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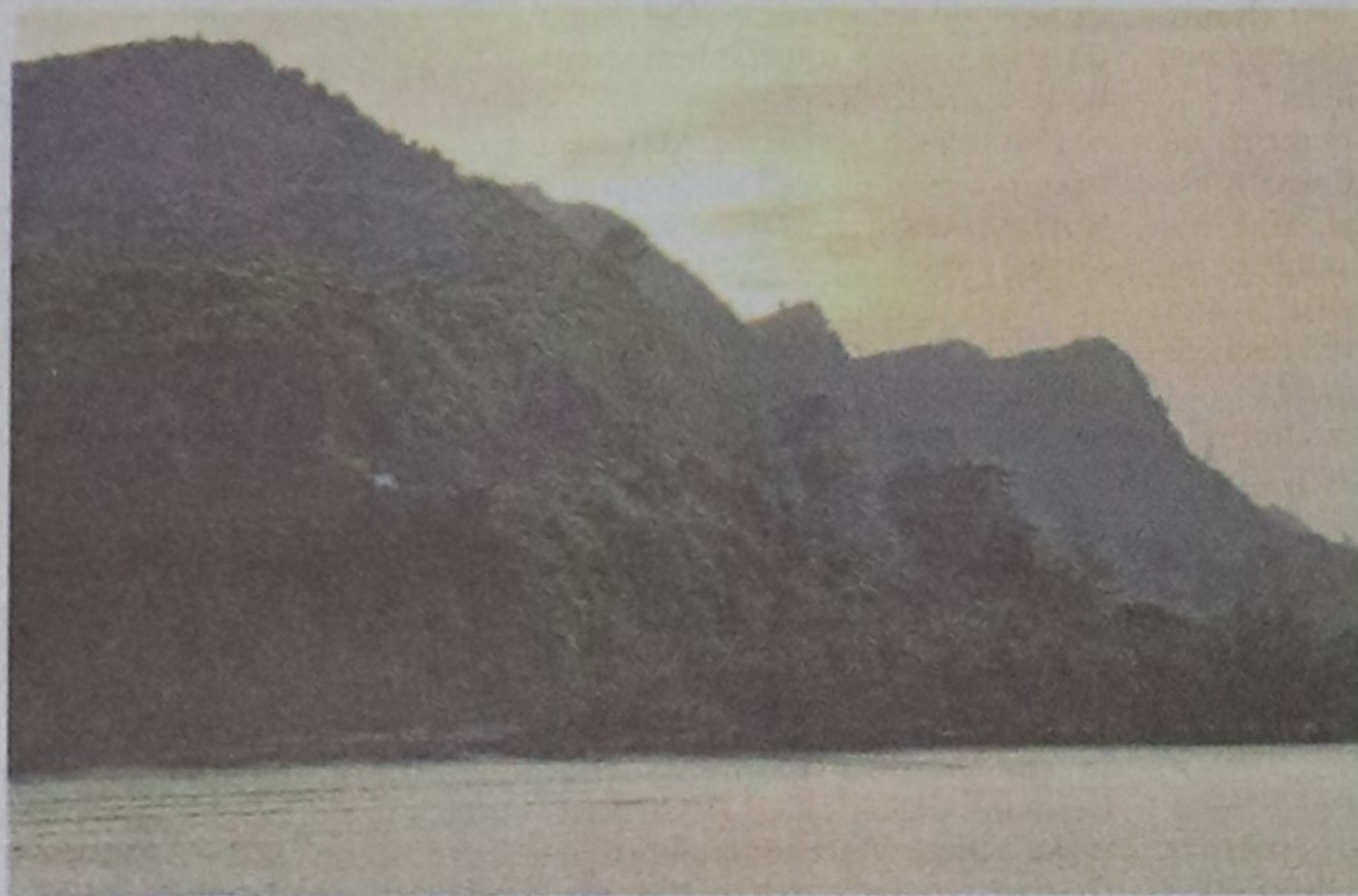
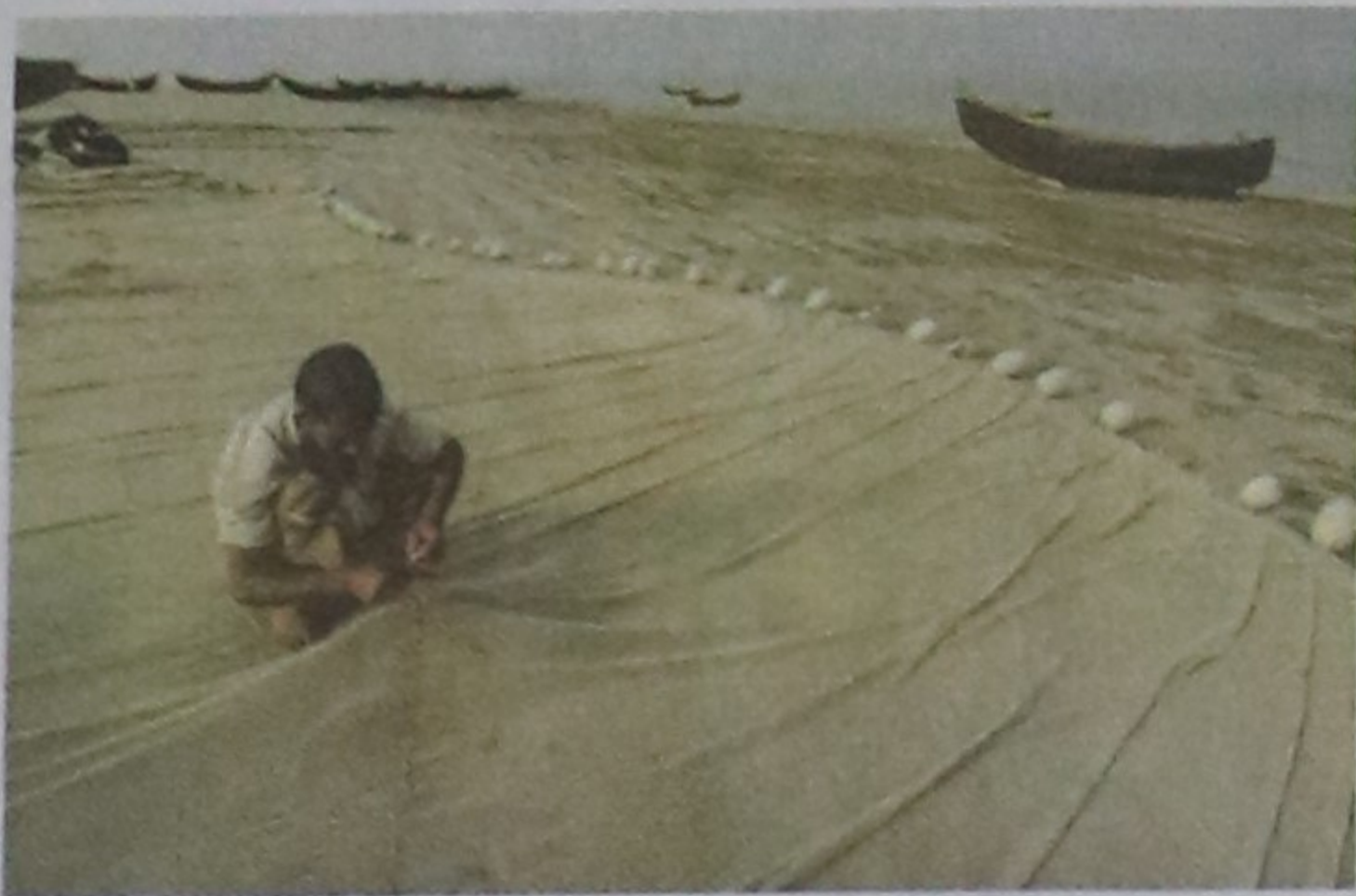


OLIDAY

DHAKA TUESDAY JUNE 17, 2008

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BANGLADESH



COASTAL TREAT

The island of paradise

WE were now off to St Martin's Island on our third and last leg of the coastal treat. The ship sailed on time but we had a bit of a problem with the cabin. The ship's crew had sold the same cabin twice to us and to another group. And now the crewmembers were nowhere in the scene as chaos erupted. Finally, with the shouting and hollering, they appeared tentatively and opened the cabin for us.

However, we had little use of the room other than dumping our bags there. Then we were on the deck. The ship passed by the Myanmar trawlers moored at the fish landing port. These trawlers were specially shaped with front leaning cabins. The fishing crews were cooking rice, we could see from this far. Some were just hanging out and gazing us down.

You get a beautiful sight of Teknaf as the ship coasts along the Naf river channel. The broken hills frill all the way to the sea and the bitumen road looks beautiful. Cars like toys roll up and down it. We passed the forest rest house where we had stayed the night before. We could see the Arakan hills from a short distance. The Myanmar coast is mostly derelict except some dispersed structures. We saw a beautiful pink pagoda. A few two-storey structures, may be some office buildings. The paddy patches shone in the morning sun like gold plated shields.

For a long time, we could see the

Bangladesh coast, and we started wondering if there was indeed a land bridge to the island and we were on this ship just for the heck of it. Later, we came to know that the gap between Bangladesh coast and the island is not really that big, only about 9km, and some young men had even swum across to St Martin's.

But then the coast ceased to exist and we were onto the open sea. We passed by a beautiful island belonging to Myanmar. The leaning coconut trees, the beach and the forest made it look like paradise. Only there were no human beings on it, as we could see through binoculars.

A little later the sea started changing colour and St Martin's came into view. The water was now turquoise green. And we could spot the red tiles of the environment bungalows where we would stay. The coastguard building looked the tallest structure.

The ship's engine slowed down to a throbbing speed as the master pulled the strings to ring the signal bell in the engine room. The island was appearing bigger and bigger by the minute. And then there was the pier. It took quite some maneuverings for the ship to moor.

We crossed the pier and were immediately on the beach, trotting down towards the bungalows. It was an amazing walk -- the green gently

lapping on our left, revealing thousands of corals, and the high wall of Kewra plantation on our right. A few brilliantly painted trawlers danced on the waves.

The resort itself was a breathtaking spot. It is on the narrow chicken neck part of the island. On both sides of it are the sea -- we could see the sandy beach in front of our bungalow and a coral beach in the back. The waves broke on the corals in huge splashes and the waves gently murmured on the sandy beach, creating a symphony of sounds. We got on to the roof of the observation centre to get a better view of the island. In the afternoon light, we could see both ends of the about 7-km long island. A truly tranquil sight, something out of this world.

Away in the sea floats a huge navy ship, its gun turrets looking like some matchsticks against the blue sky. There were some huge iron poles lying mangled on the resort premise. Later, we came to know that these were windmills that broke down during the Sidr.

In the afternoon, we walked to the northern tip of the island to the 'regular' beach where tourists flock. The fishing trawlers were mooring one by one and consignments of fish were being unloaded on to the beach. Huge sharks and stingrays were being hacked into pieces. A villager told us that dried shark is in huge demand among the

indigenous people in Teknaf.

We spent the afternoon on the beach and watched the sun set into the emerald sea in a sudden plunge. Green and pink made an evanescent moment of glory. Slowly we trotted headed back to the coast guard office where the officials had a treat for us -- fish and chicken barbecue on the beach. We sat on deck chairs and watched a huge moon break over the sea and flood the entire island with a fairy glow. The navy ship was still there, its lights shining brightly. The green water had now turned gold. Sitting under the coconut trees, we watched the marvel of the island.

Later, much later, I pulled the door behind as I quietly left the bungalow and walked on the beach, by the kewra plantation further south towards Chhera Dwip. The trawlers were all there, shiny under the full moon. But after about two kilometers, I had to stop. A channel has entered into the island from the sea. During low tide it is okay, but now it is full with water.

I had to turn back to the bungalow. It was already too late and tomorrow we would have an exciting thing waiting for us.

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