

Bara Katra, in south Chawk, close to the river Buriganga, was a prominent building in Dhaka during the reign of Mughals. In 1822 Doylee wrote: Bara Katra was a pompous, huge and beautiful. Shah Suja wanted to build his own palace in Dhaka but Shah Suja did not like the Bara Katra after it was finished, he donated it to Abul Kasem, the chief architect.

e-mail: starcity@thecitythatwas.net

Cute new babies of endangered species bustle round zoo

SHAHNAZ PARVEEN

Dhaka Zoo is busting with cute new faces as four endangered species -- freshwater crocodile, baboon, sambar and vulture -- gave birth to babies in the past few months.

On June 2, the crocodile family had as many as 47 babies. This was the first incidence of hatching crocodile eggs at the Dhaka Zoo in Mirpur. The hamadryas baboons had one offspring last March, also for the first time in this zoo. The sambar had two babies in April while one of the Bengal vulture's eggs hatched in January.

"This is really a good news as all of these species belong to the endangered category," said Dr Aminur Rahman, the newly appointed curator of the zoo.

He said the crocodile babies are now in quarantine for close observation. They will be reared separately from the adults until they become mature enough to protect themselves. The other babies are also being given special care.

In 2005, Dhaka Zoo received 45 freshwater crocodiles as gifts from the government of India. Keeping only five, the zoo authorities sent rest of the crocodiles to other places.

Twenty of them found their home in the marshland of Dulahazra Safari Park in Cox's Bazar, five were sent to the shrine of Khan Jahan Ali in Bagerhat and 15 made their way to the Karamjal breeding centre in the Sundarbans.

The zoo currently has seven Bengal vultures, six baboons and nine sambar deer.

Prof Md Anwarul Islam, chief executive of the Wildlife Trust of Bangladesh, explained status of these rare animals.

Freshwater or marsh crocodile is classified as critically endangered by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN). Experts say the fierce animal has become extinct in Bangladesh. But it can be



A rare Bengal vulture on a bough inside a cage

found in India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.

Vulture is now considered one of the most threatened birds in the world. Bengal vultures are also classified as critically endangered species. Baboons, listed as a near-threatened animal, are found in Africa. They belong to the primate family.

Meanwhile, sambar, a type of spotted deer, has also become critically endangered. Once they were found in the forests of Chittagong Hill Tracts. Dhaka Zoo brought 10 mature sambars from Africa in the 1980s. Four of them died of tuberculosis last year.

According to experts, all of these animals are now endangered due to loss of their habitat and indiscriminate hunting.

"In the case of vultures, loss of habitat, food scarcity and the use of insecticides are the main reasons why they are now nearly extinct in Bangladesh," said Prof Anwar, who also teaches zoology at Dhaka University.

Breeding in captivity can help

the conservation of threatened animals, he noted.

Dhaka Zoo has a good reputation of breeding captive animals. In May last year, tigress Promila and Raja gave birth to a triplet. Also last year, dingo, langur (hanuman), hoolock gibbon (ulluk), nilgai, waterbuck and lion families saw some new faces.

The addition of new members, however, intensified the zoo officials' worries. Space constraints is already a problem at the zoo. The new faces will make it worse, the officials fear.

The majority of the zoo budget is spent on feeding the animals. The yearly budget of Dhaka Zoo is Tk 3.75 crore, out of which Tk 2.50 crore is spent on food, hampering other development works of the recreational facility.

Breeding of tiger, lion, cheetah and leopard have already been halted. The fertile males and females of these animals are being kept in separate cages as a birth control measure.

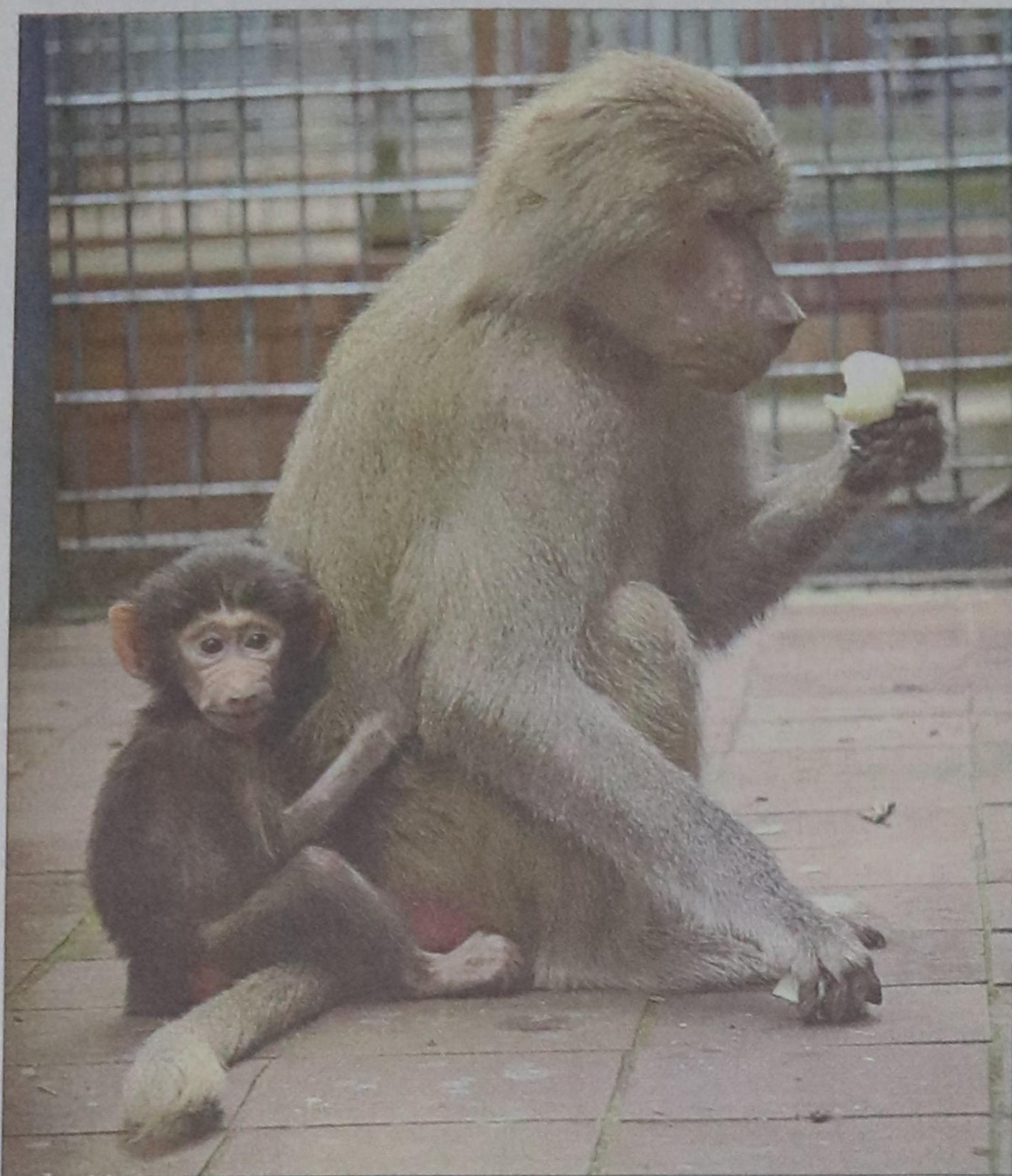
"We are facing a severe accommodation problem as the existing number of lions and tigers is already beyond our capacity," said the zoo curator.

There are 18 lions, 11 tigers, three leopards and two cheetahs in this zoo.

Dhaka Zoo officials have already thought of exchanging the additional lions, tigers, hippopotamus and pythons inside Bangladesh. Chittagong Zoo and Dulahazra Safari Park have shown interest in tigers. But the lions did not attract anyone.

Established in 1974, the 186-acre Dhaka Zoo is currently a home to more than 1,800 animals and birds of 165 species.

Of them, 58 are mammals like elephant, Royal Bengal Tiger, lion, cheetah, rhinoceros, zebras, monkeys, chimpanzees, hippos and more. Besides, there are 66 species of birds, 13 species of reptiles and 28 species of fish.



A baby baboon gives a fearful look as our photographer approaches



Newly born freshwater crocodiles

Housing remains slum dwellers' dream

RIZANUZZAMAN LASKAR

On a chilly afternoon of January 24 last year, Moktar Hossain was on his way home to his shanty in Dhaka's Bhasantek area. He spent the day looking for a job with no results.

Returning home empty-handed for the third consecutive day, Moktar, a mechanic, dreaded the hunger-ridden faces of his two young daughters. He had lost his last job after a bulldozer tore down the auto repair shop he used to work in.

A few yards from his shanty, Moktar froze on his tracks. He could not believe his ears. The authorities were announcing an eviction notice on loudspeakers to the slum dwellers.

"I heard that the government will provide us with housing. But it has been months since I heard that, and I have not seen any developments," said Kofiluddin, an evicted slum dweller who is living in a makeshift settlement near the Tejgaon railway crossing.

Kofiluddin had heard right. The government has plans to build low-cost flats for the evicted slum dwellers. "The project is currently at a state of standstill," said Professor Nazrul Islam, convenor of the committee on the rehabilitation of slum dwellers.

"The government does not seem very interested in completing the project right now. The housing and public works minis-

try is dillydallying," he said. "I do not see the rehabilitation project get completed anytime soon."

The rehabilitation plans include construction of several six-storey buildings to accommodate 2,000 to 2,500 families in small flats (250-300 sq feet), sources said.

Construction of the buildings will be financed by NGOs and the slum dwellers will pay the cost in instalments once they are allocated the flats.

"We are planning to offer the apartments to the evicted slum dwellers on a 99-year lease. They will have to pay a monthly rent of around Tk 1,000," said a source at the National Housing Authority (NHA).

But the plans are still under

consideration and maybe changed later, the source added.

"We have observed that most of the slum dwellers spend more than a thousand taka as house rent each month. So, we are planning to keep the rent lower than that," he said.

According to other sources at the NHA, there have been disagreements over the lands where the new buildings will be constructed.

"Our current plans are to construct the buildings in the Public Works Department (PWD) owned land near Mirpur Section 9. However, the location has not been finalised yet," said Abdul Qayum, chairman of the NHA.

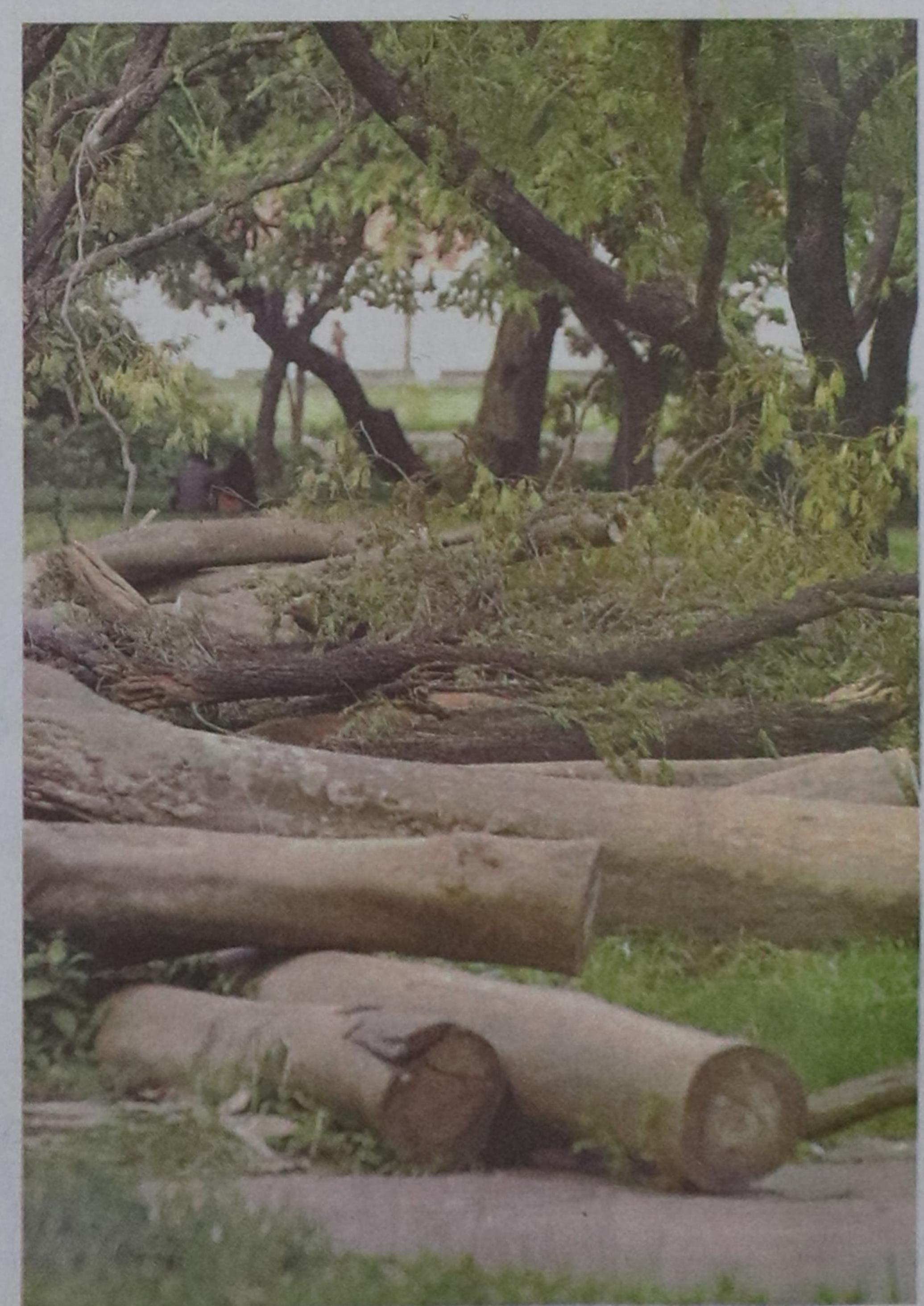
In this regard, a committee was formed in February last year to make recommendations for the rehabilitation of the slum population.

The committee headed by urban researcher Prof Nazrul Islam comprises representatives from NHA, Rajdhani Unnayan Kartripakkha (Rajuk), Centre for Urban Studies (CUS) of Dhaka University and Coalition for the Urban Poor (CUP).

According to sources, the CUP has been keeping records of the evicted slum dwellers in collaboration with the government. Some member NGOs of the CUP will initially contribute to the construction cost of the buildings.

However, the project's progress is not reassuring to the slum dwellers.

"This is the first time the government has taken such an initiative. The project is still in the planning process and its completion may take time," said Abdul Qayum.



Logs of trees uprooted during storms remain piled up under the open sky at Suhrawardy Udyan allowing their damage and pilferage.