

Textbook printing faces setback

Timely delivery of primary textbooks uncertain

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The printing of primary textbooks faces a huge setback as the authorities and printers are yet to settle some issues.

While printing of secondary-level textbooks is in full swing and a portion of the 22 crore copies have already reached different upazilas, the National Curriculum and Textbook Board is yet to place orders of primary textbooks.

The timely delivery of primary textbooks has become uncertain after the World Bank in the notices of award told the winning bidders that they would have to meet a few conditions. The lowest bidders who won the deals rejected the conditions outright.

The global lender that pays 10 percent of the cost of primary books says its teams will check the quality of books during the printing and after they reach upazilas and that it will disburse the money only if it finds the work satisfactory.

The WB also increased the performance guarantee to 15 percent from 10 percent.

Terming the conditions humiliating, the printers said those were not in the tender schedule and so they would not accept the work order unless the conditions were withdrawn.

The textbook board sent the notices of award to the printing firms by messengers yesterday, but they did not receive those. Later, those were sent through mail.

Against this backdrop, the government has been pondering whether to give the work order to the second group of lowest bidders if the first group does not agree to work complying with the WB conditions.

The primary and mass education ministry will soon talk to the printers and try to persuade them into accepting the work order, said a top official wishing anonymity.

Printing of textbooks normally begins in August every year. If the authorities fail to

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settle the issue this month, free distribution of textbooks to primary students may miss the deadline of January 1, said officials of the board.

The textbook board that has been distributing free textbooks since 2010 invited international tenders on April 29 for printing around 11 crore copies of primary books this time. Around 800 firms took part in it.

Some 22 local printing firms submitted the lowest bid at Tk 221 crore, prompting the WB to express doubt over the quality of books they would deliver.

Local printers have been doing the major task of printing since the inception of international tender in 2011, said Shahid Serniabat, president of Bangladesh Mudran Shilpa Samity.

"We have been doing quality work and will ensure quality this time as well," he said.

Calling the role of the board into question, he said it wanted to award the job to Indian printers.

"How do we accept that we will get the bill only after the World Bank is satisfied?"

The president of the Samity said he hoped to complete the task before the deadline if they could start the work soon.

In efforts to break the stalemate, the board sat with the bidders on Wednesday, but to no avail.

The printers have until September 2 to accept the job, said board officials.

"If they don't, we will have to go for other options as we want that children get the books in time," said an official, preferring anonymity.

Contacted, Primary and Mass Education Minister Mostafizur Rahman said an effort was on to resolve the problem.

The textbook board has to settle these issues, the minister told The Daily Star.

"If the board expresses its inability, the government will intervene since it's a national issue."

He, however, said the government wanted the lowest bidders to do the job. "We want that their capacity gets increased."

The government this year aimed at distributing around 35 crore textbooks among primary, secondary, technical and madrasa students at an estimated cost of Tk 733 crore.