



PICTURE TELLS THE TALE: Apparently oblivious of the risk during the ongoing outbreak of coronavirus, a good number of workers stay in close proximity as they prepare for going to work at Shamsheernagar tea garden in Moulvibazar's Kamalganj upazila yesterday. *Inset*, even after starting on foot, workers at Karimpur tea garden in Rajnagar upazila of the district remain too close.

PHOTO: MINTUDESHWARA

CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC

Tea workers exposed to high risk

Safety measures virtually absent in almost all the tea gardens

MINTU DESHWARA, Moulvibazar

About five lakh people living and working in 163 tea gardens in the country seem vulnerable during the ongoing spread of coronavirus as they often come in close contacts.

"There is no sanitizer, no soap, no clean water where tea leaves are plucked. We have to respond to the call of nature in the open as there is no latrine nearby. Afterwards, we have to use water from the dirty canals running through the tea garden," said Binota Ghatuar, 45, a woman tea worker at Kalighat tea garden in Sreemangal upazila of Moulvibazar.

"Our houses are close together. A large number of tea workers bathe in the same river," she said.

Mithun Kurmi, president of Uttaran Bangladesh, said the deputy commissioner (DC) of Moulvibazar has instructed the tea garden authorities to take necessary measures to keep tea workers safe from the risk of coronavirus infection.

"While the tea workers remain in safe distances while working in the garden, they stay together for much of the time in the afternoon when they take their lunch with tea leaves. Besides, hygiene rules are hardly followed. It poses the risk of coronavirus infection," he said.

Tea worker Asha Ornal, joint secretary of Shamsheernagar Tea Garden Panchayet Committee said, "Everything in the town is closed. We do not understand who is healthy or

who is sick."

"I met with the tea garden manager on Friday morning and talked about different laws. We have closed the garden at our own initiative," said Ornal.

"We, 34 members of eight families, live in six houses in a small space. We live together with our cows and goats," said 45-year-old Santosh Rolly, a female worker at Shamsheernagar tea garden in Moulvibazar's Kamalganj upazila.

Faruq Mahmud Chowdhury, president of Sushasoneer Jonno Nagorik's Sylhet chapter, told this correspondent, densely populated living quarters, malnutrition, lack of awareness, unhygienic living conditions and consequent weak immunity compound the risk of coronavirus

infection among tea workers.

He alleged that neither the government nor the tea companies have taken realistic steps in this regard.

About five lakh tea garden people including one lakh permanent tea workers in 163 tea gardens of the country are facing the risk of coronavirus infection, said Pankaj Kondo, vice president of Bangladesh Cha Sramik Union.

"Workers of a tea garden stopped their work from Friday and five others from Saturday although the authorities are yet to take decision. We demand suspension of work at all tea gardens to prevent the spread of the coronavirus," he added.

AKM Rafiqul Haque, acting director of Project Development Unit (PDU)

of Bangladesh Tea Board Research Institute, said tea workers usually stay in the remote area. But if they come in contact with the people of the town, there will be risk.

Contacted, Moulvibazar Deputy Commissioner Nazia Shirin said legal action will be taken if the instructions regarding coronavirus prevention is violated by anybody.

Dr Philip Gain, researcher and director of Society for Environment and Human Development, told this correspondent, "Tea gardens workers work in groups. There is no facilities like hand washing, sanitizers, supply of pure water for the tea workers in their workplaces. Besides, sale of tea is already suspended. And so, it is very important to close tea gardens for

saving the workers from coronavirus."

Meanwhile, the authorities in India's Assam, bordering Sylhet region, have imposed lockdown in 850 tea gardens there from March 24 to March 31, he said.

GM Shiblee, chairman of Sylhet branch in Bangladesh Cha Sangsad, the tea garden owners' association, told this correspondent, "Tea workers are watering in the tea plants and repairing their thatched houses in this time ahead of the rains. Besides, if we close the tea gardens, temporary workers will be deprived of benefits."

Shah Alam, chairman of Bangladesh Cha Sangsad, said, "We are following government rules. We are maintaining social distance and following the official instructions regarding the tea gardens."



A scene of the road cum embankment reconstruction work, conducted through voluntary initiative of locals, beside Naluar Haor in Jagannathpur upazila of Moulvibazar.

PHOTO: MINTUDESHWARA

Haor people repair embankment at own initiative

Farmers in Sunamganj's Jagannathpur UZ giving service, money to save crops, dwellings from floods

MINTU DESHWARA, from Sunamganj

People of twenty villages near the five-kilometre road cum embankment from Sherpur to Naluar Haor in Jagannathpur upazila of Sunamganj have continued voluntary work to reconstruct the road to protect their croplands and houses and roads.

They took the initiative four years ago after their repeated appeals to the authorities yielded no results.

During a recent visit to the area, this correspondent found around locals working to repair the road.

The protection embankment at different places of the road breached due to heavy rains and onrush of hilly water and the overflowing water caused damage to paddy fields and dwellings in different times, locals said.

"Following our repeated appeals, officials and public representatives visited the areas and promised to get the embankment repaired but it was not done," said Bishnu Das of Hartazpur village.

"Later villagers arranged money and bamboos at their own initiative and many of them provided voluntary service for repairing the embankment," he said.

Farmer Nurul Islam of Sherpur village said, "As there was no result even after repeatedly holding rallies in front of the offices of public representatives and officials of the administration, we started work on the road and it is going on."

"Farmers and other locals as well

as expatriates provided money for the purpose. During the repair work, we give priority to vulnerable road areas," he added.

"A considerable amount of paddy grown in Naluar Haor area is carried through this road. But the road becomes muddy even when there is moderate rain, causing trouble for vehicular movement," said Lutfur Rahman, a resident of Sherpur village.

"We started work with our own money for reconstruction of the 5-km-long (16,400 feet) road in 2017. So far, we have completed work on 4,880 feet road at a total cost of Tk 28 lakh.

"Last year, the upazila nirbahi officer (UNO) inspected the road work and announced that at least one kilometre of the road will be constructed by the administration this year. But the work is yet to start," he added.

Rajat Cup, a farmer of Jatrapasha village, said many farmers in the haor areas have to leave their lands uncultivated due to flooding and problem in transporting the paddy.

Rajat and several other farmers demanded that the government allocate sufficient money every year for protection of crops and facilitating their carrying through the road.

Contacted, Jagannathpur UNO Mahfuzul Alam Masum said, "I inspected the road work last year and assured the locals of government assistance, which is still under process."

Once uncultivated, now blossoming with watermelons

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Patuakhali

A vast tract of sandy land at a remote village in Rangabali upazila remained uncultivated for years but it is now blossoming with watermelon, much to the happiness of farmers and agriculture officials.

The growers in the village produce watermelon on the land for the first time this year, said agriculture officials.

Jahajmara is a small village on the sea shore of the Bay in the newly formed Maudubi union of the upazila.

Like Hasi Begum, many watermelon growers in the village are very happy to get bumper yield and fair prices of the popular summer fruit for the first time.

Hasi along with her husband and son lives in a house under a government-run housing project in the area.

Last year, Department of Agricultural Extension (DAE) in Rangabali for the first time encouraged farmers to produce watermelon on the sandy land.

Hasi said she cultivated watermelon on three acres of land at a cost of Tk 1.50 lakh. She borrowed the money from a local NGO and some of her relatives. The land is now filled with watermelons.

They dug a well to irrigate the watermelon fields, said Hasi's husband Faruk.

"I have already sold watermelon at Tk 20,000 and hope to sell the summer fruit worth Tk 5 lakh," said Hasi.

Like Hasi and her husband Faruk, 25 farmers have planted watermelon on the sandy land this year.

An official of Rangabali DAE said 35 hectares of land in the village have been brought under watermelon cultivation this year.



Watermelon growers at Jahajmara village in Patuakhali's Rangabali upazila are very happy to get bumper yield of the summer fruit. They produce watermelon on the sandy land for the first time this year.

PHOTO: STAR

Sub-assistant Agriculture Officer of Rangabali upazila Md Jewel said Patuakhali district is mainly dependent on Aman cultivation. Usually farmers in the area start planting watermelon in January after the Aman harvest in December. But these farmers in the village cultivated watermelon on the uncultivated land in December. The farmers of the village are getting bumper production of the summer fruit due to advanced planting.

Traders from different districts, including Dhaka, are coming to the remote area to buy watermelons, he said, adding, that 7,560 hectares of land in Rangabali have been brought

under watermelon cultivation this year.

Farmer Suman Dalal of the village said he planted watermelon on 20 acres of land at a cost of Tk 60,000. He has already sold watermelons at Tk one lakh.

Rafiqul Islam, a trader from Dhaka, said he bought a medium size watermelon at Tk 50 to Tk 75 in different areas of the upazila last year, which was bought at Tk 80 to Tk 110 in Jahajmara this year.

Upazila Agriculture Officer Monirul Islam said watermelon farmers of Jahajmara village are getting good price due to advanced planting.



In an attempt to aware people on how to prevent the spread of coronavirus, members of Bangladesh Army conducted an awareness campaign in Pirojpur town yesterday.

PHOTO: STAR

Schoolteacher burnt alive

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Pirojpur

A woman was burnt to death as a fire broke out at her house in Bhandaria upazila early yesterday.

The deceased, Mahfuza Parvin, 38, daughter of late Abdul Wahab Howlader of Bhandaria village, was a teacher at Khan Saheb Abdul Majid Jomadder Kindergarten.

Station Officer at Bhandaria Fire Station Faruk Hossain said the fire might have originated from an electric short-circuit around 3:00am and soon engulfed the entire two-storey wooden house.

Mahfuza, who was sleeping on the first floor, failed to come out of the house and was burnt alive, he said, adding that the fire also partially burnt an adjacent house.