

Devastation of reserve forest

Can't the wanton plunder be stopped?

IT is mind boggling that more than 250 acres of forest in Madhupur Upazilla of Tangail have been totally denuded in the course of the past one year. And from reports appearing in this paper, everyone, from the district administration and forest officials to the forest guards, seems to be powerless in the face of money, political connection and power to stop the grave damage being wreaked upon the ecology of the area.

This is certainly not the first instance of public land being appropriated illegally by ruling party goons and strongmen. This is a criminal act, and anyone in a position of responsibility who has failed to prevent it happening, either by acts of commission or omission, cannot absolve himself of the responsibility.

In Bangladesh, where one can get away with murder, particularly if one has the right connection, it is no wonder that vast tracts of Sal forest would be stripped bare for turning them into seasonal fruit orchards, with total impunity. The regrettable aspect of it is that it has been going on for many years.

The pathetic aspect of the sordid story is the link of the perpetrators with the two major political parties. During the 4-party alliance regime, reportedly, influential persons with links to the BNP had also indulged in cutting down trees on hundreds of acres of forest land for commercial purposes, in the same area.

There are several aspects of the matter that leave us wondering at the failure of both the administration and the political parties in fulfilling their responsibility of safeguarding our national resources.

Nobody should be more aware than the people's representatives of the need to preserve forest lands, which have never been quite enough, and which are getting depleted gradually due to natural causes, but more alarmingly, due to the onslaught of man. We understand that a large number of cases have been instituted against the alleged criminals, yet the plundering has not stopped. Using political clout for personal benefit at the expense of the state should not be tolerated.

The area in question happens to be government land, not to speak of the fact that it is a part of the reserve forest; and it obligates full-time protection of its resources. Nothing can justify, not even the lack of manpower, the failure of the administration to stop the incessant devastation.

The relevant ministries should arise from slumber and act to stop further damage to the forest and also bring to book the criminals as well as all those who have been complicit in the matter.

Twenty20 cricket championship

England win in style

FOR Paul Collingwood and his men, it has been a truly great triumph. England never won any world championship before this convincing victory against the mighty Australians at Bridgetown. Yes, the 'ashes' are theirs!

They outplayed their old foes in every department. There was disciplined bowling and good fielding led by skipper Collinwood himself. He took a spectacular catch at short midwicket that dealt a lethal blow to the struggling Australian batting. The bowlers never looked like giving anything away. The Australian top order could not accelerate the rate of scoring after they lost some early wickets. Predicting anything in cricket is a hazardous proposition, particularly in this Twenty20 version, but it is still not clear why the in-form Michael Hussey, the hero of the match against Pakistan, was sent so late. He got very few deliveries to show his class once more.

On a wicket where good batsmen had nothing to fear, the English victory was never in doubt. Kevin Pietersen and Craig Kieswetter made it look easy with some lusty hitting. The Australians are a truly professional side, but the paltry 147 was not good enough to put up a real fight.

England must be doubly happy to win the final of the ICC World Twenty20 trophy, since the moment of glory came against the formidable Australia superpower in international cricket for over a century.

The teams from the subcontinent could not live up to the fans' expectations. We missed a chance to score an upset victory against the Australians after our bowlers did an excellent job to restrict their strong opponents to the modest score, but the batsmen failed. The Indians could not reach the last four after some lacklustre performance by the team as a whole. The Sri Lankans did better, but were eliminated in a one-sided match by the ultimate winners.

The match of the tournament was the cliffhanger between Pakistan and Australia. The exuberance of a rather unpredictable Pakistan was finally subdued by Australian professionalism, with Michael Hussey playing some unbelievable cricket. The match has elevated the shortest version of the game to a new height. It has been entertaining cricket with the hosts West Indies doing a great job.

Twenty20 cricket has got a new champion. Our congratulations to team England.

Amending the ACC law

The people in general and the civil society members and the media in particular were happy with the creation of the ACC. Now, it is the joint responsibility of the government and the ACC to create an environment that enables the latter to work unhindered in order to attain its stated objectives and goals.

M. ABDUL LATIF MONDAL

THE cabinet, in its regular weekly meeting on April 26, approved in principle certain amendments to the Anti-Corruption Commission Act (ACC), 2004.

As reported in the newspapers, the proposed amendments include, inter alia:

- Obtaining of prior government approval by the ACC for filing cases of corruption against government officials,
- Making the ACC accountable to the president of the republic,
- Prescribing punishment of up to five years imprisonment with fines for filing a false complaint or case against any individual, and
- Appointing of the ACC's secretary by the government.

Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) and some civil society members have criticised the proposed amendments to the ACC law. The World Bank and the European Union have also expressed concern and stressed that the "ACC should work independently -- financially and politically."

The proposed amendment that requires prior government approval for filing cases against government officials by the ACC is considered by the critics as discriminatory, running counter to the spirit of law and equality before the law of every citizen in the country -- regardless of rank and authority. The amendment will take the public sector corruption out of the jurisdiction of the ACC, which will help spread corruption in the sector.

The top leaders in the ruling government maintain that the last caretaker government was engaged in absurd works in the name of eradicating corruption. The fear and panic created among the public officers by the filing of cases against scores of them and putting of many of the top bureaucrats behind bars still persists, and has led to loss of initiative and dynamism in their official work.

In order to bring back confidence among the government officials, the principal leadership in the ruling government had to ask senior bureaucrats to work sincerely without any fear, and assure them protection.

The government leadership stresses

that public officers have to take hundreds of decisions and it is not unlikely that they will commit mistake(s) in one or two cases.

Moreover, no public officer takes any decision without the approval of the higher authority. So, it is logical that consent of the higher authority should be taken before the ACC files a case against a public officer.

There are disciplinary and appeal rules for taking disciplinary action against a public officer for corruption. Hundreds of public officials have been removed from service or given other appropriate punishments for corruption charges under these rules. If deemed necessary, the authority may also refer a case involving corruption against a public officer to the anti-corruption watchdog for investigation and follow-up action.

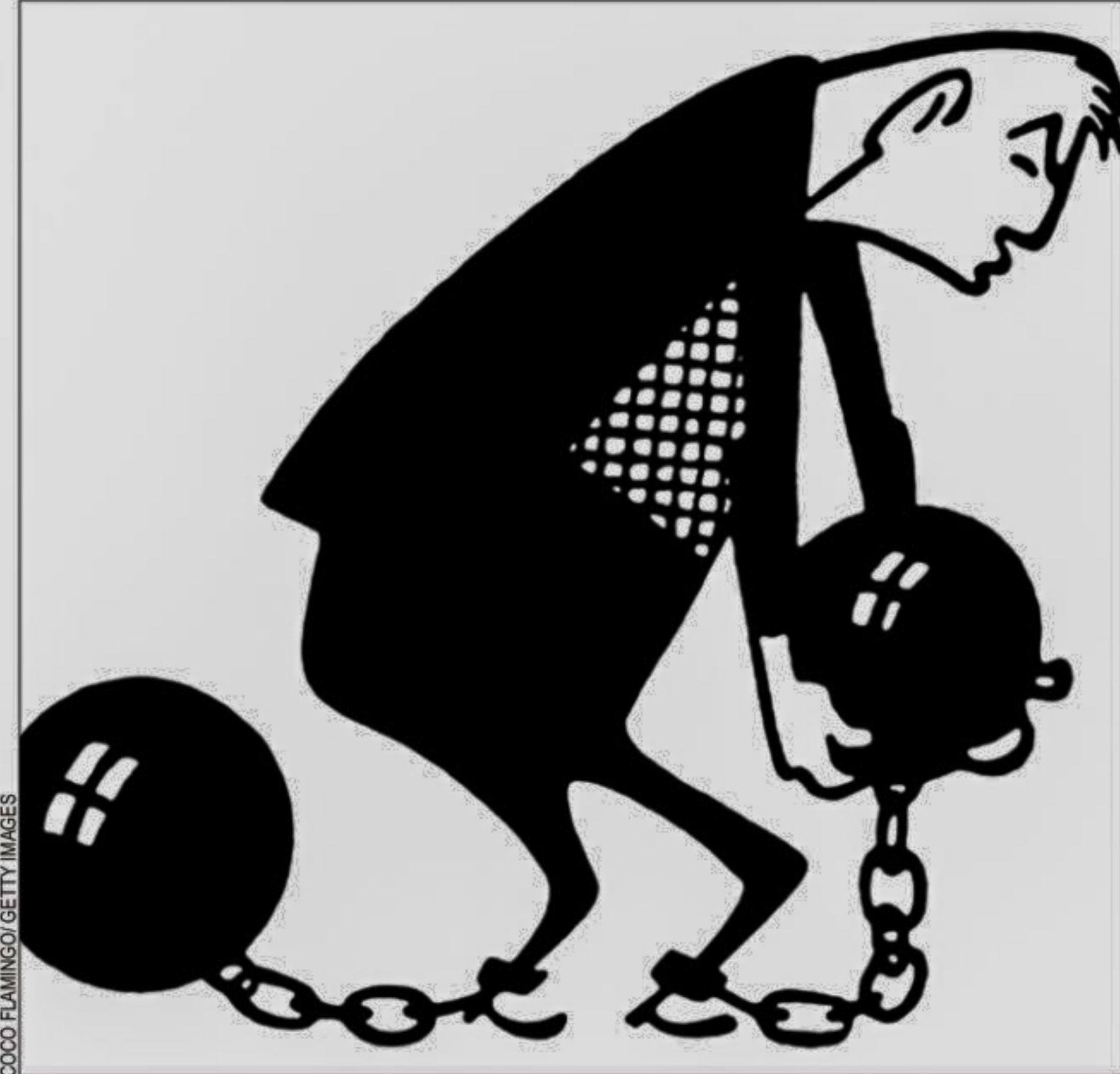
As for the proposed amendment that the ACC should be accountable to the president, some critics feel that such an amendment could mean the ACC losing its independence because under the present system of government the president is obliged to take the advice of the prime minister and act accordingly. Thus, ACC's accountability to the president could mean its subservience to the government.

Many others hold a different view. They say that the ACC, or for that any other similar body, should not consider itself being "subject to no limits as to its powers and responsibilities. It is not another sovereign body above the constitution and the republic."

The arguments put forward by both the groups are important. The TIB has suggested that the ACC could rather be made accountable to a special parliamentary committee, comprising of lawmakers from all the parties, to ensure its accountability and transparency.

To complement the parliamentary committee, the TIB has also suggested formation of a citizens' advisory committee consisting of prominent citizens of high integrity, credibility and acceptability.

The critics are of the opinion that the proposed amendment providing for five-year imprisonment with fines for filing a false complaint or case is a threat to all potential plaintiffs to refrain from complaining to the ACC. Similarly, the ACC



The ACC needs to do its job freely.

officials with the five-year jail threat hanging over them may become reluctant to even start cases. In that case, the ACC would not be able to be an active organisation.

Questions have been raised as to why this provision should be added to the ACC act when there are prevailing laws for taking action in varying degrees and in proportion to the crime against those who file false cases.

The ACC chairman has reportedly agreed to the stipulation, saying that it is needed to stop unnecessary harassment of an individual. He has, at the same time, stressed that the law also must protect the "whistle blowers" from harassment.

Some critics consider the proposed amendment regarding appointment of the ACC's secretary by the government as "a way of extending the government's influence into an organisation that should be allowed to do its work minus all kinds of external influence, and without feeling any undue restraint."

Others feel that the ACC's secretary is very important, and the incumbent must have legal expertise and knowledge of how the government functions. They argue that while a minister is the chief executive of his ministry, the secretary of the ministry acts as the principal accounting officer and is responsible for ensuring that funds allocated to

the ministry, its attached departments and subordinate offices are spent as per existing rules and laws.

It may not be denied that during the period of last caretaker government the ACC sometimes acted oppressively against corruption suspects. But, it is also equally true that the reconstitution of the ACC by the post-1/11 caretaker government and amendments made to the Act-2004 provided some degree of dynamism and vibrancy, aiming at making corruption a punishable offence and challenging the culture of impunity.

The prime minister has reportedly asked the cabinet division to find out how anti-corruption watchdogs function in the western countries and India in curbing corruption. This is undoubtedly a timely directive from the prime minister. The information collected will help update the draft law on amendments.

The people in general and the civil society members and the media in particular were happy with the creation of the ACC. Now, it is the joint responsibility of the government and the ACC to create an environment that enables the latter to work unhindered in order to attain its stated objectives and goals.

M. Abdul Latif Mondal is a former Secretary. Email: latifm43@gmail.com.

Social malady

All sorts of crimes against girls and young women, from heckling to acid assaults, from molestation to murder, do not appear to be deterred even by stringent laws in the books.

A.N.M. NURUL HAQUE

AS the social malady of heckling and harassing of school and college going girls by an increasing number of youths, sometimes with deadly consequences, has become a familiar story these days, Education Minister Nurul Islam Nahid has stressed the need for creating a social movement against this nuisance to ensure a congenial atmosphere for girls in educational institutions.

Heckling-driven delinquency appears to be increasing alarmingly, leading to tragedies like suicide, as the victims who are mostly teenage girls are unable to bear the agony of harassment. All sorts of crimes against girls and young women, from heckling to acid assaults, from molestation to murder, do not appear to be deterred even by stringent laws in the books.

One has heard of so many promising girls committing suicide in the recent past, only to have a respite from the incessant heckling and harassment. Trisa, Simi, Selina, Salma, Rumi, Fahima, Rini, Luna, Indrani, Pinky and Elora are just the tip of the iceberg, about whom we knew via media. They are a few in the long list of victims, who were heckled and harassed so much by the hoodlums that they were forced to take their own lives.

Social degeneracy has set in strongly within the country, matched by the inaction of the police. The silence of the society has also contributed to an increase of these crimes.

Deteriorating law and order, and moral degeneration among a considerable number of the youth, do not permit untrammelled rejoicing at any popular festival.

Holding cultural programs has become problematic due to lawlessness and indiscipline manifested in all spheres with growing recklessness. The musical concerts in Dhaka University campus on Pahela Baishak had to be stopped because some youths started

harassing and molesting the young women present.

The DC of the Ramna police admitted that the situation had gone out of control and the police had to rescue 15 girls from the crowd. A similar incident also occurred at a cultural program of Ananda Mohan University College Mymensingh, during the celebration of its diamond jubilee a few days back.

The Rajshahi University administration has imposed restrictions on the movement of their female students and asked them to be cautious while they are on the campus as a safety measure. Following recent incidents of sexual harassment at different places in the country, including campuses, the university administration asked the local police station to take necessary safety measures for female students on the campus.

The police, without taking any safety measures, advised the university administration to restrict the movement of the female students in the halls of residence. The university administration sheepishly followed the police advice and hung up a notice in all the female residential halls asking the students not to move out of the halls in the afternoon.

The notice reads: "If any female student goes out the RU administration or hall, the authority will not take any responsibility for anything untoward." Such a step will surely help the hecklers and harassers to go scot-free, as it carries a clear message that their targeted women are more helpless than they had thought.

To find a way out of this pervasive social malady, the education ministry has started a series of discussions with civil society leaders, law enforcers and judicial officers. To define the role of the media against this social malady, the ministry also held a dialogue with the editors and chiefs of the print and electronic media.

The dialogue laid out guidelines and measures that include exemplary punishment to the perpetrators after sum-



Vulnerable and unprotected.

mary trials, deployment of police in civil dress near girls' schools and colleges, formation of committees with guardians, police and teachers to coordinate preventive measures, and social and political action by the political leaders and civil society members.

Increasing incidents of heckling in urban places in India compelled the local authorities to take a serious look into the problem. The growing instances of the murders of young women for rejecting the love of the man had rocked the nation, and now the serious thought is given to the reasons for these crimes. The Indian government has already passed many stricter laws against heckling and sexual molestation.

A British Foundation recently selected some 480 students from different schools in Bangladesh for its "Duke of Edinburgh Awards." The awards are won after one and a half years of dedicated efforts in specific areas, such as voluntary social service, new skills development, and physical recreational pursuits like martial arts or challenging expeditions and adventures.

The benefits of such extra-curricular activities would be enormous in our society, as our errant youths need to engage themselves in community work

to keep "the devil's workshop" at bay. The government should initiate such a program, as it has a vital bearing on social peace and tranquility. The electronic media must be more cautious about their programs, and avoid airing advertisements and dramas that may provoke and encourage heckling.

Recently, a lower court at Narayanganj, for the first time in Bangladesh, handed down seven days jail sentence to six youths, in accordance with Section 34 of the Code of Criminal Procedure, for harassing female students -- a crime hitherto unpunished.

Heckling girls and young women is no longer a youthful peccadillo, but has assumed criminality of high order. A minor punishment will not deter it. The government should enact stringent laws to stop heckling and harassment of female students.

Heckling is spreading fast because of various reasons. Social awareness and stern legal action against it are absolutely essential, as it has become a dangerous social malady among a section of youth gone astray. A nationwide movement to raise social awareness is imperative to fight against this disease.

A.N.M. Nurul Haque is a columnist of The Daily Star. Email: anmhaque@hotmail.com.