

Surma-Kushiyara irrigation project uncertain after several revisions

Only 15pc work done in six years: Revised project now awaits Project Evaluation Committee nod

IQBAL SIDDIQUEE, Sylhet

Revised several times in last six years, the fate of Upper Surma-Kushiyara Irrigation and Flood Control Project has become uncertain again.

Having a bad start, only 15 per cent of the 132 crore taka project has been completed though it was scheduled to be commissioned by 2005-2006 financial year.

Revised for the fifth time, the project is now awaiting approval of the Project Evaluation Committee (PEC) of planning ministry, sources said yesterday.

The project was designed for flood control, improvement of drainage system and irrigation in over 49,000 hectares in the five upazilas of Sylhet. The upazilas are Zakiganj, Kanaighat, Beanibazar, Golapganj and Sylhet Sadar.

The project taken up by the Water Development Board (WDB) in north-eastern Sylhet could not have a good start due to lack of proper attention by authorities, the sources claimed while talking to this correspondent.

Even it failed to achieve the minimum progress though six years have passed. It was to be completed in five years.

On the other hand, repeated

floods and massive erosion along the two riverbanks have caused huge damage to crops, homesteads and lands in the region in last few years while the WDB authorities failed to take protective steps in time.

After several revisions, yet another move is there to revise the project again, the sources said. Asked by the planning ministry, WDB made a revised project a week ago, axing some components to cut the cost.

As per the plan, the project area begins from the starting point of Surma and Kushiyara in Amolshid border area in Zakiganj upazila and covers areas in Golapganj and Sylhet Sadar along the riverbanks of Surma and Kushiyara.

The project cost was first estimated at Tk 111 crore. It includes construction of 181 kilometre embankments, 813 irrigation structures, two bridges, five drainage regulators, 56 kilometre drainage canals and installation of four irrigation pumps.

The project was started in FY 2001-2002 with an initial allocation of only Tk 50 lakh. Little has been done in the last six years due to alleged authorities' apathy and non-allocation of funds in time, the sources said.

Months ago, the project cost was raised by 58 per cent involving an expenditure of Tk 181 crore with a target to complete it by 2009-10.

Under the programme, 450 hectares of land would be acquired at a cost of Tk 32 crore while construction and reconstruction of 159 KM embankment would cost Tk 33 crore.

Besides, construction of 20 drainage cum flushing regulators would cost Tk 16 crore and one pump station would be constructed with Tk 36.15 crore, WDB official said.

Other components of the revised project include 30 KM main irrigation canals (Tk 1.22 crore), 64 KM canal and 122 irrigation structures (Tk 9 crore).

But, the water resources ministry again asked for cutting down the expenditure. At the beginning this year, a four-member committee was formed for the revision.

The project was revised, cutting down the cost to Tk 135 crore five months ago. Again, it was revised to Tk 132 crore last month.

The officials said only Tk 15 crore has so far been sanctioned.

Only 77 hectares of land could be acquired so far at a cost of Tk 6.2 crore and 41 KM embankments built at a cost of Tk 7 crore in Zakiganj and Kanaighat upazilas,

the official said.

Without acquiring lands, no more project work is possible, they said.

On the other hand, only Tk 2.76 crore has been disbursed though Tk 5 Crore was sanctioned from ADP (annual development plan) allocation in fiscal 2007-08.

Most of the sanctioned amount would be spent for land acquisition for construction of embankments and digging canals. Construction of embankments is the major part of the project in Zakiganj, Kanaighat, Beanibazar and Golapganj upazila areas for flood control.

So far, only 77 hectares of land have been acquired there, the officials added.

Immediate steps are needed for construction of 25 kilometre embankments in the areas to check flooding. Otherwise, project implementation would be delayed further which would also escalate the cost further, they said.

The areas under the planned project experienced repeated and prolonged floods in the last wet season due to onrush of water from hills across the border. The floods left a colossal damage to the crops and washed away scores of dwelling houses.

Zainul's birth anniversary programmes conclude

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Mymensingh

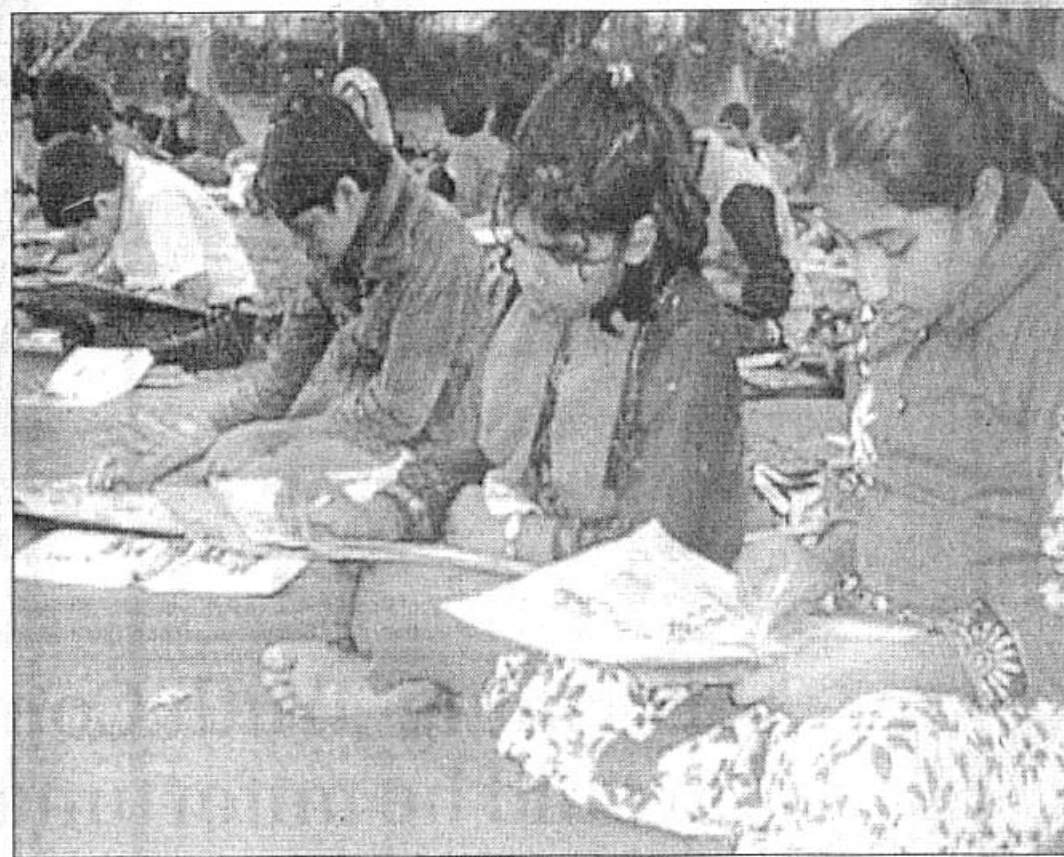
The three-day programmes marking the 93rd birth anniversary of Shilpacharya Zainul Abedin concluded on the premises of Shilpacharya Zainul Abedin Sangrahashala (art gallery) here yesterday.

Yesterday's programme included a discussion on the life and work of Zainul and distribution of prizes among winners of painting competition.

Additional Deputy Commissioner Begum Afsana Yasmin attended the discussion as chief guest with Shilpacharya's wife Jahanara Abedin in the chair. Police Superintendent Md Rafiqul Islam was the special guest.

Among others, two sons of the great artist Khairul Abedin and Molul Abedin, artist Amirul Islam, poet Farid Ahmed Dulal and Assistant Keeper of the art gallery Dulal Chandra Gain joined the discussion.

Some 200 children of different ages from different educational institutions participated in the competition held on Thursday.



Children at a painting competition held in observance of Zainul's birth anniversary in Mymensingh.

PHOTO: STAR

'Declare Sharankhola a disaster area'

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, Khulna

Sharankhola Town Protection Implementation Action Committee (STPIAC) yesterday announced an agitation programme to press its three-point demand.

The demands are construction of town protection embankment, exemption of bank loan with interest and arrangement for providing fresh interest-free loans to businessmen affected by the November 15 Sida.

The decision to launch agitation was taken in a meeting of the action committee held at the office of Sharankhola Muktiyoddha Sangsad yesterday.

Convener of the committee MA Rashid Mian presided over the meeting. The agitation programmes include views exchange meeting with different professional organisations from December 29 to January 5, formation of human chain from 11.30am to 12.40pm on January 7 and submission of memorandums to the chief adviser of caretaker government and the chief of army staff.

The action committee also demanded of the government to declare Sharankhola a disaster area.

Improve English before going abroad

UK councillor tells youths

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Moulvibazar

Zilani Chowdhury, an elected councillor of Islington Council in UK yesterday urged the young people who wanted to go abroad for education or other purposes to improve their English language skill.

Zilani said this while exchanging views with local journalists of national dailies at a restaurant here on Saturday.

He asked young people to prepare themselves to face the fast lifestyle of the West by communicating with people there easily. Anybody having no skill on language and technical work will have to face problem abroad, he said.

Citing the example of UK Ambassador in Bangladesh Anwar Chowdhury, the elected councillor of UK asked Bangladesh people to go to UK or other foreign countries after completion of their education and on attainment of required skill on language.

Chowdhury said youths from India and Sri Lanka continue their studies in UK, but Bangladeshis are less interested to pursue education.

Death anniversary of Monajat Uddin observed

STAR NATION DESK

Journalists in Rangpur and Nilphamari yesterday observed the 12th death anniversary of Monajatuddin through various programmes.

Speakers at a discussion meeting in Rangpur urged journalists to be professional, creative and honest like Munajat Uddin to project life in rural Bangladesh.

They called upon all socio-cultural organisations in Rangpur to form Munajat Uddin Memorial Council, reports our Rangpur correspondent.

Rangpur Press Club organized the discussion, presided over by Rafiq Sarker. Earlier, journalists and cultural activists placed wreaths at the grave of Munajat Uddin at Munshipara.

In Nilphamari, the local Press Club organised a milad mahfil and a discussion meeting.

Munajatuddin died in 1995 while on professional duty on a ferry boat on the Padma.

Security stepped up in Khulna city

Intelligence report on presence of extremists

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, Khulna

Khulna Metropolitan Police (KMP) has stepped up security in the entire city following intelligence information that a group of extremists in different guises are in the city to carry out destructive activities on the night of 31st December (Monday).

All police stations in Khulna city have been put on high alert and officials of KMP directed to launch operation particularly in vulnerable areas to arrest listed criminals.

A highly placed source in KMP told this correspondent yesterday evening that police will be deployed at all vulnerable points and suspected hide-outs of criminals and extremists will be raided. All slums, hotels, club and liquor shop are already under strict vigilance, they said.

The sources further said plain cloth police of KMP have also been deployed in some places in the city identified as vulnerable.

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File photo of octogenarian Monoranjan Roy being taken to jail for loan default, left, and Brig Gen Jamil Ahmed Khan handing over cheque to one of 163 loan defaulting poor farmers from army relief fund in Nilphamari on Thursday.



PHOTO: STAR

FREEING POOR FARMERS FROM BANK LOANS

Army move in Nilphamari hailed

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Nilphamari

Different organisations yesterday hailed the initiative by army to free some hardcore poor farmers of Jaldhaka and Dimla upazilas from shackles of loan.

They urged the army to spread the programme to the entire munga prone region in northern districts.

On December 24, the army paid Tk 6 lakh from its relief fund to banks concerned to free 163 poor farmers from the burden of loan.

Nilphamari district president of Krishok League, Khoka Ram Roy, Jatoyabadi Krishok Dal secretary Md Farhanul Islam, Khet Mojur Samity president Sreedam Das in separate statements yesterday said the efforts by army to free the dis-

tressed poor farmers from loan burden is a great humanitarian act and deserves praise. They said small and marginal farmers are becoming landless as they sell their land to repay loan.

Jaldhaka Press Club president Golam Mostafa in a statement urged the army to spread programme in others areas of northern districts.

In a simple ceremony at Jaldhaka Upazila Parishad auditorium on December 24, Brigadier General Jamil Ahmed Khan handed over cheques for Tk 6 lakh among 163 loan defaulting poor farmers. The farmers instantly deposited all the cheques to the bank officials present there to repay their loans.

Speaking on the occasion, Brig. Gen. Jamil said the photo of handcuffed octogenarian farmer Monoranjan of Kaliganj village

being taken to jail for defaulting on bank loan prompted the army to launch the programme. The photo was published in Bangla daily Prothom Alo on July 9.

Seeing the newspaper photo Army Chief Moeen U Ahmed paid Tk 19,530 including the interest from his personal fund to Krishi Bank through local army camp to free Monoranjan.

Loans of 163 farmers of Jaldhaka and Dimla were repaid from army relief fund. The banks exempted the interest on the loans as per a decision of the district disaster management committee.

Brig. Gen. Jamil said the programme to pay the farmers' loan money was taken at the directive of Maj Gen. Fatemi Ahmed Rume, Rangpur area commander and GOC of 66 infantry division. Lt Col Abu Naser Md Toha in his

speech said the army will always remain beside farmers.

Talking to this correspondent, farmer Humayun Kabir, one of the beneficiaries of the programme, said his father Abdul Jabbar took a loan of Tk 500 from Krishi bank 25 years ago. His father died several years ago. He was issued a bank notice to pay Tk 22,000.

"It was not possible for me to pay such a big amount. Now, the bank waived the interest and took only principal amount of Tk 500."

Jaldhaka unit president of Bangladesh Muktiyoddha Sangsad Hamidur Rahman, convener of Jaldhaka College Teachers Association Ansur Rahman Chowdhury and Jaldhaka Chamber of Commerce and Industry president Ilius Hossain Bablu also hailed the army initiative.

APPEALS GO UNHEEDED

Villagers join hands to remove silt from Kabodak

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Satkhira

Villagers joined hands to remove silt from the bed of the Kabodak as repeated appeals by people in the area went unheeded several times in Sarulia union (UP) in Tala upazila.

The river is the lone outlet for draining out rain and floodwaters from the unions situated in and around the Kabodak basin.

Massive silt deposited on the riverbed as the Bangladesh Water Development Board (BWDB) authorities did not pay heed to several appeals made by the Union Parishad (UP) leaders and local people for re-excavating the river.

People remained marooned for the last five months since onset of the monsoon as floodwaters could not pass through the river as it has been clogged due to silt. The river

also lost its capacity to hold adequate water causing heavy flooding in the area. This results in water logging in the villages on both banks of the river. The situation prevailed since mid-80s.

As people's repeated appeals failed, Sarulia UP chairman Matiar Rahman took an initiative and organized a meeting with local people on December 20 at his office.

The meeting decided to remove silt from the river voluntarily, the UP chairman said.

The meeting divided all the villagers into several groups, he said. The groups started work on December 27. Since then the work is going on in full swing.

Over 5000 villagers are expected to take part in the work, the chairman said. The work is expected to be completed by January 7, he said.



PHOTO: FOCUS BANGLA

Scarce straw is now valuable in Sidi-hit Barisal. Sold at high prices, it is used for erecting thatched houses, in betel leaf fields and as fodder.