

PHILIP GAIN

They just suddenly came and cut them," said Marak.

Two sisters from another Garo family in Sainamari, Beauty Nokorek (28) and Shagorika Nokorek (25), own 15 acres of land. They grow bananas on 12 acres to the west and east of their house. On February 15, in a matter of moments, hired workers from the Forest Department chopped down their entire banana crop. "We did not get a chance to say a word. Everything was destroyed before we could speak. They only left a few plants that had mature bananas on them," said helpless Beauty Nokorek. These hard-working sisters cultivated this crop. Now that it has been destroyed, they will suffer a financial loss of some Tk 700,000 ($10,000). Like Shagorika and Beauty, another Garo woman, Nironi Simsang (40), cried in her three acre banana garden. Nironi's two mud houses lie empty near her destroyed banana garden. She used to have 3,500 banana trees in this plot of hers, and from those she would earn around Tk 300,000 ($4,300).

The same scene plagues all of Sainamari, a century-old forest village of the Garos, one of the small ethnic communities of Bangladesh. All the banana plants were indiscriminately cut. In the hope of earning a quick profit, most of the Garo families of this village had cleared their gardens of pineapple, mango, jackfruit and lemon trees, and replaced them with banana.

With all the banana trees cut down, Sainamari village is no longer recognizable as a Garo habitation. Some years ago when I first came to this village I was enchanted by it. Every house was covered in greenery. There were many varieties of trees, vegetables, and pineapple and lemon gardens everywhere. This was the characteristic of the forest villages of the Garos, the first in the Modhupur sal forest. It is because of the invasion of banana that most villages like Sainamari have lost their characteristics.

On February 13, 14 and 15 (2007), the FD carried out the first round of its banana eviction raid. FD officers said that on these three days the FD chopped down banana plants on some 1,500 acres in and around Sainamari, Pegamari, Thanarbaid, Atashbari, Bhutia and Chunia -- all of which are Garo villages. The Garos here were terrified. They have been living here for generations, and now they feel seriously threatened. The FD alleges that the banana gardens they cut down were all on FD land and were, therefore, illegal. They allege that politically powerful and locally influential Bengalis are the main players in, and beneficiaries of, banana cultivation. According to FD sources, these people used the Garos to facilitate wholesale banana cultivation. The FD said that they were unable to take action against illegal cultivators because of these powerful actors and interest groups. The state of emergency gave them the opportunity to stop banana cultivation and recover forestland.

The first target in the banana garden eviction program was Dhokhola Beat of Dhokhola Range. The villages mentioned above fall within this beat. The Dhokhola Range officer declared that the eviction action began with the big plots of a few Bengalis.

As we traveled around Sainamari and spoke to many Garos, it turned out that although some names of Bengalis surfaced, it is the Garo families that are facing the brunt of the eviction drive. The Modhupur sal forest was once the territory of the king of Natore, and the forest-dwelling Garo and Koch of Modhupur have resided in this forest for hundreds of years. They do have legal documents of ownership of the lowland (*baid*), but they do not have titles for most of the high land (*chala*) on which they have their homesteads and gardens. Marak, Shagorika, Beauty, Nironi -- all these Garo individuals said they had no documents for their homes or gardens -- these are all *khas* or government lands. According to the government gazette of recent times, all this land falls within a reserved forest.

This makes the Garos afraid.

Most of those in Sainamari we spoke to said that their forefathers had lived in this village for the past 200 years. Because of this, they have an ancestral right to this land. This is the norm for forest-dwelling communities. They believe that under the pretext of evicting banana cultivators, the FD aims to take away their traditional rights to this land.

The Garos of Sainamari allege that the Forest Department targeted the Garo villages first, instead of going after the outsiders who established massive banana plantations by cutting large portions of forest. This is a major injustice to them.

When the FD began destroying the banana gardens, some people