

Growing use of groundwater threatens ecology in 10 dists

AMANUR AMAN, from Kushtia

Use of underground water for irrigation has increased greatly in 10 southwestern districts due to growing crisis of surface water, damaging the soil structure and posing a threat to the ecology.

Massive deposit of silt in most of the rivers is the main cause as farmers can not use water from dying rivers, according to water and agriculture experts and environmentalists.

Farmers now use groundwater to meet about 56 per cent of their needs for irrigation, which was only 11 per cent in 1978, according to data available from the Department of Agricultural Extension (DEA).

The districts are Jhenidah, Kushtia, Meherpur, Chuadanga, Magura, Jessore, Satkhira, Bagerhat, Narail and Khulna.

The trend is increasing as at least 15 rivers in the region have silted up.

DEA officials in Kushtia told this correspondent that the groundwater level has fallen by 3

to 4 feet last several years in the region.

This is damaging the soil structure, which will have disastrous effect on the ecology if not checked right now.

Damaged soil structure will make the area vulnerable to earthquake, according to environmentalists. Besides its effect on the greenery, fishery and crops, this will increase arsenic contamination of groundwater, they said.

Arsenic-free water is found deep into the soil. If the water level continues to fall, arsenic-free water will be beyond the reach of tubewells, they said.

According to the DEA, about 1161690 acres now under cultivation in the ten districts need irrigation for Aus, Aman and Boro crops. In many areas, farmers have to depend mainly on groundwater also during the wet season.

Seeing the prospect of use of surface water, the GK (Ganges Kabadak) project, the biggest irrigation project in the country, was launched in 1965 to irrigate five 5 lakh hectares in the ten districts. The project was

designed depending on the mighty Padma and its 15 tributaries.

But water levels of Padma and its tributaries over the years has now made the project virtually useless. In last 15 years, the command area under the GK project was been reduced to 28 per cent. Only about 70,000 hectares of land can be irrigated now under the project, sources said.

The rest lands under the project's command area using groundwater, extracted by pump.

According to DEA source, at least 17061 pumps are being used now for irrigation in the region. Of these 2742 are deep tube wells, 11232 power pumps and 3087 hand tubewells, which irrigate about 158392 acres.

These pumps extracted over 33,000 crore cubic feet of groundwater last year, according to DEA.

The number of irrigation pumps are increasing every year. Only 6922 pumps were used in 1997.



One of the many devastated homesteads in Kashba upazila in Brahmanbaria district, battered by storm Sunday evening.

PHOTO: STAR

PBCP posters reappear in Bagmara

Police, people apprehend return of Bangla Bhai

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, Rajshahi

Panic has gripped the people of Bagmara upazila again, seeing posters of outlawed Purbo Banglar Communist Party (PBCP) on walls.

The four-colour posters are seen in almost all areas, including Bagmara Bazar, Shikdari, Jhokra, Jugipara, Ahsanganj, Goalkandi,

Hamirkutsa and Jatapur, calling upon the people to join PBCP.

Quoting local people, police said the posters might have been pasted before Sunday morning.

Slogans in the posters include: Down-trodden people of the world, unite. Join PBCP. Uphold the red flag of Mao Tse Tung, Lenin and Marks. Follow the teachings of

Charu Majumdar."

Reacting to this, a local businessman told this correspondent over phone: We are alarmed. Where from the posters came if police and Bangla Bhai's men have routed all the outlaws?

But police officials interpreted this a different way. "Bangla Bhai's men freed from jail are regrouping.

They have been holding regular meetings in the last few days. They might be behind pasting of the posters to create plea for a comeback", said a senior police official seeking anonymity.

Supporting his view, a local journalist said, "It is natural as Bangla Bhai's target was their political opponents".

Followers of Bangla Bhai, known as Jagrata Muslim Janata Bangladesh (JMJB), killed about 22 people and tortured several hundred since April last year for their alleged involvement with PBCP.

Besides, 15 alleged outlaws were killed in crossfire with police and Rab (Rapid Action Battalion).

Golam Kibria, officer in charge of Bagmara police station, said police are investigating the matter.

"Some left party leaders held a meeting in Bagmara last week. They might have brought the posters".

Meanwhile, different sources claimed that JMJB men who were released from jail several weeks ago were holding regular meetings.

They control groups of people who are guarding villages at night by turns, the sources claimed.

On Saturday night, JMJB men held meetings at the houses of Belal, son of Hossen Ali and Meraj, son of Abdur Rahman in Goalkandi, police said. Belal and Meraj are alleged associates of Bangla Bhai, they said.

BDR,BSF talk dispute on wall construction

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Jessore

A meeting between Bangladesh Rifles (BDR) and Indian Border Security Force (BSF) was held yesterday at Benapole international check post (ICP) in Jessore.

Commanding Officer of 25 Rifle Battalion Mahubub Ahmed Zakaria led the Bangladesh side while Commandant of 193 BSF Amrik Sing led the Indian side, BDR sources said.

Major Sarwar, second-in-command of Jessore BDR told newsmen that the meeting was held in a cordial atmosphere.

BSF assured that they would inform the BDR before starting any construction work on the no-man's land.

BSF stopped construction of a wall they had started on Saturday, he added.

RU summer vacation begins today

RU CORRESPONDENT

Students of Rajshahi University (RU) started leaving the campus yesterday as a 38-day summer vacation begins today.

Classes and examinations will remain suspended from today till June 30 but offices will remain open during the vacation.

Official sources said, many departments have however voluntarily decided to take classes and examination during the vacation.

Classes and other regular academic activities will resume July 1.

Khagrachhari tense: 15 UPDF men arrested

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Rangamati

Police yesterday picked up 15 alleged activists of United Peoples Democratic Front (UPDF) from Khagrachhari town, suspecting their involvement in Sunday's incident in which an activist of Pahari Chhatra Parishad (PCP) was shot.

Those arrested are being interrogated by police, Khagrachhari administration sources told this correspondent over telephone yesterday evening. But they declined to name the arrested people.

Bullet-hit PCP activist Shiplu Tripura is now under treatment at Khagrachhari Sadar Hospital. UPDF, opposed to the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) peace accord and PCP, supporter of the accord are at loggerheads, creating tension in the hills.

Protesting Sunday's incident, the PCP held a rally on the Shilpakala Academy premises in Rangamati town yesterday.

Presided over by PCP central committee president Uzzal Chakma, the rally was addressed by, among others, its leaders Bodhishattya Chakma and Asreen Cakma.

They said the UPDF, backed by some vested quarters, are disturbing peace in the CHT. The people, irrespective of tribesmen and Bangalees want to live in peace and they will any move to create violence and tension.

They called upon all to thwart any anti-peace move by any quarter.

Sunday's firing incident followed abduction of seven UPDF activists from in front of Riveng Club in Dighinala upazila in Khagrachhari district on Friday.

Police said earlier that Shiblu

Chakma, 22, was shot in the thigh when UPDF activists opened fire on him when he was pasting posters on a roadside wall.

Tension mounted in Khagrachhari town as several incidents of clash took place between the supporters and opponents to the peace accord in the last few days.

Six activists from the parties were injured in a clash centring PCP founding anniversary celebrations on May 20.

Police patrol has been increased in Khagrachhari town to stave off violence, said SI Farooq, duty officer at Khagrachhari Kotwali police station when contacted over phone Sunday evening.

On Saturday, PCP held a rally and brought out a procession in Khagrachhari town demanding rescue of their activists.



PHOTO: STAR

Anxious relatives of victims crowd Bangla Bazar ghat on Karnaphuli river in Chittagong yesterday after a country boat sank in the river with passengers earlier on the day.

5 pc destitute and 31pc ultra-poor in country

Workshop at Gaibandha told

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Gaibandha

Seventeen percent of the country's population is 'moderate poor', 31 per cent ultra poor and five per cent is destitute.

This was stated by speakers at a workshop here, quoting statistics prepared by the World Bank and the government's Bureau of Statistics.

The workshop was organised jointly by two NGOs -- Media Professionals Group and BRAC to discuss co-operation among government agencies, NGOs and local people for poverty alleviation.

Gaibandha Deputy Commissioner Mujibur Rahman, Police Superintendent Bhanu Lal Das, Civil Surgeon Habibur Rahman also attended the workshop, held at Gaibandha Public Library hall.

Besides officials, the speakers included representatives of professional groups including teachers, doctors, journalists and NGO men.

They evaluated different poverty alleviation programmes taken up by BRAC in Gaibandha.

BRAC's programmes including poultry farming, cow and goat rearing, horticulture, small trade, vegetable gardening and animal fattening have brought changes in the life of ultra poor women, the speakers said.

BRAC officials said they had started the programme in January 2002 with 5000 ultra poor women. Now the projects cover over 25000 women. The number will be increased to 70,000 by next year, they said.

8x3

10x3

3 land ports go to pvt companies soon

A CORRESPONDENT, Dinajpur

Three land ports of greater Dinajpur district, Hili, Biral and Banglabandha will be handed over to private companies within this month.

Initially, the tenure of the contract will be for 25 years, according to sources in Bangladesh Land Port Authorities here.

Panama Traders of Dhaka and four other companies have signed contracts with the authority to develop Hili port and Dynamic Trade Syndicate signed contract to develop Biral port.

Sources in the land port authorities told this correspondent that they had already acquired 10 acres of

land at Hili, 10 acres of land at Biral and 18.03 acres of land at Banglabandha for the purpose.

The land will be handed over to private companies.

The companies will take charge of Bill Operation Transfer (BOT) from the government.

The companies will construct houses, necessary road and other infrastructure for the land ports.

The companies are supposed to start work in June which will be completed by next year, according to concerned sources.

The chairman of Bangladesh land port authorities, Amzad Hossain Sirker visited Hili and Biral in March.