

100 'happy-go-lucky' land-grabbers

They occupy 94 acres of government land with fake documents on both sides of the new road from Shilpakala Academy to the BB.

SULTANA RAHMAN

Over 100 land-grabbers occupied 94 acres of government land with fake documents on both sides of the new road from Shilpakala Academy to the Bangladesh Bank.

With the help of some dishonest officials of the Deputy Commissioner's Office, they have unlawfully transferred the plots from public to private ownership, alleged sources in the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) and Rajuk.

The plots valued at about Tk 60 crore now house a number of high-rises the grabbers built by using the forged documents based on the Cadastral Survey (CS) that dates back to the British rule.

An investigation by Star City revealed that Abdul Motalib, resident of the area, filed a case (No. 30(10) 2002) with Ramna Police Station last year and mentioned that some influential occupiers, including owners of Nakshi Homes, Aftab Dairy Milk and Nagar Chhaya Neer, grabbed the state land.

The case was handed over to the CID and an investigation team has initially found the allegation true and is planning to take action against the accused.

"We have proof that the grabbers fabri-

cated land documents. We found a distinct dissimilarity between the fake documents and official documentation in land records," a CID official said on condition of anonymity.

The outlook of the area has changed over the last few years. The already constructed high-rises apart, at least eight apartment buildings are under construction for which Rajuk said none of them has approval.

Because of unplanned constructions, the road went through bends and curves, creating traffic snarls on the way and in the lanes feeding into it.

The British government in 1875 and 1876 acquired the land for the then Dhaka Municipality. The land accusation case No. 2 was recorded in the Kolkata Gazette (Page 727) in 1875. After completion of the municipality's work, the land was handed over to the Land and Revenue Department in 1909.

The Star City investigation further revealed that the illegal transfer of land ownership from public to private began in 1975, as the grabbers projected one Rabindra Basak as the owner of the land.

SA *Khatian*, the second land record book, does not have any documentation of the plots. But it was mentioned in a confi-

dential report of the land ministry in 1978 that the government incurred a huge loss because of the fraud some corrupt officials connived in.

During the settlement operation in 1912, the land was recorded in two *mouzas* -- *Kakrail mouza* and *Ramna mouza*. The plots in *Kakrail mouza* were recorded as government land, but the land in *Ramna mouza* was wrongly recorded in the name of its old owner and some of his tenants, the sources said.

A parliamentary standing committee asked the land ministry in September to take tough measures, including deploying army if need be, to recover government land from the grabbers.

The committee also asked the ministry to submit a report in 90 days on the illegally occupied government land in six metropolitan cities, including Dhaka.

But the land ministry is learnt to have made no headway in recovering any plot of the grabbed land.

"The recovery of government land is underway," said Land Minister M Shamsul Islam without specifying any development in the ministry's preparation for submitting the report on illegal land occupation before the deadline expires on December 8.



Illegal occupiers have staked out the land on either side of the link road between Shilpakala Academy and Bangladesh Bank.

Brokers allure passport seekers, cops abet them

SHAMIM ASHRAF

Tip-hungry brokers and bank officials face almost no legal action for extracting money from passport applicants for so-called assistance, as officials of the Passport Bhaban and law enforcers abet them.

A group of brokers mills around the passport office in Agargaon all day long to allure people into their "help trap" and boasts of their links to the Special Branch for quick verification of passport applications.

"We will do everything for you except paying the fees and you will get your passport in much less time than needed," said Enayet, a broker working with Dhaka Store in front of the passport office.

"Pay us Tk 1,000 in tips, we will get you a passport in two days. But it will take you six to seven days if you submit the fees to the bank yourself. We finish the work in less than a week in place of a month and 25 days in place of three months," he said.

The brokers home in on their 'clients' and halt anybody passing by them.

"They have intercepted and tried to harass me. They did not know me," said Waheedul Haque, director-general of the Department of Passport and Immigration.

"We have asked law enforcers many times to clear the area of the brokers. Police drive them away, but they come back and resume their activities after a short time," he said.

"We ask people not to go to the *dalals* (brokers). But they cannot come to our office straight, as the brokers intercept them on the way and whisk them away with a promise of easing passport processing, which they say is complex and time-consuming," another top official said.

Some policemen were deployed at the entry to the passport office to stop harassment, but they themselves stop people entering the office. "Police allow brokers to roam the area but sometimes halt passport seekers at the gate instead, letting them be trapped by the middlemen," a passport seeker complained.

Officer-in-Charge of Mohammadpur Police Station Abdul Malek said, "When we raid the area, every broker plays the passport seeker. But the situation is much better than before."

The brokers are not alone to blame. Most of the 22 officials of Sonali Bank, Agargaon branch, where people have to submit fees for new passports or renewals, are also engaged in the deceptive assistance.

The officials are learnt to charge a client 'tips' up to Tk 250 -- less than what the roadside brokers do -- as they have good relations with passport officials. "They get more clients. People trust them as they work in government office," a roadside broker despaired of his low income.

Some bank officials sell passport forms in office, although they are for

free distribution from the passport office. A notice hangs at the bank: "Only passport forms are sold here -- not stamps."

Some traders in Agargaon allege the bank officials are interested more in passport-visa processing than official work and keep bank customers waiting in queue for hours.

Two officials have been reported to be working as moneychangers inside the bank.

The manager of the bank, Ayubur Rahman, denied the allegation and said: "I know this happened before I joined on January 14."

During a visit by Star City on November 15, some bank officials entered the manager's room with passports in hand before he asked them to leave and come later.

Many arrested at Zia International Airport for passport fraud were learnt to have their passports processed by brokers and bank officials, who used fake signatures and seals.

Asked to comment on the involvement of passport officials in the fraud, Waheedul Haque said he did not have proof yet, adding: "Still, I will look into it."

He asked the applicants to contact the information desk at the Passport Bhaban for any query or help and not to buy forms from brokers.

MEHENDI UTSAV



The 'Mehendi Utsav' at Palanno on Dhanmondi Road 27 was inaugurated by TV personalities Opi Karim and Joya Ahsan yesterday, top. Running until the eve of Eid, the henna festival features gifted Fine Arts Institute students, bottom, offering their skills and innovative designs to brighten the

'We shall overcome,' they sing at Sandra's happy home

CHARLOTTE JACQUEMART

"My name is Saddam and Bush is looking for me," the nine-year-old boy shouted out, grinning at visiting reporters and turning somersaults in the air.

Saddam, born in 1994 and named after the deposed Iraqi president, is one of the 73 children living in the road No. 7C house in Uttara.

Together with their *baba* (father) Jatindra Kumar Das and his family, the children form a big happy unit.

Jatindra is the director of the orphanage in the house No. 2B, sponsored for over 30 years by Sandra Simpson, a Canadian. Her foundation, "Families for Children", has a chapter in India.

The Families for Children in Dhaka since 1972 has grown out of the need to help two lakh rape victims of the 1971 liberation war.

In 1972 to 1984, up to 1,500 "war babies" were also adopted abroad for free, which is no longer possible as the law of adoption changed in 1985.

Simpson puts around 10,000 Canadian dollars into the Dhaka home a month. The money is spent on food, rent, salary, school and health, among others, for some physically challenged kids.

"We can host as many as 100 children," Jatindra said. "We have

kids of all ages. Their mothers find their way to our home -- mostly hearing from others."

Most children are not real orphans. But their mothers sent their kids to the orphanage for free adoption, as they were not able to take care of them themselves.

Mohammed is one of them: his father died before his birth and whose mother was desperate as she had already two other children to raise.

The children live in three locations of the centre that has a second small unit, where older girls are living. The second unit includes a special care section for the physically challenged children whom the orphanage has never refused to accept.

One more home, just recently opened, is situated in Rupganj, about 30 kilometres off the capital. The youngest 10 members of the family are enjoying life out there in a beautiful landscape -- fishing, swimming and boating in a pond. A peaceful place, far from the madding crowd in Dhaka.

Ajite Kumar Das, the eldest son of the family and in charge of the finances of the home, is a little worried about the future. "Sandra Simpson is getting older. What will happen once she is not there any longer for help?"

The orphanage is recognised by the Bangladesh government but does not get any financial support from that side, he adds.

During a Star City visit to the orphanage, some children, clinging to the visitors, have gathered to sing: "We shall overcome" and also some Bangla songs.

They show their visitors around -- proudly: the bedrooms, shared by six to eight children, the classroom furnished with wooden benches, English books and booklets, and the heart piece of the house -- a new computer-lab with ten PCs, sponsored by Finland.

"Microsoft Word, Microsoft PowerPoint, Microsoft games," listed little Saddam, unwinding in the background, obviously proud.

For Saddam and his brothers and sisters, it is bliss to be there: had they been not in the orphanage, they would have worked instead of playing, laughing and going to school.

What they hear and learn stimulates them to have plans for their own lives, once they are grownups. They would like to become artists, doctors and teachers. And some are crazy about sports. "I would like to become a gymnast," says Ratull. So does Saddam -- if George W Bush does not catch him before.

EID SHOPPING SPREE



From footpath stalls to well-stocked shops and boutiques, Dhaka was a shopping hive yesterday. City dwellers were out stocking up on Eid finery, each according to their budget, before reaching the train station, bus stop or launch terminals to journey home for the holidays.