



DHAKA, THURSDAY, APRIL 21, 2011, E-MAIL: business@thedailystar.net

Districts in Focus

A hub of cargo handling

Ages-old Majhirghat-Sadarghat in Chittagong supplies goods to parts of Bangladesh

ARUN BIKASH DEY, Chittagong

MAJHIRGHAT-Sadarghat, a hub of cargo handling in Chittagong, is the first joint in a long supply chain across the country. Lighter ships take delivery of bulk cargo from mother vessels to unload at quays, for onward dispatch to parts of the country by road and rail.

The Majhirghat-Sadarghat area has a long history of loading and unloading activities, dating back to the seventh and eighth centuries, when foreign ships used to anchor at Sadarghat.

The Portuguese, Dutch, Arab and Yemeni traders used to come with their ships to Chittagong. At the time, there was only one main quay in the area: Sadarghat. During the Pakistani rule, five quays were built. The rest of the quays were built gradually after independence. There are 18 quays in the area.

Grains, fertiliser and cement clinkers are loaded and unloaded at these quays - each having at least one warehouse. Importers select a co-called commission agent to load and unload goods in an area where at least 45 of them work. N Rahman Enterprise, Mamun Enterprise, Kabir Enterprise, Ali Enterprise and Sabbir Trading are prominent among them. The agents bear all responsibilities of loading, unloading and storing goods in warehouses.

Niazur Rahman, proprietor of N Rahman Enterprise and vice-president of Chittagong Contractors-Commission Agents Association, said 42 members are listed with their association and another five or six contractors function at these quays. He said 20 warehouses are situated in Majhirghat-Sadarghat area.

About 13,000 people are directly involved in cargo handling, said Kazi Mahbul Hoque Chowdhury Eteley, advisor to the Ghat Labourers'



ANURUP KANTI DAS

Quays at Majhirghat-Sadarghat are abuzz with activity, providing a lifeline to imports in Bangladesh.

Association. About 2,000 quay labourers work in the area, he added.

About 700 lighter ships are busy loading and unloading goods at the quays, with 15 labourers working in each on average, Eteley said. About 10,500 labourers are working in these ships.

SM Ishaq, president of Majhirghat-Sadarghat Truck Owners' Association, said some 600 local trucks and 100 inter-district trucks are engaged in quay activities.

Loading and unloading activities used to be carried out on a head-load basis even five years back. Since 2005, these tasks are being performed by

cranes, said Eteley.

A lighter ship now takes three days to load and unload goods at the quays on average, Eteley added. It used to take five to seven days before 2005.

About 170 lighter ships are loaded or unloaded every month at the 17 quays, as one quay, the Bandaira Ghat, has been abandoned due to a reduction in the navigational facilities of the Karnaphuli.

Some big importers -- Nurjahan Group, S Alam Group, Abul Khair Group, Aman Group, Meghna Group, PHP Group and TK Group -- use the quays.

There are 10 passenger quays in the area as well. In the

past, people used to board ships at these quays to travel to Burma for trading and business. Now, the passenger quays are mainly used to commute between different domestic destinations.

Khalil Majhi, a senior leader of Ghat Contractors' Association, said Karnaphuli quay is the biggest among the other quays. According to him, the quay (both 1 and 2) is about 400-foot-long. The Assam-Bengal quay is about 250-foot-long, Chanbali quay 200 feet and Homeland 110 feet, he added.

But most importers, except for those from Chittagong, are losing interest in using the

quays nowadays for several reasons, including rising truck fares.

Following construction of quays in other parts of Bangladesh, such as Baghabari, Munshiganj, Jhalakathi, Meghnaghat, Khulna, Begunbari, Nagarbari, Ashuganj, Bhairab and Barisal, importers from areas outside Chittagong find it profitable to take goods to the regional quays by lighter ships instead of transporting goods by ship and truck.

Spiralling labour cost is another reason. A labourer earns Tk 2,000 a day now, which was Tk 200 five years back, Niazur Rahman said.



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Cranes assist workers in loading and unloading goods at the Majhirghat-Sadarghat area.

Build infrastructure for fast quay-work

BSM Group chairman makes a series of recommendations for an upgrade in services

Arun Bikash Dey, Chittagong

INFRASTRUCTURE in the Majhirghat-Sadarghat area is not developing in line with rising import volumes, said Abul Bashar Chowdhury, chairman of BSM Group. Chowdhury speaks to The Daily Star in an interview on daily business in the cargo handling hub.

He has been using the quays in the area to import goods for over 25 years now.

The volume of goods imported has increased 10 times in the last 20 years, but quay facilities have not improved, he said.

"In 1992, when we began importing food stuff in bulk for the first time, import volume through the private sector was about six lakh tonnes. It has now risen to about 60 lakh to 70 lakh tonnes."

Of total imports, 20 lakh tonnes of goods are unloaded in the 17 quays in the Majhirghat-Sadarghat area, Bashar said.

According to him, the quays then were more active than today. Since the volumes imported were not much, they could use the quays swiftly.

In the coming days, the importance of the Majhirghat-Sadarghat area will only grow, as import volumes are increasing day by day, said Bashar.

So the government should pay more attention to develop infrastructure at these quays and encourage private entrepreneurs to build more quays in the area, he added.

On frequent unrest at the quays, Bashar said these situations arose when there was a lack of leadership. Moreover, a lack of co-ordination among the different concerned organisations is liable for unrest too, he added.

It is necessary to build new quays as ships at the outer anchor have to wait in queue to unload goods. Lights and other facilities should be installed. Here, the government has to come forward to build infrastructure. Everywhere in the world, businessmen do business and governments take care of infrastructure.

The city corporation, Chittagong Development Authority (CDA), Chittagong Port Authority (CPA), Bangladesh Railway (BR) and other concerned organisations should sit together to plan ways to increase the capacity of the private quays, Bashar said.

Moreover, the government should form rules to benefit the quay-labourers, so that no one can capitalise on any weak situation and consequently, the labourers get well-paid, he added.

Everything should be brought

under a system, he said.

Admitting the role of some importers in creating unrest at different times, Bashar said some importers sell more delivery orders (DO) than they import. So, when the DO holders rush to the quay and bribe the labourers into unloading goods faster than others, it creates a restive situation.

On the unrest on April 6-8, he said the situation stemmed from kick-backs. He said the importer sold more DOs than the imported volume. When the DO holders came to know it, they rushed to the quay and offered bribes to the labourers to fast-track the offloading of their goods before the goods ran short, he added.

"I would like to emphasise the need for reconciliation among the different concerned organisations and government agencies, to keep quay activities running," Bashar said, adding that the cost of goods increases by Tk 1 to Tk 1.5 a kilogram for quay mismanagement.

Importers and others concerned should follow business ethics for the greater interest of the consumers, he said.

"If the cost of goods increases by Tk 1 for a kilogram, then the cost goes up by Tk 500 crore for 50 lakh tonnes and a maximum of the money is spent as fare for foreign ships," Bashar said, adding that if the government devel-



Abul Bashar Chowdhury

ops infrastructure with the money and provides good management practices, the money could have been saved.

The government could get back its investment by imposing tolls and the money would remain in the country, he said.

Bashar said the Majhirghat-

Sadarghat region is vital to imports. Although several quays have been constructed in other parts of the country, it is still undoubtedly the main hub for the country's import sector in private entrepreneurship, he added.

"So the government should think about infrastructure and good management development."

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