

Farmers worried as Sunamganj embankment work unfinished

IQBAL SIDDIQUEE, Sylhet

Farmers in *haor* (giant water body) areas of Sunamganj district are worried as the embankment work under projects of Water Development Board (WDB) to save the boro croplands from possible natural calamities are still far from completion.

As early floods that hit the region in March end last year caused serious damage to boro crops, the government this time had set February 28 deadline to complete the embankment work. The time has now been extended to March 31.

At a meeting at the deputy commissioner's office early this month, the WDB officials claimed that 70 percent

of the works was complete and the rest would be done by mid-March but several local leaders present there strongly protested, saying that the claim is false and there were large scale irregularities in the project's work.

Local sources said the WDB started work on Boglakhali embankment in Jamalganj upazila only last week while the work on four other embankments in Dharmapasha, Jamalganj and Shulla upazilas started a few days earlier.

Most of the crop fields in the *haors* of Sunamganj district were damaged as they went under water during the period from March 25 to April 20 last year. Similar situation occurred in

2009 too, locals said.

Nurul Gani, a farmer of village Hashkuri in Dakshin Sunamganj upazila, said they fear losing boro crops this year too if the authorities fail to finish the work on the embankment before the onset of the 'season of storms and flash floods'.

"Almost every year local people suffer the same problem and lose their only crop. The government should take stern action against the people responsible for the project failures," Sunamganj Unnayan Sangram Parishad convener freedom fighter Bazlul Mazid Chowdhury said.

Boro paddy worth Tk 1127 crore on 193,000 hectares of land was damaged last year

in Sunamganj district only, according to the DAE reports. Large scale corruption by contractors and other concerned and delay in embankment protection works were blamed for the crop loss.

To recoup disastrous crop loss, the government had to take special assistance programme for the boro growers in the *haor* region covering large areas in Sunamganj, Sylhet, Moulvibazar, Kishoreganj and Netrakona districts.

Apparently in a bid to prevent corruption, WDB this time decided to do the embankment work through the project implementation committees (PIC) instead of appointing contractors,

Accordingly, 250 PICs

were formed with the UP chairman as president and a local person as member-secretary of each PIC.

But allegations of anomalies, including forming those solely with a section of the ruling party men, arose after formation of the PICs in different upazilas of Sunamganj district.

Protesting irregularities in the embankment work and 'syndicated looting' of money in the name of PICs, locals held a rally at Jamalganj upazila headquarters on March 3.

Upazila Chairman Yusuf Al-Azad addressed as chief guest at the rally presided over by freedom fighter Nurul Islam.

"Only 40 per cent works has so far been done in my upazila," the upazila chairman said.

Meanwhile, vast areas including Chaptir Haor, Tangnir Haor and Boram Haor in Derai and Pagnar Haor and Halir Haor in Jamalganj and Nolar Haor in Jagonnathpur upazila have remained unprotected.

Contacted, Sunamganj WDB Executive Engineer Shailen Chandra Das said, "There were proposals for Tk 55 crore for repairing 450 kilometre-long embankments but only Tk 20 crore was sanctioned. And so, we had to take 221 kilometre-long embankment reconstruction projects to protect the crops inside different haors."

He claimed that in some areas 70 per cent of the work had been finished.

Admitting disturbance in formation of the PICs in some areas, he said delay in placement of funds also caused delay in starting works.



PHOTO: STAR
Cyclone Aila affected people of Kamarkhola and Sutarkhali unions in Dakope upazila of Khulna in a long queue collecting water from Sadar upazila due to persisting crisis of fresh drinking water in those areas.

Aila affected people still face acute water crisis

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, Khulna

Serious crisis of safe drinking water is causing intestinal diseases like diarrhoea and dysentery in the Aila-affected Dakope upazila of Khulna district.

According to officials, sources of safe drinking water from canals and ponds in the area were badly polluted following collapse of the embankments due to onslaught of cyclone Aila on May 25 in 2009. Saline water from the coastal rivers entered the villages, especially in Kamarkhola and Sutarkhali unions under Dakope upazila worsening the situation.

"There is no source of pure drinking water in the Aila-affected areas of the upazila. People are contacting diarrhoeal diseases due to drinking saline water from rivers," said Dakope Upazila Medical Officer Dr SM Akbar Hossain.

The medical team formed after the onslaught of Aila to provide medical services is not functioning at present due to lack of manpower, he said.

Diarrhoeal disease is gradually spreading to different villages as people are drinking

saline water to quench their thirst, said day labourers Sobhan Gazi, Elahi Bux, Mandar Mandol and Bhabotosh Roy of Gunari village in Sutarkhali union.

"My four-year-old son Rajib is suffering from diarrhoea. He shows no sign of improvement as I cannot arrange good treatment for him," said Sobhan Gazi.

The situation will take an alarming turn if government and non-government organisations do not come forward to supply safe drinking water without any further delay, said Mandar Mandol and Bhabotosh Roy of Kamarkhola union.

"The project for supplying safe drinking water to Kamarkhola and Sutarkhali unions undertaken by the Department of Public Health Engineering last year has remained suspended," said Dakope Upazila Nirbahi Officer Daulatuzzaman.

"I have asked for approval of the higher authorities to resume implementation of the project to solve serious crisis of safe drinking water in the area, especially during this dry season," he said.



PHOTO: STAR

This embankment at Matiarkhara in Derai upazila of Sunamganj district has remained incomplete, quite a few days after the expiry of February 28 original deadline. Most of the embankments meant for protecting boro crop in haor areas of the district still remains in similar conditions, leaving the region's only crop of the year vulnerable to damage during floods.

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