

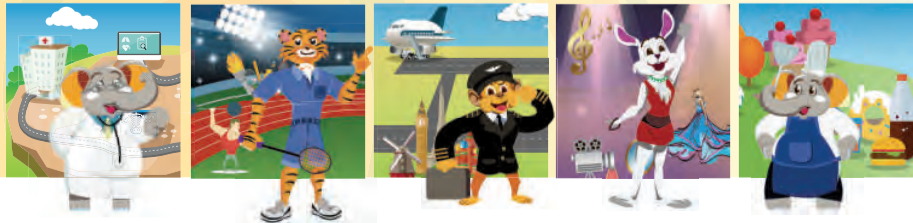
ছাত্র/পাচারের শিকার

STUDENT/TRAFFICKED

তাদের কাছে মালায়সিয়াতে চাকরী আর পড়াশুনার স্বপ্ন বিক্রি করা হয়েছিল, কিন্তু বাস্তবতা অনেকটাই আধুনিক দাসত্ত্বের মত।
They are sold dreams of work and college education in Malaysia, but the reality is more like modern-day slavery. >2-5

Photo: YAP CHEE HONG/The Star *Posed by a model

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Inside the student trafficking trade

A network of deceit and exploitation robs Bangladeshi college students of their money and education.

By **ELROI YEE, IAN YEE, LIM MAY LEE and SAMANTHA CHOW**
fb.com/thestarRAGE

WE visit Samin at his makeshift home in Cyberjaya under the cover of night. Next to it looms the skeleton of an apartment block under construction. We walk past plywood shacks and shipping containers, an open-air bathing area, up creaking stairs. He is ill, and won't talk to us.

We meet Farid at the dusty warehouse he works at in Johor Baru. He shows us his work space, where he checks all incoming and outgoing stock. Where do you sleep? we ask. "I spread the mattress out here," he motions to the concrete floor beside his desk. He cooks his meals in a small corner of a storeroom, which he is too ashamed to show us.

To speak to Biplop, we pick him up at night from a mall in Sepang where he works, and drive far away so his supervisor doesn't see him speaking to us. We stay away from main roads to avoid police. There was once, he says, he had to hide in a dumpster to avoid arrest.

All three boys are Bangladeshis who came to Malaysia hoping for a college education, only to realise they had become victims of an extensive and elaborate human trafficking network stretching from here to Bangladesh. They're now forced to work illegally, saddled with debt and treated like criminals, with little hope of completing their education.

Over the course of their journey here, they have been cheated and extorted by college "agents" in their home country and Malaysia, often with help from the money-making colleges that were supposed to educate them.

But to fully understand their stories, we must first know Karim's story.

It is broad daylight when we meet Karim, a



25-year-old Bangladeshi college student. He is sitting outside an international college whose eight-storey building stands conspicuously in a neighbourhood of low-lying shophouses.

He seems happy to meet us, excited to try out his halting English. We learn that it's his first week in Malaysia, that he's an engineering student, and that he wants to travel around Malaysia during study breaks. Maybe we can take him, he asks tentatively, if it's okay with us. He loves Malaysia, he says brightly. It's beautiful.

A beautiful lie

The trafficking begins with an education agent telling a prospective student just how wonderful it is to study in Malaysia. It's modern, comfortable and Muslim-friendly.

All true, but the agent adds lies and misrepresentations to the sales pitch. There are jobs ready and waiting for you. You can work part-time to pay for your education. The college is reputable. You can get a degree and get rich.

"Bangladeshi youths are desperate to study," said Ashik Rahman, a Bangladeshi migrant rights' activist based in Malaysia and founder of advocacy group Migrant88. "They see it as a means to escape the



R.AGE undercover journalists followed the 'student trafficking' trail all the way to Dhaka, Bangladesh, where they met 'education agents' who charge Bangladeshis up to RM21,000 to study in Malaysia. — Photos: SHANJEEV REDDY/R.AGE

poverty and unemployment of the previous generation, and they prefer to study abroad because it comes with added social status."

Preying on the students' desperation, the agents jack up their prices. For visa and college fees for the first year, they charge up to Tk400,000 (RM21,000). In Bangladesh, that's equivalent to three years' wages.

Lured by false promises, some spend their entire family's savings, sell family land, or borrow from banks and loan sharks to make the amount.

Samin and Farid both paid Tk260,000 (RM13,800). Biplop paid Tk300,000 (RM16,000), and Karim paid Tk350,000 (RM18,600).

We did the math, and after deducting administrative fees, the agents and colleges will normally split around RM13,000 per student. That means together, they would have over a million ringgit in revenue if they get around 80 students. In the past three years, over 40,000 Bangladeshi students came to Malaysia. Now you do the math.

It's a trap

The cheating continues the moment they

land in Malaysia, when a Malaysia-based agent takes over. Students rely on this agent, because they have little choice – they don't know how public transportation works, they have few friends if any to turn to, and they have a limited command of English.

At the airport, where Immigration officers are under instructions to detain Bangladeshi students until college representatives arrive to receive them, agents often extort them for a little extra.

"I waited there for two days," Farid said. The agent wanted him to pay RM200 for an "airport pickup", but Farid refused on principle, arguing that it wasn't part of the initial agreement. At the end of two days with no food or water provided, he relented.

More cheating followed. The agent took his passport to apply for a student visa. All international students, having been accepted by a local college, arrive in Malaysia on short-term visas. After they arrive, students need to submit their passports, academic records and a medical report to their colleges, which will apply for a student visa on their behalf.

But Farid's agent refused to return his passport until he paid an additional RM650.

A VICTIM'S JOURNEY



Traffickers pose as agents representing colleges in Malaysia. They tell potential victims Malaysia is a land of opportunity, where they can work and get a higher education.



Desperate to break the cycle of poverty, many families spend their life savings and even borrow money from loan sharks to pay the agents.



Despite paying the wildly overpriced agent fees, some victims have to pay for their own flight tickets. Certain agents throw it in as a deal sweetener.

DAY 1

Amount paid to agents
RM15,000 - RM21,000
Roughly 3 years' wages in Bangladesh

Flight ticket
RM500 - RM1,000

FAQ: STUDENT TRAFFICKING

1 WHAT EXACTLY CONSTITUTES HUMAN TRAFFICKING?

You can break down the definition of human trafficking into three parts:
1) Transporting, holding, or recruiting someone
2) through coercion, deception, fraud, or any kind of abuse of power
3) for the purposes of exploitation, which includes forced labour, sexual exploitation, slavery, removal of organs, or any illegal activity.

2 WHAT ABOUT 'STUDENT TRAFFICKING'? IS IT AN ACTUAL TERM?

Not really. We came up with it because we realised there's an entire network and industry dedicated to trafficking students by signing them up with bogus colleges overseas, and then exploiting them (usually for cheap labour) once they land in the foreign country. Just like with sex or drug trafficking, it's easier to fight something once there's a name to it.

3 WHAT ABOUT STUDENTS WHO KNEW THEY WERE ABUSING THE SYSTEM?

Yes, some of the victims we spoke to signed up with these traffickers so they can come here to work. But that doesn't mean they aren't victims of human trafficking. Many are still deceived and exploited when they arrive here, and thrust into situations they are unable to leave. And as the Anti-Trafficking in Persons and Anti-Smuggling of Migrants Act 2007 (ATIPSOM) states, "consent is irrelevant".



A scene captured from the slums of Dhaka. Many student trafficking victims spent their family savings to study in Malaysia, believing it would be a chance to escape the cycle of poverty.



This agent claimed he invested tens of thousands of ringgit in Malaysian colleges, in order to become their agent. Colleges and agents split a profit of about RM13,000 per student.



Many victims are forced to work illegally under inhumane conditions to repay their debts like this young woman, who worked 12-13 hours a day without break. Her husband was eventually detained for three months, and deported.

The lies never end, while the agents profiteer off the students at every opportunity, all the while knowing that the students will never receive the university degree they dream of.

And that's before the worst exploitation even begins.

Meeting a student trafficker

To meet a college agent, R.AGE went undercover as managers of a garment recycling factory looking to smuggle in migrant labour from Bangladesh.

"I've brought in 8,000 students from Bangladesh since 2013," one agent proudly told us. He claimed to represent a well-known college operating from a mall in the heart of Kuala Lumpur.

Through further undercover work, we verified that he indeed works from an office within the college, and staff members refer to him for matters related to international students.

He tells us that 98% of the students are here as cheap labour, not to study. The agent continues to sell his services by telling us that class attendance can be faked for "a few hundred ringgit" to avoid problems with the

Bangladeshi youths are desperate to study. They see it as a means to escape the poverty and unemployment of the previous generation.

Ashik Rahman, a Bangladeshi migrant rights' activist

Immigration Department.

"Every institute that gets the Home Ministry licence (to enrol foreign students), is looking for money," the agent revealed. "The only place to earn money is through Bangladeshi students – bring in 200, 300 students, distribute them, your money come back already (sic). This is the way (the colleges) do it."

Other agents and college representatives we met undercover sell us the same line. One manager of a language centre in Kuala Lumpur claims he can offer up to three years'

visa by moving students around in different language courses; and given that student visas have to be renewed every year, that gives agents a convenient excuse to extort more money, usually around RM7,000 per renewal.

Some told us that even if their college is shut down by the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE), they always have several affiliated institutions to redistribute the students, often operated by the same owners or their associates.

Through nine months of investigations, R.AGE compiled a list of almost 30 colleges that show signs of involvement in this form of human trafficking, all operating in plain sight.

Undercover visits to some of these colleges reveal empty classrooms and deserted offices. Some don't even bother to set up proper classrooms, merely operating from small office lots.

This is what defines student trafficking – genuine students who have paid exorbitant fees to study in a foreign land and are further extorted for more money at every step, but will not get an education.

"I visited the whole college, and I didn't see a single class in session. The classrooms are all empty," said Farid.

"I came for studies. Only for my studies," added Farid, angry. "But when I came here, I was disappointed."

His tone shifts to despair. "My dream is over. Everything I thought before is now broken."

Disillusioned, Farid has had little choice but to work to recoup some of his family's investment in his education. Moreover, his mother has fallen ill, and her medical bills are taking a toll on the family's finances.

Student-turned-criminal

That's how foreign college students – cheated, extorted, and now disillusioned – become criminals. Samin, who is a student at an "international college" in KL, has also resorted to working. He is an electrician at a construction site.

His agent in Bangladesh peddled him one of the most common lies agents tell students – he can work part-time while studying to pay for his education. Only when he arrived did he learn it is illegal to work under a student visa.

> TURN TO PAGE 4



The agents secure offer letters for their victims from one of the colleges in Malaysia that work with these agents.



The victims fly to Malaysia, where they are usually detained at the airport. The college's agent in Malaysia often uses this as an excuse to extort more money. Those who refuse are stuck for days without food or water provided.



Victims are sometimes placed in cramped, dilapidated halfway homes while they wait for their student visa approvals. This is where the nightmare begins.

TWO MONTHS LATER

Airport pick-up fee
RM300 - RM600

Room rental
RM100 - RM300
per month

4 MANY VICTIMS ARE TRAFFICKED BY 'AGENTS'. HOW LIABLE ARE THE COLLEGES?

Under ATIPSOM, the owners of the colleges can be charged with an offence if they 'profit from the exploitation of a trafficked person', or even had reasonable grounds to believe their services or facilities were being used for trafficking. Upon conviction, they can be jailed for up to 15 years and fined up to RM1mil, or have to forfeit all profits made from the exploitation.

5 ARE THE AUTHORITIES DOING ANYTHING ABOUT IT?

The Ministry of Higher Education has cracked down on the colleges involved, but they just keep popping back up under different names, or they channel the victims through other 'affiliated' colleges. Even so, the MOHE has moved to reduce the number of student visa approvals from Bangladesh, from 23,000 in 2015 to 1,100 in 2017 so far.

6 WHAT CAN WE DO TO HELP?

You can help us spread the word! R.AGE is working with MOHE and several NGOs to identify victims so we can help them get support from NGOs, complete their studies, or get repatriated to their homelands. Go to rage.com.my/trafficked or [fb.com/studenttrafficked](https://www.facebook.com/studenttrafficked) and share the links on your social media accounts.

Life as a trafficking victim

> FROM PAGE 3

Foreign students in Malaysia are not allowed to work, not even part-time, except during long holidays and only with special permission from their college and the Immigration Department. If caught, students face up to five years in prison, RM10,000 in fines, and even whipping. Worse, they will be deported at the end of the sentence and their passports blacklisted, potentially barring them from seeking education in other countries.

It is an astonishingly common narrative among Bangladeshi students. After nine months of speaking to various Bangladeshi communities in the Klang Valley, we logged over 50 cases where international students have been lied to, exploited, extorted, and left with no education and no choice but to work.

By definition, that's human trafficking. "All the elements (of human trafficking) are there," explained Aegile Fernandez, director of migrant rights advocacy group Tenaganita. "Anyone could be a victim of trafficking, not just labourers or sex workers. In these cases, the victims are students."

From Malaysia to Bangladesh

To expose the true extent of these trafficking rings, R.AGE followed the trail of exploited students all the way to Bangladesh, where demand for tertiary education has exploded. In the frantic, perpetually congested capital city of Dhaka, we went straight to the source – a college agent's office, where business is clearly booming.

On this particular street in downtown Dhaka, we saw signboards advertising student visa services everywhere – hanging from streetlights, crowded on shoplot facades, stenciled on walls, and even flashing in neon lights at the top of a high-rise.

Tellingly, many of the signs have logos of Malaysian colleges. "You can surely work while you are in Malaysia," said the agent to our undercover journalist, while our team listened in from a van parked nearby.

"You won't face trouble if you work while you study because you have all your documents as a student."

This is the lie that lures thousands of stu-



These trafficking victims have been stuck in Malaysia for years, building high-rise condominiums but living in shanty makeshift ghettos called 'kongs'. A Bangladeshi man recently died after a kongs caught fire in Tapah.

dents to Malaysia each year. Every college agent repeated this lie to our undercover journalist. Some even encouraged him to work so that he can fund his studies.

What about attending classes? "Class schedule will be done according to your choice," replied the agent. "Maybe you can attend classes two days a week. You can work the rest of the time."

When we described cases of student trafficking to college students studying in Dhaka, none of them were surprised. Almost everyone knew someone who had been cheated while studying in Malaysia.

One of them, a young lady, told us how her college in Malaysia never held a single class. She was sent out to work in a restaurant as part of the college's "internship programme", and had her passport withheld by the college.

She and her husband came to Malaysia with big dreams, but after over a year of being forced to work at a restaurant for 12-13 hours a day without any breaks, her husband was caught by Immigration officers and detained for three months. She was back in Dhaka when we spoke, waiting for him to be deported so they could try to rebuild their lives.

We asked her and all the other victims why they never reported their situation to Malaysian authorities. Always, the reason they cite is fear.

Suffering in silence

Currently, these students have no safe avenue for redress. Most migrant rights' NGOs in Malaysia are focused on migrant labour issues, not migrant students. Similarly, the

“My head is very pressure (sic). I need job, I need work. My head is not good.”

Karim, student trafficking victim

Bangladeshi High Commission mainly handles labour cases.

The MOHE has a complaints system, but most students don't know about it, and it has only logged 20 complaints related to international students since 2013.

Students also fear retribution from their colleges if they complain through official channels. The colleges can easily get the students deported by staging some kind of disciplinary action.

Because of this, there are no statistics available on how many students have been brought into Malaysia under trafficked situations, but one possible indicator is the number of Bangladeshi students in the country.

Recent statistics from MOHE show that there were 30,657 Bangladeshi students enrolled in higher education institutions (HEI) in Malaysia in 2015 – a third of the total international student population.

When approached by R.AGE for comment in November 2016, ministry officials indicated that it did not consider these students to be victims of trafficking, and that they have only received reports of "misrepresentation" by recruitment agents in the countries of origin.

During a follow-up interview a month later, a ministry official flatly declined to discuss

the issue, but sent a written reply denying that trafficking of students takes place.

It was only when we managed to get Higher Education Minister Datuk Seri Idris Jusoh's attention several months later that we started getting some answers.

"We discovered this was happening when our EMGS (Education Malaysia Global Services) system picked up a surge in the number of Bangladeshi students," said Idris. EMGS is the online platform that monitors and processes all international student applications.

"We have taken action against nine colleges in 2016 and 2017, so the numbers have dropped. Only 1,100 Bangladeshi student visa applications have been approved so far this year, compared to 16,000 last year and 23,000 the year before," he added.

Immigration crimes

Still, that means over 40,000 Bangladeshi students have been accepted to study in Malaysia over the past three years alone, and from what we've heard, many of them were trafficked, or at least victims of some form of exploitation. A large proportion of these students would now be undocumented, not accounted for in official statistics, and there are many more from previous years.

And with the recent clampdown on undocumented migrants, many of these students who are now undocumented are being hauled up for immigration crimes. The government ran a re-hiring programme to legalise undocumented migrant workers by granting them "E-kads" ahead of the clampdown, but remarkably, the agents found a



Having been trafficked into Malaysia, the victims quickly realise the colleges are bogus. There are hardly any classes. Some are instructed by college authorities to work.



Many victims want to complain, but there is little room for redress. They risk detention and deportation if the colleges make a disciplinary report against them.



Desperate to survive, most victims have no choice but to work illegally, which leaves them vulnerable to exploitation. Many are forced to work and live under inhumane conditions. Most of their money will be sent home to repay debts. Almost none will receive their diplomas.

STUDENT / TRAFFICKED

Live discussion

18 Aug

4 PM

LIVE AT fb.com/thestarRAGE

Average salary

RM900 - RM1,300

Live Q&A session

JOIN our Facebook livestream at 4pm, Aug 18, where we'll discuss the Student/Trafficked campaign LIVE on The Couch, R.AGE's weekly talk show. Representatives from human rights organisation Tenaganita, Bangladeshi-rights organisation Migrant88, and the Ministry of Higher Education will be taking questions from the public. So if you want to know more about the issue, and how you can help, make sure you tune in.



R.AGE found nearly 30 Malaysian colleges that showed signs of being involved in student trafficking. Undercover visits to some of them revealed empty classrooms, but most trafficked students are too afraid to lodge reports with the authorities.

way to use the programme to exploit their victims yet again.

Many student trafficking victims R.AGE spoke to saw the re-hiring programme as a way out of their situation. They were willing to pay supposed agents up to RM3,500 upfront, give them their passports, and pay another RM3,500 when their new visas are ready.

Tragically, Immigration director-general Datuk Seri Mustafar Ali confirmed to R.AGE that the scheme does not even apply to those on student visas.

“If their purpose for coming to Malaysia is to study, then they have to study. After they complete their studies, they have to go back,” said Mustafar.

Of all the Bangladeshi students we met who applied for the programme, not a single one received an E-kad, and the deadline for applications ended on June 30.

It’s common for agents to withhold passports from migrant workers to extort them for more money, so chances are the students will have to pay the agents the remaining RM3,500 anyway, just to get their passports back.

The good news is that both Idris and Mustafar are determined to set things right. Idris said MOHE will clamp down even harder on trafficking colleges and agents, and force them to pay for the victims’ education at another college.

During a closed-door meeting with R.AGE to discuss possible solutions, Idris was visibly angered.

“What these colleges and agents are doing is a sin! It’s sinful! I really feel bad for the victims,” he said, surrounded by some of his

top officials.

“But I don’t just want to use strong language. I want action. I want to put an end to this.”

Graduation day

The last time we met Karim, it was at a rented low-cost flat where he stays with other Bangladeshi students. Things have changed. The excitement of being an international student – learning the culture of a new country, meeting new people – has completely dissipated. The moment we started conversing, we could sense the desperation.

“My head is very pressure (sic),” he said. He used the word “sick” a number of times to describe himself. He had long since realised there is no education for him in Malaysia. He applied to study a degree in Engineering, but found that the college doesn’t even offer degree-level programmes. Returning home empty-handed after spending a fortune is unthinkable. His days are spent doing nothing, and his money is running out.

He has only one realistic option. “I need job, I need work,” he says, imploring for help. “My head is not good.”

Next to him sat his housemate Hossein, newly-arrived from Bangladesh, smiling, excited to talk to us.

Student/Trafficked is a documentary series following R.AGE’s undercover investigation on ‘student traffickers’ from Malaysia to Bangladesh. Follow the series’ Facebook page (fb.com/StudentTrafficked) to watch new episodes as they premiere.

Second chance at education

R.AGE is working with the Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) to help trafficked students get the education they came here for. Here’s how it works:

Victims can report their cases at **rage.com.my/trafficked**



MOHE enforcement officers will investigate cases for elements of trafficking



Once confirmed, **MOHE will force offending colleges to pay for the victims’ education at another college**



But even if you’re **not a victim of student trafficking, you can still make a report.** If you know a college or agent involved in trafficking, you can also let us know at rage.com.my/trafficked.



All cases will also be **forwarded to NGOs Tenaganita and Migrant88, who will provide advice and support** to those who have been trafficked.



শিক্ষার দ্বিতীয় সুযোগ

R.AGE মাল্যসিয়ার উচ্চ শিক্ষা মন্ত্রণালয়ের (MOHE) সাথে কাজ করছে ছাত্র পাচারের শিকারদের শিক্ষা প্রদানে সাহায্য করতে যেটার আশায় তারা এখানে এসেছিল। কিভাবে সেটা কাজ করবে:

পাচারের শিকার ব্যক্তির rage.com.my/trafficked এ তাদের অভিযোগ জানাতে পারে।

MOHE’র অফিসাররা তাদের অভিযোগ তদন্ত করবে পাচারের আলামতের জন্য।

অভিযোগ প্রমাণিত হলে MOHE অভিযুক্ত কলেজকে বাধ্য করবে পাচারের শিকার ব্যক্তির অন্য কলেজে পড়াশুনার খরচ বহন করতে।

কিন্তু আপনি যদি ছাত্র পাচারের শিকার নাও হন, তারপরও আপনি অভিযোগ করতে পারেন। আপনি যদি কোন কলেজ বা এজেন্টকে চিনেন যে পাচার কাজে জড়িত, তাও আপনি আমাদের জানাতে পারেন rage.com.my/trafficked এ

সব অভিযোগগুলো Tenaganita এবং Migrant88 এনজিওতেও পাঠানো হবে, যারা সবরকম পরামর্শ এবং সাহায্য দিবে তাদেরকে যারা পাচারের শিকার হয়েছে।

TOTAL ESTIMATED COST: OVER RM50,000



The victims now have to worry about renewing their visas. With massive debts to pay, most have no choice but to renew their student visas and continue being exploited by the same agents. For many, the renewal fees bring them almost back to square one.

1 YEAR LATER

**Student visa renewal
RM6,000 - RM7,000**



The cycle of exploitation continues for years. Many are cheated by agents who promise to get them legal work visas, but give them fake documents instead, or simply disappear with their money.

YEAR 2-3

**Work permit application by fake agents
RM4,000 - RM7,000**



Many victims are stuck here with no rights, and have not seen their loved ones for years. Those who are caught by authorities are detained and charged. And if convicted for an immigration offence, they’re deported – but they have to pay a fine and buy their own flight ticket.

YEAR 3-?

**Immigration fine and flight ticket
Up to RM11,000**

More videos at rage.com.my/trafficked



Meeting a trafficker
Our journalist went undercover to meet a man who claims to have trafficked over 8,000 Bangladeshis to Malaysia.



How student trafficking works
A short explainer on the student trafficking ‘ecosystem’ and how students are cheated of their money and turned into illegal workers.



Trafficked: Farid
Farid applied for a computer science and engineering course, but was given a culinary arts diploma course instead. Now, he works in a store to repay debts for an education he never received.