

Recover Hatirjheel lake from land grabbers

500 NGOs urge CG

BSS, Dhaka

Coalition of Local Non-government Organisations (CLNB) yesterday urged the caretaker government (CG) to recover the ancient 'Hatirjheel' lake in the capital from the land grabbers.

The CLNB placed a six-point proposal for freeing the jheel from the land grabbers by removing their structures.

"The Hatirjheel, which once ran from the backside of the present Sonargaon Hotel to Gulshan-1, is now being illegally occupied by Brac, Capital Housing, Nirman

International and other local land grabbers," said CLNB Chairman Haroonur Rashid while addressing a press conference here.

Showing many documents, he said at least 84.09 acres of the Hatirjheel belonged to 'Bhawal Raja'.

The government owned the land when it became khas, he added.

Haroonur Rashid said the Brac initiated the grabbing of the Hatirjheel by building its multi-story head office.

To preserve the biodiversity as well as safeguarding the city from any future natural disaster, the

process of reshaping the original lake should start immediately, he demanded.

Replying to a question, Haroonur Rashid said the CLNB is an organisation of over 500 local NGOs and its members do not take funds from foreign donors.

"The government is our great donor and it is also the largest donor for most local and foreign NGOs in Bangladesh," he added.

Local community leaders Mohsinul Kabir and Ibrahim Rahman attended the press conference.

Partial solar eclipse today

BSS, Dhaka

Partial solar eclipse from 6:43am to 8:24am is going to be visible over Bangladesh today.

The astrological section of the science club Anusanditsu Chakra have arranged an astrophotography camp to observe the eclipse with the help of modern telescopes from the roof of a 17-storied apartment building at 12/A, Eskaton Garden Road in the city.

A press release of the organisation yesterday said the high eclipse will be visible at 7:36am.

Those who are interested in the information and pictures collected at the camp should contact the astronomy section of the club, the release added. Astrologer Dr AR Khan and Astrophysicist Dr Dwipen Bhattacharya will attend the camp among others.

The science club warned those who are interested to observe the eclipse on their own should use welding glass or the dark portion of the used X-ray plates because watching the solar eclipse with bare eyes would be dangerous to eyes, it added.

Jamil made MD of Shipping Corporation

UNB, Dhaka

Jamil Osman, additional secretary of Establishment Ministry, has been appointed Managing Director of Bangladesh Shipping Corporation on deputation, said a handout.

It said Osman was an officer on special duty (OSD) under the Establishment Ministry.

Rejoinder

Dhaka City Corporation Mayor Sadeque Hossain Khoka in a rejoinder to the report "10 TV Channels: Licences Available at Lightning Speed," published in The Daily Star on March 16, 2007, denied any involvement with Bangla Vision, a private satellite television channel.

"I solemnly say that the information presented in the report mentioning my relation with Bangla Vision is not true. In fact, I am not involved with the channel as an owner or in any other capacity," he said in his rejoinder.

"The report also said that I have an office at the Bangla Vision at Noor Tower which is absolutely untrue," he added.

Ensure voters' right to information

Speakers tell discussion

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Mass media can play an important role to help voters elect honest and dedicated people in election, said the speakers at a discussion yesterday.

They called for enacting right to information act so that the voters can exercise their franchise judiciously.

The discussion on the 'Role of mass media to ensure voters' right to information' was organised by Massline Media Centre (MMC) at LGED Auditorium in the city.

President of Bangladesh Federal Union of Journalists (BFUJ) Monjurul Ahsan Bulbul said voters' access to information should be ensured to come out from the culture of secrecy.

He said the investigative reporting should be strengthened by enhancing professionalism.

While presenting a keynote paper, Prothom Alo Reporter Moshul Alam pointed out that while the voters in neighbouring countries are enjoying their right to information, Bangladeshi voters are deprived of this right.

The freedom of expression that

the constitution provides would become meaningless if people's right to information is hindered, he said, adding that awareness of the voters should be increased to make the democratic system more effective.

The speakers said the owners of news media and newspapers must be motivated as they fix the agenda.

They suggested planned journalism for election year and said the investigative reporters should be provided with more training.

The non-government organisations could work with the media owners and policy makers in this regard, they added.

The speakers said it could be helpful to make people know details about the candidates by utilising the potentials of alternative media.

In a message to the discussion, Adviser Geeti Ara Safia Chowdhury said mass media could create a scope for the voters to take right decision in electing right person.

Media even could reveal whether the elected representatives are working properly or not after the election, she added.

Describing information as one of the most basic elements of democracy, Geeti Ara said all information should be kept open for public in the greater interests of democracy.

Democracy Watch in a survey found that while the voter roll was updating for the second time, very few voters were informed about the matter and those who were engaged in updating process could not clearly perceived the issue, said Mostofa Sohel pointing out people's lack of awareness about the election and the system.

He also urged the media to reveal information honestly as sometimes people get confused by the false news published by the media intentionally.

Dr Hossain Zillur Rahman presided over the discussion which was attended by Kamrul Hasan Monju of MMC, Badiul Alam Majumdar of Shujan, Nurul Hasnat of Election Working Group, Dr Ananya Rayhan of D net, Munira Khan of Fema, Zenifar Zabin Chowdhury of Unicef and Tahera Jabin of CIDA.

Obaedul Karim venture inflicts huge loss

FROM PAGE 1
supposed to finish the job by January 2007, it has so far completed only 10 percent of the work which is also substandard, according to Hotels International Limited (HIL), the parent company of the hotel.

During a visit to the project site, The Daily Star found that no part of the renovation work has been completed yet.

But in the meantime Accom destroyed a good section of the hotel's structure which used to house some of the main amenity features including 100 rooms, the swimming pool, tennis club, kitchen, poolside restaurant, pool deck, and the health club.

As a result, revenue earnings of the state-owned hotel dropped to Tk 40 crore in 2006 from its earlier average annual income of Tk 75 crore. The hotel authorities predict that the earnings might come down to zero in 2007 as it seems uncertain whether the renovation work will be finished within the next two or three years.

The hotel is not only suffering from a very low revenue generation but also facing the lowest rate of occupancy in its history. The occupancy rate of the hotel came down to 30 percent from an average of 60 percent over the last one year due to the stalling renovation work, according to HIL statistics.

The hotel sources said a former state minister for civil aviation and tourism and some former lawmakers, who were close to Orion Group, facilitated the awarding of contract to Accom.

HIL sources alleged that the former state minister took Tk 5 crore as bribe from Orion Group and rewarded the company with the lucrative contract.

However, due to slow progress of the work, HIL already trimmed the project plan to reduce the hotel's losses bringing the cost down to Tk 148 crore including the cost of contingency items.

According to the contract signed between the parties, Accom was supposed to pay a penalty fee of Tk 24 crore to the hotel authorities for missing the deadline.

But dramatically, the hotel authorities in a board meeting in August 2006 waived the penalty and gave a four-month extension to Accom for finishing the job. Sources said an executive of HIL, who allegedly does his own business with Orion Group, exerted his influence in waiving the penalty for Accom.

Some HIL officials said at the current pace, the renovation work will not be completed in the next three years as most of the high officials of Accom and Orion Group went into hiding.

Due to the renovation project, some important amenity features of the hotel have remained unavailable to the clients for the last one year, causing drastic revenue shortfall for

the hotel.

"Usually, Hotel Sonargaon contributes Tk 20 crore a year to the national exchequer. But due to the stalling renovation work it might incur a loss this year," said a high official of HIL.

Meanwhile, HIL is funding the project from its own coffer, putting itself in a financial uncertainty as it has already lost a large amount of money over the last 12 months.

"Generally we get money from the hotel. But for the time being unfortunately we are paying Pan Pacific, the management authority of the hotel," an HIL official said.

He said a total of 560 employees of the hotel are also experiencing reduced income since the hotel authorities have not been paying the customary 12.5 percent service charge to every employee of the hotel since Accom started the renovation on January 2006.

GRAFT IN TENDER
Investigating the over all project scenario, it was found that HIL awarded the contract to Orion Group bypassing some of the lowest bids.

Seventeen local, foreign, and multi-national joint venture companies showed their interest in participating in the tender but as the former state minister for tourism directly handled the bidding process, most of the bidders opted to drop out.

And most of the remaining bidders were disqualified by the tender committee one after another in the name of being technically unfit, although some of their bids were lower than Accom's.

Finally the hotel authorities selected two companies - Accom Engineering Ltd and Orion Development Ltd - for the final bidding, both of whom are concerns of Orion Group. The two companies submitted their proposals along with pay orders from a state owned bank bearing consecutive serial numbers.

A board member vetoed the questionable move in the meeting just to be sacked by the former state minister on a very short notice.

From the very beginning of the renovation work, irregularities and substandard work were detected by the hotel authorities.

HIL authorities sometimes expressed their dissatisfactions with the slow pace of the project. Such an expression of dissatisfaction sent a managing director (MD) of HIL to forced resignation. A four-party alliance lawmaker who was known as very close to Orion Group forced the erstwhile MD of HIL to resign on September 2006, before his contract deadline of May 2007.

ACCOM'S SUBSTANDARD WORK

HIL sources said Accom submitted a tender bid demanding very high price for every material needed for the job. But after getting the contract, the company did not maintain the agreed required standard of the project.

Sources said all imported materi-

als were supposed to be examined by a consultant firm before use. But most of the time Accom flouted the rule and used the materials on its whim.

Citing an example, the sources said Accom used local Nasir brand glass in bathrooms instead of Japanese made glass required by the agreement.

In its project proposal Accom mentioned that it would import some materials for kitchens and some bathroom fittings from Japan and the US, but in the approved final project plan the specific condition was dropped, the sources said.

The management of Pan Pacific found many other irregularities in the project. The main plan of the project had to undergo changes many times due to Accom's lack of efficiency in such work, the sources added.

The substandard work of the company was also detected by Southeast Asia Technology Co Ltd (SEATEC), a consultant firm which supervised the renovation.

SEATEC in a letter on 21 January, 2007 said, "We believe the contractors' latest target date for completion of the work is not achievable at the current pace of work."

Sources said Interiors International Ind LLC of UAE is the lead partner of Accom, but no hotel official has ever seen any representative of the lead partner at the project site.

OTHER BIDDERS' VERSIONS

A failed bidder told The Daily Star requesting anonymity that some of the competitors' bids were lower than Accom's.

"But unfortunately, the tender committee disqualified us in the name of technical inadequacy," he said adding, "If you consider our portfolio and our experience in such work, the decision of the tender committee will seem questionable."

He also said the situation was such that all the competing companies had no other choice but to withdraw their bids.

When asked how much was his company's bid for the work, he said it was lower than Accom's. But he declined to give any more detail due to his concern for his own security considering the said state minister's much known habit of using muscle in settling disputes.

"When we found that a strong group with BNP affiliation was working behind the scene, we had to drop out from the bidding," said another bidder who also requested anonymity.

HIL'S VERSION

The image of Hotel Sonargaon is taking a beating due to the bungled renovation project, said a high official of HIL.

"It is happening only because of a state minister's corruption during his three and a half year tenure. He and his associates did everything according to their whims," the high official added.

He said the former state minister exercised dictatorial control over the affairs of the hotel beyond his jurisdiction.

He was a very powerful man and he imposed all his whims on the hotel authorities, just like he did in other sectors under his ministry, the official said.

He also said, "It is possible that a large amount of money was siphoned off from the project."

About tender irregularities, he said it might have happened. An inquiry committee had been formed by HIL to look into the allegations of irregularity which interestingly gave a seal of approval to the tender process, he added.

Hotel sources said some of the committee members were also involved in the irregularities and were very close to the former state minister.

Gholam Nabi, managing director of HIL said, "We will look into the allegations of irregularities against Accom Engineering Ltd."

He also admitted that the hotel is incurring a large amount of loss and said, "Business was very dull during the peak season between October and February."

About the dilly-dallying by Accom he said, "We sent a letter to the company asking it to address the issue."

PAN PACIFIC EMPLOYEES' VERSION

A total of 560 employees of Pan Pacific are being deprived of their 12.5 percent service charges for a year now due to the delay in renovation work.

But unfortunately no action has been taken so far to resolve the problem.

Talking to The Daily Star, the employees said they are victims of the greed of some already rich people.

"I feel ashamed when I see my foreign guests sunbathing on the roof of the hotel or in the passage outside," said an employee.

He said, "We had a large number of regular foreign guests. But when they found on our website that some common amenities of a five star hotel have been suspended for a year they felt discouraged to come to the hotel."

"We want a quick solution from the present government," he added.

ACCOM'S VERSION
Contacted by The Daily Star, Accom's Chief Project Coordinator M Sayedur Rahman refused to comment on the progress of the work and the bidding process.

He said he is new in the company and not aware of what went wrong with the project. Another official, who works in the head office of Orion Group, told this correspondent that he is also new in the company and that there was no authorised person in the office to comment on the project.

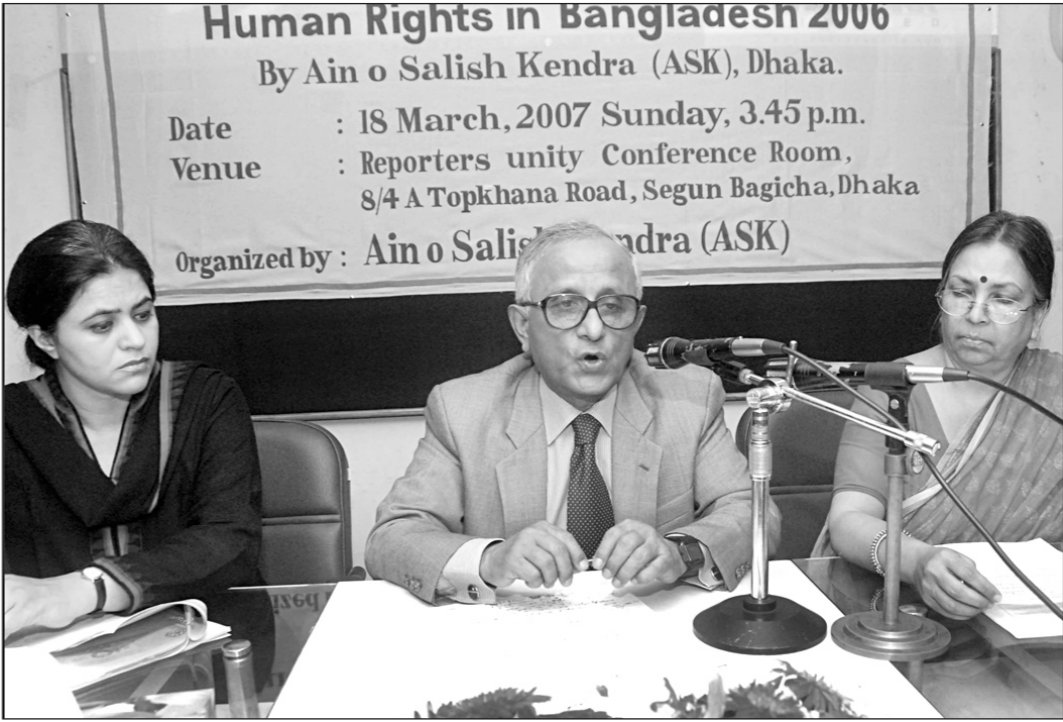


PHOTO: STAR

Bank Asia Chairperson M Syeduzzaman speaks at a press conference at Reporters' Unity in the city yesterday. On his left is ASK Executive Director Sultana Kamal and on his right is human rights activist Sara Hossain.

Human rights showed downward trend in 2006

Reveals Ain O Salish Kendra report

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Human rights in the country showed a downward trend in 2006 as arbitrary exercise of power, including 359 extra-judicial killings by law enforcers, and inefficient democratic institutions like parliament worsened the situation.

There were also mass arrest of 46,210 people and 251 cases of assault on journalists—the highest in a year, said the summary report of "Human Rights in Bangladesh 2006" prepared by Ain O Salish Kendra (ASK).

At least 70 persons died last year in jail custody, including 32 at the Dhaka Central Jail, said the report revealed at a press conference at Dhaka Reporters' Unity yesterday.

Dr Faustina Pereira, director of ASK advocacy and research unit, presented the summary report at the press conference. The ASK said it will publish the full report soon.

The ASK report shows that 1,254 cases of violence against women were reported in newspapers in 2006 but only 389 cases were filed with the court.

It said although the Appellate Division confirmed the death sentences of the six militant leaders in December 2006, the people still remain completely ignorant of the reasons behind the emergence of the militancy.

Moreover, the government failed to hold any discussion in parliament on major human rights issues like the extra-judicial killings, bomb and grenade explosions by religious extremists, and workers' unrest in

the garment sector, the report noted.

Referring to the eight incidents of suicide due to Monga, the report said abnormal and uncontrolled price hike of essentials throughout 2006 was widely ascribed to manipulations and extortion by syndicates supported by influential political leaders, and intimidation in transport sector.

Bank Asia Chairperson M Syeduzzaman said, "This report will help the present non-party caretaker government to take necessary steps to improve the human rights situation in the country."

ASK Executive Director Sultana Kamal said, "The present government is working very sincerely to improve law and order."

The ASK report also presented a few recommendations to improve the human rights situation in the country.

It recommended holding independent, impartial and effective investigations into the allegations of extra-judicial killings by the security forces, including the Rapid Action Battalion (Rab) and the police.

"It is very difficult to try the law enforcers. As they are the investigating authority, biasness in the investigation report might affect the whole process," said human rights activist Sara Hossain in the open discussion session.

Discussions also recommended holding independent and impartial investigations into tortures and arbitrary detentions including mass arrests in the last 10 years.

The ASK report also recommended taking measures to stop forced eviction of the poor without prior rehabilitation and resettlement arrangements.

BSF kills 1

UNB, Sathkira

A Bangladeshi cattle trader was shot dead while another injured in firing by the Indian Border Security Force (BSF) on Hizadi in Kolaro upazila yesterday morning.

The dead was identified as Nawsher Ali, 22, of Boyerdanga village while the injured as Kalu Majid, 28, of Hizaldi village.

BDR sources said BSF troops of Arshikuri camp opened fire on the cattle traders when they were entering Bangladesh from India at about 7:00am.

Later, they took away the body of Nawsher and injured Kalu into the Indian territory.

BTV director sent on forced retirement

UNB, Dhaka

Bangladesh Television Director for Programme and Planning M Mahbubul Alam, who was made OSD earlier, was sent on forced retirement yesterday.

Alam, who was holding the charge of Deputy Director (Programme) of the state-run television, has been given the retirement under the Government Employees Service Rule 1974 as "he has completed 25 years in job".

Ex-BNP MP of Sherpur, Dulu's close aide held

FROM PAGE 1

the raid on the house at around 5:00am.

Rubel and Rupam were later handed over to Kafrul police.

Officer-in-Charge of Kafrul Police Station Abdul Khaleque filed a General Diary (GD) accusing Rubel of earning crores of taka in cooperation with his brother Rupam through extortions and tender manipulations.

In the GD, Rubel was also accused of holding a rally in Sherpur town on March 9 night along with the leaders and activists of Sherpur district Jubo Dal and Chhatra Dal violating emergency rules.

Rubel's name figures in the Anti-Corruption Commission list of 15 graft suspects of Sherpur district, UNB adds from Sherpur.

Police produced the former MP and his brother before the Chief Metropolitan Magistrate's Court, Dhaka where defence lawyers sought their bails.

Rejecting their bails, the court ordered sending them to Dhaka Central Jail with a home ministry proposal for a one-month detention.

Our staff correspondent from Rajshahi added: Rapid Action Battalion (Rab) arrested Sadrul Islam Dambel, a ward commissioner of Natore municipality and a top cadre of former deputy minister Ruhul Kuddus Talukdhur Dulu from Baliapukur in Rajshahi city yesterday afternoon.

As a Rab team raided a poultry farm in Baliapukur Shantibagh where Dambel was hiding, he tried to escape arrest by firing on the law enforcers. Rab said, adding that a short pipe-gun was seized from him.

Dambel, who was bleeding profusely from the bullet wound in the left leg, was admitted to Rajshahi Medical College Hospital.

Dhaka where defence lawyers sought their bails.

Rejecting their bails, the court ordered sending them to Dhaka Central Jail with a home ministry proposal for a one-month detention.

Our staff correspondent from Rajshahi added: Rapid Action Battalion (Rab) arrested Sadrul Islam Dambel, a ward commissioner of Natore municipality and a top cadre of former deputy minister Ruhul Kuddus Talukdhur Dulu from Baliapukur in Rajshahi city yesterday afternoon.

As a Rab team raided a poultry farm in Baliapukur Shantibagh where Dambel was hiding, he tried to escape arrest by firing on the law enforcers. Rab said, adding that a short pipe-gun was seized from him.

Dambel, who was bleeding profusely from the bullet wound in the left leg, was admitted to Rajshahi Medical College Hospital.

The dreaded criminal along with a number of armed cadres accompanied Siddik Islam Bangla Bhai during the latter's operations in Bagmara in Rajshahi, Atrai and Raninagar in Naogaon and Naldanga in Natore in 2004.

In March 2004, Dambel's group engaged in a gunfight with police in Naldanga of Natore that cost the life of microbus driver Babu.

He shot Awami League adherent Arifur Rahman Masum in 2003.

He had 'torture cells' at several places in Rajshahi and Natore.

Dambel amassed huge wealth through corruption and extortion and he was accused in several cases for murder and terrorism in Rajshahi and Natore, police said.

Govt agency to monitor prices

FROM PAGE 16

welcomed the government initiative of exempting taxes on wheat and rice imports. They also suggested going for the same step regarding import of other food items like soyabean oil, milk, lentil etc.

The businessmen demanded removal of L/C (Letter of Credit) margin in importing essentials so that the supply and demand ratio is evenly balanced.

The finance adviser assured them that his ministry will talk to the central bank and National Board of Revenue (NBR) in this regard.

Some high officials of commerce ministry and NBR, however, said that the reduction of L/C margin will not play any role to reduce the prices of commodities, adding that only businessmen will be benefited from such provision.

A long-term sustainable system from the stages of supply to demand is needed to prevent the price manipulation by the businessmen, they said.

Meanwhile, the members of

Bangladesh Rifles (BDR) yesterday installed 17 more makeshift open markets in the capital.

Countrywide Open Market Sale of rice starts

Some one lakh metric tonnes of rice will be sold through the OMS programme by the government that will continue till April 18, an official announcement said.

One person is entitled to buy a maximum of 5-kilogram rice at the rate of Tk 15.25 per kg in this rationing system.

On the inaugural day of country-wide operation, Food and Disaster Management Ministry Secretary Dhiraj Malakar visited four sales centres at Mirpur, Plasey and Motijheel in the capital.

The price of rice would become stable and reasonable on the market due to the OMS programme, he said.

"The government has enough stock of rice and the OMS programme will be continued after the set timeframe if necessary," the secretary told people at the makeshift rationing shops.

Director General of Food Department Molla Waheduzzaman, Dhaka Divisional Commissioner M Mahfuzur Rahman and other high officials of the food department were present.

First day of OMS in Ctg saw huge demand

Only three spots, out of the 82 spots fixed for OMS at the port city, sold rice yesterday with huge crowds thronging the places from the morning.

Due to huge demand, all the three stalls ran out of stock within one and a half hours after starting the sale. Many consumers returned empty-handed as a result.

Each of the dealers was allowed to sell a maximum of 510 Kg of rice a day.

The officials concerned of the Regional Food Controller's (RFC) Office said that the sale would gradually increase within a few days when more dealers will start selling rice.

Saarc Car Rally leaves for India

STAR REPORT

Saarc Car Rally left Bangladesh for India through Burimari Port in Lalmonirhat last evening.

Lalmonirhat district administration and leaders of socio-economic organisations received the rally at Tista bridge point.

Our Correspondent from Rangpur reports: The rally reached Rangpur at about 1:10pm from Dinajpur. District administration, boy scouts, girls' guides and business leaders received the delegates of the Saarc countries at Taraganj point.

A team of Bhaoiya (folk) artists performed there to welcome the rally.

Rangpur Chamber of Commerce and Industry organised a handicraft fair at Parjatan Motel auditorium. Women entrepreneurs of Rangpur displayed the handicrafts.

Earlier, the rally entered Dinajpur through Bogra at about 8:15am.

Our Correspondent from Dinajpur adds: Upazila Nirbahi Officer Faruq Hossain welcomed the rally at Ghoraghat along with thousands of school students who were waving flags and feestoons.

The rally will follow a special intermediary flag off ceremony at the 14th Saarc Summit in Delhi on April 3. The rally, first of its kind in the region, will officially conclude at Male in the Maldives on April 14.

The rally is planned as a media and business event to highlight Saarc objectives and also act as a curtain raiser to the upcoming Saarc Summit in New Delhi on April 3-4, 2007, sources said.