



In plain view of everyone, the killing of fish, aquatic animals and insects goes on in the beautiful Ratna river. The makeshift sheds on both sides of the river are used by guards to protect the catch in the fishing net, set across the river, and the docked boats are used to transport the catch. A few hundred feet away, just past the curve, a similar structure can be seen in the river. Such illegal structures have been placed across the Ratna and Shutki rivers in at least 20 places of Baniachong upazila under Habiganj, alleged locals. The photo of the river was taken nine kilometres away from the upazila headquarters.

PHOTO:STAR

When two years is not enough

The authorities appear to have been in their slumbers for about two years, during when all sorts of aquatic animals continue to be killed in the Ratna and Shutki rivers in Baniachong upazila, threatening ecology and biodiversity

MINTU DESHWARA, back from Baniachong

While many rivers in the country are dying slowly due to encroachment, several others, such as the Ratna and Shutki in Baniachong upazila of Habiganj, are facing a different predicament -- being robbed of all their aquatic life.

Thanks to the indifference of the authorities concerned, a chairman of a union parishad and several others have been destroying aquatic animals and insects in the two rivers for the last couple of years by placing fine fishing nets across the rivers -- in not one, not two, but at least 20 places.

This correspondent during a visit to the upazila recently came across two such nets, supported by bamboo structures, on the Ratna river.

Every single aquatic animal or insect that tries to pass through the nets are getting caught as holes in the nets are exceedingly fine. Later on, during collection of fish, the workers engaged by the net owners simply destroy all other living creatures caught in the nets.

Such practice is not only threatening the

ecology and biodiversity in the area, but also causing a decline in fish population in the rivers.

Besides, locals who depend on fishing for their livelihoods have been struggling immensely to provide for their families through alternative means.

According to the Protection and Conservation of Fish Act, 1950, it is a punishable offence to set up any structure that obstructs flow of a river.

Prof Dr Md Shahab Uddin, dean of Faculty of Fisheries at Sylhet Agricultural University, said fish fry and aquatic life are being destroyed due to the unabated netting. "If this is not stopped right now, the reserve of indigenous varieties of fish will decrease to a drastic level."

A number of villagers requesting anonymity said Nine Mandori Union Parishad (UP) Chairman Sheikh Shamsul, also former vice president of Awami League's Habiganj district unit; Anwar Khan, Arab Ali, Juber Ahmed, Shamsul Haque and Yunus Khan with the help of several others have are behind the illegal fishing in the Ratna and Shutki rivers in the upazila.

Fisherman Sadek Mia from Bhatipara village said, "Most of the villagers living by the river depend on fishing. But some influential people have illegally set up nets with bamboo structures at around 20 different points of the rivers, depriving the villagers of their livelihood."

Hasan Mia, also a fisherman from the same village, said, "The nets are causing obstruction to the river's natural flow. Moreover, all sorts of fish and aquatic animals, including frogs and snakes, are dying after getting trapped in the nets. Only a few years ago, there used to be a plenty of fish in the rivers. But now, the number has fallen sharply."

Although the authorities were informed on numerous occasions, they did not take any action against the influential people responsible for the illegal act, he alleged.

Asked about the illegal structures in the rivers, UP Chairman Sheikh Shamsul denied any involvement.

Meanwhile, Juber Ahmed, refuting the allegation raised against him, said, "I am not involved in [setting up] the bamboo enclosures [in the rivers]. Rather, I buy fish

from fishermen and sell it to others."

Tofazzal Sohel, general secretary of Bangladesh Poribesh Andolon in Habiganj, alleged that although the illegal activities have been going on for quite some time, the authorities concerned seem to be reluctant in taking any action against the offenders.

Local fishermen are being deprived of their livelihood, while local species of fish and other aquatic animals are going extinct due to the mindless act, said Imdadul Hossain Khan, general secretary of Baniachong Press Club.

Contacted, Baniachong Upazila Nirbahi Officer Mamun Khandakar said some of the structures in the Shutki river could not be removed due to stay orders from the court.

He also said they would soon take necessary action against the people who built the other obstructions in the Shutki and Ratna rivers.

ML Saikat, executive engineer of Water Development Board in Habiganj, said the obstructions in the Ratna and Shutki would eventually be removed under the ongoing drives of the government against river encroachers.

College teacher suspended

9 allegations including sexual harassment of girls raised

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Lalmonirhat

The authorities of Barabari Shaheed Abul Kashem College in Lalmonirhat Sadar upazila on Monday suspended a teacher on charge of nine crimes including sexual harassment of girl students.

The accused, ABM Faruk Siddiki, hailing from Barabari Shibram village in Lalmonirhat Sadar upazila, is an assistant professor of Bangla at the college.

On January 11, the college authorities issued him a notice, citing nine crimes committed by him earlier, and asked him to show cause within seven days.

"Faruk Siddiki did not respond to the show cause notice, even he misbehaved with the senior fellows over the matter. The college authority has suspended him and notified all the authorities concerned about the decision," said Snigdha Chakrabarty, acting principal of the college.

"The accused teacher, a locally influential man, vitiated the academic environment of the college. Many families in the area did not send their daughters to study at this college in fear of him," she said.

The nine allegations brought against Faruk includes stalking and sexually harassing college girls, misbehaving with colleagues and torturing his wife in public.

The show cause notice mentioned that Faruk kidnapped a girl student of the college in 2010 and sexually harassed her, keeping her in a hidden place for two months.

Afterwards, he was arrested and kept in jail for six months but later the case was 'settled'.

"We will write to the higher authorities concerned, seeking legal action after discharging him from the college," said the acting principal.

Faruk's wife, who lodged a case against him with the court on Monday, said, "I was very much disturbed due to my husband's character. As I protested strongly about his immoral acts with women, he tortured me at a public place a few days ago and drove me out of home."

Contacting over mobile, ABM Faruk Siddiki said, "Allegations against me concerning women are not new, I will deal with it."

Then he cut the line and put the phone switched off.

Boy killed over trivial matter, stepmother held

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Tangail

A schoolboy was killed allegedly by his stepmother for watching television with high volume.

The deceased was identified as Saif Ahmed Walid, 9, son of Salahuddin Imon and a Class IV student of a local school in the town.

On Monday, accused Sabrina Nahar Sinthe gave confessional statement to the court of Munira Sultana, additional chief judicial magistrate in Tangail, under Section 164, said Tanvir Ahmed, court inspector.

The court later sent her to jail, he added.

Shofiqul Islam, additional superintendent of police in Tangail, said Salahuddin Imon, owner of a computer training centre, along with his wife Sabrina and son Saif had been living in a rented house of the town's Amin Bazar area for the last few years.

Police recovered the body of Saif from the house on Saturday night.

During interrogation, Sabrina said when Saif was watching TV with high volume on Saturday night, she asked him to reduce the sound.

As Saif did not do so, she got angry and tied his hands and mouth with her scarfs. She later confined him to the room.

After half an hour, she entered the room and found Saif senseless.

Croplands under water as canal blocked for fish cultivation

Farmers worried as Boro cultivation on 1500 bighas hampered

AZIBOR RAHMAN, Jhenidah

Boro cultivation on around 1500 bighas of land is hampered due to overflowing of Majdia beel (waterbody) as a consequence of building an embankment at the mouth of Sonalidanga canal in Kaliganj upazila of Jhenidah.

The 1440-bigha beel touching Badurgachha, Mahishhati, Badedehi, Majdia and Sonalidanga villages is under Barobazar 9 No union in Kaliganj.

Locals said Barobazar union parishad (UP) chairman Abul Kalam Azad, and his brothers, who are cultivating fish at Majdia beel for several years, built embankment at the mouth of Sonalidanga canal in March last year, impeding flowing down of water from the beel through the canal.

Consequently, overflowing of the waterbody keeps 1500 bighas of cultivable

land in the area inundated.

Villagers dare not protest as Abul Kalam Azad, also secretary of union unit of Awami League, is an influential man.

"I grow crops on my 28 bighas of land beside the waterbody. But this year I will not be able to cultivate Boro paddy there as all the land is under water due to building of the embankment at the mouth of Sonalidanga canal," said a farmer of Majdia village, seeking anonymity.

The local administration should take immediate steps to remove the embankment so that hundreds of farmers of five villages can cultivate Boro paddy, he said.

A good number of farmers echoed the same. "I took loan from a local NGO and had plans to repay it after selling the Boro paddy that I would grow on my three bighas of land beside the waterbody. Now I am worried as the land is under water," said a farmer from

Jaganathpur village.

UP chairman Abul Kalam Azad could not be reached for his version as nobody received his cell phone when this correspondent called several times.

Demanding steps to remove the embankment to save them from losses, local farmers submitted a petition with hundreds of signatures to Jhenidah deputy commissioner (DC) on December 4 last year and the DC asked the upazila administration to see the matter.

Kaliganj Upazila Assistant Commissioner (Land) Bhupal Rani Sarkar said, "Following direction from the higher authority, I visited the spot and learnt that a case is pending with the court. And so, nothing can be done regarding the matter at this moment."

Contacted, Kaliganj Upazila Nirbahi Officer Subarna Rani Shaha said she will take action if the stakeholders approach her.



Defying the biting cold, a section of people get into the Mahananda in Tentulia Bunglow area of Panchagarh for collecting stones from the riverbed. The photo was taken on Sunday.

PHOTO:KONGKONKARMAKER



Embankment built at the mouth of Sonalidanga canal in Jhenidah's Kaliganj upazila impedes flowing down of water from the adjacent Majdia beel, eventually inundating a large area of croplands in the area.

PHOTO:AZIBORRAHMAN

Orphan tortured by employer on theft charge

UNB, Laxmipur

Police on Monday detained two people in connection with a case for torturing a boy, tying him to an electric pole, on theft charge on Saturday.

The law enforcers arrested Rashed, a leather shop owner in Laxmipur municipality area, and one of his accomplices from Banchhanagar area the district town on Monday evening, Officer in Charge of Sadar Police Station AKM Azizur Rahman said.

Earlier on Saturday, the 12-year-old victim, Nirab Hossain, son of late Kiran Hossain of the municipality area, was accused by his employer Rashed on theft charge.

Later, Rashed and his men tortured the orphan boy inhumanly by tying him to an electric pole. They also placed a garland of shoes around his neck.

Nirab, however, denied the allegation of theft and said he had secretly taken the amount equal to his wages as the owner wasn't paying his dues.

A video clip showing the boy being tortured inhumanly went viral on Facebook, causing a huge public outcry across the country.

Locals said, since losing both his parents, Nirab was being brought up by his maternal grandmother and the boy used to work at Rashed's shop to make ends meet.

On Saturday afternoon, Rashed accused Nirab of stealing and the former along with his two accomplices tied the minor boy to a nearby electric pole and beat him mercilessly.

They also placed the garland of shoes around Nirab's neck and made him walk through the locality before handing him over to Sadar Police Station.

But moments later, they took the boy back from the police station and arranged an arbitration meeting with village elders on Sunday to settle the issue.

The arbitrators, whose motives were not clear, found the boy guilty and fined him Tk 30,000.

Obviously unable to do so, when his grandmother refused to pay the fine they started torturing the boy again.

Eventually he was rescued by police and admitted to Laxmipur Sadar Hospital. Contacted, Rashed said they boy stole money from his shop and the arbitration found him guilty.

OC said a case was filed over the incident.