

Sundarbans' fate

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the loss caused to it might be permanent, the officials warn.

The government in a bid to save the forest has already barred all activities there except fishing.

Restriction has been slapped on the collection of honey and woods from the fallen trees. But the move may fail if the affected are not rehabilitated when the relief distribution draws to an end.

"People are not turning to the Sundarbans now as there is a flow of relief," says a forest official asking not to be identified.

"But they will resort to the forest to earn a living and rebuild their houses and other structures after the ongoing relief phase is over."

"It will then be very difficult for us to protect the Sundarbans without adequate management and logistic support," he adds.

Sidr has not only affected the trees but also the food sources and grazing land for the wild animals.

"Each of the Royal Bengal Tiger maintains its own territory," says Kamal Uddin Ahmed, forest ranger of Sharankhola Range. "These territories are now all messed up. We've noticed these tigers randomly shifting from places to places."

Another forest official says, "We usually did not come across any tigers before. But now forest officials often report seeing tigers. We have to fire blank shots to shoo the tigers away to ensure that they don't enter the localities."

"The devastation has transformed the domains of the wildlife so much that they cannot recognise their own territory and food sources. But the forest has been saved and we believe it will regenerate again," another forest staff points out.

Assistant Conservator of the Sundarbans Bipul Das however believes it will take a lot of preparations and intensive management to help the forest regenerate.

"If the forest continues to be harmed, in future the people won't have its protection any more from cyclone or other natural disasters," Das observes.

"Rather the southwestern region will become more vulnerable to damage due to cyclones or tidal waves."

The 600,000-hectare Sundarbans offers more than 400,000 hectares of forest, while the remaining part includes water bodies.

About one-fourth of the 400,000 hectares of the forest has been affected by the cyclone. Had the Sundarbans not been where it is now, the devastation would have taken place in the localities with much higher intensity.

The Sundarbans is Bangladesh's guardian angel as long as storms and tidal waves are concerned. "No Sundarbans means the cyclone would have caused havoc intensely in Bagerhat, Khulna and even up to Dhaka; and thereby inflicted damage across Bangladesh," says Kamal Uddin.

Like many international experts, the forest officials and even some enlightened coastal people believe a cyclone like Sidr is the result of global warming. Such cyclones are likely to happen in future and therefore, the forest must be protected to ensure that the people are protected.

But such a task is too challenging for the forest department, which has the 'reputation' of being one of the most corrupt government agencies.

The forest officials themselves admit this. But they claim they need sufficient logistic support side by

side with uprooting corruption from the department.

They further say the department even cannot ensure proper monitoring and security of the Sundarbans due to insufficient logistic support, which includes short supply of fuel to run water vehicles.

Sidr has damaged many of the department's vessels. Some of its boats have been swept up to the land and the officials cannot bring those damaged boats down to water.

In addition, the forest department's own infrastructure has also been badly damaged, leaving many officials homeless.

Despite such a situation, the department has alerted all its officials about not letting anyone cut a tree or move out the fallen trees.

The department is putting number marks on the damaged trees for a proper damage assessment. The officials have been warned that if any tree is stolen, responsible ones, if found, will be suspended.

The huge responsibility of protecting the forest with inadequate logistic support may become impossible for the department to comply with if the affected people turn to the forest to save their own lives.

"We'll need stronger management to save this forest, or else theft of trees will sharply increase soon after the relief phase is over. We won't be able to handle that with the current human resources. And our failure will be the most unfortunate for the nation," quips a forest official.

Khoka accuses

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"The ACC included on the list of my properties the 5 crore taka I have invested in the share market, which is not fair," Khoka complained.

The mayor of the capital went on to say, "I don't own any house at 89/9 RK Mission Road in the capital. The real fact is that the government acquired that house on a six katha of land while constructing a road there."

Khoka claimed that the ACC nonetheless included the non-existent house of his parents, which used to be there before demolition, on the list of his properties and thus misinformed the media.

Citing another example, the DCC mayor said, "A 120 decimal land at Sirajdikhan in Munshiganj was shown as my property but it's not right, as the land is yet to be divided among our family members."

About his 40 bank accounts, the mayor said only 12 to 15 of those are currently operational, the rest are either closed or do not have any money in them.

Khoka also claimed that the ACC did not follow the due process stipulated by the laws governing the commission, while ordering him to submit his wealth statement.

"In fact, the Anti-corruption Commission had come to a decision about me even before issuing the notice for me, which is neither fair nor proper," the mayor alleged.

"It is unfortunate that they have already prejudged that I own a huge amount of property disproportionate to my known sources of income," Khoka said adding, "The ACC have already decided that I have committed an offence."

The commission served notices to 12 people including the DCC mayor on Nov 18, asking them to submit their wealth statements.

Pollution alarming

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air is the highest in winter.

The AQMP says the reason for this is climatic conditions as air pollution begins to worsen by the end of October and continues until the onset of rains.

Statistics recorded last winter through continuous air monitoring stations and satellite equipment show very high levels of PM in different parts of the city.

The PM10 concentration in Tejgaon last December was 354 mg/m³, while PM2.5 in the same area was 240 mg/m³, both more than double the level recommended by EPA.

Statistics indicate the situation was worse in January this year when the level of PM10 in Tejgaon rose to 428 mg/m³ and PM2.5 to 303 mg/m³. In Tongi PM10 was recorded at 369 mg/m³ and PM2.5 at 275 mg/m³ and in Lalbagh the level was 350 mg/m³ and at 232 mg/m³ respectively.

These are all higher than average levels prevailing throughout the rest of the year. The same situation prevails in the port city of Chittagong.

The level of PM2.5 in Lalbagh last month was recorded at 171 mg/m³, which the AQMP categorises as hazardous to public health.

Both particulate matters 10 and 2.5 cause serious health hazards. The PM10 is usually present in the smoke created by burning of wood and can penetrate deep into the cardiovascular system. The PM2.5 generally arises from burning of fossil fuels and has a strong association with circulatory diseases.

According to experts at the

Department of Environment, faulty vehicles, brick kilns, dust from roads and construction sites and toxic fumes from industries are the sources of PM10 and PM2.5.

AQMP Director Dr Mohammad Nasiruddin suggests that faulty and unfit diesel-run vehicles be phased out and environment friendly technology be introduced.

He said diesel-run vehicles contribute about 60 percent of the particulate matters, while brick kilns account for another 25-30 percent.

These particulate matters may cause bronchial and kidney diseases and even lung cancer, he added.

National Institute of Diseases of Chest and Hospital (NIDCH) sources say the number of asthma and related patients increases during winter. City clinics and hospitals are already crammed with patients complaining of various respiratory problems.

Children, especially those under the age of one, are the worst sufferers of respiratory complications during winter.

Prof Abed Hossain Mollah, head of the paediatric department of Dhaka Medical College Hospital (DMCH), said, "At least six to seven children suffering from bronchitis are being admitted to the hospital every day."

"The number of asthma and Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD) patients has doubled in the last two weeks, with about 18 to 20 admissions every day," said Asif Mujtaba Mahmud, associate professor at NIDCH.

Ex-wife takes on Chavez's socialist push

AP, Barquisimeto, Venezuela

A new voice has emerged to challenge Hugo Chavez's push to turn Venezuela into a socialist society, someone with rare insight into the president's passions and vulnerabilities: his ex-wife.

Marisabel Rodriguez says her return to the public spotlight is not a personal vendetta.

"This fight is not against a single person," she said in an interview at her home with The Associated Press. "This struggle is against the danger posed by leaving a person in power for a long time."

Rodriguez had largely kept out of the public spotlight since she and Chavez divorced in 2004. But the former first lady resurfaced with a series of appearances urging voters to vote "no" in last Sunday's referendum on constitutional changes that would have let Chavez run for re-election indefinitely.

Chavez narrowly lost the referendum, his first defeat at the ballot box in nearly nine years in office.

"We were on the verge of handing over the country to the president like a blank check," she said, calling it a "road straight to totalitarianism."

Rodriguez denies any interest in running for office herself, but already her outspoken resistance has become a public relations thorn in Chavez's side.

As first lady, she was part of the assembly that drafted the current 1999 constitution.

Now she is proposing an amendment to shorten presidential terms from six to four years, saying Chavez has been in office long enough. She also has spoken in favor of dissident politicians and student protesters.

And on Sunday, she went to the polls with Rosines, the 10-year-old daughter she had with Chavez, while the president's supporters chanted: "Get out of here!"

Chavez has not responded directly to her, though in a speech Wednesday he suggested his daughter was being kept away from him.

Malaysian

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requested his family to make the payment. Razzak however could not immediately say how much his family had paid to Bashar.

Upon receiving complaints from Razzak's family about the ordeal, Rab 3 asked Bashar to make arrangements for bringing Razzak back home.

Bashar's brother Titu then provided a fake passport to Razzak under the name of Motalab. As Razzak made an attempt to come home with that passport, he was arrested at the airport in Malaysia.

The authorities sent him to a detention camp where he was detained for four months in a miserable condition without adequate supply of foods and water. He had to share a single room with 70 to 80 detainees at the camp.

Around 700 Bangladeshis were also detained in that camp. Razzak told The Daily Star adding that many other Bangladeshis are being detained in around 10 different detention camps in Malaysia.

Saarc nations

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Pranab said, "Sri Lanka offered to host the next summit to coincide with the 60th anniversary of the country's independence. The council welcomed it," he added.

The meeting also endorsed the appointment of the new Saarc Secretary-General, Sheel Kant Sharma, a former Indian diplomat. Sharma will replace Chenkyab Dorji from Bhutan.

On the sidelines of the summit, foreign adviser Iftekhar A Chowdhury called on Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, alongside other Saarc foreign ministers yesterday.

Iftekhar conveyed the country's gratitude for lifting India's export ban on rice up to 500,000 tonnes from Bangladesh, which Manmohan said contributed to the "current excellent bilateral relations."

Iftekhar also met Indian Vice-President Hamid Ansari earlier in the day.

Rab captures

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extortion and shootings.

The Rab official said Masud is known by different names in different areas of the city. They suspect that he uses up to ten different names for himself. Rab also seized two passports from Masud's house, both with his picture but under different names.

Bhuiyan said Masud has admitted to recently entering Bangladesh using a passport in the name of Ismail.

According to information held by Rab, Masud killed a man called Sinha in Motiheel area about 15 years ago. He also killed a businessman at Purana Paltan Lane about five years ago and has murdered one Masum in the city.

Another team of the same battalion captured Mohammad Hafiz from Malibagh.

Both the arrested men were presented before the press yesterday but were not allowed to answer any questions.

Govt urged to back

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"The growth in the agriculture sector suffered due to several factors including recurrent floods, disruption in the distribution network of fertiliser, high price of diesel, shortages of electricity, and inadequate availability of quality seeds," it explains.

The BB says agriculture output target for FY08 is optimistic and "requires significant extra efforts in increasing food grains production, especially during the boro season and the remaining period of FY08."

Manufacturing sector productivity fell by one percent in the first quarter of FY08 compared to that in the first quarter of FY07 due to high oil prices and power shortages.

According to the BB estimates that take FY 2000-2001 as the base year, manufacturing sector had grown by 3.2 percent in the first quarter of FY07.

But Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) figures, with 1989-1990 as the base year, show manufacturing sector growth slowed down by 5 percentage point.

The BB figures show manufacturing grew by 1.6 percent in the first quarter of FY08 compared to 2.1 percent in the first quarter of FY07.

The central bank's preliminary estimates show that growth of jute, cotton, ready-made garments (RMGs) and leather sub-sectors fell by 2.8 percent in the first quarter of FY08 compared to that in the first quarter of FY07.

This contributed to 5.4 percent fall in export earnings in FY08 first quarter, due to negative growth in women's garments, handicrafts, knitwear, leather and RMG-related exports to US and European markets.

The BB report however says production of chemical, petroleum and rubber products grew by 5.4 percent, while food, beverage and tobacco production rose by 2.6 percent in the first quarter.

In the remaining three quarters of FY08, the economy will rebound

due to disbursement of agricultural and industrial credit, import of raw materials and intermediate goods, and a rise in labour remittances, the central bank forecasts.

Security upped

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such "illegal and emotion-driven" demands in future.

However, colleagues and family members of the four convicted teachers of RU fear that the RU authorities might dismiss the four teachers over their conviction in any of the cases filed against them.

On Friday, wives of the four teachers met the RUVIC and requested him not to take any rash decision against the teachers, sources said.

VC Altaf Hossain told journalists that the RU authorities would go slow on the matter. "After we get the judgement copy officially, we will seek legal explanations from our legal cell and from the attorney general, if necessary. Besides, the teachers have scope to appeal to the higher court."

Our RU correspondent adds: Students of Mass Communication Department yesterday did not attend any class as part of their class boycott programme launched on Thursday demanding the release of the teachers.

Meanwhile, students of Management Department of RU submitted a memorandum containing nearly 1,000 signatures to the chief adviser demanding unconditional release of the detained teachers.

"We believe that all detained teachers were working for truth from their respective positions and they can not be involved in any anti-state activities," the memo says.

On Tuesday, a Rajshahi court sentenced four RU teachers to two years' rigorous imprisonment for violating Emergency Power Rules by bringing out a silent procession on the RU campus on August 21.

The teachers are - Moloy Kumar Bhounik of Management Department, Dulal Chandra Biswas, Sayed Selim Reza Newton and Abdullah Al Mamun of Mass Communication Department.

Filing of case

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participants has been questioned reasonably," Additional Chief Metropolitan Magistrate Ruhul Amin said in the verdict.

The proceedings of the case, however, will not be illegal, nor will the accused be acquitted on the grounds that all participants were not accused in the case, the magistrate said.

In the judgment delivered last Tuesday, the court mentioned police officers' negligence in preserving case evidence, but said it will not create obstacles to proceeding with the case.

However, the court neither rebuked the police officers concerned nor recommended that the authorities take action for the failure.

The speedy trial court sentenced four Rajshahi University teachers to two years' rigorous imprisonment for violating the EPR by participating in a silent procession on August 21 in protest against the previous day's police attack on Dhaka University (DU) students. It acquitted two RU teachers of the charge.

The court examined submissions of both the sides and the case document. Magistrate Ruhul Amin said the defence counsels had argued that according to the prosecution witnesses' submission, it is

possible to identify 40 people from one photograph and 20 others from another. The case, which was filed on the basis of these photographs, however was not filed against all of them.

No step was also taken to identify all the people in the photographs, he said quoting the submission of the defence lawyers. "The defence counsels' submission on this issue seems to be appropriate," he added.

The court observed that examining submissions of the witnesses and case document it was found that processions, act of vandalism and rallies took place in almost all educational institutions, including those in Dhaka and Rajshahi, centring the August 20 unpleasant incident at DU.

"The incident that took place at Rajshahi University was part of the picture at all the educational institutions across the country," observed the court.

Eminent jurists recently said the verdict was based on "poor" evidence and has raised questions about the caretaker government's neutrality in enforcing the EPR. Referring to a number of incidents that have taken place violating the emergency rules, they said the government has rather targeted university teachers only for prosecution.

DU teachers to wear

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the arrest of Awami League President Sheikh Hasina.

Meanwhile, three army officers met DU Vice Chancellor Prof SMA Faiz and DU representatives yesterday and requested them to consider their decision of wearing black ribbons.

Duta Acting President Prof Tazmeri SA Islam, its former president and general secretary Prof AAMS Arefin Siddique and Prof Muhammad Akhtaruzzaman were present at the meeting.

Prof Faiz said the meeting was held in a congenial atmosphere and was fruitful. "The army personnel and we all think that this issue should be solved urgently," he said.

Prof Tazmeri said, "They [the government] are positive about the release of the detained teachers of Dhaka University and are working on it."

There was, however, no specific date for the release, she said, adding that the meeting only discussed the release of DU teachers, not anything about the convicted RU teachers and detained DU students.

"Certain government actions have raised questions in people's mind. I think the government should be alert about it so that people do not lose trust in them," he said.

AL forest and environment secretary Dr Hasan Mahmud said it is disgraceful for the nation that the trial of war criminals has become uncertain while the daughter of the architect of country's independence remains in jail.

Disabled

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registered for national identity cards.

According to a census conducted a couple of years ago by different NGOs the number of people with disabilities in the country stands at 90 lakh.

The situation in education sector is another example of government negligence. So far only 1,335 children with disabilities have access to education. SWID, a non-government organisation, provides education facilities for another 7,500 children. For the programme, it receives 80% of its budget from the government.

"People make fun of my child when we go on an outing while the government has been fiddling with our miseries by neglecting the issue over the years," said Ayesha, mother of a physically disabled boy.

Experts say the basic rights of the disabled people could not yet be ensured as only social welfare ministry is entrusted with the job whereas at least 30 ministries need to work in this regard.

Access to special treatment and training facilities, rehabilitation and employment could not be confirmed as the ministries like education, labour and employment have not been made legally responsible for dealing with the issue.

The government even could not begin its work with the disabled at district and upazila levels as the disability law does not involve the local government and rural development ministry in the task.

The government, however, has formulated an action plan this year involving 40 ministries with the work for the disabled populace, but the experts believe it would not be of much help as the ministries have yet to be made legally bound to perform the duties in this regard.

Referring to different flaws in the Bangladesh Disability Welfare Act, 2001, legal experts say the act defines disability rather ambiguously. Besides, it does not specify the diverse needs and rights of the people with disability.

"If the rights were specified in the law and action against violator of the rights made clear, the issue will become legal rather than only constitutional," said Supreme Court lawyer Dr Naim Ahmed.

The law describes disability descriptively and fladly. It should have had a more complete description containing income status of the disabled people and the reasons for their inability to earn.

Besides, the experts say, the law does not differentiate between a mental patient and a person with mental disability. The difference is that with proper medication and treatment a mental patient could be cured while mental disability is incurable, they added.

To shed light on the shortcomings of the disability welfare law, legal experts mentioned examples of flaws in different countries.

For instance, the law in Sri Lanka specifies the rights for the disabled people.

In the United Kingdom (UK) it is unlawful for organisations to discriminate (treat a disabled person less favourably, for reasons related to the person's disability, without justification) in employment; access to goods, facilities, services; managing, buying or renting land or property; education. Businesses must make "reasonable adjustments" to their policies or practices, or physical aspects of their premises, to avoid indirect discrimination.

In the United States, the government extends protection to anyone with (A) a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more of the major life activities of an individual, (B) a record of such an impairment or (C) being regarded as having such impairment.

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) ensures a number of financial and care support services including Incapacity Benefit and Disability Living Allowance. It also includes that organisations like retail businesses, movie theatres, and restaurants must make "reasonable accommodation" arrangements for people with different needs.

Unfortunately, the disability act in Bangladesh does not provide for action against those violating or abusing the rights of the disabled people. It does not have any provision ensuring accountability of government officials and employees.

The act also does not say anything clearly about employment or rehabilitation of the disabled segment of the population. It does not have any provision for building up trained manpower to help them.

The government has a 10% quota of public service jobs for those with disabilities. But the private institutions have yet to be made legally obliged to ensure access to employment for them.

South Koreans help clean up oil spill

AP, Mallipo Beach, South Korea

Residents and emergency workers used buckets to remove dense crude oil from South Korea's western shore as the Coast Guard struggled in high waves and strong winds to contain the country's largest oil spill yesterday.

The oil was reaching scenic and ecologically sensitive areas. At Mallipo, one of South Korea's best-known beaches, tides of dark sea water crashed ashore, while the odor could be smelled a half-mile away. Hundreds of troops, police and residents were engaged in cleanup efforts there.

Oil was still trickling out of the tanker hit Friday, but Kim Woon-tae, a Coast Guard official, said the last of three holes would soon be sealed completely. The Coast Guard headquarters had said Friday that all three punctured containers on the tanker were plugged.

The region is popular for its scenic beaches and is also the site of fish farms, a national maritime park and is an important rest stop for migrating birds.

Mallipo, about 95 miles southwest of Seoul, is one of the hardest-hit areas in the oil spill, which occurred Friday when a barge carrying a crane slammed into the supertanker, causing it to release 2.7 million gallons of oil into the ocean.

The spill involved about twice as much oil as the country's previous largest in 1995.

The oil reached shore Saturday morning, contaminating about 4 miles of coastline, said Jung Se-hi, a spokesman at the Coast Guard headquarters in Incheon. Strong winds and prevailing currents spread the oil slick overnight to an area about 1 mile wide and 10 miles in length, he said.

Environmental activists expressed anguish over the situation.

"It's helpless," said Lee Pyong-gook, an activist with the Korean Federation for Environmental Movement. "It's a sea of oil."

Lee said the region is a major stopover for migratory snipe. "It was fortunate that those birds have yet to arrive," he said, adding however, that some seagulls had been tarred by oil.

The Coast Guard sent 67 vessels and six helicopters to the site Saturday in an effort to clean up the spill, said Kim Woon-tae, a Coast Guard official who is stationed in the region.

"We're doing our best to remove the contamination as quickly as possible, but it will take some time to clean up the shore because it needs to be done by hand," said Kim, who is stationed in the region.

China, West squabble

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below 1990 levels between next year and 2012, when it expires.

Indonesian Environment Minister Rachmat Witoelar, who is president of the conference, said discussions on starting post-Kyoto negotiations were on track and that "God willing" an agreement would be reached by next weekend.

"There is no deadlock," he said. "I would think about 85 percent of those in the room have the same direction."

However, Climate Action Network Canada, a coalition of Canadian environmental groups, said Canadian negotiators in Bali have been told to "demand that poorer nations accept the same binding absolute emission reduction targets as developed nations."

"The Kyoto Protocol is built on the recognition that industrialized countries are largely responsible for the problem of climate change, and must take the lead in tackling it," said Steven Guilbeault of the environmental group Equiterre. "Canada is trying to rewrite history by putting the burden of emissions reductions on poorer countries."

Climate Action Network Canada provided reporters a one-page document that it described as a leaked copy of Canada's negotiating stance. It was impossible to verify the authenticity of the document, and a spokesman for the Canadian delegation did not respond to a request for comment.

The chief UN climate scientist, Rajendra Pachauri, said it was next to impossible to expect the developing world to agree to cuts when their per capita emissions are so much less than the West.

"What is absolutely essential is to see that the developed countries establish a record