

Walking miles

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already contaminated with arsenic, has now been polluted with salinity. "We have to walk this long way as the water of two ponds in our village has turned to saline and is too muddy to drink," said Chapala's mother, Usharani Das.

Arsenic or saline contamination of groundwater is not a new problem, but it has achieved unprecedented dimensions since the mid-80s because, as sea levels rise and shrimp cultivation grows unchecked, saline in now flooding the water supply. The resulting crisis, which now affects 25 upazilas of Satkhira, Khulna and Bagerhat, is transforming not only the physical terrain, but also the cultural, social and economic landscapes of the affected areas. The situation is worst in Ashashuni, Tala, Kaliganj, Shyamnagar, Debhata, Koira, Paikgachha, Dacope, Botiaghata, Dumuria, Mongla, Rampal, Chitolmar, Morelganj, Bagerhat and Sharankhola upazilas.

Increased salinity is the result of both man-made and natural factors. Experts say the seabed is rising 3 to 4 millimetres a year, the result of global climate change, spreading saline water to more and more areas by the rivers. Upstream rivers, meanwhile, are failing to wash the saline water back out to sea, because their currents are diminishing and ceasing altogether in the dry season. The current in upstream rivers has also become weak due to India's withdrawal of water from the Ganga for agricultural works in Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Hariana and for ensuring navigability of the Hoogly River.

"Once saline water enters local water bodies and fields, they cannot go down as the filled-up river beds block their way," said Sheikh Selim Akhter Shawpan, a local NGO official working with water management. He added that coastal embankments built in the 60s aggravated the problem.

Over the past few years, shrimp cultivators have been one of the largest single factors contributing to the increase of salinity in groundwater already contaminated with arsenic. "Collecting saline water and holding it to their lands for most of the year, the shrimp cultivators are sending the salinity to the ground," said Abdul Mannan, an official of CARE Bangladesh, which received financial support from the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) to run a project with local NGOs to reduce vulnerability to climate change. "They are not only sending salinity to the groundwater but also to adjacent croplands."

The effects of increased salinity are far reaching and potentially devastating, not only for the natural landscape but those inhabiting it. Tube-wells that previously lifted sweet water are now lifting saline water from the ground. Excessive use of groundwater for irrigation in Boro paddy fields during the dry season, meanwhile, also results in damage to underground water bodies. Because water is being lifted without being replenished, the groundwater level is going down.

Women and children are the worst victims of the current salinity crisis, as they have to fetch drinking water by walking over ten kilometres by narrow katcha roads in some cases. Their ordeal is most acute during the rainy season, when roads become slippery and difficult to navigate.

"It takes the women several hours to give a round and one has to remain engaged in bringing water. Male members do not go to bring the water," Bhadrakanta Sarker, a teacher of Khasherabad Primary School in Ashashuni, told The Daily Star.

The crisis is even transforming old local customs and creating new cultural barriers. Twenty three-year-old Shwapna of Dumuria village of

Shyamnagar now finds her dream of marriage a far cry, since her aged parents, fearing that there will be no one to fetch them drinking water, do not want to marry her away. People of less water crisis-stricken areas, meanwhile, refuse to marry their sons and daughters to people from the crisis-hit areas.

There is no end in site to the crisis for Kalidasi, Ashalata and Manisha, three housewives from Shamukpota village of Paikgachha upazila. Four tube-wells set up in their village a few months ago only lift water heavily contaminated with saline and arsenic, forcing them to bring water from Bahirubunia village, 3 kilometres away from their house.

Keshamoni of Pankhali village of Shyamnagar takes her minor son on her lap while walking two kilometres for drinking water. She endures this extra burden after three children recently drowned in a shrimp gher when their mother went out to bring water.

The scarcity of drinking water is also helping to transform the local economy, turning some people into water traders. This correspondent found many three-wheeler vans and boats carrying large containers of water – collected from ponds with less salinity and hardly purified – from Satkhira town in the morning to sell in nearby villages.

Sundari, a 45-year-old Hindu widow of Burigoalini village of Bagerhat, now earns her livelihood by selling water to well-off families, collecting water from a PSF 2.5 kilometres away and selling it at Tk 8 to 10 for a pitcher.

Recent government efforts have not helped to stem the problem. Government officials have set up one pond-sand filter (PSF) in a pond in Dasherhati village, but the result is far from satisfactory, villagers say. "We have to stand in cue for hours for a pitcher of water as people from all adjacent villages come here for water," said Usharani, the 30-year-old housewife of a local day-labourer.

Although this crisis will loom for the foreseeable future, CARE Bangladesh is working to bring a resolution within reach. Along with its partner NGOs, it is educating the public about water purifying systems, including rainwater harvesting, PSF and pitcher filter system. "We've set up some filters and people themselves are managing those," Abdul Mannan told The Daily Star.

He insisted, however, that the greatest chance for improvement is making the issue an integral part of the nation's water policy. "If the government does not bring shrimp cultivation under a discipline by formulating a land use policy and ensure supply of fresh water to these people, the problem would force people from the land here," he said.

Dr Kamal

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the prime ministerial orders to arrest Bangla Bhai.

"Let us sit with the IGP (Inspector General of Police) to discuss the arrest of that notorious person (Bangla Bhai)," said the eminent jurist.

Dr Kamal also urged Prime Minister Khaleda Zia to identify the police officers who had failed to carry out her orders.

"If your orders are not taken seriously, then what will become of the commoners?" he asked.

Besides, the Oikyanmancha president reiterated his allegation that the government is in clear breach of the constitution for killing people in the name of 'crossfire'.

"The constitution of the country clearly states that no person could be killed without trial, but the government does not follow that," he said adding that killing people without trial is tantamount to showing disrespect for the country's judicial system.

He blasted the government for what he said was using the police force for partisan purpose and said that the country's army too is being smeared. "The government is encouraging extra-judicial killings and army personnel are being used to that end in the form of Rab (Rapid Action Battalion)."

Dr Kamal demanded that reports of investigations into all the previous bomb and grenade blasts be made public. "If the government publishes those reports we would at least know that they are sincere," he added.

Gono Forum leaders Pankaj Bhattacharya, Mostafa Mohsin Mantu, advocate Jahirul Islam and Mafizul Islam Kamal were also present at the conference.

UP chairman killing

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them in a search for firearms in Khagaria at around 12.15am, sources said. As they reached Beyapara, his accomplices fired on them. Police returned fire resulting in a gunfight. Nurul while attempting an escape got shot and died on the spot at 12.40, said police.

Quoting the statement made by another accused Helal, police said that Nurul had fired the bullet that pierced the head of Aminul Islam.

He was accused in 10 cases including two for murdering school-girl Ayesha Siddiqi Milli and Nurul Kabir.

Besides Nurul, three others – Shamsul Islam Hakimi, Afsar Uddin and Helal – had been arrested and sent to jail in connection with the UP chairman Aminul Islam murder.

Graft case against Tarique discharged

COURT CORRESPONDENT

A Dhaka court yesterday discharged Tarique Rahman, ruling BNP's senior secretary general and Director of Dandy Dyeing Ltd, and four others in a graft case.

Judge Rezaul Karim Khan of the Special Court for Dhaka Division issued the order at a jam-packed courtroom in presence of Tarique and the others.

Others discharged are Dandy Dyeing Managing Director Major (ret'd) Syed Iskander Mirza, MP, Director Giasuddin Al Mamun, former managing director of Sonali Bank M Ehsanul Haq and Abdul Khaleq Pathan.

Earlier, the defence lawyers submitted discharge petition and made submission on it, while the prosecution prayed for framing charges against the accused.

Now-defunct Bureau of Anti-Corruption (Bac) filed the case with Motijheel Police Station accusing Tarique, also senior joint secretary general of ruling BNP, and others on September 14, 1996. The investigation officer pressed charges on May 22, 1997.

PM helps hartal victims

UNB, Dhaka

Prime Minister Khaleda Zia yesterday provided financial support and offered further assistance to the family members of those killed and those severely injured in the capital during hartals enforced by the main opposition party.

To meet their urgent need, she donated Tk 100,000 each to the families of Mofizur Rahman, a rickshawpuller, and Mamun, an NGO worker.

Mofiz was killed in a bomb attack at Mirpur during hartal on January 29 and Mamun run over by a speeding bus at Teigaon during the February 5 hartal.

The prime minister also gave Tk 50,000 each to three people who were injured in arson and bomb attacks during hartals in January and February.

They are Sourav, an auto-rickshaw driver, Haji Babul, a businessman of Old Dhaka and Mohammad Ali Akbar, a store-keeper of National Ophthalmology Science Institute.

The prime minister consoled the bereaved family members and the injured. She directed the authorities concerned to provide suitable jobs for the sisters of Mamun.

40 JMJB cadres remanded in Bagmara

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, Rajshahi

Forty activists of Jagrata Muslim Janata Bangladesh (JMJB) were remanded for three days in connection with three cases filed recently for murders and attack on police in Bagmara.

Police took the JMJB activists to a magistrate's court and sought a seven-day remand for each of them. The court, however, granted three days.

Earlier on January 24, 64 JMJB cadres were arrested in Bhabaniganj in Bagmara as they clashed with police while protesting lynching of three fellow men.

A mob lynched the three after they made a failed attempt on the life of a Union Parishad chairman and bombed an Awami League leader to death on January 22.

Police have so far questioned 24 JMJB men during remand.

Farm loan

BNP LAWMAKER Manzur Quader said a farmer has to pay at least Tk 3,000 as a bribe to brokers in the agriculture bank against a loan of Tk 10,000.

Another BNP lawmaker, Rustam Ali Farazi, alleged that a branch manager of Sonali Bank within his constituency extracts Tk 2000 from every borrower who takes Tk 10,000 in loans.

Abdul Motealeb Akanda made similar allegations, saying that certain corrupt bank officials harass farmers when they seek agricultural loans. He demanded the government to waive the agricultural loans of farmers from the Gaibandha region, who are suffering due to a devastating flood last year.

Abdul Karim Abbasi reiterated the presence of irregularities in disbursing agricultural loans, stating farmers are deprived of receiving loans in a timely manner due to dishonest lending practices, which he termed a matter of shame.

Ali Newaz Khaiyam of BNP criticised the government for taking a tough line to realise agricultural loans while not standing firm enough to realise industrial loans, which are higher.

Uneasy calm at PMO

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officials and ministers to take immediate action against the APS for the sake of image of the prime minister, they said.

Principal Secretary to the PM Dr Kamal Uddin Siddiqui issued the show-cause notice on January 30 asking Shamsul to explain within seven days the purchase of a government house for Tk 2.77 crore in the name of his brother-in-law through auction and living in the house for long.

Officials of the rank and status of secretary were usually allotted that house at Gulshan, but the APS being a senior assistant secretary-level official was allotted it before he purchased it.

Sources at the PMO also said officials, who made huge money in the last three and a half years, are now panicked about leaking of such reports against them. They are now making all efforts to conceal the matter and lobbying with top officials and BNP leaders for this.

An influential official said the PMO staff are apparently divided over the scandal of the APS, many of them openly siding with him and many others going against him.

The official thinks there may be more such press reports on corruption as both the sides are out to defame each other. "Most rooms at the PMO have become centres of extortion and dens of corruption for long but no actions have been taken in this regard due to unknown reasons," he added.

Govt creating confusion

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"As far as we know, the government is yet to make any request to the US government for FBI assistance in inquiring into the killing of my husband," said Asma Kibria at a press briefing at her Dhanmondi residence yesterday.

She said, "What the government has been saying about FBI assistance are untrue and nothing but eyewash."

"I want to see the document that shows when the request was made and what conditions the government has been trying to impose," she added with obvious cynicism.

Asma also demanded of the government to inform them what has it done to nab the criminals during the over two-week time past after the killing.

Referring to a comment of the prime minister in parliament last Wednesday, Asma pointed out that "the lapses of the administration mean lapses of the government, as administration is a core part of it."

She said, "We don't know who killed my husband and we certainly aren't accusing the government of killing him, but it's its responsibility to arrest and bring the culprits to justice."

But, his son Reza Kibria apprehended that the killing might be related with what he said was the government's motive to rig the next

Maoists

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no force in making the arrests. The assault, which was repulsed by the security forces, took place Wednesday night in the far western region of Kailali, the source said.

"Several hundred Maoist rebels tried to attack various government offices including those of the district police, regional police and ward police, Nepal Rastra (Central Bank) and district administration office in Dhangadhi district," the source said.

"The security forces foiled the attack but five security men were killed and four other injured," he said, adding that the rebels had bombed the local jail and set free 18 inmates.

ACC in new controversy

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appointment of a person retiring from the office of the CEC, to the service of the republic.

The Article 118 (3) (a) of the constitution says: "a person who has held office as Chief Election Commissioner shall not be eligible for appointment in the service of the Republic."

Asked, Justice Sultan who was also a High Court Judge refused to comment on the issue. He however advised this correspondent to consult legal experts whether the office of the ACC chairman is considered a service of the republic.

The constitution says the service of the republic "means any service, post or office whether in a civil or military capacity, on respect of the Government of Bangladesh, and any other service declared by law to be a service of the Republic."

Moreover, the Supreme Court in its December 2, 1999 judgement on the separation of judiciary said, "...

In broad concept the service of the republic means all services of Bangladesh. It is a generic term and person who is getting emolument because of his service in the Republic is a public officer."

Justice Naimuddin Ahmed, a former member of the Law Commission, told The Daily Star yesterday that there is no option for a former CEC to be appointed to an office of the republic after retirement.

"The office of the chairman of the

Talking to The Daily Star, a senior minister on condition of anonymity said the PM in her speeches repeatedly warned against corruption but she does not know how much money was made by some of her personal staff, who sit in her office.

Showing a newspaper report, he said the PM on August 28 in 2002 at Chittagong divisional representatives' meeting in Dhaka said, "Her government's first challenge is to curb crimes and corruption. We are going ahead with specific plans to eliminate these two septic wounds...We have made it clear that whoever is involved in crimes and corruption must face legal action."

On September 4, the PM in a similar programme renewed her commitment to fight poverty, violence, corruption and misuse of the country's resources. "No forbearance, sympathy or mercy will be shown on party or personal grounds. No-one will get any mercy however powerful or whatever post he may hold," she asserted.

Another minister said it was wise for the PM to remove the corrupt officials much earlier but it is high time now to remove them immediately and take legal action against them in the interest of image of the PMO and the government.

If no action is taken against corrupt officials, it would encourage them to step up their corrupt practices as the government's tenure ends next year, the minister thought.

general elections, as Kibria was one of the think tanks of the main opposition AL.

Asma once again expressed her determination to continue her movement until the killers are brought to the books. She announced to the press her next course of action including candle-lit demonstration in front of her house from February 16 to 18.

Biman accused

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The incident happened when Aminul along with his parents boarded flight BG-016 at Heathrow Airport, London on December 29 last year. Instead of allowing the passenger to travel in the executive class seat he was entitled to (by ticket), Biman crew had transferred him to economy class.

"It's a clear breach of Bangladesh Disability Welfare Act 2001 and we demand punishment of those who ill-treated the passenger," said Mosharraf Hossain, ADD country director.

Biman officials when contacted yesterday denied any maltreatment of the passenger. The acting Managing Director of Biman Bangladesh Airlines Md Mahmud Rahman said, "The passenger while purchasing the tickets did not disclose any information regarding the disability. Whereas, it's a rule that passengers with disabilities declare the nature of their disability so that crew can take necessary preparations for them on board and also at the airport."

"The crew did not misbehave with the passengers, rather tried to assure them that the arrangements were made for the benefit of the disabled child," Rahman added.

An ADD official said that they lodged an official complaint with the Biman office in Dhaka on February 8, but did not get any response.

The Biman management yesterday said they did not yet receive any official complaint.

KILLING OF KIBRIA BDB's hunger strike to back family's movement

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Bikalpa Dhara Bangladesh (BDB) yesterday observed a token hunger strike at slain former finance minister SAMS Kibria's house to show solidarity with his family's non-violent protest demanding justice.

The BDB leaders and workers led by their Organising Secretary lawmaker Mahi B Chowdhury reached Kibria's Dhanmondi house in a silent procession from Abahani ground. The leaders and workers of the BDB's front organisations – Bikalpa Sramik Dhara, Bikalpa Chhatra Dhara and Bikalpa Jubo Dhara – also took part.

"Asma Kibria has called for a peaceful movement demanding punishment of her husband's killers and Bikalpa Dhara must convey its all-out support to the call," Mahi said.

He added that his party wants to make a peaceful and united protest against the string of bomb attacks and establish law and order.

"People no longer want to see the failed government in power as LGRD Minister Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan admitted its failure to stop grenade attacks," he added.

Mahi also asked the people to make success BDB's blackout protest for a minute at 7:00pm everyday during February 18-22.

Asma Kibria in her speech said, "I simply want to see my husband's killers in the dock and I believe it'll happen if people from all walks of life stand beside me."

"It's possible to bring all killers in the country to justice if the government forms impartial probe committees," she observed.

Ashura

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yesterday with Information Secretary and member of the committee Zafar Ahmed Chowdhury in the chair.

"The month of Moharram, 1426 Hijri, will be counted from today," an official handout said.

Director General of the Islamic Foundation AZM Shamsul Alam, Director of Met Department Mohammad Akram Hossain and Baitul Mukarram Khatib Maulana Obaidul Haque were among others present at the meeting.

Tk 10cr gas

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On the other hand, a failure on the part of the Canadian company to take the necessary protective measures while digging the well helped caused the explosion. Although the well was dug to a depth of 806 meters, the company took protective measures for only 300 meters. If protective measures were taken up to 450 meters, the company may have avoided the explosion, the committee report observed.

The report also encouraged the government to press Niko for proper compensation for the wastage of natural resources, the source said.

Immediate rice

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procurement drive, a spiralling rise in rice and wheat prices made both the urban poor and rural consumers suffer miseries for the last two months.

The Aman harvest was at least 30 percent lower than the government's expectation. And later the government's rice procurement drive was hamstrung due to a poor price offered, much less than the existing market price, further straining the food-reserve situation.

With an 8.5 lakh MT food stock considered as the critical 'food security' level for Bangladesh, the government granaries at the moment have only 6 lakh MT of food-grains in reserve.

The approval of the rice procurement and import came only a day after the food minister had told the Jatiya Sangsad that there was no shortage of rice in the country and, on the contrary, a national taskforce meeting had recommended temporary waiver of import duties on rice.

A total of 18.5 lakh MT of grains have been imported so far in the current fiscal year by the private sector, with another 5 lakh MT waiting in the pipeline.

To shorten the import time, the Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs has already approved a special measure under which the tender process can now be completed within 21 days instead of the standard 45 days for grain import.

Yesterday's meeting at the Cabinet Division once again deferred approving a controversial BTTB proposal on Cox's Bazar-Chittagong optical fibre link project, as the necessary approval of the prime minister was not available. The state-run Bangladesh Telegraph and Telephone Board (BTTB) proposes to pay Tk 47 crore to Siemens, the highest bidder, for installing the optical fibre link, instead of assigning Nortel that offered Tk 30 crore for the same job.

The meeting also endorsed a renewal for two years of a 2004 contract with Indian Oil Corporation (IOC) for import of diesel and jet fuel. Besides, it approved five other purchase proposals of ministries involving a total expenditure of Tk 390 crore.

2 police sergeants

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"As they reached Mirpur-14 (Kafur) at around 9:00pm, a white microbus hit their autorickshaw forcing the driver to stop. Seven to eight youths jumped down from the microbus and held them hostage," Monir told reporters.

The youths rubbed a kind of ointment on their faces to make them unconscious and then took them to an unknown place, he added.

"Someone phoned me from my brother's mobile phone at night and demanded Tk 5 lakh for their release and asked me to pay the money by today (Thursday)."

Mohammadpur police was then informed about the incident.

Monir said collecting Tk 2 lakh from their relatives, he phoned the abductors yesterday morning for the release of the sergeants.

"They asked me to go to Mirpur-10 roundabout alone with the money. When I reached there, they phoned me again and asked to go to Mirpur-14. While I was waiting for them, they phoned me again and asked to go to Kakuhket Bazar."

"Two youths came to me at 1:30pm and took the money, saying they would

release them in five minutes," said Monir, adding, he found the two coming to him seven minutes later from the direction of a slum near Kakuhket Bazar.

Monir took them to their house and later sent them to Rajarbag Police Hospital. "The abductors beat them up for ransom," said Monir.

Kafur police, meanwhile, could not confirm the incident. "We did not find any evidence of such incident," Sub-Inspector Nasir, duty officer at Kafur Police Station, told The Daily Star last night.

He said no-one contacted with them and no case was filed in this connection.

Officer-in-charge of Mohammadpur Police Station Saidur Rahman Babul termed the incident a mystery.

Some sources, however, expressed doubt about the 'abduction.' They said the incident might have been linked to 'illegal dealings' involving the two sergeants.

Asked, Deputy Commissioner of DMP (West zone) Mazhar Hossain said he heard the incident but did not know the details.

FBI agent arrives

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depends on the outcome of the meetings, he said, adding, "Washington will take the final decision in this regard."

Vu will also study the situation, which and how many experts are needed to come to Bangladesh, in case Washington finally agrees to involve FBI in the probe, the source said.

The details of Vu's meetings with government officials have been kept secret. What could be gathered was that he met some home ministry officials, and the police and intelligence officials involved in the probe.

Dhaka formally requested for FBI assistance on January 29. The next day US Assistant Secretary of State for South Asia Christina Rocca called Foreign Minister M Mosharraf Khan and said it was important that the US receives clear terms of reference for the assistance.

Rocca said the terms should include full access to all evidence and witnesses to make the FBI enquiry effective.

On Sunday, a highly placed home ministry source had told The Daily Star the government has no objection to

providing FBI with full access to evidence and witnesses and is awaiting Washington's response.

The prime minister on Monday also assured that all co-operation would be given to the US government if it goes for assisting in the investigation.

Another FBI agent, Gibson Wilson, came to Bangladesh last year to help probe the August 21 grenade attack on an Awami League rally. He visited the scene of the carnage and examined the evidence. But no details about that investigation was made public.

Findings of another FBI probe into the recovery of a 76-kilogram bomb on July 20, 2000 from a meeting ground at Kotapalira in Gopalganj ahead of a scheduled meeting of the then prime minister Sheikh Hasina also could not be known.

FBI is responsible for the protection of the US and its citizens from any terrorist attack. Investigation of violations of federal criminal laws, and providing guidance and law enforcement assistance to federal, state, local and international agencies are also among its tasks.

12 killed, 50 hurt

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