

Hill cutting rampant defying ban, danger of disaster

Over 3 lakh exposed to serious threat in CHT

JASIM MAJUMDER, Khagrachhari

Hill cutting in Rangamati, Bandarban and Khagrachhari continues unabated despite mudslides every so often during the monsoon in a chilling reminder of the disastrous consequences that it could leave.

Forest office sources said the senseless act disregarding the government prohibition poses serious threat to over three lakh human lives, ecology and biodiversity of the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT). The department of environment banned levelling hills in 2005.

Mudslides triggered by monsoons killed at least two people and injured 20 others at sadar and Lama upazilas of Bandarban district in the last three days. Besides, mudflows have caused extensive damage to many houses in the CHT.

Earlier on Monday, a series of landslides across the port city left at least 123 killed and scores injured.

Illegal hill clearing is common in almost all the 28 upazilas of Khagrachhari, Rangamati and Bandarban, the forest office sources said.

Local influentials teamed up with a section of crooked government officials have levelled off a vast expanse of hilly areas to build houses, business centres and other structures, they added.

In Khagrachhari district, Shalban, Comilla Tilla, T&T Building area, Sabujbagh, New Police Lines, Panchmille, DC Hills, Jail Hills, Roads and Highway Resthouse Hills, Khagrachhari College Para, Tetutala and No-1 Kadamtali are the areas where denuding and razing of hills are rampant.

Besides, Barkal, Subolong, and

Rajasshali in Rangamati and Balagata, Alikhong, Ruma, Dabrukhyong, Bus Stand area, Alikadam, Kalaghata and Betchhari areas in Bandarban have long been subjected to the illegal practice.

Some government establishments on the hillsides are dangerously exposed to rain-induced cave-ins.

Environment activists and journalists have filed several general diaries with the local police stations against hill cutting. But the administration has yet to take measures to protect the high lands from depletion.

Bangladesh Environmental Lawyers Association (Bela) last year issued legal notice to secretaries of the environment and forest,

land and public works ministries, calling on them to act immediately against hill cutting but to no effect.

The same year it also issued notice to divisional commissioner of Chittagong, deputy commissioner of Khagrachhari, environment department offices in Dhaka and Chittagong, superintendent of police and Dighinala upazila

SEE PAGE 15 COL 5



People wade in a flooded area of Halishahar in Chittagong as yesterday's downpour submerged many low-lying areas of the port city.

Hasina not allowed to leave country

Govt trying to push me out of politics, alleges AL chief

HASAN JAHID TUSHER

The army-backed caretaker government yesterday did not let Awami League (AL) President Sheikh Hasina leave the country for the USA. The former prime minister termed the government move "inhuman" and a "mistake".

"I wanted to go to the US to assist my pregnant daughter. But the government did not allow me to go... This is undemocratic and absolutely inhuman. I think good sense will prevail soon upon the government," Hasina said in her immediate reaction.

However, expressing her firm desire to go to the US any day, she said, "I must go to the US to assist my daughter."

Sources said when contacted on behalf of the party the government informed the AL of its decision that Hasina would not be allowed to leave the country. The immigration authorities also told the AL leaders that they have government orders not to let Hasina go abroad.

Coming out from Hasina's Sudha Sadan residence, AL Presidium member Matia Chowdhury told journalists at 10:00pm that the party is aggrieved and shocked at the government decision and termed this a "mistake".

Matia hoped that the government will realise its mistake and allow Hasina to see her daughter in the USA.

Meanwhile, in addition to deploying heavy police contingents around Sudha Sadan, the government did not also allow the police protection for Hasina to go to Sudha Sadan yesterday. A total of 12 platoons of police were deployed around Sudha Sadan. More police were also deployed in Dhanmondi residential areas.

Talking to The Daily Star, police officials posted at Sudha Sadan said they had instructions to prevent Hasina from going to the airport.

A Dhaka court on Thursday asked the police to take necessary

SEE PAGE 15 COL 1

Govt to jeopardise its legitimacy if polls not held at earliest

Butenis tells The Daily Star

ASHFAQ WARES KHAN

Outgoing US Ambassador in Dhaka Patricia A Butenis said on Thursday that she would like to see Bangladesh democracy return to its "full fold" at the earliest, otherwise the legitimacy and legacy of the government will be jeopardised.

In a parting interview, Butenis reiterated her support for the caretaker government but said she will continue to speak out against human rights violations and that the ban on politics should be lifted to allow political parties to engage in electoral reforms.

Recounting her experience during the political turmoil leading up to the declaration of state of emergency on January 11, Butenis said she "begged" the late Jafuddin Ahmed-led caretaker government not to hold a one-sided election, and pleaded, in vain, with the major political parties to reach a compromise.



Patricia A Butenis

Butenis was appointed the US ambassador to Bangladesh 14 months ago and is leaving prematurely for a high-level post in Baghdad.

In an exclusive interview with The Daily Star at its office, Butenis

SEE PAGE 15 COL 4

900 Biman staff resign so far under VRS

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Voluntary Retirement Scheme (VRS) of Biman Bangladesh Airlines got 'satisfactory' response from its officials and employees on the second week of its three-week time limit as some 900 Biman staffs have so far resigned voluntarily.

As part of the government plan to turn the national flag carrier into a public limited company (PLC) and make it a healthy and profitable commercial venture, Biman Bangladesh Airlines on June 5 offered the VRS aiming at trimming its staff to 3,400 from around 4,800 working at the organisation.

The Biman's present organogram approves a 6,800-strong manpower.

Expressing satisfaction over the number of respondents to the VRS so far, Managing Director (MD) of Biman Bangladesh Airlines Dr MA Momen said, "We think the number of respondents would exceed our expectation."

Many Biman officials and staff said that they will take some more days to decide about responding to the VRS.

The VRS offer ends on June 20. Biman sought about Tk 300 crore from the government to implement the VRS programme.

Some 100 Biman officials and employees have been either axed or given forced retirement in last six months, Biman sources said.

Top outlaw killed in 'crossfire'

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, Rajshahi

A top leader of the outlawed Purbia Banglar Communist Party (PBCP) was killed in "crossfire" during a "shootout" between Rapid Action Battalion (Rab) and his cohorts at Parkasunda of Atrai upazila in Naogaon yesterday.

The dead was identified as Dulal alias Kalam, 28, of Sadupur in the upazila. He was a PBCP operations commander of Naogaon zone. He was wanted in six murder cases filed with Atrai and Raminagar police stations in Naogaon, Rab in a press release claimed.

On secret information, Rab personnel went to a mango orchard in Parkasunda around 4:00am and saw around 10 people holding a secret meeting there.

Sensing the law enforcers' presence, the gang opened fire on the Rab team that triggered a 10-minute gun battle.

SEE PAGE 15 COL 3

Top level changes in foreign ministry soon

DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENT

Some changes are on the anvil in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, diplomatic sources said.

Acting Secretary to the Foreign Ministry Tuhid Hossain, who holds the rank of an additional secretary, is due to be posted as the country's high commissioner to Australia.

The position became vacant after Humayun Kabir, who used to be the high commissioner to Australia had been appointed as the ambassador to the United States.

Meanwhile, the government is seriously considering appointing a senior diplomat with international exposure as the new foreign

SEE PAGE 15 COL 2



Artists perform at a function on the premises of the Institute of Fine Arts to celebrate the first day of Ashar, heralding the rains in Bengal yesterday. Uddichi Shilpi Gosthy arranged the function.

INDOOR POLITICS

Ban unlikely to go till fate of 2 top leaders settled

SHAKHAWAT LITON

Allowing indoor politics seems uncertain unless political future of the two top leaders -- BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia and Awami League (AL) President Sheikh Hasina -- is settled.

Sources said policymakers of the caretaker government and pro-reform senior leaders of both the BNP and AL believe that meaningful reforms in the parties are not possible keeping the two leaders at the helm.

And the government appears unwilling to lift the ban on indoor politics until there is an atmosphere for such reforms.

In the prevailing situation, the Election Commission's (EC) move for massive electoral reforms including reforms in political

parties to ensure intra-party democracy and financial transparency is yet to make any headway since it cannot hold talks with political parties due to the ban on indoor politics.

Insiders of both the parties said Khaleda and Hasina have already been informed from within and outside the parties about the need for quitting their party posts. Besides, a number of senior leaders of both the parties are working to drum up support for reforms, excluding the two party chiefs.

If the two top leaders do not quit their party posts, pro-reform leaders of both the BNP and AL would go for new leadership of the parties, sources said.

Both of them might face action for corruption and criminal charges as intelligence agencies are

gathering information about their alleged involvement and patronisation of corruption, the sources pointed out.

Meanwhile, the government claims that it is working for political reforms but it is yet to come up with a plan or a proposal in this regard. Only the EC has made a set of reform proposals but the government is not assisting it to proceed with those as the ban on indoor politics continues.

Political observers believe that exclusion of the two top leaders from politics is the focus of any political reform at the moment.

Law and Information Adviser Mainul Hossain on Thursday said the government is not thinking of election or resumption of indoor politics at the moment in the

SEE PAGE 15 COL 4

Khaleda also wants reform but won't quit post

Reformists say she must disprove corruption charges

RAKIB HASNET SUJMAN

Differences between BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia and other party leaders over the much-talked-about intra-party reforms have now turned into a serious conflict, sources said.

Khaleda is worried over the activities of party leaders working for reforms while the reformists expect her to quit the top party post as, they think, she has failed to run the party in an acceptable manner. They might make a formal announcement on reforms soon.

Party insiders said Khaleda also wants some reforms in the party but refuses to leave the post of chairperson under pressure. But pro-reform leaders believe she will

rehabilitate corrupt party leaders like her son Tarique Rahman in future if she continues to head the party.

"Party leaders and workers will not allow her to head the party unless corruption allegations against her and her family members are proved false in court," a senior BNP leader told The Daily Star.

But Goyeswar Chandra Ray, joint secretary general of the BNP recently met party Secretary General Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan and urged him to resolve the reform issues through discussion with Khaleda. "Leaders and activists of the party will decide through election during the party council whether Khaleda will continue as

the party chairperson or not," he told reporters yesterday.

Referring to reported split in the BNP, Goyeswar said, "We are now hearing about BNP (Zia)... In the past we saw BNP (Huda), BNP (Matin) but all these initiatives proved fruitless."

Former BNP lawmaker Sardar Shakhawat Hossain Bakul, known as a pro-reform party leader, yesterday told this correspondent, "Top leader of any political party should leave the party as well as politics if there are allegations of corruption against him/her."

Party leaders will sit shortly for announcement of reforms, he added.

Besides preparing reform

SEE PAGE 15 COL 6

No textbooks even after 5 months of academic year

SURANJITH DEABNATH

English medium students of secondary level under the government education boards are facing problems as they are yet to get this year's English version textbooks even after passing of five and a half months of the current academic year.

Students of classes six to ten have to buy photocopies of old English version textbooks at much higher prices while most of the photocopy books are obscure and with missing chapters, teachers said.

NCTB officials, however, said printing process of around 10 lakh books of 58 subjects for classes six

to ten is now going on and the printing and binding of the new books will be complete by the end of the current month.

NCTB Chairman Prof Yusuf Farooq, who attributed the unusual delay mainly to correction of huge errors, rewriting and translation of a number of books, said, "We had to translate anew 23 books which ate up a lot of time. Besides, we have to check and recheck the earlier editions which are full of errors and with missing chapters."

"At the eleventh hour we had to rewrite the history of the Liberation War for different books including Bengali, social science and civics as the education ministry directed us

SEE PAGE 15 COL 1

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208

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- আমানত সংগ্রহ
- আকর্ষণীয় সুদে মাইক্রো-ঋণ
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