

Tobacco cultivation poses threat to environment in CHT

SHANTIMOY CHAKMA, Rangamati

Tobacco cultivation is posing a threat to the public health and the environment in Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT).

Although tobacco cultivation is strictly prohibited, the tobacco companies are doing brisk business, violating the rules. Besides, they motivate the farmers openly by offering incentives in cash and kind to cultivate tobacco.

At least 60 to 70 thousand metric tones of firewood are being burnt in 2,000 tobacco processing kilns every year, causing depletion of reserve and natural forests, threatening environment and ecology in the hills, environmentalists said.

They said tobacco cultivation leaves bad impact on the soil fertility and once tobacco is cultivated its difficult to grow other crops on the same land. Some 7000 farmers are involved with the tobacco farming in the CHT, sources at Agriculture Extension Department (AED) said.

Most of the farmers in Rangamati, Bandarban and Khagrachhari have been losing their interests in cultivating indigenous crops like paddy, banana, maize, sesame, cotton, potato, pumpkin etc as

they became defaulters of loans provided by tobacco companies, they said.

Farmers and labourers said staffs of tobacco companies offer lucrative amount of money as loans to trap them. Sometimes the companies provide them with bank loans for agriculture along with tobacco seeds, fertiliser, polythene bags and high-powered pesticides like Diaconal, fertilisers of BSP, BAP, FMC and SOB and DDT powder.

British American Tobacco Bangladesh (BATB) sources said farmers receive bank loans as per the rules of Bangladesh Bank and each farmer gets Tk 6000 for an acre of cultivable land.

They said farmers get money by selling dried leaves and the company purchases leaves from them and adjust the loans that they provide.

Bindu Bikash Chakma, a tobacco cultivator at Mynee under Dighinala in Khagrachhari, said he has been cultivating tobacco for the last ten years but hardly got any benefit.

Farmers Abani Kumar Chakma, Aunglahpru Marma and Sarafat Ali in Khagrachhari also echoed the same.

Zahirul Islam Jewel, manager of BATB in Bandarban, said tobacco is not a banned item and if

it's banned then how the companies produce tobacco. It's a cash crop, he said, adding that the government is earning huge amount of revenues from it.

He said tobacco cultivation does not create any negative impact on environment. He said they have been cultivating tobacco on 1200 acres of land in Bandarban without any impact on environment.

Dhaka Tobacco, Abul Khair Tobacco, Nasir Tobacco, KB Group Tobacco, RB Group Tobacco and Rangunia Samity also cultivate tobacco in the hills, sources said.

Chowdhury Harun, secretary of Rangamati Paribesh Sangrakhon Unnayan Sangstha, said tobacco cultivation should be banned as it seriously hampers the usual growing of other crops.

Abu Daud, member of Bangladesh Paribesh Ainbid Samity, in Khagrachhari said Government should take legal action against the tobacco companies to save our invaluable agricultural lands from decay and infertility.

Md Lise Uddin, deputy director of AED in Rangamati, said they discourage the farmers to grow tobacco since it requires large quantity of

fertiliser than cultivation of other crops.

AED sources said the root of tobacco tree usually penetrate nine inches deep into the soil whereas it's only four inches in case of other crops. As a result, the tobacco root badly affects fertility of soil.

A group of journalists during a recent visit found massive tobacco farming in Kaptai, Barkal, Rajasthali, Baghaichhari, Jurachhari, Longudu and Bilaichhari areas in Rangamati. Tobacco is also largely produced at Ruma, Lama, Alikadam, Thanchi, Nikhyangchhari, Rowangchhari and Sadar upazilas in Bandarban and at Dighinala, Mainee valley, Panchhari and Ramgarh in Khagrachhari. Sources said about 5000 farmers have cultivated tobacco this year in Bandarban alone.

Besides, 2626 hectares of lands were brought under tobacco cultivation in Bandarban (2312 hectares), Khagrachhari (209 hectares) and Rangamati (105 hectares) last year.

Last year, the total production was 5758 metric tones (MT) worth about Tk 100 crore. Of this, 5440MT were produced in Bandarban, 209MT in Khagrachhari and 109MT in Rangamati.

Para Kendra a ray of hope for hill children, women

NUR UDDIN ALAMGIR

The underprivileged children and women of tribal communities have started to reap the benefits of Para Kendra (centre) in the remote hilly areas of Rangamati, Khagrachhari and Bandarban.

Para Kendra is the local pre-school education and healthcare centres set up under the Integrated Community Development Project (ICDP) in Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT).

Set up under the joint initiative of Chittagong Hill Tracts Development Board and the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (Unicef), the Para Kendras are playing significant role in improving education and healthcare services in remote hilly areas.

Mothers reading book to their children or teaching them the basic skills before enrolling them in primary school is a rare scene where poor rate of literacy and malnutrition among children were prevalent and maternal health was neglected.

The scenario, however, is changing there as the children aged between three to six are receiving pre-school education at Para Kendras under the supervision of a woman of their community.

Mothers of these kids are also learning about healthcare, nutrition as well as water and sanitation issues at the centres. In addition to pre-school education and healthcare, the centres also motivate the children to attend classes distributing micronutrient biscuits provided by the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP). The biscuits not only encourage the children to attend classes but also help improve their nutritional status and capacity to concentrate.

While visiting a Para Kendra at Golachhara, around 14 kilometres from the Rangamati town, Para Karmi (worker) Swapna Debi Chakma was seen



(Top) A Para Kendra at Golachhara in Rangamati. (Left) Children from indigenous community take lessons at a Para Kendra at Moshmara Para in Rangamati.

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teaching the children. She was giving lessons to 17 pupils, including 12 girls. They sang songs in Bangla and Chakma.

Earlier a delegation of Bhutan visited the area to have an idea and gather experience on the pre-school education.

Swapna said she has faced difficulties to control and give lessons to the children at the preliminary stage but now they become accustomed gradually with the activities of the Kendra and aware of the benefits of attending the classes.

The local Union Parishad Chairman Arun Kanti Chakma said there are four Para Kendras in his union.

He said parents are happy to send their children to the Para Kendras as it makes easier for them to get enrolled in primary schools. The dropout rate is decreasing gradually at the primary schools following the programme.

Sonam Tsherins, Chief

Programme Officer of Non-formal and Continuing Education Division of Ministry of Bhutan, told The daily Star that the programme can be introduced in their country to reduce dropout at the primary school level.

He said, "I think it is playing a significant role in the life of the tribal people of the remote hilly areas and we want to utilise the knowledge gathered from them." Same scenario was also seen at Moshmara Para Kendra, around seven kilometres off the town, where children were playing display on hygiene as per instruction of Shefali Chakma, a Para Kendra worker.

Of 2,520 Para Kendras, 962 are in Rangamati, 668 in Bandarban and 890 in Khagrachhari. Unicef and ICDP have plan to establish 3,500 Kendras to cover all paras in the hill districts, said Unicef Chittagong Hill Tracts Region Programme

Officer Mong Yai. Para Kendras are becoming the focal point of all development activities offering preschool education, parenting information about low cost hygienic latrines and safe drinking water, vitamin A capsules for lactating women and fortified biscuits for children attending preschools, Mong said.

Construction of most of the Para Kendras are borne by the community providing land, labour and locally available materials. Ninety-five percent of the Para workers are women and get Tk 1,500 a month as remuneration, he added.

A memorandum of understanding (MoU) was signed between government and the Unicef on July 11, 1980 in order to improve socio-economic condition of tribal people especially the women and children.



A vast tobacco field at Shilchhari in Kaptai in Rangamati.

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theweekthatwas

Tagore's birth anniversary observed

Speakers urged the young generation to go through the works of Rabindranath Tagore in order to realise the philosophy of the maestro.

They were addressing a discussion marking the 148th birth anniversary of Rabindranath Tagore on Thursday. Oikotan Paribar, a cultural organisation, arranged the discussion at its office at South Middle Halishahar in the city.

Resident Editor of Bengali Daily Prothom Alo poet Abul Momen was the chief guest at the discussion with Liton Kanti Sarker in the chair. Prama Abrity Sangathan President Rashed Hasan was the special guest while organi-

sation chief coordinators Tutul Kumar Das and Sabuj Dey Ratan spoke. Abul Momen in his speech said the great poet depicted the discrimination among different classes in the society in the then Bengal properly through his writings.

The discussion was followed by a cultural function. Singers Sreyoshi Roy, Aniruddha Sen Gupta and Irin Saha performed at function.

Workshop for nurses held

A daylong workshop for the working nurses was held at the Centre Point Hospital on Friday. The hospital organised the workshop in collaboration with Reneta Limited, a pharmaceutical company, at its conference room.

A scientific seminar titled

'Management of Severe Bronchial Asthma and COAD' was also held with hospital Managing Director (MD) Nizam Uddin Mahmud in the chair.

Dr Shahadat Hossain of Chittagong Medical College Hospital (CMCH) moderated the workshop on how to provide at first hand the treatment properly and carefully to the patients.

Hospital Chief Executive Officer (CEO) KM Tariq, DGM (Admin) Iqbal Faruque and on duty doctors were present at the seminar.

Working nurses of the hospital participated in the workshop. Hospital authority thanked Reneta Limited for its cooperating in arranging the workshop and seminar.

They also emphasised arranging such workshops regularly for the skill development of the nurses.

Monitoring of KG schools stressed

Awami League lawmaker from Kotwali constituency Nurul Islam emphasised the monitoring of the state of education in the kindergarten schools to ensure quality education.

He said this while he was addressing a view exchange meeting with the officials of Chittagong Educational Board on Sunday.

He also visited the Chittagong Board office to see for himself its activities.

Chittagong Board Chairman Prof Dr Md Yusuf, acting Controller Md Abu Taher, acting Secretary Formujul Hoque, School Inspector Prof Ali Hossain and acting College Inspector Suman Barua were present at the meeting.

Nurul Islam urged the board officials and staffs to work with sincerity and to play role in spreading the light of education for materialising the dream of building a 'digital Bangladesh'. The officials urged the lawmaker to take steps to fill up the vacant posts in the board.

Killing of tribal girl protested

Tribal students studying at different educational institutions in Chittagong formed a human chain on Friday protesting the killing of a of a Marma girl after rape at Gazalia union in Bandarban on May 8.

A number of leaders and activists of different progressive student organisations and political parties also joined the human chain in front of the central Shaheed Minar.

Members of Bangladesh

Marma Students Council (BMSC), Bom Students Association, Tripura Students Forum, Pahari Chhatra Parishad, Bangladesh Chhatra Federation, Gono Sanghati Andolan, Communist Party of Bangladesh (CPB), Workers Party of Bangladesh participated in the human chain.

Speakers at a rally held during the human chain demanded immediate arrest and exemplary punishment to the rapists and killers of Machingkhoy Marma who was killed after rape at Remong Member Para of Gazalia Union under Bandarban.

CPB city unit President Shah Alam, Chittagong University (CU) Communication and Journalism Department Chairman Mir Mosharrif Hossain Rajib, Workers Party leader Amrita Barua, Gono Sanghati Convenor Hasan Maruf Rumi, Bangladesh

Chhatra Federation leader Helal Uddin, Anupam Barua, Rapru Chai Marma, Pritimoy Khisa, Lal Khan Bom and Avilash Chakma spoke at the rally.

Later a procession was brought out.

100 years of Karankhain School celebrated

The ceremony to celebrate 100 years of Karankhain Government Primary School at Dhalghat union under Patiya upazila was inaugurated on Friday amidst enthusiasm.

Speakers at the ceremony urged the affluent section of the society to form student welfare funds in different primary schools in rural areas for helping the poor students in order to

prevent dropout at primary level.

Patiya Upazila Chairman Idris Mia was the chief guest at the inaugural ceremony with President of School Governing Body Shankar Sengupta in the chair.

Tony Che, founder of Dr Iek Memorial Trust, was the special guest at the ceremony while Unicef consultant Dr Nurul Amin Chowdhury was the chief discussant.

Patiya Upazila Vice Chairman Dr Timir Chowdhury, Chittagong District Education Officer Debesh Chandra Sarkar, Upazila Education Officer Rabiul Hossain, Upazila Anti-Corruption Committee Secretary Sangha Priya Thero and Dhalghat UP Chairman Salamat Ullah Molla spoke at the function.

A student welfare fund titled Dr Iek Memorial Trust was also launched at the programme.