

Coastal ultra poor find lifeline in alternative employment

BSS, PATUAKHALI

June 27: Thousands of poor coastal people, exposed to wraths of subsequent cyclones and soaring food prices, appeared to have found their lifeline under an alternative employment generation programme aimed to lay a social safety net here for a critical time.

"In this lean season, I otherwise had to travel nine miles everyday to work as a domestic help (maid), which too is not easy to get" at coastal Patuakhali district town at this time, 50-year old Nurjahan Begum as she spared a few minute for rest keeping her spade beside a tree.

Along with scores other ultra poor men and women, she was engaged in reconstructing a nearly three kilometre cyclone ravaged village road at Jainkathi at sadar upazila under an employment generation scheme.

Nurjahan now ponders if she could save some money from her Taka 5,000 wage for the month-long work so she could launch a small self-employment venture like roadside rural tea stall borrowing some more from any NGO.

In partnership with Local Government Engineering Department (LGED) and voluntary Eco- Social Development Organisation (ESDO), the UN World Food Programme (WFP) launched the temporary Employment Generation Programme in southwestern coastal districts earlier this year with financial assistance of European Commission (EC).

"The soaring food price earlier this year and the infrastructure damage caused by the cyclones in the region, prompted the EC to intervene with our collaboration," WFP official Nathan Sarkar said. Sarkar and other officials of the UN agency familiar with the programme, however, said their engagement in the region under the Employment Generation scheme was a temporary intervention but they planned to pull the extremely poor people out of their poverty cycle enhancing their capabilities by expanding their regular programmes in the region.

In another such scheme area at Awaliapur union of the sadar thana, 30-year old Mariam Bibi was in a state of wilderness for want of work with her ailing husband and four children at home until Employment Generation Programme came.

"At this period of time in the year, we don't have any work at the cropland. We have to look for works like building or road construction or survive on scanty previous savings.

Many people like us temporarily migrate to big cities like Barisal and even Dhaka in their search for work," she said.

Marium, however, had a milking cow, which earn her family of six some Taka 30 per day as the price of milk in rural bazars was also low in this period of the year.

Malek Hawdadar, a day labourer with three young children and the ailing wife at home, said he hoped to save at least Taka 1,500 as under the road cum embankment repair scheme at Jainkathi, he was expected to get a total of Taka 5,000 at the rate of Taka 150 each working day for removing and setting certain volume of earth.

The 40 year old Begum Bibi's husband is a fish trader but his ailment, diagnosed as chronic ulcer forced his to stay at home for the past couple of months exposing his four-member family to a critical state.

"I will spend the money for the treatment of my husband . . . I hope he will start his small fishing business once he is cured," she said.

The EC financed programme was launched in March this year to bring some 4,00,000 ultra-poor people under a safety net employing directly 21,885 of them for 60 days in 93 unions of 12 upazillas in five coastal districts while the target beneficiaries were selected involving the local villagers under a closely monitored process.

"The beneficiary groups themselves select a leader from among them to oversee the work and after assessments by the LGED officials, they are given their wages in every fifth day in presence of all stakeholders," said an ESDO official which is WFP's implementing partner at the project sites.

LGED engineers, who are overseeing the reconstruction of embankments and rural roads, said the schemes were selected in consultation with the people at grassroots in a manner so those could ensure the improved connectivity with rural growth centres to boost economic activities engaging the poor people.