The banana war

Philip Gain writes about the Forest Department's ruinous campaign against the Garo banana plantations in Modhupur

AS we entered the Garo village of Sainamari in the early morning of February 21, it was glistening with golden sunlight. But we were shocked to see that all the banana plants on both sides of the mud road through the village were cut and left lying there. As we approached the people of the village we saw that they were frightened of us, the strangers.

When we wanted to know what happened to the banana gardens of this huge village with some 400 Garo families, one of them, John Marak (55), led us to his house that stands in the eastern corner of his banana garden. Johh Marak is a retired BDR *nayek* (para-military personnel).

It is an unbelievable scene. He has six acres of banana gardens around his homestead. All his banana plants, except for some with bunches of mature banana, have just been chopped down. The Forest Department (FD) engaged scores of labourers to chop down his banana plants on February 15. He once had a pineapple garden and some 200 jackfruit trees on this land that he converted to a banana garden in the hope of a quick cash return. Some years ago, he cut all his jackfruits trees and sold them for cash to invest in the banana garden. He also invested Tk 290,000 ($4,000), that he got upon retirement, in banana gardening and constructing a large house. He watched helplessly from a distance as the FD cut down the banana trees. Given that the country is in a state of emergency and that the FD was assisted by the authorities, nobody could think of attempting any resistance.

Like John Marak, the entire village watched with great despair while their banana gardens were destroyed. "I received no notice before they cut my banana trees. No one discussed the matter with me.

