

FROM BANGLADESH TO MALAYSIA

## Student trafficking nexus exposed

THE STAR, Malaysia, and The Daily Star

They are sold a dream, of a ticket to study and work in a foreign country, but after spending their family's entire savings they are caught in the harsh reality of being trafficked and trapped in a constant cycle of exploitation and extortion.

Thousands of young Bangladeshis have been trafficked to Malaysia through obscure private colleges and their unscrupulous "agents".

Some pay over RM 20,000, equivalent to three years' wages in Bangladesh, to the agents for securing student visas and admission into these bogus colleges.

But that's just the beginning of the exploitation.

Many have no choice but to work illegally under inhumane conditions, creating a cycle of exploitation where they have to earn enough to repay their debts and buy a ticket home, or pay the agents again to renew their student visas so they can work another year.

"I can't go home, because my family spent all their money on the agent fees."

"Now I need to work here to pay for my father's medicine," said one victim, 24, whose father has suffered two strokes.

The Star's (Malaysia) R.AGE team uncovered these trafficking rings through a series of undercover investigations, all featured in its new video series, Student/Trafficked.

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## Student trafficking

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The team met up with agents while posing as factory managers looking for cheap labour, infiltrated the colleges, and followed the trail all the way to Dhaka.

One agent told our journalist he works for a "Datuk" who owns a college in Kuala Lumpur, and that he has trafficked over 8,000 Bangladeshi students to Malaysia.

"Bangladeshi students are easy and quick money," said the agent, who is Nepali.

"Bring in 200 or 300 of them, then distribute them (among the colleges), then you'll make your money."

Many of these victims live and work not far from the glittering lights of the Klang Valley's major towns, hidden and suffering.

"Our living conditions here are worse than the garbage dumps in the slums of Dhaka," said one victim, now a construction worker living in a makeshift ghetto in Cyberjaya.

His family had to take a loan to pay for his "studies" in Malaysia, for which they pay Tk 21,000 (RM 1,100) a month in instalments.

He now earns around RM 1,500 a month.

"In my college, there were around 200-250 Bangladeshi students, but only 30-35 have renewed their visas (to continue studying).

"Where the rest are, we don't know," he added.

During the course of its investigation, R.AGE met over 30 student traf-

ficking victims, and found almost 30 colleges that showed signs of having worked with student traffickers.

When a R.AGE journalist posing as a prospective student went to one of these colleges, an employee quietly warned him against signing up.

"If our own people [Malaysians] come, I'll tell them not to study here," she said.

"Look around, the whole place is empty! I wouldn't want any Malaysian students stuck here."

An earlier report by The Star (Malaysia) revealed a large number of foreign students arriving through dubious colleges in 2013.

The Ministry of Higher Education revoked the international student licenses of four such institutions in 2015.

Since then, a further 26 institutions have had their licenses revoked or not renewed.

Though many of these colleges can no longer enrol international students, they continue to operate by channelling students to other affiliated colleges.

"We do have something like collaboration, a group of companies," said the Nepali agent.

"We have a language centre and four colleges, all are like 'joint-venture' companies."

He also claimed that he enrolled 3,000 Bangladeshi students at one of these colleges, but R.AGE found its campus to be nearly deserted.

"I came here to study. Only to study. But now, my dream is dashed," said one victim.