

Land grabbers gobbling up Rupnagar main canal

RAHMAN SABUKTAGIN

Due to a lax rescue effort by the authorities, land grabbers are filling up the Rupnagar main canal at Pallabi by constructing road and tin-shed houses across the canal.

This unauthorised grabbing of the canal has worried locals as they fear the area would be waterlogged permanently if the canal is blocked in such a way.

The natural canal carries sewage and stormwater of West Shewrapara, Kazipara, Monipur, Mirpur Section 2 and Rupnagar residential areas, Duaripara and

Alokdi villages, and discharges them into the river Turag.

The canal has virtually turned into a sewerage line at several places near Manipur and is now facing massive filling up in Rupnagar residential area.

Locals alleged the influential land grabbers are not only destroying the drainage system and environment but also deteriorating law and order in the area.

The gangs often fight for the possession of the grabbed land and toll collection, said Mokhesur Rahman, a resident of road-27 in Rupnagar residential area.

New land-grabber gangs are emerging with sets of so-called documents on land rights. For protecting the land they hire musclemen who create trouble, the locals alleged.

"Due to the mindless filling up of the canal we are fearing permanent waterlogging in the whole area," said Shahidul Alam, a house owner of road-28.

He mentioned that scores of trucks have been engaged by the land grabbers for carrying sand for filling up the canal since the last couple of weeks. The heavy trucks have already destroyed several roads and sewerage lines

in the area.

ABM Osman Ghani, president of Rupnagar House Owners' Association, said all this illegal activities are being done under the authorities' nose.

"Land-grabber gangs are destructing our canal, roads and social environment. There is no eviction drive. We have applied to the National Housing Authority (NHA), Pallabi Police Station and DCC for taking action, but nothing has been done," he noted.

Ghani said the house owners' association is contemplating filing cases in the environment

court against the land grabbers and the authorities concerned for killing the canal.

About a year ago the government directed the authorities to free the canal from illegal grabbers after several reports on this issue were published in the Star City.

Dhaka Division-1 of the NHA is supposed to demark the canal and conduct eviction drive against the illegal occupiers and then hand it over to Wasa for maintenance.

However, the decision is yet to be implemented and even no date has been fixed for the planned eviction drive to rescue the canal from illegal occupiers.

According to the master plan of the Ministry of Housing and Public Works which was designed in 1984 for the Rupnagar residential area, the western part of the allotted plots are designated for the main drainage canal.

The canal helps groundwater recharging and without it the whole area could suffer a crisis of water for daily use or during fire incidents in future, he cautioned. "If the main drainage canal is completely blocked, the sewerage system will also collapse."

About the illegal filling up of the canal by the land grabbers, Nurul Islam, chief executive engineer of the Dhaka Division-1 of NHA said the NHA has filed several general dairies with Pallabi Police Station in this connection.

This correspondent found some influential people occupied the whole space of the ring road around the canal and shrunk it into 2/3 feet wide at several points.

Now a cooperative association of the employees of a pharmaceutical company is constructing a road by filling up the canal.

This correspondent talked to some people from different groups who are claiming ownership of the land. All of them claimed that they have genuine documents on the land rights but officials at the NHA said no private land exists there.

According to sources at the Pallabi Police Station, last week a clash took place between two groups over land rights. Two cases were lodged after the incident.

Mohammad Abdul Momin, officer-in-charge at Pallabi Police Station, said merely filing general dairies will not help rescue the canal. "NHA has to come forward to identify the land grabbers and seek our help to rescue the canal," he said.

He said the police have advised the warring groups to solve their problem in the court. "We are not the authority to verify land documents. If NHA needs police to evict the illegal grabbers from the canal, we will certainly help them."

When I came to this city last week I felt like entering a concrete jungle. I have found very few open spaces. But this is a wonderful place for roaming," said Anisur Rahman, a villager visiting a relative's house in old Dhaka.

"This is a breathing place in old Dhaka. Often I come here for a stroll," said Shahidul Alam, a resident of Siddiqbazar. "The environment of the park has improved but still beggars and addicts roam inside it. I cannot think of entering the park at night."

Dhaka City Corporation is implementing a beautification project for the park. The first phase of the project was completed in September 2006 at a cost of Tk 2.93 crore. The second phase costing Tk 3.40 crore is going on.

In the first phase DCC fenced the park with a combination of concrete wall, iron grilles and shrubs. A 2-km walkway and an artificial lake were made in the park.

The second phase includes landscaping, walkways, planting grass, ornamental trees and big trees, making flower beds, installation of lights, drainage system, non-mechanised recreational toys and sand pit for children and a separate area for women.

Except for ornamental trees and recreational toys all other works have been done.

There is a committee called Osmani Udyan development, beautification and modernisation advisory committee, which comprises representatives from the civil society, educationists and environmentalists. The committee submitted the plan of the project to DCC on September 25, 2004.

Prof Serajul Islam, member of the committee, said they have proposed to employ a group of local residents, players and joggers for the security and maintenance of the park.

"This is a social institution. So we proposed to form a volunteer group of locals for its maintenance," he said. "We also proposed to widen the lake towards the eastern boundary wall and plant big trees of local species," he added.

A decision was taken two and a half years ago to chop down 600 rain trees, 200 acacia and 70 eucalyptus trees as they are harmful to the soil and groundwater. These were imported and planted during the rule of Ershad. Around 86 rain trees have been felled later.

"Replacing these trees we have been planting local environment-friendly trees like arjun, mahogany, banyan, bokul, kodom, teak, silk cotton, mango, jackfruit and coconut over the last one year," said Abul Hasnat, executive engineer, zone 5, DCC.

"At present our aim is to make the park greener. We have planted 1,350 trees in our own initiatives and HSBC donated 1,000 more trees, which were also planted," he said.

At present 12 gardeners of DCC work at the park.

Hasnat said in the morning the vagabonds do not get the chance to enter the park as DCC people are deployed there. But they start to infiltrate into the park in the afternoon.

"Presence of the police in front of the park does not help at all. They do not take the trouble of warding off vagabonds. Once a DCC gardener was seriously injured by the floating people. We lodged a complaint with the Shahbagh Police Station," he said.

Several acres of land of the park have been under occupation by different groups for the last two decades. Among them are Pir Yameni Market, Muktioddha Sangsad club, a Wasa pump house, Golap Shah Mosque, an air-conditioning plant of Osmani Memorial Hall and a 20-foot road to the police barrack, said sources at DCC.

"They have some sort of permission from the DCC but we should free the park from these installations," he said.



Illegal tin-shed houses are mushrooming encroaching the Rupnagar main canal at Pallabi.

No queue, pay gas bill thru' mobile

CITY CORRESPONDENT

The hassle of standing in queues to pay utility bills is about to become a thing of the past for Dhaka dwellers. Bill payment is becoming as simple as sending an SMS to a friend.

Titas gas subscribers are the first to enjoy the facility.

Under an agreement between Titas Gas Transmission and Distribution Company Ltd and Grameenphone Ltd (GP), subscribers can send their bills through mobile phones. They can also pay the bills at over 650 GP authorised 'BillPay' centres across the Titas Gas' zones.

"Titas subscribers can now pay their bills electronically using the BillPay system of GP," said a Titas Gas official.

"GP subscribers may pay their bills from mobile phones. As for others -- including people who do not even have a cellular phone -- can pay their bills at the nearest BillPay centre."

"They can pay their bills from anywhere, anytime even in the holidays, without any kind of hassle or inconvenience," the official said.

The step was taken for the convenience of Titas subscribers and streamlining the bill payment process, Titas sources said.

Earlier in 2006, Power Development Board (PDB) introduced the system in Chittagong as an experiment. There are currently over 215 BillPay centres in Chittagong for around 3 lakh PDB subscribers.

"We have been considering about updating the system. Titas became interested after the electronic bill payment system saw great success in Chittagong," said the Official.

According to GP officials, the BillPay system is as simple and accessible as the popular 'Flexiload' system.

Similar to Flexiload outlets, every neighbourhood will have BillPay centres. They will have 'BillPay' signs outside the outlets. To pay the gas bill, Titas subscribers would have to bring their gas

bill invoice at the centre.

After the bill is paid in cash, the money will be sent to the subscriber's Titas account number electronically. The transactions will also have ID numbers so that the customer can easily

and input the amount of money to pay as the bill.

"The ledger of the Titas subscriber will be updated instantly since it is an electronic transaction. The customer will also receive a confirmation message

system.

"He (subscriber) has to insert some money in his account through a BillPay centre. Later he can transfer the money to pay utility bills. He can even transfer money from that account to his mobile as talk time," explained Azad.

Subscribers registered with the BillPay system will also receive other facilities such as notifications on the payment deadlines.

According to sources at Titas Gas Transmission and Distribution Company Ltd, subscriber using the BillPay system would have to pay an amount of government-fixed service charge to GP. The charge would range from Tk 5 to Tk 25 depending on the amount of bill.

"The major benefit of this system is of course the convenience," said a Titas official.

"The information on the transaction will be electronically sent to both Titas and the customer almost instantaneously. As our ledger will be updated instantly, room for any mix-ups is minimal," he said.

The promise of phones that double as digital wallets is not new. Consumers in many Asian and European countries have bought everything from convenience store trinkets to subway tickets using their mobile handsets for years. But the idea has largely been a gadget enthusiast's fantasy here in the capital city of Bangladesh.

Only recently have local banks and wireless companies begun developing mobile payable products. Now, the next wave of technology is about to wash ashore where people can pay their utility bills through mobile phones.

"This has happened sooner than anyone actually realised," said a top Titas official. "We are confident that our subscribers will embrace technology as eagerly as others have because of less wariness, security and the ease of use."



Paying gas bill has now become a lot easier as subscribers can pay it through mobile phones at BillPay centres.

inquire about the status of the payment by contacting the GP customer service.

"GP subscribers may also pay the bill through mobile phone," said Delwar Hossain Azad, head of Finance, Grameenphone Limited. They would have to enter their Titas account number

from Titas shortly after the bill is paid," Azad explained.

However, the subscriber would have to enlist his number with the BillPay system before he can use his cellular phone to pay utility bills. After enlisting his number, the subscriber will have a specific account for the BillPay



Vagabonds and anti-social elements still while away their time at the Osmani Udyan.

Osmani Udyan not fully congenial to visitors

DURDANA GHAS

Despite a number of steps taken to improve the environment of Osmani Udyan, one of the last remaining open spaces in the city, the historical park situated on 23 acres of land is not yet fully safe and secure for the visitors.

Vagabonds and floating people were evicted from the park by the Dhaka City Corporation (DCC) but they were back again after a year of the eviction.

DCC constructed a concrete wall around the park to prevent floating people from entering there. But still they are infiltrating into the park and residing there at night.

"There is a boundary wall but it does not ward off floating people. They come toppling the wall at night. Besides, there are prostitutes. Strong police guard is needed to stop them," said a security guard of a private construction firm engaged in the beautification of the park. His duty is only at night DCC has no security personnel to guard the park.

"However, the environment of the park is better now after the authorities removed the railway colony a few days ago," said the security guard.

In spite of these complaints Osmani Udyan still is a place where people, mostly from old Dhaka, come to breathe fresh air.

On a visit to the park last week this correspondent found people sitting by the pond inside the park. Some were taking a stroll. Some people were taking a bath in it.

A scantily clad demented person was seen roaming freely. Some people were found relieving themselves near the trunk of a big tree beside the pond.

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An old man is rowing a boat with pitchers to collect drinking water because of acute water crisis due to ongoing flood. The picture was taken from Nasirabad, a low-lying area of the city.