

# Food crisis in remote CHT hills as rats eat up paddy

## Officials assure of assistance

SHANTIMOY CHAKMA, Rangamati

Indigenous jhum farmers in remote hills in Rangamati are facing a food crisis this year as rats are eating up their paddy.

Paddy yield was good this year but the crop is lost due to massive attack by rats, people said.

Locally they call it Indur Bonnya (flood of rats) because the numerous rats can not be killed or controlled.

There is a saying in the hills that flowering and fruiting of bamboos is followed by food crisis. This year there was flowering and fruiting of bamboos in large scale in different remote hills in Rangamati, Khagrachari and Bandarban. The Daily Star published a report on it months ago.

Paddy harvest is going on in the hills but most farmers are frustrated as little of the yield is left by rats.

Some 3779 families in Sazek union under Baghaichhari are passing hard days for want of food as rats destroyed their paddy in fields, locals said.

All the 17 Kurbaries (village chiefs) from 17 villages in remote Farua union under Bilaichhari upazila came to the district town on Monday. They brought a large number of rats killed by them to show people and draw attention of the authorities.

They also submitted applications to Rangamati Hill District Council Chairman and the Deputy Commissioner (DC) for food supply and financial assistance to tide over the crisis.

Thanga Pankhwa, chairman of

Sazek Union Parishad, women UP member Kuliti Tripura, ward member Jopaitang Tripura submitted applications to the district administration, Rangamati Hill District Council, Chittagong Hill Tracts Regional Council and representatives of UNDP and Red Crescent Society for food and financial help.

About 3500 families in six mouzas of Lankar, Betling, Rului, Tuichur and Haldalui in Sazek union are worst affected by the rat menace this year, Thanga Pankhwa told this correspondent.

Some 300 families in Rainkhyang Para, Barthali Para, Pukurpar, Prangan Para, Hakichara, Chadarchhara, Tiger Para, Sepro Para, Arif Para, Dhupanichhara, Charging Para and Kiyandachhara Para have also been affected in remote Farua union in Bilaichhari upazila, chiefs of the villages said on Monday.

"Many villagers in my union are passing days amid hardship due to food crisis," Thanga said.

The district administration has ordered upazilas nirbahi officers (UNOs) and officials of the department of agriculture extension (DAE) to visit the affected areas to assess the crop damage.

Administration sources said they have assured affected people of providing VGF (vulnerable group feeding) cards.

Quoting indigenous jhum farmers, sources said around two-thirds of the paddy has been destroyed in hilly terrains in Rangamati, Bandarban and Khagrachari.

"Last year, the average yield was

lesser than this year but we could

take home the crop. The yield is better this year but the crop is lost", Nofini Tripura, whom came from Sazek said.

"Indur Bonnya will keep us unfed this year", he apprehended while talking to this correspondent.

"I cultivated paddy on five acres of jhum land this year but got only 160 kilograms", he said.

Thousands of indigenous jhum farmers in inaccessible areas in CHT particularly in Sazek union in Baghaichhari upazila and Farua on Sunday (tomorrow) to estimate the crop damage.

Deputy commissioner (DC) Md. Nurul Amin said he has ordered UNOs and UAOs to visit affected areas.

"We will provide relief. I told UP chairman and members and Karbaries in Sazek and Farua to come through concerned agriculture officers and UNOs for relief."

Talking this correspondent, Jagat Jyoti Chakma, chairman of Rangamati Hill District Council, admitted that many jhum farmers are passing hard days for lack of food.

"We are thinking to launch a package programme from the district council fund for the affected people. We will also supply pulses, edible oil and provide them with ginger and turmeric for cultivation to create alternative income sources."

He said advisor for CHT affairs ministry Dr. Iftekhar A Chowdhury at meeting in Dhaka on October 23 allocated Tk 15 lakh for the affected people.

"We will get this money in few days", he said.

Elders said flowering, fruiting and withering of bamboo forests

take place in the hills after about every 50 years. It broke out in a large scale in 1937 when natural bamboo forests were destroyed, followed by massive rat attack on paddy fields, they said.

The rats come to eat bamboo flowers and fruits and then eat crops, they said. Once it appears, the menace normally persists for three years, they said.

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Many people died from starva-

tion in Mizoram in India in 1959 following a rat menace after such flowering and fruiting of bamboos, they said.

Flowering of bamboos continues in many forests in CHT, they claimed.

When contacted, Rangamati DAE deputy director Md. Liyes Uddin said upazila agriculture officers in Bilaichhari and Baghaichhari will visit the affected areas in Farua and Sazek unions on Sunday (tomorrow) to estimate the crop damage.

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"We will provide relief. I told UP chairman and members and Karbaries in Sazek and Farua to come through concerned agriculture officers and UNOs for relief."

The complainant said in her FIR that former lawmaker Selim forced her to pay Tk 50,000 on June 10 last year.

The accused had demanded Tk 5 lakh as toll and threatened to kill her in case of non-payment, she added.

Razia Makbul, a field worker of upazila health complex, filed the case with Kachua Police Station of Bagerhat district on July 3 this year.

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