

Jafflong gets a respite from plunder, ecological damage

Illegal stone extraction stopped, 37 crusher machines seized

IQBAL SIDDIQUE, Sylhet

There has been at least a respite from the mindless destruction of the ecology in Jafflong.

The illegal stone extraction from hillocks and plains along the Sylhet-Tamabil highway, which ravaged the scenic beauty of the tourist spots for years, have been stopped.

The joint forces on Thursday demolished structures and seized 37 crusher machines in the area, a step welcomed by environmentalists and local people.

Organised groups under protection of political godfathers had long been engaged in collection of stones, defying a ban. The Department of Environment and other agencies failed to take effective measures against those even after repeated appeals from locals and citizens' forums.

The law enforcers also seized 50 excavators from different areas in Jafflong tourist spots during the daylong drive. These were being used for illegal extraction of stones from quarries, hillocks and plains around

Jafflong, belonging to the forest department and private owners.

The nationally important tourist spot was fast losing its attraction day by day, much to the detriment of environment.

Besides, the indiscriminate plunder was also changing the country's borderline due to erosion during rainy season as the area is located close to the Meghalaya in India.

Erosion in last two decades forced the authorities to shift the Sangram BDR Border Outpost (BOP) half a kilometre inside Bangladesh territory, BDR sources and local people told this correspondent during a visit.

The BOPs in Mohammadpur and Mamabazar may have to be shifted if the erosion accentuated by the illegal stone extraction continues, they said.

At least 10,000 people including about 3000 women labourers were engaged in stone and sand collection at Ballaghat stone quarry, attached to Jafflong. But the extraction was not confined to the quarry.

The organised groups spread their activities in surrounding

plain lands and hillocks also.

However, drives against the illegal activity were launched at times, but those were eyewash, locals alleged. The groups manage officials concerned and resumed their illegal activity within days, they alleged.

Ataur Rahman, a small trader at Jafflong Bazaar, said, "Things went beyond control. We welcome the demolition drive."

"It seems there was none to look into the problems in Jafflong, though it (illegal stone extraction) was going on for long".

An ecological disaster may befall us, he said. Hill river Dauki, which enters Bangladesh as Plain, may devour at least 10 villages in Jafflong if it flows through Kandubasti and Mandirjurm during monsoon this year, he apprehended.

"It will cause large-scale damage to lands and property and make hundreds of families homeless", echoed sideways standing Abdul Mannan.

The disaster looms only due to indiscriminate stone extraction, they said.

In last few years, property worth crores of Taka were washed by waters rolling down Indian hills through Kandubasti and Mandirjurm rivers. The Jafflong Road was badly damaged and Sylhet remained cut off for months. We may face such a disaster this monsoon also, they said.

Over the years, vast areas of cultivable lands were covered with sand, making those barren.

The indiscriminate stone extraction continued almost 8 months a year, except the rainy season. Every day at least 200 truckloads of stones used to leave the area for different destinations, they said.

When contacted, an official of the Department of Environment in Sylhet said, "We sent several reports to higher authorities on the environmental damage caused by indiscriminate stone extraction."

"Locally, we could not take any effective step as the groups were influential".



PHOTO: ZOBAER HOSSAIN SIKDER

'Caged' bird in Chittagong Zoo...A vulture with its wings fluttering can hardly move in its cage made in an unplanned way.

Grabbers occupy Tk 200cr BR Western Zone lands for long

EAM ASADUZZAMAN, Nilphamari

More than Tk 200 crore lands in the Western Zone of Bangladesh Railway (BR) are under illegal possession for long.

A section of officials and employees at BR's Divisional Estate Office, trade union leaders and activists of political parties are involved in the grabbing.

Sources at the Estate Office said BR has a total of 26,409.64 acres in its Western Zone. Most of the lands are in important railway junctions and 'railway towns' like Saidpur, Nilphamari, Parbatipur, Khulna, Sirajganj, Lalmonirhat, Pashia and Bogra.

Of the lands, official records show that 15,151 acres have been 'utilised for its own purposes'. Of the rest 11,258.64 acres, 4,600 acres were leased as agricultural land and another 148 acres are wetland. A big part of the remaining 6,510.64 acres are shown as fallow lands, most of which have been occupied by land grabbers, the sources said.

The 15,151 acres shown as utilised by the railway department accommodate officers' quarters,

workers colony, hospital, workshop, rail junctions, playground, mosques, schools, community centres and other structures in different areas under the Western Zone. But in fact, large portions of the lands shown as utilised have also been occupied by land grabbers, the sources said.

The railway never launched any meaningful drive to recover the lands. At different times, its eviction drives proved eyewash as those stopped midway for mysterious reasons, the sources said.

The grabbers either use the lands for their own businesses or rent those on monthly basis. Action is hardly taken against the grabbers.

The 4,600 acres of agricultural land and 148 acres wetland are leased for various periods. But most of the leasees are enjoying the lands for long virtually without paying any revenue. They do it by managing a section of officials and employees.

Only in Saidpur town in Nilphamari district where the country's largest railway workshop is situated, the railway has

2,636 quarters for its employees. But 900 of them are used by illegal occupants, the sources admitted while talking to this correspondent. But other sources put the number of illegally occupied quarters at about 1,500.

Same is the situation in other 'railway towns' in its Western Zone.

A section of employees at the BR Estate Department, allegedly in connivance with illegal occupants, have declared some quarters in good condition as 'damaged and rejected' and have rented those to illegal occupants, the sources claimed.

Two-thirds of the area in Saidpur municipality comprise railway lands covering several hundred acres land. A major portion of the lands have been occupied. Magnificent private buildings and business establishments or markets have been constructed illegally on those but the railway department is deprived of revenue.

In Mistri Para and some other areas in Saidpur town, stranded Pakistanis are illegally occupying a large number of railway quarters

and have turned those as 'refugee camps'. Leaders of different political parties and workers union have also occupied railway lands to construct their offices.

Seeking anonymity, a high official at the Divisional Estate Office dmited that the value of the occupied railway lands would be over Tk 200 crore.

The illegally occupied railway quarters have become criminals' dens, locals alleged.

Few months back, law enforcing agencies raided some illegally occupied railway quarters at Munshi Para and recovered 25 drums of locally made wine, several hundred bottles foreign liquor and stolen electric wires. When asked, president of Railway Employees Welfare Trust Abdur Razzak said these irregularities should not be allowed to continue.

Sources at Divisional Estate Office's office at Pakshi however said a drive would be launched in two-three days to recover the lands.



PHOTO: STAR

Excavators used for illegal stone collection demolished during the drive gathered at Jafflong.

Satu raises fish not just to fish for compliments

AMINUL ISLAM, Mymensingh

Satu Deo, an unmarried young girl, has proved how women can also contribute to the national economy.

Her success as a fish farmer now draws many people including officials and newsmen to her farm at remote Galagoan village in Phulpur upazila in Mymensingh district.

She earned a profit of about Tk five lakh in six months last year.

Born and educated at Mymensingh town, she started fish culture in a pond in 2003 at her village home with a financial support of Tk 40,000 from her father advocate Badal Chandra Deo.

In the initial year, she earned a profit of Tk 20,000, which encouraged her.

"I was in a dilemma whether I would be successful. The initial profit enthused me and I took it seriously", Satu Deo told this correspondent during a visit.

Now, Satu, 22, still being single, owns of six ponds and has a plan to expand her project.

She is interested more in raising indigenous varieties of fish like Koi, Shingi, Magur (catfish), Rui and Pabda. She is popular in her area for cultivating local variety of Shingi, a delicious indigenous fish.

Satu started a hatchery this year to produce fries of Thai Koi and local catfish from eggs.

"I have a target to produce 20 to 25 lakh fish

fries this year in my hatchery. This is the first such initiative by a woman in the district", Satu said.

After fully concentrating in the profession, she took training on fish culture from local Jubo Unnayan Directorate and Phulpur Upazila Fisheries Office in the district.

"Fish culture has changed my lot and earned honor for myself and my family. It has been possible due to my devotion and hard labour and support from my father."

Breaking social prejudices, Satu conducts all work at her project from feeding fish fries to marketing.

She now employs five persons and pays them Tk 5000 each as salary. Now there are fishes worth about Tk 10 lakh in her six ponds, she said.

"Fish traders from Mymensingh and Dhaka come to my farm to buy fish", she said hoping more profit this year.

This is a very prospective sector which can gainfully employ thousands of unemployed youths if government gives necessary support, she said.

"It gives me a good feeling when people including women come to me to seek advice on fish culture. I try to give them moral support and advice", said Satu.

Satu is the eldest among her five brothers and sisters.

PBCP 'regional leader' held

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Sirajganj

Shahzadpur police yesterday arrested a 'regional leader' of Purba Banglar Communist Party (PBCP) and recovered a shutter gun from his possession at Salla Chapri village the upazila.

The arrestee is Elahi Mollah, 35, son of late Sobir Mollah.

Acting on a tip-off, a team led by Sub-Inspector Sultan Mahmud raided the house and arrested him at around 2 am, police said.

A case was lodged with Shahzadpur police station in this connection.

BDR, BSF trade gunshots on Satkhira border

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Satkhira

Bangladesh Rifles (BDR) and Indian Border Security Force (BSF) Saturday night traded heavy gunshots across the borders in two upazilas here.

In one incident, BSF personnel of Amudia camp in 24 Parganas district, West Bengal, India, fired 10 gunshots towards BDR at Taluigachha border in Satkhira Sadar upazila at about 12-30 am. At once, BDR members retaliated by firing 75 gunshots.

In another incident, BSF personnel of Tarali camp under Swarnnagar Police Station in 24 Parganas district, West Bengal, India fired five gun shots targeting BDR of Kaddanga camp in Kalaroa upazila at about 3 am. BDR retaliated promptly by firing 28 gunshots.

In the third incident, BSF of Gobra camp in India fired 4 bullets aiming at BDR of Chamdunia camp in Kalaroa upazila at about 3-30 am. BDR retaliated by firing 10 gun shots.

However, no casualty was reported in the firing incidents.

On contact, 41, Rifles Battalion Commanding Officer (CO) Lt Col Md Asif Abdur Rouf confirmed the incidents saying BDR had to retaliate in self-defence as BSF fired over 110 gunshots targeting them.

A tense situation is prevailing along the border areas in the district as similar gunfights are taking place one after another between the two border guards for the last couple of days, BDR sources said.



Workers' fronts of two major political parties have constructed buildings by occupying railway lands in Saidpur town.



PHOTO: STAR

Fuel supply to Baghabari stops as 11 tankers stranded on Jamuna

A CORRESPONDENT, Pabna

At least 25 Baghabari-bound vessels including 11 fuel tankers with 62 lakh litres of diesel are stranded at Kaitola point on the Jamuna river, just 20 kilometres from Baghabari Ghat as the river lost navigability due to drastic fall in the water level.

Movement of vessels has been disrupted because of numerous underwater shoals between Baghabari and Nagarbari, officials at Baghabari said.

As fuel can not be reached Baghabari depot, Bangladesh Petroleum Corporation (BPC) requested Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Corporation (BIWTC) to take steps to open a temporary fuel depot at Kazirhat ferry ghat but it is yet to be com-

plied with, they said.

Bera Upazila Nirbahi Officer Abu Bakr Siddiqi said yesterday the request for opening a temporary depot at Kazirhat is yet to reach him.

He however said he is monitoring the situation and will take whatever steps necessary.

Officials at Baghabari depot said fuel supply to 16 northern districts from Baghabari depot may stop any moment as stocks are depleting fast.

They claimed that in last seven days, supplies were made from a 'disaster reserve' of 2 crore 57 lakh liters. This may be exhausted any time if the reserve is not replenished immediately, they said.

At least 20 lakh liters of diesel are needed everyday in northern

districts during the current Irrri-Boro season, they said.

The underwater shoals have appeared at Mohonganj, Pachakola, Nakalia, Harirampur, Rakhsha and Nagarbari points on the Jamuna, where the water level is hardly 5 feet. At least 10 feet water is needed for oil tankers to ply, the officials said.

The water level is around four feet from Mohongonje to Harirampur, they said.

BIWTC sources said dredging of the channel is being hampered due to dense fog for last three days.

Different sources said the fuel crisis may deepen in northern districts if supply to Baghabari depot can not be resumed immediately.

RU students protest enhanced seat rent

RU CORRESPONDENT

Several hundred resident students of Begum Khaleda Zia Hall at Rajshahi University brought out a procession on the hall premises yesterday and submitted a memorandum to the vice-chancellor through the provost demanding immediate withdrawal of the enhanced seat rent, made effective from last month.

They also threatened to launch tougher agitation if the enhanced seat rent is not withdrawn.

Earlier on Friday night, students of Taposhi Rabeya and Munnujan Hall also brought out similar processions to press the same demand.

Rajshahi University authorities enhanced seat rents from Tk 55 to Tk 120, effective for all students' dormitories from January.



PHOTO: STAR

Satu and her employees with fishes produced at her farm.