

# 2 lakh acres of reserved forest still in dispute

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who handed those over to the erstwhile government following a gazette notification between 1923 and 1935. The forests were then vested in the hands of the forest department after the dissolution of the Zamindari system. For better

management of the forestlands, an initiative began in 1956 for declaring the forests as reserved, only 71,369 acres of which have been declared as reserved so far.

The report however claimed that a process is underway for declaring another 9,297 acres of forestlands

of Mymensingh and 44,207 acres of forests under the Tangail forest department as reserved. But forest officials could not specify a timeframe for completing the task.

Since the notification for declaring the forestlands as reserved had been issued in 1956, a huge number

of claims were lodged against it, most of which were based on false documents. Additional deputy commissioners (revenue) of the districts concerned, who were appointed as settlement officers for the cases, have not been able to settle the claims over the last half a century.

Taking the opportunity, many local people encroached upon those forestlands by showing fake documents and later some of them sold some of those lands to other people. For instance, currently detained businessman Abdul Awal Mintoo purchased 94.98 acres of such forestlands in Mymensingh while former BNP lawmaker MA Hashem, who is also currently in detention, purchased 47 acres of such forestlands.

The forest department took initiatives for recovering the lost

forestlands, but it faced tremendous difficulties since people who purchased such forestlands took legal actions against the forest department based on fake documents, said the forest officials.

Moreover, the forest ministry in the past allotted forestlands to ruling party people or businessmen loyal to those parties. For instance, ignoring the objection of the forest department, the forest ministry during the immediate past BNP-led government's regime, allotted 23.75 acres of forestlands to controversial businessman Giasuddin Al Mamun, who is currently in jail being convicted in a plethora of criminal cases, sources said.

Once the process of declaring a forestland as reserved begins, it is the duty of the forest department to recover the forestland from encroachers. But the land grabbers filed so far four to five thousand cases claiming ownerships over the slated forests and got court orders in favour of them in many of those cases.

If a forestland is declared as reserved, the Forest Act 1927 allows the forest department to take legal actions against any attempt to encroach upon that reserved forest.

The Forest Act prohibits in reserved forests kindling or carrying of fire except in seasons specified by the forest department. The act also stipulates that an offender shall be punishable with imprisonment for a term which may extend to six months and shall also be liable to fine which may extend to Tk 2 thousand in addition to the compensation ascertained by a convicting court for the damage done to the forest by trespassing or bringing cattle for grazing or for permitting grazing or trespassing; for causing any damage to the forest by negligently cutting any tree or dragging any timber; for quarrying stone or burning lime or charcoal; for collecting forest produce or for subjecting them to any manufacturing process; and for entering a reserved forest with firearms without prior permission from the divisional forest officer concerned.



PHOTO: STAR

An illegal structure encroaching on Nimgala Khal (canal) is being demolished in the port city yesterday.

## 30 illegal structures demolished in Chittagong

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Ctg

Encroachers themselves demolished extended portions of about 30 illegal structures on both sides of Nimgala Khal (canal), a branch of Mohesh Khal, at Nimgala in the port city yesterday in presence of a mobile court.

The structures included houses, hotels, restaurants and other commercial establishments.

The court led by Chittagong Port Authority (CPA) Magistrate Mohammad Munir Chowdhury in a drive found that the encroachers have disrupted the normal flow of the around 22-feet-wide canal.

When contacted, Magistrate Munir said the canal started to lose its navigability since 1990 due to such encroachments.

Chittagong Metropolitan Police (CMP) and Chittagong City Corporation (CCC) assisted the mobile court in the drive that lasted for about six hours.