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The river Turag is getting drastically narrower near Ijtima Maidan in Tongi as land encroachers pile up sands indiscriminately on the riverbank, gradually extending their greedy hands towards its bed.

Encroachment, after pollution, stands as the biggest threat to the life of our rivers. The reach and scope of the encroachers have made them seemingly invincible. Powerful, rich and ruthless, these encroachers have come to pull strings in government, pocket law enforcers and lean on land administration to produce ownership papers out of the blue. The legal system has been left helpless in its wake and left our rivers in peril.

Starting today, we offer a series on the most visible encroachments on the Turag and three other Dhaka rivers, with a plea to authorities to go and check grabbers' claims. We invite our readers to join the cause -- save our rivers.

... The Daily Star

PHOTO: SYED ZAKIR HOSSAIN

Turag almost grabbed

River encroachers back after 2 years of hibernation; rampant onslaught narrows the river down to a canal

PINAKI ROY

The Turag flowing along northern vicinity the capital is virtually disappearing from the map thanks to indiscriminate encroachment on the river for years. If the trend continues further the river would become history for the future generations.

After a break of two years, the encroachers are back to business with the new Awami League government assuming power in January. It seems now there are no authorities to bar these people from encroaching the rivers around the capital.

Although the AL pledged before the national elections to bring

"changes in political culture and prevailing ill practices", no change is apparent in the culture of river grabbing.

Different vested quarters including influential locals, political leaders, housing estates, government officials, refuelling stations, private universities, sand traders and religious groups have grabbed the banks of the Turag over the years.

Once an affluent 100-metre-wide river has now turned into a narrow canal to only 30-40 feet in width in some places as grabbing still continues in full swing.

Originating from the old Brahmaputra river, the Turag, main

tributary of the Buriganga on the northern side of the capital, has a length of 78 kilometres and 23 kilometres of it flows along the city.

The river is now being sacrificed to 'development' as both the banks have been grabbed for constructing buildings. Besides, its waters are contaminated by lethal effluent, making it one among many rivers in the country to face environmental devastation.

With huge encroachment on both of its banks, the Turag in Tongi, Kamarpada, Ashulia and Amin Bazar points looks so pathetic that anyone might surely think the river would die any time, if not dead already.

Not only the banks, the riverbed itself in the upstream near Ashulia and Birulia has also been grabbed by the encroachers, who have erected huge structures at various points.

The Conservation of Playing Field, Open Space, Garden and Natural Water Body Act, 2000 enacted by the previous AL government clearly prohibits filling up of water bodies and terms it a punishable act.

Unfortunately, the authorities seem reluctant to enforce the law.

At least nine fresh patches on the bank of Turag are now being filled up between the Tongi Bridge and Ashulia just within a couple of kilometres.

Bringing soil by sand-carrying large cargo boats, the encroachers are filling up the river thanks to the 'circular waterway project' of Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority (BIWTA).

The BIWTA authorities have spent Tk 36 crore to implement the first phase of the project to maintain navigability of the river which is in fact facilitating encroachment.

During a recent visit to the river, many 'ownership' notices were seen that read "owned by purchase". The notices were erected in places where the waters reach during high tide, very much within the river periphery.

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CTG ARMS HAUL

Ex-NSI chiefs tell of foreign links

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, Ctg

Interrogators have gleaned important information about the smuggling of 10 trucks of arms and ammunition and foreign links to the incident from the two arrested former National Security Intelligence (NSI) chiefs, the prosecution yesterday told the court.

But the former NSI directors general—Maj Gen (ret'd) Rezaqul Haider Chowdhury and Brig Gen (ret'd) Abdur Rahim—tactfully avoided information about their involvement in the incident, the prosecution lawyer said while placing his prayer for taking the two on further remand.

The court of Chittagong Metropolitan Magistrate Osman Gani granted six days' remand for each for further interrogation at the Taskforce for Interrogation (TFI) cell in Dhaka. The Criminal Investigation Department (CID) had prayed for 10-days' remand for each.

After the hearing on remand prayer both Rezaqul and Rahim were sent to Chittagong jail.

The two are likely to be sent to Dhaka for interrogation today.

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CHT accord implementation body recast

First JS body meet outside Dhaka

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Bandarban

Deputy Leader of the House Syeda Sajeda Chowdhury has been made chairperson of the National Committee for Implementation of the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) Peace Accord.

State Minister for CHT Affairs Dipankar Talukder disclosed it at a meeting of the parliamentary standing committee on CHT affairs in Bandarban yesterday.

It was the first time a parliamentary standing committee meeting was held outside the parliament house.

He said that the CHT Land Commission will be reformed soon. "We want to appoint an energetic person for the post of chairman as the land commission is the most important

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Major decisions on coal likely within this year

Govt working on approval of coal policy, open-pit mining at Barapukuria, resettlement of affected people

SHARIEF KHAN

Within this year, the government will take several major and thorny decisions on developing the coal sector, including approval of the coal policy, an open-pit mine in Barapukuria, resettlement of people affected by the existing mine and development of a mine city.

The government is already working on the mine city in Barapukuria by identifying areas to be acquired. This mine city will initially aim at providing livelihood and living facilities to 10,000 families and ultimately give room to one lakh families, says Towfiq-e-Elahi Chowdhury, adviser to the prime minister on energy.

Towfiq-e-Elahi pointed out that the government has signed a draft memoran-

dum of understanding (MoU) with villagers who are affected by land subsidence around the Barapukuria coalmine area. "Their resettlement will be implemented in phases," he noted.

"Our bigger concern is to ensure these affected people their livelihood. We aim at giving jobs to the second generation of these affected people," he added.

A government committee has already recommended quick framing of a human resettlement action plan for the villagers affected by the Barapukuria coalmine in line with the one for the Jamuna Multipurpose Bridge project. Such a plan should be chalked out within a few months.

Till this plan of "international standard" is approved for action, the people

should be immediately given a standard compensation package and alternative shelter, said a source quoting the committee's report submitted to the energy ministry late last month.

Deep grievances are brewing among several villages around the mine for the last two years. The mining project was implemented without recognising that the mine would cause land subsidence leading to loss of agricultural land, water supply and cause environmental damage.

For now, the government is addressing the water issue in the area by installing 600 deep tube wells (Tara Tubewells). The subsoil water level in around 15 villages in Barapukuria rapidly dropped as the mine is pumping out huge quantity of water for

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Odd BDR deaths to be probed

Committee asked to report in 15 days

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The government yesterday formed a three-member probe committee to investigate the suicides and unnatural deaths of BDR jawans in custody after the mutiny at the Pilkhana BDR headquarters.

The committee headed by Deputy Secretary (Police) of the home ministry Zakir Hossain has been asked to submit its report to the government within 15 days, reports private satellite TV station Channel i.

The two committee members are Assistant Superintendent of Police Mahfuzur Rahman al Mamun and Maj Arifuzzaman.

The government in a circular asked the committee to determine the number, name, designation, and address of the BDR jawans who died after the mutiny.

It has been asked to prepare a list of the deceased BDR jawans, find out the causes of their suicides or unnatural deaths and make recommendations for preventing such suicides and unnatural deaths in future.

The home ministry sent a letter to the health ministry for inclusion of a physician in the committee.

Meanwhile, the national committee probing the massacre at

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Paltan killing case against AL leaders to be dropped

COURT CORRESPONDENT

The metropolitan public prosecutor (MPP) yesterday recommended scrapping of the Paltan killing case against Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, Home Minister Sahara Khatun, AL General Secretary Abdul Jalil, and 37 others.

The other accused in the case include Workers Party President Rashed Khan Menon, Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal President Hasanul Haque Inu, State Minister for LGRD Jahangir Kabir Nanok, former home minister Mohammad Nasim, and former AL lawmakers Mofazzel Hossain Chowdhury Maya, HBM Iqbal, and Haji Mohammad Selim.

In defence of his recommendations, MPP Abdullah Abu said the case filed by Jamaat-e-Islami on October

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For the Prime Minister's Attention

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