

BLOCKADE-HARTAL DELAYS TEXTBOOK DISTRIBUTION

First time in four years

WASIM BIN HABIB

After four consecutive years of successful and timely distribution of textbooks, the next academic year might witness a delay due to the ongoing blockades that have seriously disrupted the final round of printing and distribution.

Students at primary and secondary levels got fresh textbooks on the first day of the academic years since 2010. Officials and printers suspect it might not be the same this time.

They say the opposition's back-to-back blockades have left a domino effect on the entire process. Printed textbooks have been piled up in stores as those could not be despatched to destinations.

Similarly, the printers were not able to do the last moment's printing as papers did not reach the press. They also could not send the already-printed books for binding as the binders could not clear their stocks for distribution, they add.

Extension of blockades has further added to their worries as they fear at least 30 per-

cent books might not reach the destination before the deadline.

They say the political unrest had already taken a heavy toll on students as it messed up the academic calendar. But it will be a double blow for the students if they do not get books in time.

Set against a failed track record, the government started distributing free textbooks among the students from class One to class Ten in 2010.

The government aims at distributing more than 29.74 crore copies of new textbooks to more than 3.73 crore students of primary, secondary, ebtedai (primary level of madrasa), dakhil (secondary level of madrasa) and vocational classes of the 2014 academic session.

Printers and sources at National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB) have informed roughly 70-75 percent textbooks of primary and secondary levels have reached the upazila headquarters, but more time is required to send those to the educational institutions.

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They say they lag behind in distributing ebtedai and dakhil textbooks as a large quantity of books could not be printed due to disruption in paper supply. They add they could not send 50 percent books of these levels yet.

Amid this situation, Bangladesh Mudron Shilpa Samity, a platform of printers, has recently requested the NCTB to extend the deadline until December 31 for the distribution. The deadline had earlier been set from last week of November to mid-December.

"The situation is very bad. We were hopeful until last week. But Monday's announcement of extending the blockade makes us utterly depressed," AFM Shah Alam, general secretary of the printers' association, told The Daily Star on Monday.

He said several trucks carrying textbooks had started for destination on Friday but were stuck on the way following the declaration of further blockades. "We hoped to send the books on Friday and Saturday but now Saturday is not spared as well," he said.

"We could only meet the deadline if the textbook scheme were kept out of the purview of hartal and blockade," Alam added.

The printers say they have completed printing a

major portion of books but could not send those.

"The entire process has come to a standstill. Many printers are not taking the risk of sending books amid blockade fearing arsons. Truckers too don't want to move amid such a situation," said the proprietor of a printing house that got a work order for 2.5 crore copies of textbooks.

Besides, the NCTB had said they would not take any responsibility if any such incidents occurred, said the proprietor asking not to be identified.

"It is the key month for textbook distribution. But we are unsure about meeting the deadline if the political situation remains unchanged," he added.

The printer said their cost of transportation had doubled as the truck owners were charging extra due to the volatile political situation.

"It used to take Tk 17,000 to Tk 18,000 to reach books to Chittagong from Dhaka, but now it went up to Tk 35,000," he said.

Contacted, NCTB Chairman Prof Shafiqur Rahman told The Daily Star, "You can understand the current situation. We are using whatever scopes we have to distribute the books in time."

"I'm still hopeful," he said, claiming that majority of the books had already been sent to destinations.