

Weekly weather forecast for the city

Today

Low: 21 °C
High: 30 °C
Nice with plenty of sunshine

WEEK AHEAD

Monday
Low: 22 °C
High: 31 °C
Partly sunny and pleasant

Tuesday
Low: 22 °C
High: 32 °C
Partly sunny and humid

Wednesday
Low: 22 °C
High: 35 °C
Times of clouds and sun

Thursday
Low: 22 °C
High: 31 °C
Humid with sun and some clouds

Friday
Low: 23 °C
High: 33 °C
Sunny and humid

Saturday
Low: 19 °C
High: 30 °C
Plenty of sun

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HATIR JHEEL

Toxic wastes kill retention pond

TAWFIQUE ALI

Unabated dumping of untreated industrial effluent is fast killing Hatirjheel, a low-lying flood retention basin earmarked in the Dhaka Metropolitan Development Plan (DMDP).

Hundreds of industrial units mostly of textile dyeing in Tejgaon industrial area are releasing thousands of litres of toxic liquid waste directly into the water body.

Under the Flood Protection Priority of the DMDP, the existing entire stretch of Begunbari Canal from Panthapath culvert behind

Sonargaon Hotel up to Rampura Bridge is defined as a flood retention pond.

The Begunbari canal study conducted in January 1995 recommended that stretch of this retention pond could not be reduced to less than existing 84 hectares (at that time).

As per the DMDP, one third of Dhaka's storm and wastewater is drained through this canal and adjoining low-lying area.

Recently, the area has turned into one of the largest mosquito breeding grounds with stagnant wastewater, as Dhaka Water Supply and Sewerage Authority

(Wasa) has kept the Rampura sluice gate closed to prevent high level of toxic solid waste in the Hatirjheel from flowing into the river.

The river water may get heavily contaminated with the high toxicity, reaching an untreatable extent for existing water treatment plant, said Wasa officials.

Mayor of Dhaka City Corporation Sadeque Hossain Khoka said one major reason behind overwhelming mosquito menace recently in the city is that the Hatirjheel has turned into a huge mosquito breeding ground.

The bed of the wetland is fast being filled up through a process called eutrophication that kills a lake or water body. Chemicals like nitrates and phosphates act as fertilisers and facilitate massive growth of algae and weeds take-over the bed of a water body.

Professor Md Mujibur Rahman of Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (Buet), who led an expert team that carried out a study on Hatirjheel and Begunbari canal area, said, "Hatirjheel, though is a wetland, has been turned into a wasteland."

He said he had suggested in the study report taking measures to contain toxic wastes of Tejgaon industrial area. "No wastewater should be discharged into the

Hatirjheel but not only the industries in Tejgaon, Wasa itself does it."

Quality of raw water deteriorates to such an extent with industrial and domestic wastes that it becomes impossible to bring it to a drinkable condition at Wasa's water treatment plant. The contamination level with high toxicity turns critical particularly during February and March in absence of rain.

"The effluent treatment plants in the industrial units are actually inoperative," said Prof Rahman. He said there are even many hidden disposal lines that carry toxic industrial wastes and release into Hatirjheel spelling a serious environmental threat.

Industrial waste discharge even occurs through Wasa's storm sewerage system.

According to a source in the Wasa, 155 industrial units mostly of textile dyeing in Tejgaon release a huge volume of untreated toxic effluents into the Hatirjheel. Interestingly, most of these units have clearance from the Department of Environment.

The Sayedabad water treatment plant of Wasa is not capable of treating heavy metal (in textile dye) and other toxic effluents in water. One is not allowed to discharge untreated heavy metal in



Sluice gate of Hatirjheel has been shut to serve Wasa's water treatment plant (left). The designated retention pond has become extremely polluted due to stagnant wastewater.



open space or in water.

Extreme contamination with toxic industrial wastewater has completely destroyed the aquatic life in Hatirjheel area and Begunbari canal.

Fate of canals like Narai and Devdholai, Trimohini (confluence) and the river Balu to further east is the same.

Stagnant liquid toxic effluents destroy aquatic diversity and it is all the more dreadful that toxicity get transmitted to human body through consumption of fish, said architect Iqbal Habib, member secretary of Bangladesh

Paroibesh Andolon (Bapa).

Wasa itself releases the whole lot of untreated domestic and other sewages of entire Baridhara and Badda areas into the Gulshan Lake and Hatirjheel, as the agency has no sewer system in those areas, he said.

Begunbari originally used to flow from the confluence of three canals -- Paribagh, Kathalbag and Panthapath -- up to the Jirani canal to the east.

Begunbari now links Sonargaon Jheel (at the back of Sonargaon Hotel) on west and Hatirjheel on the east.

Wasa Deputy MD and (currently in-charge of MD) Shahidur Rahman Pradhan said that water of the rivers around the city is already polluted.

"We have closed the Rampura sluice gate to increase oxygen in the water and we will open it with rainfall," he said. "Around 80 percent of used water goes as sewer water but Wasa has no treatment plant for such water except the one at Pagla in Sayedabad."

A number of locals of Tejgaon (Ward no-37) meanwhile alleged that illegal land grab-

bers have been running a very lucrative business erecting makeshift structures across a vast swath of south Begunbari canal area and renting out them to poor people.

These slum settlements not only significantly contribute to pollution of the low-lying area but also harbour criminals. An unscrupulous section of officials make money providing illegal connections of utility services to these makeshift structures.

RICKSHAW

Associations flourish on Illegal registration

RAIHAN SABUKTAGIN

An illegal rickshaw registration business continues to thrive in the capital under the very nose of Dhaka City Corporation (DCC).

Numerous organised groups under the banner of rickshaw owner's and puller's associations with the connivance of DCC officials have been making a fortune by selling fake rickshaw registrations to owners of illegal rickshaws in the city.

There have been allegations that the so-called associations involved in this illegal business of fake registrations flourished under the wings of major political parties. The association leaders designate a particular area for a rickshaw while handing over the fake registration plate and they ensure that the law enforcers do not harass the puller of that particular unauthorised rickshaw.

Monirul Islam from Agargaon, owner of nine rickshaws, told Star City that eight of his rickshaws were plying without any harassment in Agargaon and Pallabi areas with registration plates provided by the association leaders. He collected five of those from Bangladesh Jatiyatabadi Rickshaw-Van Malik Sramik Sangram Parishad housed on the third floor of 23 Bangabandhu Avenue, office of Bangladesh Awami League (AL).

Both associations claimed that the registration numbers had been issued against proposed registration numbers issued by DCC. Numbers of the proposed DCC registrations claimed by the leaders of these two associations however were not the same.

According to Bangladesh Jatiyatabadi Rickshaw-Van Malik Sramik Samannay Parishad, the proposed DCC-issued registration numbers are 55,000, while the other association claimed it to be 43,000 including 35,000 rickshaws and 8,000 rickshaw-vans.

Abdur Rahman from Rupnagar in Pallabi is owner of 23 rickshaws. He said the registrations provided by the associations cost between Tk 300 and Tk 500 for three months. "The association arranges the release of any rickshaw seized by law-enforcers during the covered three-month period," he said, adding, "It is risky for rickshaws with fake registrations to ply the streets after the three-month validity is over." Moreover, the association will not be responsible if the rickshaws are seized outside the designated territory, Abdur Rahman said.

After doing some investigations, it was found that several rickshaws were plying with the same registration plate and document. The registration holder keeps the 'blue book' (paper document of registration) and rents out fake tin registration plates and other documents. These registration holders collect a one-time security deposit of Tk 2000 and a minimum of Tk 200 monthly rental for the tin plate and the documents.

When asked about the rickshaw registration plate forgery, Insur Ali, coordinator of the Bangladesh Rickshaw-Van Malik Sramik Sangram Parishad told Star City that various unscrupulous quarters of rickshaw traders in collaboration with a number of DCC officials have been forging registration plates and documents.

Syed Jahangir, chief of Wheel Branch of DCC, told Star City that DCC has been conducting drives against the forgery rings. Any rickshaw without registration number issued by the DCC

is unauthorised, he added.

He said despite unauthorised rickshaw seizures, numbers of unauthorised rickshaws have been increasing as the owners are putting more new rickshaws on the roads regularly. "We are not involved with fake rickshaw registrations and we are always against any illegal activities," he added.

According to Wheel Branch, there are 79,000 authorised rickshaw registrations in the city.

In reality, about four lakh rickshaws are plying in the city.

On issue of unauthorised rickshaw registrations provided by associations, Fazlur Rahman, convenor of the Bangladesh Rickshaw-Van Malik Sramik Oikya Parishad, said the DCC failed to maintain a concrete system for the rickshaw sector and that gave rise to various problems including fake registrations, controlling the increase of rickshaws and curb-

ing rickshaw thieves.

Aminur, a rickshaw puller from Rupnagar, told Star City that pulling an unauthorised rickshaw is perilous for a puller as well. "My rickshaw owner forcefully collected the full cost of a rickshaw from me when the authority seized a rickshaw I was pulling as he failed to recover the vehicle even through the association leaders. I do not like pulling an unauthorised rickshaw after that incident, but I am helpless."



Associations issue illegal registration numbers in exchange for cash.

DoE's endless siesta

Department of Environment remains bogged down with pending lawsuits and writs

SHAHNAZ PARVEEN

Pending lawsuits and writ petitions are weighing down the Department of Environment (DoE) making it an ineffective government body to deal with environmental offences.

According to DoE sources, as many as 90 lawsuits filed by the department against factories in and around Dhaka city are now pending with different courts. Besides, there are 111 cases against DoE filed by brick kiln owners are awaiting disposal.

"We cannot take action against environmental offenders because of these cases as they are progressing very slowly," said Nazimuddin Chowdhury, director of DoE, Dhaka Division.

"Writ petitions and cases are extra burden for DoE. We have no control over the slow pace of the legal procedure. Our activities are stalled because of this," he added.

Among these cases, 19 need immediate attention as they are pending since 2001. Also, there are 31 cases pending in the Appellate Division of the Supreme Court for a long time.

The brick kiln owners lost to DoE in 80 cases while verdicts went in favour of the owners in 10 cases. But both DoE and the owners went to the Appellate Division.

Most of these cases were filed under The Environment Conservation Rules, 1997 (Amended).

According to the law, industrial enterprises must obtain environmental clearance certificate from the office of the Director General of DoE. Industries discharging pollutants in the nature must have in-house Effluent Treatment Plant (ETP).

"The offenders either did not have clearance certificate from DoE or they lack in-house Effluent Treatment Plant as directed in the act," he added.

"Some factories had ETP but they stopped its function to save money. They were directly discharging untreated toxic waste into adjacent rivers," Chowdhury said.

Chowdhury also mentioned that brick kilns are supposed to have 120 feet long chimney but most of the owners defy the rules. "We issued a circular to the brick kiln owners. The owners in response filed cases against the department," he said.

He mentioned that these are all serious offences but the offenders continue polluting the nature as the cases are taking time to resolve.

The highest penalty for pollution under the conservation act is 10 years' rigorous imprison-

ment or a fine of Tk 10 lakh.

Tonnes of hazardous untreated waste from around 7,000 industries are polluting all the four rivers, canals and low-lying areas around the city posing major environmental threat.

According to a study, 67.7 million litres of untreated liquid industrial waste are dumped into the nature every day.

Most polluting industries in and around the city are tanneries, dyeing, textile, pharmaceutical and chemical factories.

These industries are situated in Tejgaon, Shyampur, Fatulla, Konabari in Gajipur, Ashulia, Ruggani, and on the banks of Shitalakhyia, Bangsi, Balu and Turag rivers.

According to DoE findings, the water in the canals and rivers around Dhaka has become extremely poisonous due to industrial pollution.

The situation worsens during winter as the water remains stagnant during this season. Also the flow of water is hampered by construction of various infrastructures.

Experts say Biological Oxygen Demand (BOD) has reached a very high level in the rivers. Condition of the river Balu and Turag is most dangerous, officials at the DoE said.

DoE remains as a very weak department regarding enforcement of law to stop pollution.

Polluting factories are first given a notice by the department. If they (factory owners) do not comply then DoE requests the utility services to disconnect their lines. They take action in the third stage if the utility services do not help out.

"When we try to take action, the owners move to court with petitions saying that they are providing jobs to thousands of people or that they have taken loans from bank," said Khandaker Rashedul Haque, director general, DoE.

He mentioned that there is a severe shortage of manpower in DoE to handle the situation. In the Dhaka Division the DoE has only 42 officials and 11 posts are vacant.

"Frequent transfer of the officials also hampers our work. Whenever an official is transferred DoE's activities is delayed," Haque said.

Syeda Rizwana Hasan, director, Bangladesh Environmental Lawyers' Association (Bela), said, "DoE needs to strengthen itself with a legal cell, which will follow the legal process closely. It will help increase the pace of the trial."

"They seriously lack manpower but most importantly they lack honest people with motivation to bring changes," she added.

DoE served 487 notices to various polluting factories since February 2006. These notices however failed to have an effect on the situation.