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Poachers raid reserve forest



En route to extinction

A Great Indian Hornbill, popularly known as Dhanesh, at its sanctuary in the Saapchari forest in southern Sylhet. Thanks to poachers, they have become a rarity and are on a further decline.

—Courtesy photo: Sirajul Hossain

By Shehab Ahmed

Poachers preying on the natural forest at Saapchari in southern Sylhet region are endangering a wide variety of wild life, including the last retreat of Hullock Gibbon in Bangladesh and 246 species of birds, nature watchers said.

Poachers are working in the virgin forest, indiscriminately felling trees threatening the wild life. Wing Commander (rtm) Inam-al-Huq, noted nature photographer and a leader of Nature Conservation Movement (NACOM) said.

Huq said some people have gone on a rampage, claiming that they have permits to extract 'aging and dying' trees from the reserve forest in Sylhet and Maulvibazar districts.

In late 1997 the forest department cleared one kilometre strip of the forest apparently for cane-planting in total disregard for the evergreen forest and its inhabitants.

Earlier some officials toyed with the idea of turning it into a palm plantation, destroying a good portion of it and driving away the leopards who once lived there.

Law prohibits extraction in the natural forests under a five-year moratorium expires this month.

Ministry of Forests and Environment officials, however, denied that they have given anyone the permission to extract woods from Saapchari.

A highly-placed source admitted that they have received reports about poachers active in the forest in connivance of a section of forest officials.

He said that the government is keen to preserve natural forests. The moratorium on felling of trees is going to be extended for another five-year period from next month. Necessary process is under way to extend the moratorium, introduced in 1995, he added.

The moratorium covers seven per cent of the 17 per cent woodlands, including the land mass.

But a FAO estimate put the country's total forest coverage to only nine per cent of the land mass.

A section of unscrupulous businessmen are selling vetch, an imported toxic lentil, in ground form as gram flower (besan) taking advantage of holy Ramadan that begins this month.

We have received reports that vetch is being sold as besan, after a recent ban on import and sale of the toxic product," said a commerce ministry official.

The ground vetch has been found in shops and markets of the city and officials feared that the flour might have already been despatched to different parts of the country.

besan paste, made of a popular ground lentil known as *khechari*, is widely used as a dip for frying different types of eaters. The flour and the paste are particularly popular during the month of Ramadan, for preparing a wide range of *iftar* items.

It was in the wake of reports regarding its toxicity that the government had banned open sale or import of vetch marketed as lentil and ordered withdrawal of the entire quantum of vetch from the market, the official said.

The commerce ministry on Tuesday directed city corporations, municipalities and the district administrations to crack down on those involved in the malpractice.

"Faxed messages have been sent to all deputy commissioners for taking immediate steps in this regard," the official said.

The government banned the item on October 17 following press reports that vetch, which looks like *masoor* pulse, is toxic and can impair eyesight,

Political temperature rises in Sylhet

From Staff Correspondent

Affect human tissues and even cause lathyrism.

The item was imported as 'lentil for human consumption', mainly from Australia.

Earlier, as a preliminary step, the government had ordered that vetch is to be seized if and when it was found being sold in the open market.

According to press reports, 1,100 tonnes of vetch had been imported from Australia during the last four months of the cur-

rent fiscal, 6,410 tonnes during the last fiscal and a total of 50,000 tonnes since 1992.

Sources said that a section of unscrupulous traders, have this time opted to grind and convert the toxic merchandise into *besan*, which is hard to differentiate from normal *besan*.

The officials could not say if they had any mechanism to test the flour and confirm its level of toxicity.

The Supreme Court yesterday stayed till December 8 operation of the High Court order staying the functioning of the Enquiry Committee on alleged irregularities and rigging of votes in the parliamentary by-election in Tangail-8 constituency.

The HC fixed December 8 for hearing the leave petition in this regard.

The HC on November 28 stayed functioning of the Enquiry Committee and issued a rule nisi on the government and the Chief Election Commissioner.

There is no end to sufferings of patients, particularly those in neurology, heart, gynaecology and surgery departments, due to lack of ambulance service. Patients have to make their own arrangement to come to the hospital or to return home.

An old patient said, "I had to hire a private ambulance paying TK 400 to return to my house in the city's Bashabo area following a gall bladder operation."

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The speakers said the university authorities have named the halls and buildings after some national heroes to uphold the spirit of the Liberation War. These should remain unchanged for the greater national interest, they said.

Vested quarters are now out to create chaos in the name of movement, they alleged. The peace-loving people of Sylhet should take a strong stand on this issue, they said.

Later, a memorandum addressed to the Prime Minister was handed over to the Deputy Commissioner.

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