NEWSNOTES

Hide-and-seek in Lawachhara

The 1250 hectares of Lawachara National Park, located 8 kilometres east of Srimongal town holds the largest group of Hoolock Gibbon in the country, 155 species of identified birds, more than 20 species of wild orchids, 160 plants species, 246 bird and 30 animal species and is home to two adibashi communities. One of the most beautiful forests in the country; the last thing it deserves is careless handling by outside forces.

But despite concerns by environmentalists, Chevron started a 3D survey in the forest last month. The survey was badly timed. This is the breeding and nesting time for birds and animals and the presence of the survey workers at the forest, many allege that, has disturbed the ecological balance of the area. After Chevron started to trigger explosions as part of its survey, panic gripped the locals and wild animals alike as the deafening explosions jolted the area violently. The tremor and the shockwave damaged many structures including the building of a mosque. A fire broke out in the forest area in an acre of the forestland known as Khashiya Punji where Chevron was conducting the survey.

In 1997, another blast took place in the now sealed-off Magurchhara gas field close to Lawachhara due to poor operation of Unocal (stake taken over by Chevron).

According to a government-formed environment monitoring committee, Chevron has violated the conditions of government's environment clearance certificate (ECC). There needs to be accountability for Chevron and other companies like it on what standards they maintain when they carry out such surveys and whose interest they have at heart -- profit-making at the cost of the environment or profit-making in line with preserving the environment. Bangladesh has already had more than its share of man-induced natural disasters; it can do without any more of such incidents in the future.



Trial of War Criminals

The movement for the trial of war criminals is on to muster public opinion against them and mobilise public support for the trial. The Sector Commanders' Forum (SCF) has scheduled trips to different district headquarters in order to do this, their first visit being to Dinajpur last Tuesday. Perhaps most importantly, the forum has scheduled a meeting with the Election Commission (EC) on May 11 to place their demand that war criminals and other anti-Liberation forces -- who they claim have been identified but not yet punished -- not be allowed to take part in the upcoming national elections. This obviously includes, among others, Jamaat-e-Islami, which has been identified as an anti-Liberation force, as well as any political party that goes into alliance with it. It has also been demanded by different groups, including at a reception for freedom fighters in Rajshahi, that the war criminals be tried in a special tribunal as has been done in other countries.

The government's stance on it is also unclear, with nothing being done about it. Stopping identified war criminals from becoming national leaders could be a step towards punishment for their crimes and justice for their victims.