

Dhaka Jail, which is known as Central Jail, was established in the time of East India Company. The building was actually a Mughal Fort before the Company era. A government report in 1833 states that Dhaka Jail is able to accommodate 800 people. Though everyday nearly 526 people stayed there. The convicts of Dhaka Jail were used for the construction of Saint Thomas Church in 1820.

Ban on sand extraction sends thousands out of work

Although over 250,000 people in the sector are now out of work, the move to bring discipline in the sector is welcomed by environmentalists, who have long been fighting to save the flood-flow zones around the city

MORSHED ALI KHAN

A Ban on sand extraction from the Meghna and Dhaleshwari rivers since February has stopped all activities related to land filling and sand trading in the city, sending thousands of construction sites idle with their workers.

In the first week of February the joint forces banned extraction of sand from 130 sand extraction points in the two rivers. Over 2,000 sand laden vessels known as "bulkheads" operated day and night between the extraction points in the rivers and various projects and dumping sites in and around the city.

According to sources, over 250,000 people, mostly day labourers, worked in the sector.

To the relief of environmentalists the ban on sand extraction has however stopped indiscrimi-

nate land filling of low-lying lands earmarked in the city's master plan as flood-flow zones.

At present thousands of dredgers and vessels along the rivers Meghna, Dhaleshwari, Buriganga, Turag and Balu are lying idle with the labourers.

The extraction was authorised by the Energy and Mineral Resources Ministry for a token fee, while Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority (BIWTA), under the shipping ministry oversaw the operations. The BIWTA earned over Tk 1 crore every year from the sector renting out berthing sites.

Sources in the shipping ministry said the authorities are now investigating whether the sector is depriving the state of revenues and also whether extraction at such a rate is causing any environmental degradation.

With the construction sector

booming in the city, sand extraction 'silently' grew phenomenally over the years. Although the past government talked about formulating a guideline but it took no step to do so. Sand extraction and its sale involving hundreds of crores of taka were never monitored by a single body, leaving the sector drift to near 'lawlessness', according to sources.

Even some deputy commissioners issued permission for sand extraction without having any knowledge on its environmental impact. It has been alleged that a powerful political quarter, based in the city's Lalbagh area controlled the whole process of extraction, transportation and sale of sand in the city.

Most of the city's construction sites are also severely affected by the current crisis of sand, price of which has rocketed since February.

Before the ban, coarse sand sold for Tk 6 per square foot. Now the price is over Tk 12 per square foot, according to leaders of the Bulkhead Owners Association based at Amin Bazar.

Normally the city requires over ten lakh square feet of sand every day. The biggest buyer of sand for land filling in the city was Rajuk for its Uttara third phase project, where it is filling up thousands of acres of low-lying land for plots. The Eastern Housing Pallabi project is the second biggest buyer.

There are hundreds of other sites around the city where land filling was continuing day and night.

The President of Bulkhead Owners Association in Gabtoli, Ebrahim Khalil Babul, said up to a quarter of a million people are now sitting idle due to the ban. He claimed that the owners paid



Idle dredgers at Rajuk's Uttara third phase project on the river Turag in Mirpur.

up all taxes imposed on them. "We urge the authorities to investigate the entire process as soon as possible and tell us how

to restart the sector and save livelihoods of lakhs of people," he said. "Most of the traders involved in

sand extraction have bank loans to pay back, for nearly two months now we have no business. This is not a very good time for us," said

Babul.

KHILGAON PLAYGROUND

Occupation mars sports

While Ansar and VDP members take over the playground, thousands of children of this densely populated area remain deprived of sports facilities

RIZANUZZAMAN LASKAR

Bangladesh Ansar and Village Defence Party's (VDP) controversial possession of a playground at Khilgaon Chowdhury Para has been depriving thousands of children of the only local recreation ground.

According to local residents, the ground, locally known as Chowdhury Para Pachaar Math, has always been an object of tug-of-war between various authorities and influential quarters during the tenures of different governments.

Several attempts to possess the ground ensued as the ground was allotted to different organizations for different purposes in the past, locals said.

"This ground is the only children's playground in the area and has been subjected to various attempts of encroachment in the past," said Majibur Rahman, a local resident.

"It has always been surrounded by rickshaw garages, makeshift stores, mechanical workshops, etc. Despite the risk factors and consid-

ering the fact that no other option is available in the area, the children used to go and play there everyday," he added.

Finally, the ground was made off limits to all after Bangladesh Ansar and VDP occupied it on January 31, 2007 violating an injunction issued by a High Court bench.

According to sources, the High Court issued an injunction prohibiting any type of construction work or landscape transformation on the designated ground on February 2, 2006.

The Ansar officials blatantly violated the injunction and fenced off the ground from the public.

Locals said on the morning of January 31, 2007, they were taken by surprise as hundreds of Ansar and VDP officials with trucks loaded with metal sheets, bamboo and other equipment took over the ground and started to put up fence around it.

"When asked, they told us that they were acting upon instruction from 'higher authorities'," said Munir Hossain, a local resident.

"A few of us [local residents] tried to protest the abrupt invasion and got brutally beaten up



Khilgaon playground where children are unwelcome.

by the Ansars. Many of us were even detained," Munir alleged.

Col Abul Kalam Mohammad Zaki, director (admin) of Bangladesh Ansar and VDP, told this correspondent that they rightfully occupied the ground.

"The ground was leased to us by the then state ministry. Even though successive governments made attempts to allocate the ground to other organisations, the original allocation [the lease] was never cancelled," said Col Zaki.

"The court issued the injunction without properly acknowledging the situation. As the authorized authority, the Ansar and VDP will take appropriate steps to avoid any confusion over the ground," he added.

However, sources said although the ground was leased to the Ansar and VDP in 1987 by the then state ministry, the lease was cancelled in 1996 due to Ansar and VDP's failure to pay an instalment of Tk 36,00,000 by due date.

The ground was later allotted to Sabuj Mati Trust (SMT) for construction of a health complex in 2000. Again, the housing and public works ministry cancelled that allotment in 2004.

"We purchased the land at a rate of Tk 40 lakh per bigha as determined by housing and public works ministry in 2000. Although there has been an injunction on the land by the High Court, Ansar and VDP occupied the land without informing any magistrate or the police," said an SMT official seeking anonymity.

On January 2, 2005, SMT filed a writ petition with the High Court after the ministry cancelled the allotment of the land to SMT on November 25, 2004. Later, on April 26, 2005, the ministry issued work order to a company for development of a park on the land, added the sources.

Following the writ petition filed by SMT, a High Court Division Bench issued an injunction on the land on February 2, 2006. The Court directed not to make any construction on the land and not to change the nature and character of the land in any man-

ner till disposal of the previous stayed rule issued by High Court on January 2, 2005 which is still pending and yet to be disposed of.

Local residents expressed resentment and discontent over the authorities' failure to save the ground and turn it into a recreational park for the children as the government had planned it.

"This is the only ground in the whole area and the authorities never really took necessary steps to construct a full-fledged recreation park on the ground," said local resident Munir Hossain.

Col Abul Kalam Mohammad Zaki, director (admin) of Bangladesh Ansar and VDP, however said the Ansar and VDP officials would take steps, if deemed necessary, to renovate the ground and turn it into a full-fledged playground. "If they [locals] want a children's playground there, and if it deems necessary, the Ansar would renovate the ground to suit the needs of the local residents and I would personally see to it."

Fire fighters in perennial dilemma

RAIHAN SABUKTAGIN

Since independence, number of fire fighters at eleven fire stations has been reduced from 264 to 242 despite a phenomenal growth of the city.

According to Fire Brigade and Civil Defence officials, fire causes damages worth about Tk 725 crore annually in the country. But as the Fire Brigade and Civil Defence is not equipped with any information cell, it is unable to provide any information on damages in Dhaka -- one of the most densely populated cities in the world.

Despite indispensability, successive governments neglected the importance of an efficient fire fighting force for the city. The existing force of fire fighters remains extremely incapable to handling a large-scale fire.

A fire service control room source said that 70 percent of the reported fire incidents took place in Dhaka and Chittagong.

Disappearing water sources, narrow road networks, slow and chaotic traffic in the city are making fire fighting increasingly difficult day by day, said a fire fighter at Mirpur. "It is high time we looked into the crippling problems of fire fighting in the city and resolve those," he added.

"Dire consequence of the recent inferno in the 11-storey Bangladesh Steel and Engineering Corporation (BSEC) Bhaban at Karwan Bazar on February 26 could be an example of fire hazard negligence," he said. "For the first time, the media appreciated our bravery and pointed out our technical incapability."

"We saved several hundred people with the only Turntable Ladder of the country which is not really appropriate to serve the purpose."

To explain how vulnerable this city is to fire hazards, he said although Banga Bazar is located right across the fire services head quarters, a little can be saved by the fire services if the market catches fire.

Brig Gen Rafirur Rahman, director general of Fire Brigade and Civil Defence told

Star City that fire damages worth around Tk 725 crore are reported annually, but lots more go unreported. "I personally believe that the real amount of damage due to fire is many times more," he said.

Civil Defence and Rescue Service was unified in 1982 to form Bangladesh Fire Service and Civil Service. That was a development for the organisation, but it still needs modern equipment and adequate training to fight fire in urban areas, the fire chief added.

He put the emphasis on various issues to prevent fire including creating designated water reservoirs around the city, enforcing fire licences for warehouses and factories, launching a fire safety campaign, ensuring regular checking and proper maintenance of electrical and radiation sensitive equipment in buildings.

He also emphasised that Fire Prevention and Dousing Act 2003 (Ogni Protirodh O Nirbapon Ain-2003) and the amended Building Construction Act 1952 needs to be implemented through conducting mobile drives against violators.

He suggested that fire hydrants, designated water pipelines with outlets, could be installed throughout the city streets from which fire fighters can obtain water for putting out a fire. "Water pressure would not be a problem for us if water was available in the hydrants. Water reservoirs like ponds and canals inside the city should be restored and maintained to solve water crisis during any fire."

The fire chief also stressed the need for setting up designated emergency road lanes on city streets to reach a fire site in time without getting stuck in traffic. A coordinated road clearance arrangement for fire trucks by the traffic control room can also help fire fighters reach a spot smoothly. "A modern training complex at Mirpur is under construction and it is about to be finished. Also, I am hoping receive a highly capable Turntable Ladder by mid next year," Gen Rahman said about recent initiatives taken at his organisation.

An electronic wizard without a job

RIZANUZZAMAN LASKAR

Wahiduzzaman Bachhu, an electronic genius with a range of promising innovations under his belt cannot find a job to support his family.

The gifted genius holds an impressive portfolio of 22 small and large auspiciously modulated projects, which he claims to be far more cost effective and manufacture-friendly compared to similar products available in the market.

His inspiring range of innovations includes hand-rechargeable torchlight, mobile water power station, auto hand-sensor, water sensor, friction powered toy cars and auto lantern along with a variety of other electronic gadgets.

Even though he tried hard to continue his projects taking loans and credits, the situation turned worse in the last few years when he failed in business and investors threatened his family to get their money back.

Curiosity and immense passion was the very driving force that stirred the first model of the torchlight that he planned in 1988. The Science Museum and

Science and Technology ministry assisted in his efforts back in 1992, 1993 and 1998 to implement two of his projects and he managed to build his first torchlight in 2004.

The torchlight, designed with contemporary scientific technologies need no battery replacements. It has a long range and can be recharged with electricity. The knob at the end of the torch can be turned to charge the batteries. One complete rotation of the knob will allow the torch to light for at least a minute. This torch can be very handy in places without electricity.

"There are some expensive American brands of similar torch lights available in the market. My flash light is better and is more cost effective," he added.

Another project is the friction-powered toy car. The car is designed to run and flicker flashing lights without batteries. It would move 20-25 feet given one push on flat surface.

Wahiduzzaman's auto sensor water shower is another ingenious project. Similar to auto-sensor hand-dryers in hotels and restaurants, water will spurt out of the shower when it senses the

presence of any person at a close proximity. Japan-made similar auto water sensors available in the market are very expensive.

The most significant of his project is the 'Wahid Engine', an engine that he claims runs without any lubricants, oil or any chemical for that matter.

"I have about 80 percent of all the components required for this project, and I would be able to complete it within another 6 to 7 months with proper funds," he said.

According to Wahiduzzaman, he has been working on the 'Wahid Engine' since 1998, which once built would incessantly produce an unlimited amount of electricity without any source of power or polluting the environment.

Son of martyred freedom fighter HM Obaidul Huq from Jhalkathi, the gifted mastermind has come all the way without any specialised or higher education. At Present he along with his wife and kids are leading a limping life in severe adversity.

"I did not make any of the gadgets for any commercial purposes, rather it was sheer



Wahiduzzaman at work at his home-based workshop in Mirpur.

curiosity and passion that inspired me," said Wahiduzzaman.

"Now I can't even support my family, let alone finish my projects. I am compelled to sell my inven-

tions just to support my family," he added.

Born in 1970 in Krishnokathi, a village in the Jhalakathi district, he passed the Secondary School

Certificate examination with much difficulty and had to end his formal education because of lack of money.