

Illegal stone collection threatens CHT ecology

Explosives used by syndicates

MONIRUL ALAM, Rangamati

Illegal extraction of stone in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) goes on unabated, threatening the ecological balance and depriving the government of huge amounts of revenue.

Powerful syndicates engaged in the illegal business at times use explosives, displacing big chunks of soil for the hidden rocks, making hills vulnerable.

Landslides have become rampant, particularly in the rainy season, and brooks are changing their courses due to this, sources said.

Already, brooks in many areas

have dried up or changed their courses, they said.

The illegal stone collection continues throughout the year but dry season is the best time.

There are at least 30 such illegal quarries only in Kawkhali upazila in Rangamati district from where stones are collected illegally.

This correspondent visited one such quarry in Ghagra village in the upazila.

Local people said they earn Tk 20 to Tk 25 for extraction of one cubic foot of stone. Accumulated stones were seen on yards of almost every household.

It was gathered from villagers

that the district administration and the Department of Forest (DoF) are indifferent to the huge extraction of stone. They said they never face any obstruction from the administration in extracting and transporting the rocks.

On investigation, it was gathered that the DoF had once issued 'permits' for stone extraction without any study on its impact on the ecology.

Issuance of permit was stopped in early 1994 but the illegal extraction continues.

Earlier, rocks were collected by some contractors on orders from government departments concerned for their use in building roads

and protecting river embankments in the CHT.

As these have good demand and earn hefty profit, some powerful syndicates have been formed with blessings from certain people in the administration and the DoF, the sources said.

As the pebbles available in this region are economically attractive, illegal extractors operate in more than 100 quarries in the entire CHT region now, said Kalam, a sub-contractor in Rajshahi. He supplies rocks to big buyers.

The quarries are in Ghagra, Wagga, Fatikchhari and Kolopot in Kawkhali; Bondukvanga in Rangamati Sadar; Paindong, Moidung, Doluchhari, Punorbasonpara, Tanchagypara and Thanchi in Bandarban; and Rangarh, Matiranga, Guimara and Lakhmichhari in Khagrachhari district, according to contractors. When contacted, Additional Deputy Commissioner (Revenue) Mahfujul Hugu said he has ordered the Kawkhali UNO (Upazila Nirbahee Officer) to visit the areas and give a report. The step was taken after receiving a complaint from a local man, the ADC said.

Talking to this correspondent, Zahir Uddin Ahmad, Divisional Forest Officer (DFO) of CHT South Forest Division, said they will take action against illegal extractors. "As hill cutting is strictly prohibited, extraction of hard rock is also illegal", he said. He said illegal extraction is threatening the ecological balance in the hills.

He expressed his concern that stone extraction also affects flow of water underneath the soil, which may ultimately turn the hills barren.



PHOTO: STAR

Stones collected illegally piled up on the yard of a homestead at Ghagra village in Kawkhali.

'Ensure equal rights for Bangalees in CHT'

11-point demand put forward at Bandarban roundtable

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Bandarban

Speakers at a roundtable here have put forward a 11-point demand and urged the government to fulfil those to ensure equal rights and privileges for Bangalees and indigenous people in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT).

The roundtable on 'Present Situation in CHT: Our Responsibility', organised by the Bandarban district unit of CHT

Bangalee Student Parisad, was attended by professionals including Chittagong University teachers, political leaders and leaders of Bangalee communities.

Pro Vice Chancellor of Chittagong University (CU) Prof Dr Mohammad Samsuddin was the chief guest at the discussion meeting.

The speakers included Associate Professor of CU Anthropology Department Md Ashikur Rahman, CU Political Science Department

Chairman Abu Taleb Chowdhury, Dr. Hassan Mohammad, Somoadhikar Andolon President Md Osman Goni, Bandarban district BNP Secretary Advocate Kazi Mohotul Hossain, Jamaat-e-Islami Amir Abdus Salam Azad, Bandarban Press Club President Md. Badsha Miah, Atiqur Rahman from Rangamati and Bangalee Chhatra Parishad General Secretary Jamsedul Azam.

Yakub Ali Chowdhury, central president of Bangalee Chhatra

Parishad moderated the discussion held at bandarban Press Club on Monday.

They alleged that Bangalees in the hills enjoy less facilities than the indigenous people but subsequent governments did not take any step to remove the disparity, created by the CHT Peace Accord signed by the then government with PCJSS (Parbatyia Chattagran Jana Sanghati Parishad) in 1997.

They alleged that NGOs working in the hills have a hand in fomenting discord between Bangalees and indigenous people.

The demands include deployment of Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) to recover illegal arms, setting up of more army camp in border areas and holding of election of the CHT Regional Council and the three district councils.

Man given 14 year RI for acid violence

A CORRESPONDENT, Comilla

The Women and Children Repression Prevention Court in Comilla on Monday sentenced a man to 14 years rigorous imprisonment for throwing acid on a girl and her younger brother.

The court convicted Omar Faruq of Donarchar village in Daudkandi upazil and fined him Tk10,000 for throwing acid on Ayesha Khatun and Mohsin Mia of the same village as she refused a marriage proposal. The acid was thrown while they were asleep at night.

AL man elected Hakimpur pouro chairman

A CORRESPONDENT, Dinajpur

Awami League backed candidate Kamal Hossain Raj was elected chairman of Hakimpur Paurashova. The election was held on Saturday. According to unofficial results, Kamal got 4,539 votes while his nearest rival ruling party backed candidate Sakawat Hossain Shilpi got 4,229.

The elected ward commissioners are Abdul Alim, Salim Reza, Israil Sheikh, Mamunur Rashid, Murad Hossain, Astak Ali, Chatmul Haque, Aktara Banu, Parul Nahar and Alea Bibi

BOU examinees demand textbooks

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Nilphamari

About 200 Secondary School Certificate (SSC) examinees under Bangladesh Open University (BOU) on Sunday put up demonstration in front of the university's tutorial office here demanding textbooks.

The SSC examination under the university is scheduled to start on Friday. But hundreds of examinees in the district have not yet got text books, Arif Hossain, an examinee told newsmen.

The Regional Director of BOU, Rangpur failed to give any satisfactory answer when newsmen asked him for his comments.

However, the director (PPD) of Open University, Dhaka, Fazle Ali refuted the allegation of textbook crisis.

A source in the university's Rangpur regional office told this correspondent, as many as 10,000 examinees of eight districts of the region would take part in the examination. Another source in Nilphamari Tutorial Centre said they received sufficient text books which are being delivered among the examinees.

Tk 19 cr Comilla Pourashava budget

A CORRESPONDENT, Comilla

A Tk 19 crore budget of Comilla Pourashaba for 2005-2006 financial year was announced yesterday.

Acting Chairman of the Pourashaba Anjum Sultana Sima announced the budget at its auditorium in presence of ward commissioners, political leaders and the elite.

The total income has been estimated at Tk 10.89 crore. This will include grants from government and non-government sources. An amount of Tk 9,26,01500 has been earmarked for development projects.

Land acquisition delays Bhomra port uplift

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Satkhira

Bhomra Land Port is yet to be developed into a full-fledged port due to 'dilly-dally tactics' of the port authorities in acquisition of land.

Even an announcement of Shipping Minister Col(Retd) Akbar Hossain at a meeting held at the port last year regarding its development through a private company remained unfulfilled.

A vested quarter who occupied a vast area illegally is also obstructing in way of its development. On a plea of existence of graves, 22 alleged land grabbers, in joint petitions to the port authorities and the prime minister urged for abandonment of the uplift plan.

The export-import activities of the port started in 1996. It exceeded the targeted annual revenue earning although its infrastructural facilities are yet to be built', Satkhira

Chamber of Commerce and industries president Sheikh Azahar Hossain told this correspondent.

An importer seeking anonymity said, 'It is a pity the port activities are going on in a three-room tin shade structure since its establishment', he lamented.

The district administration and the port authorities exchanged several letters during the entire period. Finally, the port authorities sent a revised proposal to the district administration to acquire 14.97 acres of lands.

According to Satkhira deputy commissioner (DC) Md Elias, the land acquisition is being delayed due to lack of coordination between the district administration and the Customs officials. 'Above all the Land Port authorities are lingering the process of acquisition of lands for the purpose,' he told The Daily Star.

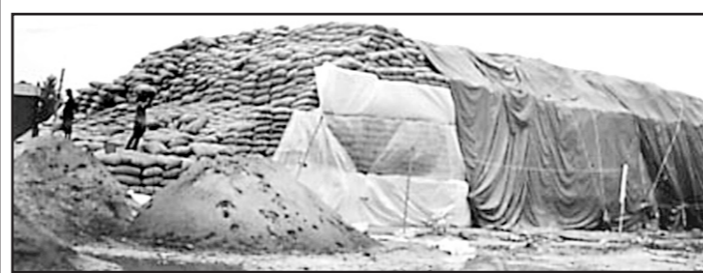


PHOTO: STAR

Goods piled up in the open in absence of sheds in Bhomra land port.

Newsman demand security

5 killed, 295 hurt since last January, speakers at World Press Freedom Day dialogue say in Rajshahi

RU CORRESPONDENT

The World Press Freedom Day, 2005 was observed in Rajshahi yesterday through various programmes, demanding government steps to ensure security of newsmen.

The Bangladesh Center for Development, Journalism and Communication (BCDJC) and the Central for Communication and Development (CCD), an NGO, jointly organised an open dialogue on 'Journalist Repression: Reality and Responsibility', held at Rajshahi City Corporation training centre.

Rajshahi Union of Journalist (RUJ) General Secretary and Daily Sangram's Rajshahi Correspondent Abdur Rahman presented papers at the discussion meeting.

The speakers including senior journalists demanded safety of media men and their financial

security.

They also stressed the need for free flow of information and implementation of the proposed Right to Information Act to ensure press freedom. RUJ President and daily Observer's Rajshahi Correspondent Mustafizur Rahman said political violence and social unrest has made journalism a risky profession in Bangladesh. This is a great threat to the profession. Liakat Ali, editor of local daily Sonali Sangbad, also presented paper on 'Threats to Fair Journalism: State of Press Freedom in Bangladesh'.

Its Assistant Editor Hassan Millat said there can neither be professionalism nor press freedom without financial security of journalists. He also asked the government to form a press commission to implement journalists' demands. According to a report prepared by CPJ, five journalists were killed

and 295 injured in the country in attacks on them since January last year. CCD and BCDJC also presented separate reports on murder and repression on journalists. All the speakers said Bangladesh is one of most dangerous countries in the world for newsmen.

They also demanded immediate arrest and trail all killers of journalists in the country. Over 80 media men from local and national dailies, electronic media and a good number of students from Rajshahi University Mass

Communication Department took part in the open dialogue. Earlier, a big colorful rally was brought out in the city.

Discussion meetings were also held at Metropolitan Press Club, Rajshahi Press Club and at Rajshahi University on the day.



PHOTO: STAR

Children display banners at a programme dubbed Education to End Poverty, held in Netrakona recently.

'Education to End Poverty'

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Netrakona

Sabalambay Unnayan Samity (SUS), a local NGO, organised a week-long program dubbed Education to end Poverty.

The programme, participated by school students and their guardians, teachers, leaders of local bodies and political parties and the elite, included drama, rally, seminar, discussion meeting and screening of a short film--Amader Fulu.

The programme held marking the Global Action Week, 2005 concluded on April 30.

SUS Executive Director Kazi Shuhol Ahmed Dilo presided over the seminar.

Demand for trial of 4 Rajshahi murders after rape

Joint demonstrations by nine bodies

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, Rajshahi

The Committee to Resist Torture on Women and Children, a newly formed body comprising nine professionals' organisations and NGOs, yesterday put up demonstrations in the city demanding trial of rape and murder of four girls in the district in last one month.

The nine organisations are Rajshahi Mohila Parishad, Bangladesh National Women Lawyers' Association, Barind Development Forum, Prochasta, Trinamul, Swa Unnayan, Niskriti, Partner and DARK.

They formed a human chain at

Shaheb Bazar Zero, followed by a procession and a rally. The processionists carrying banners paraded different city streets chanting various slogans.

The four victims are schoolgirls Joly of Durgapur and Hasina of Bagha, teenager Rulifa of Charchat and Noor Banu, a domestic help at the house of a Rajshahi City Corporation engineer.

Addressing the rally, the committee's convener Kalpona Roy said none of the culprits who violated and murdered the four girls have been arrested because they have links with men in the administration and in the ruling party.