

FOLLOW-UP



The Begunbari canal.

BEGUNBARI CANAL

Cancellation of dirty allotment tangled in paperwork

TAWFIQUE ALI

The process of cancelling anomalous allotment of plots to influential organisations in the Begunbari Canal is confined within mere lengthy paperwork for more than two months despite government instructions for cancellation.

The authorities concerned appear to have resorted to a delaying tactic in accomplishing the job, said sources in Bangladesh Railway, although the allotments can be cancelled just on the ground that the leases were not made through open bidding.

The BNP government, at the fag end of its tenure, allotted four plots to the Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FBCCI), Bangladesh Textile Mills Association (BTMA), Millennium Holdings Limited (Hotel Hilton) and International Arbitration Centre violating environment and wetland conservation related laws.

The action deprived the government of a huge amount of revenue, as the prime public lands were leased out at a token price.

The communications ministry

sold 0.66 decimals of land to BTMA and leased out 4.16 acres to Hilton. It leased out one acre of land to FBCCI at a token price of Tk 1 lakh.

At present day market price, one acre of land in the location should cost more than Tk 150 crore, according to sources in the railway.

There was no public bidding for leasing out these pieces of land though it is a vital precondition as per railway's land management rules. The then communications minister made these anomalous deals applying his 'discretionary' authority.

LGRD and Cooperatives Adviser Anwarul Iqbal said in the last week of March that all the anomalous allotment of plots in the Begunbari Canal area would be cancelled and illegal structures would be removed to restore the railway's vital water body.

Director General of Bangladesh Railway Belayet Hossain said that he received a letter from the communications ministry two to three days ago, asking for documents of agreements between the government and the lessees.

"We will send the documents

soon," said the DG. "It is the communications ministry that has to cancel the allotments."

According to sources in the railway, the DG forwarded files case by case to the ministry more than two months back for cancellation of allotments but railway authorities did not attach all the relevant documents like copies of agreements along with the files.

Law adviser of the communications ministry sent the files back to railway to make them complete. The adviser, Mujibur Rahman, said: "The file has not reached me yet."

Belayet Hossain earlier said that he had forwarded the files clarifying railway's position and on what terms and conditions the plots were allotted.

Adviser Anwarul Iqbal told The Daily Star earlier: "We requested the communications ministry to cancel the allotments." He told an inter-ministerial meeting on April 5 that the government has decided to cancel all the recent plot allotment in Begunbari Canal.

Joint Secretary (Railway) of the communications ministry Shafique Alam Mehdi said details of the

matter were not in his knowledge. But a competent source said that the ministry sent two files back to the railway DG asking for documents of agreements.

A top official of the ministry said that two files regarding BTMA and International Arbitration Centre have been forwarded to the higher authorities with legal opinion for cancellation of application for allotment, as no letter of intent was issued in favour of these two organisations.

The government has recently undertaken a Tk 1, 600 crore project to construct a peripheral ring road and develop a drainage system to restore Begunbari Canal and Hatirjheel catchment area.

The Dhaka Metropolitan Development Plan (DMDP) earmarks the Begunbari Canal as a natural canal and clearly prohibits any change to its status.

MOTORBIKE RELATED ACCIDENTS

Weak laws, carelessness cause most fatalities

SHAHNAAZ PARVEEN

For weak laws and even weaker enforcement, motorcyclists remain one of the most defiant road users in Dhaka city.

Bikers in the city pose a threat to themselves and others as they tend to be careless to abide by road safety and traffic rules.

A traffic police personnel on duty at Bijoy Sarani requesting not to be named said, "Since the vehicle is very small, bikers crisscross their way through the traffic gridlock. They stand in packs in front of all the standing vehicles and slowly cross the red signal hindering the flow coming from the other end."

"Often they speed off right at the moment when the traffic signal is about to change. They speed through the busy traffic haphazardly switching lanes very often. This can be really dangerous mostly to the bikers themselves," he added.

According to Road Safety Cell, Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA), motorcyclists are one of the most vulnerable groups in the streets of Dhaka. In 95 percent of the cases, ignoring to wear helmets is the primary reason for fatalities in motorbike related accidents. Motorcyclists aged between 20 and 30 are the most vulnerable group comprising 32 per cent of the total accidents

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"The most risky part is that majority of the motorcyclists do not use helmets. Often three people ride in one bike very uncomfortably. Sometimes they carry objects at the back. They can easily lose control yet they don't bother. They even speed in this condition," said another traffic police at Farmgate.

"Bikers often carry their entire family at the back. May be one child in the front, wife and another kid in the rear without wearing any helmet. People risk the lives of their entire family mostly to save money," he said.

There are no specific rules regarding this dangerous practice. Jashimuddin, joint commissioner of traffic said, "Currently we can only fine bikers without helmets. The fine for not wearing helmets is only Tk 200 under Motor Vehicle Ordinance 1983, which is definitely not enough. Most bikers do not care for the fine."

During the last seven days, around 2,500 cases were filed against motorcyclists for various traffic rule violations, according to Dhaka Metropolitan Police control room.

"Bikers often ride without any papers showing 'applied for registration' sign at the back. This will not be allowed at all. If the biker fails to provide legal papers we will file cases," added Jashimuddin.

According to BRTA, there are around 1,56,334 registered motorbikes in the city. The original number however would be more than 2 lakh. BRTA suspects that thousands of bikers do not

have any registration. BRTA is making it mandatory for the dealers to obtain registration papers for the motorbikes while the purchase takes place.

"There are no learners' school for bikers. They learn to drive from friends or family members. It is obvious they will not learn about traffic rules and safety issues," Jashimuddin said.

"Change in the public attitude is very important to ensure safety and definitely stronger laws for motorcycle related offences is required," he said.

BRTA issues a three-month apprentice licence that does not require any test. Young bikers misuse the apprentice licence and without much experience, they drive recklessly in the city.

"Most bikers are young men. They are often not alert of the inherent risks of high-speed

travelling or riding without helmets," said Abu Bakar M Shahjahan, chairman of BRTA.

"We have counselling programmes for drivers. It is brief because we cannot afford more than that. We try to give guidelines for the drivers and try to make them aware of possible danger," he added.

He mentioned that after the apprentice period, there are three types of tests for obtaining a motorcycle licence -- written, oral and practical.

"In most of the cases, bikers forget about the counselling sessions and do not abide by the rules after getting the licence. BRTA cannot do anything after that. It is the responsibility of the bikers themselves," he said.

Shahjahan said that use of helmets while riding motorbikes will be strictly enforced in the

future. BRTA is planning to revise the Motor Vehicle Ordinance 1983. The revised law will give special emphasis on road safety. Bikers without helmet will be penalised under clause 82 (C) with a fine of Tk 500. The fine will be doubled for repeat offenders.

Road traffic injuries place heavy financial burdens on the victims and their families. Many families are driven deeply into poverty by the loss of a breadwinner and the added burden of disabled members. World Health Organisation (WHO) projects that by the year 2020, road crash injuries will be the third highest threat to public health.



Motorcycle riders frequently risk their lives by not putting on helmets.

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