

## Playing around with strategic tree cover!

The issue is law enforcement

**T**HE felling of at least 30,000 *jhau* trees in Teknaf beach is the latest incident of priceless greenery being plundered in the country.

The trees have been destroyed with the ulterior motive of illegally grabbing the sandy beach. But the damage done to the environment in the process is huge, to say the least. The trees were planted in 1995 and the plan was to create a shield for the coastal people badly exposed to cyclones. The plan worked very well as the trees grew big, but now everything is back to square one as a 10-kilometre swath of land has been completely denuded of any vegetation.

Local influential people are reported to have committed the crime in collaboration with some forest department employees. This is self-evident, but the question remains how could they destroy such a huge number of trees without being noticed by the law enforcers? The police, Rab and BDR personnel did reach the place but only after the plunderers had successfully accomplished their mission. Such lapses can, as they did in this instance, cause colossal damage.

The government departments concerned appear to be content with their age-old ploy of blaming each other when something goes terribly wrong. The forest department is blaming the police for not cooperating with them. Similarly, the local UNO is unhappy with the role of the forest department. What is evident from this blame game is that there is little coordination among the government agencies which actually allowed the plunderers too much latitude as there was virtually none to stop them from felling the trees.

There may be a lot more substance in a forest official's contention that the department does not have enough manpower to patrol the vast areas. Even then, such free-for-all destruction of natural assets cannot be defended. The forest department has clearly failed to save the trees, a task for which it is paid from the government exchequer.

The wanton destruction of greenery in Teknaf has proved beyond any doubt that our concern for the environment is almost never reflected in the activities going on at the field level. The criminals have to be punished, but at the same time it is imperative to find out why the noose of the law gets so slackened from time to time. The forest department owes an explanation to all as to how such large scale felling of trees could take place.

## Homebound passengers' woes

Will their misery ever end?

**I**T is the same old story of angry men returning home dejected at not being able to get tickets. And the sufferings of those planning to travel home to enjoy Eid with family and friends keep on recurring every year with, it seems, an ascending intensity. And their haplessness and misery continue to remain unmitigated, with no one really caring to do anything of note to see an end to the terrible situation confronting the home goers.

This is the time when one sees increase in the fares for all modes of surface transports and tickets become a rare commodity. It is so devastating to see pictures of multitudes lining up from midnight for tickets at the railway counters with most of them returning dejected as usual.

As for train services, we understand that additional passenger compartments are being provided for this occasion, but that is hardly enough to cater to the large number of people planning to get home in the last few days of Ramadan. While one understands that the present railway resources are not able to cope with the demand, what aggravates the misery of the public is to see the nexus between railway officials and ticket brokers exploiting the situation and making money at the expense of the common man.

And, in spite of active presence of law enforcing agencies including RAB at the railway stations and ticket counters, to see reports of tickets being siphoned off to black marketeers by people connected with the system, is unacceptable.

Similar is the situation with private bus and launch services where travellers can do very little against arbitrary hike in fares and where too most tickets find their way into the hands of black marketeers. And of course do not write off the extortionists who are over active at this time in extorting money from passenger buses.

It was time the administration intervened instead of leaving the people at the mercy of dishonest railway staff and greedy private bus and launch operators. It is exasperating that illegal transaction, as one picture appearing in some national dailies reveals, can happen in broad daylight under everyone's nose. Not only that this practice must be dealt with a heavy hand, those that have indulged in it, and those tasked to prevent it must also be held to account for their failure to curb the practice.

The BRTC must also get its full fleet of buses on road which we feel would help to some extent ameliorate the suffering of the homebound passengers.

## What will happen to the bills?

It will look odd if the government opposes the first private member's bills piloted by its party lawmaker in the ninth Parliament. The people will, therefore, be watching the fate of these two bills with great interest.

M. ABDUL LATIF MONDAL

**O**N September 10, Awami League lawmaker Saber Hossain Chowdhury moved two private members' bills in the House, one styled Oppression and Custodial Deaths (Prevention) Bill 2009, and the other Eviction of Slum Dwellers from Government Land (Prevention) Bill 2009.

According to the rules of procedure (ROP) of the Parliament, "private member" means a member other than a minister, either from the treasury bench or the opposition bench. Rules 72, 73 and 74 of ROP have laid down the detailed procedure for the introduction of private members' bills.

A private member desiring to move for leave to introduce a bill shall give to the secretary of the Parliament fifteen days' written notice of his intention and shall also submit three copies of the bill, along with an explanatory statement of objects and reasons. The bill shall be accompanied by a copy of the recommendation by the president if required under the constitution.

Newspaper reports suggest that the Oppression and Custodial Deaths (Prevention) Bill seeks enactment of a law against torture and cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment by law enforce-

ment agencies or government officials. It also proposes punishment including life-term imprisonment and suspension from service during investigation of charges against an offender, regardless of whether the offender is a member of regular law enforcement agencies or the armed forces, or of any public office.

In his statement supporting the bill, the lawmaker said that the proposed bill was necessary to uphold the constitutional provisions guaranteeing protection of the citizens under law. Since Bangladesh is a party to the UN convention -- signed on December 10, 1984 -- against torture and inhuman treatment or punishment, the country needs to have a law to protect its citizens from such malpractices.

The Eviction of Slum Dwellers from Government Land (Prevention) bill, seeking protection against eviction of slum dwellers, advocates that habitation is one of the basic human rights. The bill proposes several provisions to protect the rights of the poor, hapless, aged, destitute, disabled people and children.

Speaker Abdul Hamid sent both the bills to the parliamentary committee on private members' bills and resolutions for further scrutiny. The committee will scrutinise the bills and recommend or disregard those for

placement in the House.

In the British parliament, a bill may be brought in either by the government or by a private member. Private bills are those bills that relate to "the interest of someone, locality, or corporation, municipality or other particular person, or body of persons." Such a bill originates in a petition that is examined by the paid officers of the House, called the examiners of petitions for private bills. If they report that the bill complies with the standing orders on private bills, the House proceeds with it.

The procedure for introduction of private members' bills in the Lok Sabha (House of People) in India is more or less same as in the Bangladesh Parliament.

The Bangladesh Parliament has a poor record of passage of private members' bills. Available record shows that out of over 300 bills submitted by private members, only 6 (all from treasury bench lawmakers) have been passed since independence.

It may be recalled that during the eighth parliament a number of ruling BNP lawmakers moved bills proposing a number of amendments to the constitution, aiming to help strengthen parliamentary democracy, promote good governance and make the parliament more effective. This embarrassed the ruling BNP.

Consequently, law minister Moudud Ahmed, in consultation with the party high command, imposed a restriction on the ruling BNP lawmakers, asking them to take permission from the Leader of the House or the party's parliamentary wing before placing a private member's bill in the parliament. So, those bills didn't see the light of day.

It will be interesting to see the position taken by the government regarding the passage of these private member's bills in a House where the AL-led ruling alliance has got four-fifths majority. This is because the passage of these bills will have widespread political, social and environmental ramifications.

Bangladesh does not have a satisfactory human rights record. Mass arrests, undue delay in producing an arrested person(s) before the magistrate, inhuman torture in the name of "police remand" extra-judicial killings, etc. are not uncommon.

While speaking in the first session of the current Parliament, an influential member of the ruling AL alleged excruciating torture on him by the DGI after 1/11, and called for a parliamentary probe into the matter. He demanded that those responsible be meted out exemplary punishment.

The government may also find difficulties with the "Eviction of Slum Dwellers from Government Land (Prevention) Bill." Any government may find it difficult to allow people in towns and cities to continuously and unauthorisedly occupy its land. However strong the government's point may be, eviction of slum dwellers without providing alternative accommodation is considered inhuman.

It will look odd if the government opposes the first private member's bills piloted by its party lawmaker in the ninth Parliament. The people will, therefore, be watching the fate of these two bills with great interest.

M. Abdul Latif Mondal is a former Secretary to the Government. E-mail: latifm43@gmail.com

## Cruelty knows no bounds

Our zoo authorities must not be allowed to import large hunting animals from here on. It is downright cruelty to confine such majestic animals in small concrete cages because such confinement only hastens their death.

SHAHNOOR WAHID

**G**ARIAN, the majestic Royal Bengal tiger that was kept in confinement in the Mirpur Zoo, is now beyond all pain and suffering. He has died a lonely and prolonged death at the hands of some heartless, mindless, cruel men who would now skin him and sell his hide to another profiteer.

Perhaps Garjan in his last days cried in solitude for a last look at the Sundarbans, where his ancestors lived like kings. Perhaps Garjan cried in silence to be near his own kind who still roam the mighty forest, free and ferocious, just as tigers should be. Perhaps Garjan cried in loneliness to get one chance to smell the Sundari tree leaves, the salty water of the canals, the air over the Sundarbans filled with the sweet aroma of honey in the numerous hives hanging from the trees.

Pray tell me, who has denied him his rights? Who has given us the right to enchain a hunting animal like Garjan who has been created by the same God who has created this world and all life forms in it for a divine purpose? By torturing and caging those animals created by God, aren't we interfering in God's desire for a world where man and animal will live side by side enjoying the freedom given by Him? Does any religious scripture allow such cruelty to animals?

God has given all animals freedom to roam and hunt but we have dared to step in and snatch away that freedom and confine

them in cages. Just because we cannot hear them cry does not mean they don't cry. We don't even know whether they curse us every day.

The story does not end with Garjan. Just look at those sad eyes of the lion in the picture that came on the front page of this daily the other day. What is this gorgeous animal doing in a rainy, damp, tropical country like Bangladesh? Who had taken the decision to bring an African lion here? Do they have any idea what climatic conditions can cause to animals when they are taken away from their natural habitat?

It is common knowledge that lions can never survive in a damp country like Bangladesh. Are those men sitting in the air-cooled rooms of the relevant departments educated enough to understand all this? Or are they just after making money? How much money have they made in the process? To be candid, those men should be put in a cage next to that lion so that they can hear his sobs and sighs.

How heartless could we become? Can we call ourselves hundred percent civilised if we confine large hunting animals like lions and tigers in small cages in the zoo, and allow them to fall ill and die eventually? We are so engrossed with our own *danda* that we never bother if those majestic animals eat or don't eat, if they live or die.

Our zoo authorities must not be allowed to import large hunting animals from here on. It is downright cruelty to confine such majestic animals in small concrete cages because such confinement only hastens



Sentenced to death.

their death. Besides, the attendants do not have sufficient training, neither do they have the compassion to take care of such animals.

We have seen that only rich countries can afford to create large areas where hunting animals are allowed to roam and hunt, which the spectators can see from a safe distance. Since we cannot afford such luxury, let us not spend public money to buy those animals and then cause death-inflicting pain and anguish in their hearts. The sick and dying lion, the lonely tigress, the dead giraffe and lastly Garjan are only testaments to how heartless we the humans in Bangladesh can become when it comes to taking care of animals.

Here is food for thought. Do we know that some lowly characters, thieves actually, known as officials and attendants in all the zoos in this country, steal money from the fund that is earmarked to buy food and medicine for the animals? They do it many ways. They do not feed the lions and tigers

the exact amount of food required to keep them healthy. They buy half the amount and take away the money. And there is no higher authority to investigate and take the criminals to task. As a result, the beautiful exotic animals in our zoos keep dying a lonely death far away from home.

A nation must talk about everything that takes to make a country rich and progressive. We do not talk about animals unless we have to. But we only talk about politics and politicians all the time because that's supposed to be the smart thing to do. Our intellectuals, academics, media, social workers, human rights activists et al hardly talk about animals or cruelty to animals because they think that's not intellectual. Nothing else exists in this country. Nothing else matters in this country. So, animals can go to hell.

Shahnoor Wahid is a Senior Assistant Editor of The Daily Star. E-mail: shahnoorwahid@yahoo.co.uk

## Whose property is 'our' gas reserve?

My suggestion is to keep the gas for use in Bangladesh. The money spent to buy that is also important. If the Bay of Bengal gas reserve is the property of our country our share should logically be around 50%, whatever might be the cost and the risk of investment associated with the exploration.

M.A.S. MOLLA

**A**BOUT a decade ago, a group of researchers was observing a primary school classroom in the US. The second graders were talking about Lake Michigan and water pollution in and around it. One of them innocently enquired: "Who owns the water?"

The first probable owner was thought to be George Bush because he was the then president of the US. Bill Gates is well known for computer engineering and his riches, so the kids speculated that he owned the water! Perhaps, the second grade kids also knew of the many discretionary powers that the police usually apply, so that was their third choice.

Now, let us come to our gas reserve and its ownership. Some welfare-oriented organisations recently protested against

any Production Sharing Contract (PSC) of our offshore gas reserve in the Bay of Bengal, and a university professor, Dr. Anu Mohammad, was injured in police action. Many condemned this police excess and The Daily Star columnist Mr. Syed Badrul Ahsan (in his column of September 9) asked another basic question which is: "Who owns the state?"

His point is that such incidents signify that the state has been lost to somebody else, and we need to "reclaim" this independent state that was achieved after much bloodshed.

The PSC on our offshore gas exploration says that only 20% of the available gas during the contract period of 25 years would be Bangladesh's property. The rest 80% would virtually be the property of the exploring companies, which they

could sell to us or to others.

My question is, if our share is only 20% and the contracting international companies (ICs) get 80%, then does not it mean that the property is mainly theirs? One of the contracting ICs is said to be American. So, is our Bay of Bengal resource also owned, at least partially, by the US (like the water of Lake Michigan)? I realise that the quantum of investments in the offshore exploration is very high and the risk associated with these investments is extreme.

But this is only one side of the coin. The other side shows that the risk is not so much and the gas reserve in Bangladesh's part of the Bay of Bengal is estimated to be 15 trillion cubic feet (tcf). Myanmar's reserve is known to be 7 tcf, while India has discovered 100 tcf reserve!

So far as I understand, Anu Mohammad and his group's protest is based on the assumption that the major share of gas will go out of Bangladesh, which is not only energy-hungry but also experiencing short in gas supply. Their demand is that the PSC must be revised so that the full amount of gas can be used here in the country whatever the price

might be.

My suggestion is to keep the gas for use in Bangladesh. The money spent to buy that is also important. If the Bay of Bengal gas reserve is the property of our country our share should logically be around 50%, whatever might be the cost and the risk of investment associated with the exploration. Otherwise, it would mean that the property actually belongs to the ICs, and we are just gatekeepers who will get a meager share of 20%. If I were one of the policy makers, I would never agree to a PSC that gives Bangladesh less than 40% share.

It is true that we badly need to explore just now to quench our thirst for energy, but we cannot leave the next generations hungrier in energy by giving away 80% of our own property. This is simply unacceptable. It is known that at present, we have huge amount of idle liquid money in banks, which we could invest if the project is proved profitable. And we can wait longer to develop technical expertise of our own if no IC comes to explore at a higher rate of share for us.

M.A.S. Molla is a PhD candidate in Singapore, and an occasional contributor to The Daily Star. E-mail: momas71@yahoo.com