

Big shots levelled vast terrain

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Bayezid Bostami, Sholoshahar, Sitakunda, Bhatiani, Hathazari and other places in the district over the last three decades using names of their relatives, friends, institutions, or in the name of other purposes.

Environmentalists believe that such destruction of hills—both complete and partial—is the main reason for massive landslides during torrential rain just like the latest tragedy on June 11 that claimed over 120 lives.

It was learnt that Ibrahim Cotton Mill, owned by former Chittagong municipality (now city corporation) chairman late Sekander Hossain Miah, took lease of a vast hilly area at Nachnikhola on Hathazari-Bhatiani Link Road near the Golf Club under Hathazari upazila many years ago in the name of horticulture.

But the farm was never established, and instead the mill management further leased out the property to some influential people who soon razed the entire hill and built 12 brick kilns.

AMIR KHASRU AND HIS FAMILY

Locals and other sources pointed at some family members of influential BNP leader Amir Khasru to be involved in hill cutting. There are allegations that Khasru and his family members own several hills in the city's posh Khulshi residential area, Sitakunda and elsewhere.

DoE sources confirmed that Khasru took lease of vast hilly land in Sitakunda-Bhatiani area using the name of his mother Meher Banu without obtaining any "no objection certificate" from the DoE.

A gang of criminals allegedly looks after another hill owned by Khasru in southern Khulshi area and the hill was razed during the rule of the immediate past BNP-led alliance government for commercial purpose, they said.

Amir Khasru could not be contacted for comments despite repeated efforts.

His brother Amir Humayun Mahmud Chowdhury, however, claimed to The Daily Star that his father had a piece of hilly land in Jangal Salimpur area under Sitakunda upazila which the government later took over as khas land. There is a pending case involving that land.

Humayun, former president of Chittagong Chamber of Commerce and Industry and chairman of lease financing firm Union Capital Ltd, said they have not visited the place for many years. One Kashem meantime built a brick kiln there namely Meher Bricks Industries, which reminds one of the name of Humayun's mother.

The influential family also allegedly razed a hill measuring around four acres near the Foy's Lake at North Pahartali adjacent to the CCC-run Lake City Housing Society.

Sources yesterday said the power of attorney of the land was recently given to one Abdul Jalil and Co. The Chittagong Development Authority (CDA) on January 31 this year filed another case against the family with Khulshi PS.

The family of Humayun also owned a 30-acre piece of hilly land near the Foy's Lake where the CCC built its largest plot business. They first sold the property to Purabi Housing Society, which later sold it to the CCC.

CCC MAYOR

DoE officials also named Chittagong Mayor and city Awami League (AL) President ABM Mohiuddin Chowdhury as one of the big plunderers of hills in recent years. He razed several hills at south Khulshi for the city corporation's Hill View Project, in Foy's Lake area for the Lake View Project and at Sitakunda to sell plots and apartments.

Pahartali police arrested two CCC-

appointed workers and one staff during a raid last month following a case filed by the DoE against the authority of the CCC-run Lake City Housing Society for hill cutting. The police are preparing to submit the charge sheet against the three soon.

The Chittagong mayor is in jail now. **MIR NASIR**
Former civil aviation minister Mir Nasir also owns 30 kathas of land worth Tk 50 crore, which was originally a hill, in Jalalabad area under the Khulshi PS.

There are allegations against Nasir, who is in jail now, that he used political power during the rule of the BNP-led government to save those involved in hill cutting.

Mosharraf Hossain Dipti, former president of Chittagong city Jatyatabadi Chhatra Dal and loyal to Nasir, encroached on a hill plot measuring 100 katha at Akbar Shah Colony near the Foy's Lake. Dipti, who is now in Dubai, built some tin-shed houses and rented those.

Jatiya Party (Ershad) City Convener Solaiman Sheth, who emerged as a political character recently and is now in jail, is widely known for land grabbing. He also has a track record in other criminal activities and maintained a criminal gang to help materialise his ill plans, sources said.

Sheth is an accused in many criminal cases, including murder, hill cutting and land grabbing. He was sent to jail on May 30 by a court after he surrendered to it in a murder case.

Sources alleged that two-time minister Abdullah AL Noman also owns a vast hilly area at south Khulshi and he too levelled the hills to construct apartments and sell plots.

Chittagong north district AL President and another former civil aviation minister Mosharraf Hossain also exercised his power and influence to grab hills to build commercial plots in the city's Polytechnic and Chandranagar areas in Nasirabad when AL was in power from 1996 to 2001.

ABUL KHAIR GROUP
The Abul Khair Group has also gobbed up hills in Hathazari area and built a brickfield there. The DoE served a notice on the group and later closed the brickfield in 2003.

No responsible person of the Abul Khair Group was available for comments.

SALAM GROUP
The S Alam Group allegedly bought 156 acres of hilly land near the cantonment from Baitush Sharaf Foundation Ltd, which initially took lease of the land. The S Alam Group has been cutting the hills for "development work" for the last six months.

Abdus Samad Labu, vice-chairman of S Alam Group, however said they have only made a preliminary agreement with the Baitush Sharaf in charge to buy the land.

He said the group does not have any real estate or brick kiln business, so the allegation of hill cutting is totally baseless. "Local land grabbers might be cutting the hill but nobody from our company or family," he said.

Another syndicate of four businessmen razed almost half of a large hill behind the Chittagong Press Club in Jamal Khan area under Kotwali PS recently. Two of them have been identified as Sarwar Alam and M Muniruzzaman.

DoE sources said the department lodged a case in this regard and the main culprit has been absconding abroad.

A CDA mobile court in a drive yesterday afternoon stopped the construction work of an apartment on the land and lodged a case against Sarwar and Muniruzzaman under the Building Construction Act 1952 with the Kotwali PS.

The DoE also stopped the razing of

hills in Forest Research Institute area in Sholoshahar and Sitakunda by some "influential" quarters. It also filed separate cases.

Sources said an association of some Bangladesh Bank staffs took lease of a hill at Chakresho Kanan in Bayezid Bostami area to develop housing plots there.

BRICK KILN OWNERS' SYNDICATE

A syndicate of around 100 brick kiln owners razed vast hills in Hathazari area and built brickfields. When the DoE filed a case to stop the destruction of the hills, the group appealed against it in the High Court.

The court issued a stay order on any activity on the land, but sources said the syndicate secretly continued their operation until recently.

Vast hills in and around Lebu Bagan near the cantonment were reportedly leased out to some persons. A signboard posted at the place bears names of three people—Mannan Chowdhury, Osman Gani and Mahtab Chowdhury—declaring them as the owners of six acres of land at the place.

But DoE Director Mosharraf said the three men could not be traced.

Over 70 people were buried alive in the devastating landslide on June 11 here.

DoE
When contacted, DoE Chittagong Region Director Mosharraf Hossain cited shortage of manpower and lack of tough laws as the major barriers to taking action against such rampant plundering of hills.

"We have only one inspector against three posts. The inspector too was recently transferred and now junior chemist M Saiful is discharging additional duty as an inspector to cover 11 districts from Teknaf to Brahmanbaria under the Chittagong DoE," the DoE director said.

WEAK LAWS

The Environment Act has provisions for monetary penalty ranging from Tk 5,000 to Tk 50,000. There is also a provision for maximum penalty of Tk 10 lakh but it has never been applied against any one yet.

"None of the plunderers of hills could be placed behind bars either," said a DoE official.

The DoE has filed a total of 32 cases of which only 12 have so far been disposed.

Biman staff

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On June 5, Biman Bangladesh Airlines offered the VRS to its officials and employees in order to downsize its staff to 3,400 by axing about 1,500 current employees. The scheme is part of the government plan to turn Biman into a PLC and to make it a healthy and profitable commercial venture.

The process for turning the airlines into a PLC is nearly complete, Biman high officials said.

Ministry of Civil Aviation and Tourism has almost finalised the Memorandum of Association (rules and regulations of Biman), Articles of Association (terms and conditions) and ordinance, under which Bangladesh Biman Corporation would turn into Bangladesh Airlines Limited, sources said.

Many Biman officials and staffs are yet to decide about responding to the VRS.

"We will wait till the last date," a Biman official told The Daily Star last night.

The Biman has a workforce of 4,800 at present. According to the present organogram, approved manpower of Biman Bangladesh Airlines is 6,800.

Anwar Hossain

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a former lawmaker, owns wealth worth about Tk 17.78 crore.

Among his significant wealth, Monju has plots of land in six places, shares in 9 companies, 5 bank accounts, one BMW car worth about Tk 55 lakh, \$ 17,231 and cash Tk 17.46 lakh in hand.

Among her notable wealth, Tasmina has a four-storey building in Dhanmondi on 33 decimals of land, plots of land in different places, shares in 20 companies, including Tk 8.54 crore and Tk 3.48 crore in two companies, 9 bank accounts, 11 fixed deposits, 3,433 US\$ and cash Tk 4.26 in hand.

Although Monju in the statement stated that his four daughters are not dependent on him anymore, he gave the details of wealth possessed by the four daughters.

Former chief conservator of forests Munshi Anwarul Islam also submitted the accounts of his and family's wealth through representative.

Anwar, his wife, three sons and one daughter-in-law possess wealth worth about Tk 7.28 crore.

With the submission of asset accounts by the two corrupt suspects, the number of those of the 21 suspects who complied with the ACC directive stood at 18.

Those who are yet to come up with their asset accounts are former health minister Khandaker Mosharraf Hossain, Awami League Joint General Secretary Obaidul Kader and AL leader Kamal Ahmed Majumder.

All of them are now in jail.

However, the statement of Kader was sent to the ACC secretary through prison authorities, but it was not received due to technical reasons.

Lobi, Munshi

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MUNSHI CASE

The ACC pressed charges against detained former BNP lawmaker from Comilla Manzurul Ahsan Munshi, his wife Mazeda Ahsan Munshi, two sons barrister Rizviul Ahsan Munshi and Rizwanul Ahsan Munshi. ACC Deputy Director Akhter Hossain, also the IO, submitted the charge sheet against them to the court of CMM showing 49 people as prosecution witnesses.

On March 27, ACC DD Abu Sayeed filed the case against the former lawmaker, his wife and sons for submitting false wealth statement and earning huge sums through illegal ways.

The court issued a stay order on any activity on the land, but sources said the syndicate secretly continued their operation until recently.

MOUDDUD CASE
Judge Mohammad Azizul Haq of the Metropolitan Sessions Judge's Court heard arguments from the prosecution and the defence.

After hearing both the sides, the court fixed today to decide whether the charges would be framed against Moudu or not.

Mouddud was present in the dock during the hearing of the case.

Mohamamd Obaidul Haque, officer-in-charge of Gulshan Police Station, also the investigation officer (IO), submitted the charge sheet to the Court of Chief Metropolitan Magistrate, Dhaka on May 28 showing 10 people as prosecution witnesses.

The joint forces apprehended Mouddud, also an influential BNP leader, on April 13 raiding his Gulshan residence in the capital.

The forces also seized various documents and 220 sars meant for government relief to the poor.

Later, a case was filed against Mouddud, a member of BNP standing committee, under Section 25 (B) of the Special Powers Act, 1974 for obtaining foreign liquors evading government tax.

In the charge sheet, the IO mentioned that the charges brought against Mouddud were primarily proved and he should be brought to justice.

Following his arrest, Mouddud was taken on a four-day remand for interrogation.

On March 25, the National Board of Revenue directed banks to freeze the accounts of Mouddud Ahmed and his wife.

Mouddud served as a minister in three cabinets since the country's independence in 1971. He also served autocrat ruler HM Ershad's government as a prime minister and as a vice-president.

REMAND FOR NTVM D

The ACC yesterday sought a ten-day fresh remand to interrogate ntvm MD Enayetur Rahman Bappi in a fraud case.

Metropolitan Magistrate Jagannath Das Khokon fixed today for hearing on the remand prayer in Bappi's presence.

Earlier on March 29 and May 20, Bappi was placed on a five-day remand in two phases.

Two other accused in the case are former BNP lawmaker Harunur Rashid and owner of Sky Autos, Istiaq Sadiq.

The case was filed on March 17 with Pallabi Police Station in connection with evading tax during import of a luxury car by abusing duty-free car import privilege of an MP.

In his remand prayer, the IO Monaem Hossain, also assistant director of the ACC, mentioned that Bappi was directly involved with fraud and he needs to be quizzed to find out vital clues.

PANKAJ-FIROZ CASE

A Dhaka court yesterday directed the authorities concerned to publish advertisements in two national Bengali dailies asking Monika Devnath, wife of AL leader Pankaj Kumar Devnath, and Rawshan Ara Begum, wife of T&T CBA leader Firoz Miah, to appear before it within three days.

Judge Mohammad Azizul Haq passed the order, as they did not appear before the court after repeated summons.

Earlier, the same court had issued arrest warrants against them, as they have absconding since the cases were filed with Dhanmondi and Ramna police stations in March.

Pankaj and Firoz were produced before the court yesterday during hearing of the cases.

The cases were filed against them for submitting false statements to the ACC.

BDR starts

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wholesale markets to be set up in front of Uttara Rajuk College and at Titipara, Mohammadpur and Adabar.

"We'll start selling vegetables from Wednesday," Chief Commanding Officer of BDR Dal-Bhat Programme Lt Col Fazle Akbar told UNB.

EC proposal

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that the EC suggests that the political parties follow the procedure for nominating their candidates for the parliamentary elections to extricate themselves from the existing situation.

The EC has already made a set of proposals regarding the political parties' registration system, the election commissioner said, adding, "Leadership from grass-roots level to the central committee will have to be elected through secret ballots to ensure the practice of democracy within the political parties."

Transparency and intra-party democracy are required before people can expect it to work in a democratic way, he said.

"We don't have anything to say as to who will be leaders of a political party. The workers of a party will elect their leaders. We just want to assist them in bringing about some reforms to ensure the practice of democracy within the parties," he added.

As part of the ongoing reform initiatives, the EC has already made a set of proposals for electoral reforms including some conditions for a political party to get registration with the EC.

As per the EC proposals, a

political party must be registered with the EC to contest the parliamentary election and no registered political party shall form any front organisation with the students or teachers of educational institutions and no political party shall have any branch abroad.

To get registration, a political party will not require making specific provisions in its constitution regarding inclusion of at least 33 per cent women as office bearers in the central and other committees

The EC also made proposals to ensure financial transparency of the political parties.

The EC, however, cannot proceed with the proposals since it is facing difficulties to hold talks with the political parties to finalise the proposals due to the embargo on indoor politics.

The chief election commissioner at a meeting with the law adviser on April 4 asked the government to lift the ban on indoor politics allowing the EC to hold talks with the political parties. But the army-backed caretaker government has not yet responded to the EC's request.

Regional workshop

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(Bela) with support from Oxfam NOVIB organised the programme attended by the conservationists, legal experts and community leaders from Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Nepal.

Philip Gain, general secretary of Society for Environment and Human Development Bangladesh, said that the forest dwelling communities have lost their rights of protecting and utilising the forests.

"The government always fails to recognise the customary laws and knowledge of the local community in forest management," he said adding that often, the perspectives of the indigenous people and the conservationists differ in case of forest conservation.

He demanded state recognition of customary rules of forest management, ending the practice of replacing native forests with commercial monoculture and amending social forestry rules.

There has to be a set of common principles from a broader South Asian perspective for protecting forests and environment, Farhad Mazhar of Nayakrishni Andolon observed.

Dr Arun Nishat, country representative of The World Conservation Union, said that both ecosystem of forests and livelihood of the dependents are equal concerns in forest management.

"Mindset and legal mandate of the forest department have to be changed," he said adding, "An independent country should manage its natural resources in a way that differs from the ways the colonisers had aimed at during bygone days."

Ikil Mondol, deputy chief conservator of forests of Bangladesh, said that

Pvt land-phone

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their activities outside Dhaka as per its plan submitted to the commission will be fined a huge amount, he said.

The regulatory authority, however, is yet to finalise the licence fees and the number of such licence to be awarded.

The BTRC made the delayed move to end the hassles people had to undergo in getting the state-run land phone connections or transferring their phones to new addresses.

The BTRC chairman said they will not renew the licences of companies that had been awarded licences earlier but have not yet gone into operation.

Peacekeepers

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Foreign ministry sources say the hybrid force of army and police personnel may be 17,000 if they are "mobile" and is likely to be constituted by two African and two non-African countries.

Even after the UN has pledged to give preference to African troops and police, the UN must look to non-African contributors to contribute troops. At this stage, Bangladesh is only likely to contribute two battalions, or two thousand troops, to the hybrid force, the sources added.

Bangladesh is the second largest troops contributor to UN peace-keeping missions.

This would be the first deployment of Bangladeshi peacekeepers after the declaration of the state of emergency.

Various international agencies have accused the Sudanese government of committing genocide in Darfur, where reportedly 200,000 people have been killed in the past four years. But the Sudanese government claims only a few thousand have died.

Meanwhile, the UN is probing allegations of Bangladeshi UN peacekeepers opening fire on eight Congolese prisoners, killing one and seriously injuring another, who were trying to escape on February 27, 2005 in the Ituri region of Congo.

"I am very much concerned about this incident where detainees have been excessively mistreated by peacekeepers," said UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon last week.

The alleged incident took place two days after nine Bangladeshi peacekeepers were killed in an ambush in the same region.

Bangladeshi workers

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potential of being converted into strong economic and political ties.

"Poland is a key member of the European Union and is eager to expand her trade and investments with Bangladesh," he said.

The delegation also comprises Polish envoy to India, concurrently accredited to Bangladesh, Ambassador Krzysztof Majka, and Member of Parliament Hubert Costa.

New party

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(retd) Zafar Imam, Noor Mohammad Khan, Mainuddin Bhuiyan, Fakhru Imam, Tajul Islam Chowdhury, Fakir Ashraf, Noor Mohammad Mandal and Moshir Rahman Ranga met Sayeed Khokon on Saturday.

Sayeed told reporters on Wednesday that he does not want to stay with the politics of division anymore and so has joined the initiative for a new political party. He threw a party to like-minded political leaders on Saturday.

The designers of the new political party is regularly holding meetings at different places in the city and is pursuing some important political leaders to join them, but could not be very successful in their efforts.

Most of these leaders have no strong position in their constituencies and some of them are even facing corruption charges. Many served military dictator HM Ershad as ministers.

The organisers are also trying to communicate with the district level leaders of different political parties as well as members of the civil society.

"The process is going on and you will see the development very soon," Kazi Firoz Rashid, former minister in the cabinet of military dictator Ershad, told The Daily Star yesterday.

Asked if any senior leader from the BNP and AL might join the new party, he said, "The BNP and Awami League leaders are working in their own ways to make their parties more democratic."

The organisers are also reportedly trying to involve Dr Kamal Hossain with the process to make their initiative a success and are now working to formulate a constitution for the new party. They have claimed that they are looking for honest leaders and that the new party will follow a policy which is not rightist or leftist, sources said.

As per the organisers' plan, the new political party will provide honest and competent candidates in the next election for the 300 constituencies across the country and they will form a coordination committee at district levels to run the party, sources said.

Mohiuddin arrives

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officials escorting Mohiuddin will hand Mohiuddin over to the airport police on arrival at ZIA. A warrant is still pending with the police station, said a police official preferring anonymity.

Police will produce him before a Dhaka court and act as per the court directives thereafter, added the official.

Also sentenced to life for aiding and abetting the killing of the four national leaders on November 3, 1975, Mohiuddin was detained by the US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) officials in Los Angeles on March 13.

Of the 12 sentenced to death for the gruesome August 15 killings, four are in jail, one has died, and seven have long been haled overseas.

Mohiuddin fled to the US on a visitor's visa in 1996 while serving as a Bangladeshi diplomat to a Middle-Eastern country. Since then, he had been fighting for permanent residence there.

Mobile court

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When contacted, Chittagong Divisional Commissioner Mokhesur Rahman told The Daily Star that they would continue the drive in the district with the help from both the CDA and the district administration authorities.

Upazila Nirbahi Officers (UNOs) also started such drives in different upazilas, Deputy Commissioner Ashraf Shamim said.

The mobile court filed two separate cases against Md Ibrahim and Mamunur Rashid with Khulshi Police Station.

The mobile team found that Ibrahim, a ship breaker, built a two-storey building on plot no 67/8-1 on Road no 1 at South Khulshi residential area through cutting 126 cubic metres of a hill.

Ibrahim's wife told the reporters that they constructed the building about five years back after taking permission for hill cutting.

She however could not produce any document to the mobile court in this regard, sources said.

Another accused Mamun also constructed a one-storey building after cutting hill.

Sources said the CDA earlier on May 10 sent two show-cause notices to both the owners regarding the razing of hills.

The mobile court also lodged a case against Md Maniruzzaman and Sarwar Alam with Kotwali Police Station for violating Building Construction Act, 1952.

During a drive in Jamalkhan Road area, the court found that construction works were going on through cutting of a hill in two plots owned by the accused just behind the Chittagong Press Club.

Chinese envoy

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investment atmosphere in Bangladesh and said both the countries would be benefited if China buys jute from Bangladesh.

She also sought Chinese cooperation in setting up a urea fertiliser factory in Bangladesh as the country has huge demand for agri-inputs and the ambassador assured her of his country's help.

Palestinian cabinet

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Hamas, the Islamic Resistance Movement whose fighters overran Fatah strongholds in Gaza after a week of bloody battles, dismissed the new government as "illegitimate."

Palestinian officials hope however that the creation of the emergency cabinet without Hamas will lead to the lifting of a crippling Western aid boycott.

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, now in the United States, said he will work with the new government as a partner for peace.

The appointment comes amid a continuing Palestinian power struggle, with masked Fatah fighters storming parliament in the West Bank and ransacking Hamas-linked institutions on Saturday, while Hamas militants hunted out Fatah men and looters rifled through fallen bastions in the Gaza Strip.

The tit-for-tat revenge attacks stoked fears the deadly factional violence could spread to the West Bank, which remained largely free of the Gaza bloodletting over the past few months.

Hamas — regarded as a terror group by Israel and the West — routed forces loyal to Abbas from Gaza on Friday after days of gunbattles that left more than 110 people dead, creating what the Israeli press dubbed "Hamastan".

Abbas, who enjoys the support of the West, declared a state of emergency and sacked the Hamas-led unity government, naming Fayyad, a respected former finance minister and World Bank economist, as prime minister.

"We insist on organic unity, both administrative and political, of the two parts of the homeland, the Gaza Strip and the West Bank," Fayyad said in televised remarks moments after taking the oath of office.

Hamas's takeover of Gaza, branded a military coup by Abbas, has effectively split the Palestinians into two separate entities in Gaza and the West Bank, making their aspirations of an independent state an ever more distant dream.