriculum up to class five, the students in the schools will be taught various extracurricular activities, including music, dance, recitation and sports.

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Ms Lydia Sigelakis, another AAFLI official, said most of the students in the schools were former child labourers who once worked in garment factories while the others were the children of garment workers.

A total of seven teachers have been appointed in the schools under the supervision of two supervisors. Classes are being held in each of the schools in two shifts daily, she said.

BIGU officials were found very much enthusiastic about their venture. Although the schools are being funded by AAFLI, they have plans to seek assistance from other sources.

Nazma Akhter, BIGU's press secretary, said they were also trying to explore government assistance for the schools.