



PHOTO: STAR

Some female school students of char villages in Munshiganj cross the Padma river to attend classes by a trawler amid risk of accident. The photo was taken recently.

## Crossing Padma a daily risk for Munshiganj students

FARHANA MIRZA with ANDREW EAGLE

Commuting to school should be a pleasure but it isn't always. Early morning rush and worries about homework; in the cities students have to contend with traffic jams, making it a challenge to arrive on time. But spare a thought for those students who live on chars in the Padma River in Munshiganj. For them, to walk for kilometres and catch up to two ferries is usual, just to reach the school gate.

Approximately 2,000 students from 15 char villages in Munshiganj rely on ferry or trawler to go to school. "There's not always time for breakfast," says Hanif, a class-four student from Patulir Char who attends Uttal Digal Primary Model School. "We have to leave home very early. There are two ferries and sometimes we can't reach home again before nightfall."

"After walking through open, scrubby land we have to wait for the ferry to cross the Padma River, sometimes for hours," says Noyon Akter, a class six student of Louhajong Girls' Pilot High School. "After that we need local motorised transport such as a 'nosimon' to reach school."

The headmaster of Uttor Digholi Government Primary School in Louhajong's

Ghoradour Bazar, Razzak Mridha, says that up to one-third of the school's 900 students come from char areas. "They suffer a lot especially in the rainy season," he says.

"There aren't any roads on the Padma shoals," says the chairman of Louhajong's Tuitia union, Hajji Mohammad Rafiqul Islam Dhali. "But Professor Shegufta Yesmin Emily has recently organised for the construction of one road which will benefit students from ten shoal villages. Also solar lights are available in shoal areas nowadays, and a primary school is due to be constructed soon. Already a mosque and madrasa are built there."

Indeed a Japan-based organisation has already established the first school in the char area with the help of local youths.

"It's true that thousands of students attend school with great difficulty," says the local upazila nirbahi officer Md. Khalekuzzaman. "But eventually the obstacles they face will be overcome. We have the Padma Bridge under construction in this upazila. A water treatment project and Olympic institute will also be built here. Change is on its way and includes a proposal to establish three government primary schools in the char areas."