



Oil spills and siltation posing a major threat to river Karnaphuli

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Oil slicks pollute Karnaphuli

NURUL ALAM

Oil slicks are floating at the channel of Chittagong port and at the outer anchorage that threatened the marine lives due to pollution, sources said.

Consequently, the river Karnaphuli on which country's major seaport

Chittagong is based, has been exposed to massive pollution due to such

Oil spillage from the cargo vessels calling here.

Around 1500 cargo vessels including 40 oil tankers arrive at Chittagong port annually, port sources said.

A senior official of Chittagong port on condition of anonymity said, "Oil spillage from the cargo vessels at the port's channel and at the outer anchorage is a common phenomenon while oil slicks are frequently found here as steps were hardly taken for survey".

Meanwhile, Chittagong Port Authority (CPA) fined about 100 vessels including 12 foreign ships during its ongoing crackdown against oil spillage at the

Karnaphuli river and its surrounding areas in the past one and half year period, port sources said.

CPA also took action against 68 organisations located on the bank of the river Karnaphuli, on charge of dumping garbage and other effluents into

the river, port sources said. The fines realised during the crackdown amounted to around 23lakh taka.

Padma Oil Company, a subsidiary of Bangladesh Petroleum Corporation (BPC), was fined on Sunday Tk 50,000/- for causing pollution in the river Karnaphuli by dumping its wastes and effluents.

Action was also taken against other oil installations, soap factories,

cement factories and dry docks located around the bank of the river Karnaphuli, port sources said.

The magistrate of CPA Munir Chowdhury launched the crackdown frequently on receipt of information about oil spillage from vessels and dumping of garbage and effluents from different organisations.

Such a drive was initiated from the year 2001, but before that no step was taken for launching anti-pollution raids at Chittagong port limit areas, sources concerned said.

As a result, earlier many cargo vessels responsible for oil spillage or dumping of garbage escaped any action because it was neither monitored nor recorded at all.

Even some vessels which came at Chittagong port loaded with food grains or other essential commodities, reportedly dumped the damaged cargo at the outer anchorage during its departure from this main seaport.

Sources say that mechanised boats operating in the Karnaphuli channel and ships brought for scrapping in Sitakundu coastal area are also responsible for oil spillage.

Large number of vessels are dismantled at Sitakundu ship breaking yard every year that allegedly cause pollution with oil spillage due to lack of any action or monitoring system, sources said.

The ship breaking yards stretch over 30 kilometer coastal areas at Sitakundu.

Officials say that Chittagong port could not yet develop the reception facilities for the waste and garbage of the vessels calling here.

The environmental department also hardly go for any action against the menace, sources said.

An official of environment department said, "we can not function as we want due to various limitations and lack logistics".

BIWTC needs care

Passengers suffer due to wretched and inadequate number of vessels on Chittagong-Barisal route

ABDULLAH AL MAHMUD

The services of Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Corporation (BIWTC) emerge as a matter of growing concern for the coastal passengers as well as the organisation itself.

The passengers have been suffering due to wretched and insufficient number of vessels and the BIWTC at the same time, despite having huge passengers, incurring loss for the last few years 'mysteriously'.

Concerned circles blame the absence of pragmatic steps and decision needed for improving the service and measures to check the irregularities.

With a view to addressing the problem, BIWTC has recently introduced a modern vessel in Chittagong-Barisal route and four sea-trucks in other different coastal routes.

But it would be of little use unless BIWTC is sincere and takes care of the interest and needs of the passengers, the people of different coastal areas said.

Prior to the addition of these five vessel and sea-trucks to its fleet, BIWTC had three vessels in Chittagong-Barisal route, nine in Dhaka-Khulna route operating under Rocket Service and four sea-trucks in different coastal routes.

All these three vessels -- MV Alauddin Ahmed, MV Monirul Haq and MV Abdul Matin -- were procured around three decades back and are now tenure expired.

The wretched and worn out vessels consume several times higher the normal time while they go out of order every now and then and very often one or two undergo repairing and maintenance frustrating passengers.

The frustration leads to a consequent remarkable decline in the number of passengers as many people of Bhola and Barisal are forced to avoid BIWTC service and undertake hazards of travelling through land routes.

Due to the decline in passen-

gers, the BIWTC had closed down its Chittagong-Kutubdia route two years back while at present it raises the question of economic viability of operating vessels up to Bhola and Barisal.

As such, the operation of the recently introduced modern vessel MV Bara Aolia in Chittagong-Barisal route has been kept limited within Chittagong and Hatia en route to Sandwip.

However, the coastal passengers of this zone said, with the people of the off-shore islands of Sandwip, Hatia and Bhola having no other means of travelling, the vessels of Chittagong-Barisal route leave Sadarghat terminal in Chittagong with passengers and goods several times higher the capacity.

Though the vessels become almost empty by the time they reach Barisal, the BIWTC's decision not to operate the newly-procured modern

and air-conditioned vessel MV Bara Aolia - up to Barisal greatly disappointed the people of those areas.

One Almas Hossain Sarder said, "the people of Barisal and Bhola are forced to avoid BIWTC service as it takes several times higher than the normal time, but while travelling along with family everyone crave for a good service of this marine route."

"As in the land route a passenger of Barisal or Bhola has to change the mode of transports for several times, most of the well off families had been waiting for a modern vessel to offer a comfortable journey in this route for long," he said.

"The decision not to operate the new vessel up to Barisal and Bhola has disappointed many," he added.

Besides, the people said, introduction of vessels replacing the wretched ones and in greater number, was a growing need for the coastal people.

Pragmatic steps and decisions

to increase the number of trips between Chittagong and Hatia via Sandwip and introduction of fast moving vessels up to Barisal would surely increase the number of passengers and help BIWTC become a profitable one again. It would also reduce the length of the route.

"Introduction of more and new vessels in the route is a vital need as each of the 550-passenger capacity vessel is always overcrowded with 1000 or more passengers," said one Sarwar Jahana, a Chittagong University student and a passenger of this route.

The Assistant General Manager (Passenger) Shah Alam said, "the higher authority decided to operate the vessel up to Hatia due to the decreasing number of passenger."

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The first ever air-conditioned vessel-MV Bara Aolia.

PHOTO:STAR

SSA haunts Chittagong Port

MOHIT UL ALAM

Chittagong Port has become a burning issue over the years. The port has developed stagnancy due to inefficient management and labour unrest resulting in enormous loss to the country's foreign earnings. As the port is causing more loss than profit, an alternative way is insisted on being found out now, and that happens to be the idea of establishing a private container port at the mouth of river Karnaphuli. An American agency, called SSA, is said to have almost received the government's approval for starting a port on the downstream of the Karnaphuli. But it has become a national issue and seminars and symposiums are being held regularly to analyse the situation. As the seminars are held, the other issue of equal national importance of whether to export gas or not is easily tied up with the agenda, so that when people talk about Chittagong Port, they also talk about the natural gas.

I have attended a number of seminars on these two now closely related issues: port and gas, and as I am a layman to understand the technicalities of these issues, I try to enlighten myself by listening to the expert opinions forwarded by the designated speakers in the semi-

nars. Like every national issue, the Chittagong Port crisis has both an emotional and a practical aspect to it. The emotional thing is that Chittagong Port is the nation's pride, so its status cannot be impaired by an attempt at substituting it. The practical thing is that Chittagong Port has not been operating to its full capacity for ages. Now, to say in football language, the situation is something like this: if Batistuta doesn't deliver for Argentina should the coach not substitute him! But the SSA arguments are that the private container terminal should not be considered as an alternative one to Chittagong Port, and its volume of trade will also be a very small percentage of the total revenues earned by the main port. They also argue that the rights of revenue will go to the government of Bangladesh. Their final argument is that the terminal, if built there on the other side of Patenga, will be off the stream, and, therefore, will by no means jeopardise the movement of the vessels in and out of Chittagong.

But experts criticising the bid say that the terminal will not only affect the operational capacity of Chittagong, but also drain the national economy. The main thrust of their arguments lies in their oppo-

sition to the idea that a foreign agency will be allowed to operate independently upon the soil of Bangladesh. They deem that the agreements with the SSA will be incurring the same kind of loss Bangladesh had met with in its venture with KAFCO, which now is considered as a white elephant for Bangladesh. They also claim that the terminal will be a private affair between the SSA and some vested interests in Bangladesh, that is, people in general will not be benefited from it.

This is really the point. If our national interest is compromised then we will not allow the SSA to build a terminal at the mouth of the Karnaphuli (the critics have suggested they might erect the terminal somewhere near Selimpur -- about eight miles north of Chittagong, that SSA is unwilling to do).

Before Bangladesh permits a foreign-assisted port to operate here on its major river basin, it should first try to solve the problems of Chittagong Port. Because of mismanagement, authorial laxity, and workers' associations' strikes on and off, Chittagong Port's capacity has been so crippled that it has become one of the most expensive ports in the region for a merchant vessel to harbour. However, I heard one speaker at a seminar saying

that Chittagong Port is a costly quay is a propaganda spread by the supporters of the private terminal.

At another gathering I heard a union leader confessing that when they raised a one-point demand for the removal of a minister concerned with the Port, then another minister sent them money to raise the slogan more strongly. So internal squabbles within the government is responsible for the non-activity of the port. And there is the alliance of 22 trade union bodies that virtually controls the port. The port authority is more than helpless in restoring any semblance of normalcy to the port.

It is possible to guess that the Port being the biggest earner for the country may also be the place for illegal income of all sorts through over- or under voicing, through trading in contraband items, and through bribery. The system loss at the Port is unbelievably high. So vested-interest groups have established a wide network of racket before which all administrative measures collapse.

Everything, therefore, boils down to having an efficient and strict administration backed by a sympathetic and understanding minister. And, honesty, of course, will be core of this moot.

About SSA's claim, the government should be careful. Best is to bring it to the parliament and request the opposition to join the debate. The parliament debate then can be brought to the people for a consensus vote. Before the vote, however, as most of our country people are illiterate, the debate should thoroughly be explained to them by the national media and local agencies. If the people are not well informed about the consequences, right or wrong, they might be swayed or bought for casting their votes in favour of the party that has bought them.

Let me site an example from China, and that is from football. China did not have a professional league, but as they planned to start one they studied about its feasibility, about the craze for football among the Chinese youths, and then its potentially to lead China to a World Cup venue. After about years of contemplation at all levels of administration, the Chinese football has finally gone professional. And today China is one of the 32 countries playing in the World Cup 2002. Let us go slow about the port and the gas.

The writer is Professor, Department of English, Chittagong University.

'Preserve indigenous culture to enrich culture of Bangladesh'

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

No body would challenge the fact that the three hill districts -- Rangamati, Khagrachhari and Bandarban -- still stand well below the standard of other parts of the country, as far as the education is concerned.

Successive governments came to power with promises to make different socio-economic development programmes including improvement of education, which has been at its lowest ebb for long, failed completely to live up to their rhetoric.

Speakers at a seminar here underscored the need for inclusion of diverse language, culture and tradition of indigenous people of three hill districts of Chittagong in the curriculum for the sake of future socio-economic development of tribal areas in particular and for the greater interest of Bangladesh in general.

For this, they stressed the need for establishing institutional infrastructures such as indigenous language learning and cultivation centres, separate board and curriculum, based on indigenous language and culture, in those areas. The day-long seminar styled 'Crisis of Education of the Indigenous People in Chittagong Hill Tracts', was held at the Rangamati District Council auditorium on Sunday. Noted journalist Sunil Kanti Dey moderated the seminar with Council Chairman Dr. Manik Lal Dewan in the chair. The seminar was jointly organised by Rangamati District Council, Action-Aid Bangladesh and Green Hill, an NGO.

Deputy Minister for CHT Affairs Moni Swapan Dewan addressed the seminar as chief guest while Faisal Hossain, the country director of Action-Aid Bangladesh, was present as special guest. Director of Green Hill Mong Thuai Ching gave the address of welcome.

Cultural activist Mong Key Shoye Nu presented the key-note paper, in which he tried to identify the key reasons behind the poor condition of education and literacy as well as

the drawbacks of indigenous people residing in the hill districts and recommended some suggestions in this regard.

The resident editor of the Prothom Alo in Chittagong Abul Momen, chief news editor of Ekushey Television Monjurul Ahsan Bulbul, Additional District Magistrates of Rangamati and Bandarban Md. Fazul Haq and Shamsul Kibria Chowdhury, Head Mistress of Rangamati Girls High School Anjulica Khisa, Director (operations) of Action-Aid Shafiqul Islam, Professor of Rangamati College Hirohito Chakma and additional director (research) of Tribal Cultural Institute (TCI) in Bandarban Mong Nu Ching took part in the discussion on the topics. Later, an open-floor discussion also held.

Moni Swapan Dewan said the

tribal people of CHT are in all respects -- 'mentally-physically and economically' -- being disturbed for over two decades.

He urged the authorities concerned to take a specific policy for preservation of the novelty and integrity of indigenous culture, language, tradition and heritage. "By doing this, the culture of Bangladesh herself would also be enriched," he said.

Expressing grave concern over the increasing number of dropout, he demanded subsidies to run the 'ailing and dying' primary schools in CHT.

Moni Swapan underscored the need for setting up a 'common platform' to help flourish and ensure proper education, better healthcare and greater development in the hill districts.

Faisal Hossain urged for concerted efforts by all to help narrow

down the level of discrimination between the school-going children of CHT and that of 'main land.' He said, "The dropout rate in CHT at present is 70 against each 100 enrollment, while the figure is 40 per cent in main land. This is doleful and it demonstrates that the state failed completely to apply a non-discriminatory education system in the country."

Abul Momen said specific action plan and policy are needed to uplift the indigenous language and culture.

"We cannot let the cultural heritage of indigenous people gone into extinction by any means," he said. He said, "Language is like a river. The more you use it the more it flourishes and enriches."



PHOTO:STAR

Women Entrepreneurs Chittagong organised a sapling distribution programme on the occasion of the World Environment Day.



PHOTO:STAR

Women wait in a queue for hours to collect water from a hydrant at Batali Road area in the city. The water crisis remains a longstanding problem for the city dwellers.