



Why schoolbag back-breaking?

HC asks govt, nudges it to ensure bag not heavier than 10pc of kid's body weight

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Getting back from school by a microbus in the early afternoon, Lara, a class-three student, presses the calling bell on the ground floor to let her family on their third-floor flat know that she's home.

It's not that the collapsible gate is locked. It's just that her bag, stuffed full of books and writing pads, is so heavy that she cannot climb the stairs slinging it over her tiny shoulders. She needs help.

Then some older member comes down, carries the satchel and walks her up to the flat.

"The bag weighs her down so much that she cannot walk properly while carrying it. That's why one of us goes to help her out," said her father, a resident of the capital's Mirpur area.

Lara's case is not an isolated one. Children struggling with the weight of heavy and bulky satchels are a common sight in Bangladesh.

To the relief of school-going children and their parents, the High Court has issued a rule aiming to lighten the kids' burden of heavy schoolbags.

The court yesterday asked the government to explain in two weeks why it should not be directed to formulate a specific law or regulation against carrying

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schoolbags that weigh more than 10 percent of the children's body weight, and against use of any schoolbag by pre-primary children.

The rule came following a writ petition collectively filed by three Supreme Court lawyers seeking an HC directive on the government to formulate a law or rule or policy on the use of schoolbags by children.

The law secretary, the education secretary, the director general of Directorate of Primary Education, and the chairman of National Human Rights Commission have been made respondents to the rule.

Last month, the Indian state of Maharashtra ruled that schoolchildren should carry bags no more than 10 percent of their weight.

Children are developing spinal deformities because of heavy bags they carry to schools, said SM Masud Dolon, one of the petitioners, citing a report of a national daily that quoted experts' opinion on this.

"The students carry overweight bags as their school authorities compel them to carry many books, papers and instruments," Dolon told The Daily Star, referring to the Maharashtra government regulation.

Farzana Tonni, mother of a class V student, said apart from six textbooks, her son carries three exercise books and a diary for noting down homework as per the teachers' instruction. Besides, he keeps a few more exercise books for his coaching.

"His bag looks bulky but I can't help

him. He often goes to school without eating his breakfast," she said.

"He looks tired when he returns home after school and coaching. He tells me his shoulder aches when he carries the bag on one shoulder for a long time," Tonni added.

Citing from the petition, Deputy Attorney General Motaher Hossain Sazu said a student in the country has to carry a bag weighing 30 to 40 percent of his or her body weight.

The DAG also said there is no law in the country prohibiting the school authorities from compelling students to carry heavy bags.

The HC bench of Justice Moyeenul Islam Chowdhury and Justice Md Ashraful Kamal issued the rule after hearing the writ petition filed by lawyers Masud Dolon, Ziaur Rahman and Anarul Karim on August 9.

"There would be some physical problems if kids carry overweight bags. They may later develop pain in their neck or back," Prof Dr M Amjad Hossain, an expert orthopaedist, told The Daily Star.

The former head of Orthopaedics and Trauma Surgery of Dhaka Medical College and Hospital said parents often come to them with their children complaining of pain in waist or back.

"Nowadays children have limited scope for playing and doing other physical activities. Therefore, carrying heavy bags poses health risks for them," Dr Amjad said, suggesting that there should be a weight limit for carrying schoolbags.