



Photo: Emran Hossain

Jewel, one of the victims, shows the way he was kidnapped and tied in a medieval manner

The horrors of modern slave trade

CRIMINAL STRUCTURES Bangladeshi journalist uncovers human trafficking network

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Next time you go to a fancy restaurant, consider that the shrimps on your plate might have been produced by chained up and beaten slaves from South Asia. Bangladeshi journalist Emran Hossain went on an undercover mission and discovered the horrors of human trafficking.

The story began in October 2014 when reports appeared in Bangladeshi newspapers about kidnappings that had occurred in the coastal region.

It soon became obvious that some sort of human trafficking was going on, but what was really happening remained unclear.

Bangladesh is a poor country with an estimated GDP per capita of just above 1.300 US dollars per year. Hence many workers used to migrate to countries in the region in order to make a living. However, „lately it has become very difficult to travel to Malaysia, Thailand or Singapore for work“, says Mr Hossain.

It is precisely this growingly difficult situation that brought human traffickers onto the scene. „They tell parents that they do not have to pay any money for their sons so that they could travel“, says Mr Hossain.

The only thing they would be asking for is the fare for the ferry of 10.000 taka, approximately 118 euros – a huge amount of money in a country where the average monthly income amounts to less than 100 euros.

„The traffickers promise their victims to take them to Malaysia where they are supposed to get a better job“, explains Mr Hossain.

The shocking numbers

According to the International Labour Organization (ILO) 21 million people worldwide are victims of slavery, 19 million are exploited by private individuals or enterprises, 4,5 million are victims of forced sexual ex-

ploitation. In terms of earnings, profits of 150 billion USD are made each year in the „slave business“. Migrant workers and indigenous people are the most vulnerable individuals to forced labour.

The Cox's Bazar is a coastal district in Southeast Bangladesh, near the border to Burma, and its sandy beach is about 150 km long.

There the victims have to climb into small fisher boats that can take up to 50 or 60 people. „These boats are very small“, says Mr Hossain, „and when people do not all fit in, they are tied to the outside of the boat with the ropes used for anchoring.“

Then the overcharged boats make their way in the dark to a larger cargo ship waiting about 100 nautical miles away from the coastline. Those ships can take up to 1.000 or 1.200 people.

It takes approximately one or two weeks to fill it up completely. Then it starts its journey to Thailand.

„Thailand consists of many islands. The people are taken there into so-called holding places in the forest“, explains Mr Hossain. These places are areas where a big tent is set up and in which the immigrants are kept as prisoners.

But the real horror begins here. „The victims are beaten and many women are being raped while their families have to listen to their screaming over the phone“, reports Mr Hossain. „Then the

tormentors ask for at least 200.000 taka for the release of the victims.“ That amount equals roughly 2.400 euros, twice the average yearly income in Bangladesh.

Over 21 million slaves in 2015

Furthermore Mr Hossain says: „These criminal activities have been going on since 2000 at least and some people even died as a result of the torture.“

But they didn't attract much attention until March this year, when Emran Hossain published the results of his six-month investigation. The first human trafficking victims were the Rohingya people, a Muslim minority from Myanmar. „When there were no Rohingyas left, they started taking Bangladeshi“, explains Mr Hossain. „And one has to consider that 90 percent of the Thai shrimp industry depends on slave labour.“

Once the abductors have received the payment consisting of 200.000 taka by the families of the victims, the latter are brought

from Thailand to Malaysia by land. Mr Hossain's investigation also revealed that the border guards were involved in the trafficking. The journalist explains: „Once the people are inside Malaysia, what happens to them is simply a matter of luck. If the police catches them, they are being taken to a detention centre, which they are normally released from after a few days. But if they are caught by the human traffickers, they are tortured for money again.“

Thanks to Mr Hossain's investigation many future victims might have been avoided. A Thai general has been arrested for his involvement in the Bangladeshi human trafficking, another one is being searched for.

Yet many details about the case itself remain unclear. Who were the high-ranking officials benefiting financially? Did the local police officers turn their heads away in exchange for money?

„At the so-called 'Malaysia airport' in Teknaf, in the far South-east of Bangladesh, you can find those fisher boats used for the transport of the victims“, says Mr Hossain. „The local police was informed about it and ignored it. Apparently there was an exchange of money for that kind of 'favour'.“ „Malaysia airport“ is a gloomy place. Even local people avoid going there. Furthermore it is actually forbidden to go there after nightfall.

Yet Emran Hossain went there. „And to my surprise I found there was a big market, the kind you do not find in many places in the country, with smartphones and plenty of food. But when the sun had gone down, people started giving me strange looks.“ Mr Hos-



The victims are being beaten while their families have to listen over the phone

Emran Hossain
Undercover journalist, „The Daily Star“

sain remembers this particular moment. A rickshaw driver managed to get him out of „Malaysia airport“. „The village gave a cunning and sinister impression.“

The topic of crisis reporting is being discussed at the 10th ASEF journalists' colloquium, which takes place in Luxembourg this week.

ASEF-Gipfel

Derzeit findet das zehnte ASEF-Journalisten-Kolloquium statt, bei dem das *Tageblatt* Medienpartner ist. Aus diesem Anlass sind Journalisten aus der ganzen Welt nach Luxemburg gereist. Mit den Teilnehmern werden Gespräche in englischer Sprache geführt.