

Tk 270 crore of public land occupied



ALASDAIR MACDONALD

The Ministry of Land is unable to recover over 15 acres of prime public khas land from illegal occupiers.

SULTANA RAHMAN

The Ministry of Land is unable to recover 15.84 acres* of prime land in the Nilkhet-Babupura area from 34 listed illegal occupiers.

Sources in the ministry said that the estimated value of this public khas land, situated in the heart of the city near New Market, could be as high as hundreds of crores of taka. They said that for years successive governments have simply witnessed these individuals grab this prime public property without taking any action.

Documentary evidence exists as to how senior officials in the land ministry have played vital roles in secretly 'allocating plots' to individuals. Officials at the Deputy Commissioner's office in Dhaka were also involved in illegally grabbing much of the 15.84 acres, by 'fabricating' and 'falsifying' documents.

According to an investigation conducted by the land ministry in January this year, 34 individuals have illegally occupied the land. The list includes eminent persons like the former Vice Chancellor (VC) of Dhaka University, professors, government and public officials. The report shows that the land has been illegally allotted or acquired under the names of 70 separate persons and organisations.

For the last six months, however, the report has been shelved and gathering dust at the Ministry of Land.

Md Abu Solaiman Chowdhury, divisional commissioner of Dhaka, led the investigative committee while Abdul Khalek, additional district commissioner (Revenue), and AJM Salahuddin Ahmed, deputy secretary of the ministry of land, were members of the committee.

Sources said, the land ministry is in a dilemma over how to handle the 'scandal' because influential individuals, closely associated with the ruling BNP, are directly involved in grabbing the prime public land. They said that if we calculate the present market price at Tk 30 lakh per katha, the value of one bigha of land would be Tk six crore. There are about 45 bighas of illegally occupied public land there whose value is around Tk 270 crore.

The report revealed that 15 plots were secretly leased out on a long term basis by the land ministry over several years. But sources said that some of the beneficiaries have no legal documents whatsoever of their leasehold.

Instead a number of dishonest officials of the land ministry and Deputy Collector's office were involved in the illegal transactions.

Many of the grabbers have even gone to court with fake documents and managed to obtain temporary injunctions barring any government move to recover the land. Government lawyers who are supposed to protect the interest of the public are also 'playing into the hands of the grabbers', sources said.

Moreover, four market authorities (Baniya Bitan Super Market Samobay Samiti, Nandini Super Market Samobay Samiti, Islamia Market Banik Bahumukhi Samobay Samiti and Babupura Khudra Baboshai Samobay Samiti) are now lobbying the land ministry for long term lease of the markets, which they have already been illegally running for several years.

In fact, ten out of eleven markets at the site have been established illegally. The illegal markets include the four mentioned above as well as Gausul Azam Market, Adarsha Bipani Bitan, Anirban Babosai Samiti, Hazrat Bakushah Hawkers Market and two markets in the name of City Corporation Market.

Besides these, three religious institutions, Tin Awaliar Mazar, Jame Masjid and Mazar Sharif Masjid, are also listed as grabbers of public land.

The former VC of Dhaka University has occupied two plots of land (0.0799 and 0.0401 acre) in the Nilkhet area. He claims that he bought the two plots from one Abdul Gani in 1989, on one of which he constructed a building in 1991, as per the permission of RAJUK. He also claims that he has paid taxes regularly for the land that was bought in the name of his wife.

However, according to an official at the Deputy Collector's office, "Paying taxes does not establish ownership of a plot."

The Assistant Collector's office (Land) in Dhanmondi filed a case against 18 of the illegal occupiers of the khas land. The case was last brought to court on June 7 this year. Senior officials of the land ministry said that the entire management of public land is done on the basis of old and mistaken land records which opportunists take advantage of.

(*One acre = approximately three bigha)

Healthy tiffins give way to snacks and junk food

BISHAWIT DAS

The tiffin period is that magical moment every school-going child looks forward to.

"Only after promising of a tasty tiffin, could I take my little girl to school," says Nilu, mother of Shyama who has just started going to school. "For her, the quality of tiffin she carries to class is a matter of pride."

Nurunnahar, mother of a five-year old says: "We are living in a time where people like to show off and children are no different. Sometimes, they share their food with others. So I give my daughter a little more than what she needs."

"I try to give her favourite food but sometimes it's quite impossible to make her happy."

Historically, tiffin has been

a mode of bonding and camaraderie between children.

Sadia Khan, a clinical psychologist, pointed out that kids seldom keep provisions for sharing their tiffin.

Some schools provide daily snacks for students in exchange of an annual fee while some have own canteens. However, the hundreds of kindergartens across the city seldom keep provisions for tiffins and their students bring food from home.

The children have varied and interesting views on school snacks. It is also noticeable how tastes differ among students of different economic sections of the society.

"Usually, I take egg fried rice with kebab for snacks everyday. I prefer this because I don't get time for breakfast," says Sarah, a student of class IV of a posh private school in Dhanmondi.

"Sometimes I bring noodles and maybe sandwich with mayonnaise on other days. And I don't like to share my tiffin," said Anila, an 11-year-old.

"I love to eat Peter's burger

belonging to others," says Anamika, a kindergarten teacher.

Many parents prefer to give some money to their wards to buy tiffin.

"I have to rush to the office

Sometimes I bring noodles and maybe sandwich with mayonnaise on other days. And I don't like to share my tiffin.

I love to eat Peter's burger and soft drink. My younger brother likes to have singara and chop from the canteen.

and soft drink. My younger brother likes to have *singara* and chop from the canteen," says Mahmud, who studies in class X at St. Joseph High School.

"Hindu students, like myself, face various difficulties while eating at the school canteens. Most items there are prepared with beef," complained Hemanta.

"My favourite food is the *chatpati* sold in front of the school gate," says Kamal.

Street food with seriously dubious hygienic character like *chatney*, *aachar*, *chatpati*, *jhalmuri*, *chanachur*, *phuchka* and ice-cream are quite popular in most of the schools and are traditionally sold at the school gates.

"I don't bother whether it's hygienic or not. What matters to me is the taste, and the food on the streets are the best," says Saber of Dhanmondi Boys High School.

For the teachers, it sometimes becomes very difficult to control the children during tiffin periods.

"The little ones often want to have their snacks inside the class room rather than going out. At times, some even try to grab the tiffin

in the morning, so I can't prepare the tiffin for my kids. I give them money instead so that they can have something from the school canteen," says Rahela, a servicewoman.

But Maria Gomes, a mother of two, says those who give money, unintentionally put pressure on other parents.

"I cannot always afford to give my children extra money for tiffin. So I prepare home-made food for them. But they want whatever they see other students taking. It's quite embarrassing for me sometimes."

"My son goes to an English medium school, and it takes Tk 20 to reach school and back everyday. To give him extra money for tiffin and a soft drink daily is certainly beyond most of us," said Morshed Khan of Lalmitia.

While some children dwell on their favourite menu for tiffin, many, many others don't even understand the word.

"I haven't had tiffin for as long as I can remember. My father died when I was three and my mother simply couldn't afford it," said Dipak. "I have rice before heading for school and on returning home, I eat rice again."



Along with the traditional street snacks, junk food is replacing healthy school tiffins.

Supplying lunch to live by

SYED TASHFIN

Mohammad Haider carries a large pile of empty lunch pails back home in the late afternoon after selling lunch to managers, workers and other employees, mostly at Karwan Bazar.

Poverty forced 12-year-old Haider to work hard and help his family with what he earns from the sale. Born to a slum family in Kazipara, he could not afford school after primary education and has been left to a life without playfulness that other children his age get.

He would have gone to high school, if his family had been better-off. He hates letting his family slip into extreme poverty.

"If I study, who will be working to support my family? I don't even have the time to play like other children," said Haider in despair.

His eldest brother is a drug addict and his other brother is too busy with his work to take care of his family. The family of five solely depends on Haider's income.

Haider has to meet the deadline for lunch supply to five offices in the Karwan Bazar area that has become home to banks and companies. He works six days a

week, as determined by the work schedule of the employees.

People presume that Haider is earning a lot. He earns only Tk 2,000 a month, as many white-collar workers run off at the end of the month without paying their dues to him or his mother.

They supply lunch in tiffin carriers to the given addresses of the customers. But the customers who happened to be bachelors usually leave their rented houses before Haider arrives for payment. "We have so far lost around Tk 40,000 to such frauds," said Haider's mother.

Moreover, Haider's old customers negotiate any contract with new customers and the rate never increases as the new customers follow the old ones when it comes to payment.

The house where he lives in with his family has a monthly rent of Tk 2,000 and a two-month house rent is due.

"Our family is going through a very hard time. We are surviving thanks to Haider," said Haider's mother.

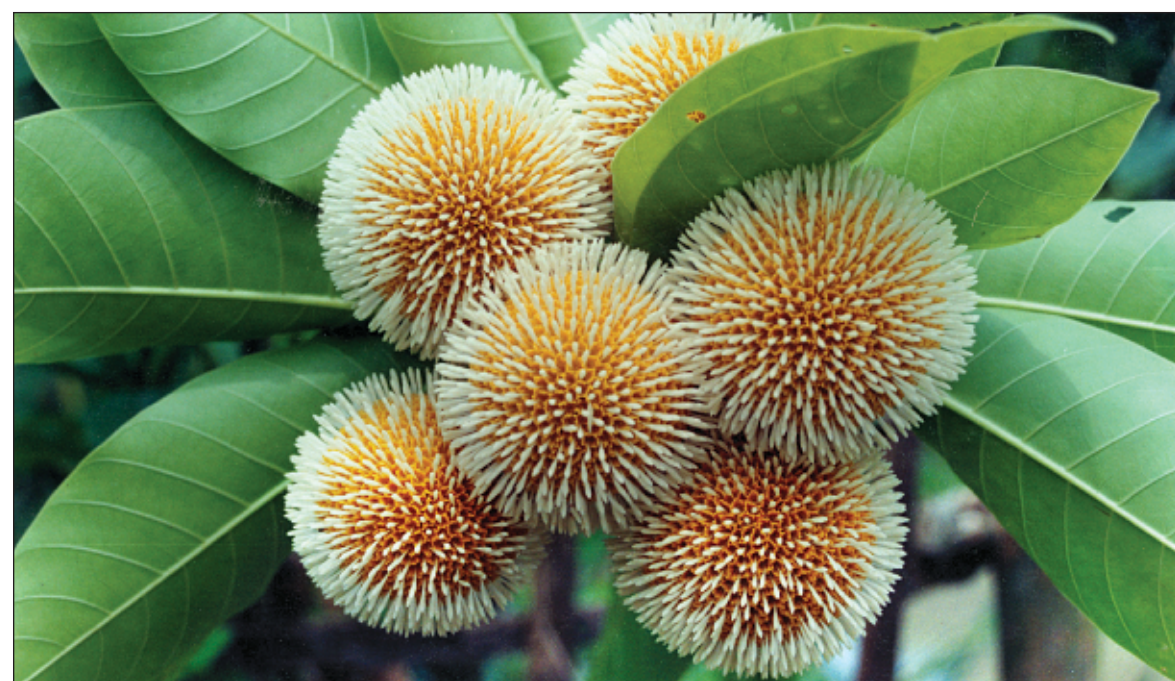
Haider is not alone. There are hundreds of children in the city, who supply lunch in tiffin carriers to office employees.



Poverty forced 12-year-old Haider to support his family by selling lunches.

SEASONAL SIGHTS

Every season brings its own sights, smells and sounds. The Kadam flower is symbolic of the rainy season, which has been immortalised by Tagore and many other poets. This beautiful and romantic flower can still be seen blooming within the confines of Dhaka's concrete landscapes, and is sold by flower sellers throughout the city. These Kadam were photographed at Amin Bazar, Gabtoli.



STED ZAKIR HOSSAIN