

Brick fields fined, owners jailed

STAR REPORT

A mobile court has awarded sentences to four persons including three brick kiln owners on charge of preparing bricks by burning wood in their illegally setup kilns in Sadar upazila of Bagerhat yesterday, reports our Bagerhat correspondent.

The convicted are-- brick kiln owners Delwar Sheikh, 35, Humayun Kabir, 25, Mosharraf Hossain, 35, and Jabbar Sheikh, 55, a worker of another brick kiln.

The mobile court raided eight brick kilns, closed those and seized 2620 maunds of fuel wood and about 50 thousand bricks from there.

A mobile court led by Executive Magistrate Mehedi Hassan raided the brick kilns at Pashchimbhag village of Sadar upazila.

Mehedi said that the convicted have been given jail sentences of different terms and fined as per article 7 of Brick Burning Control Act 1989.

There are more than 300 brick kilns in Sadar and Morelganj upazilas of Bagerhat and they will continue their drive, he added.

Meanwhile, in another drive Department of Environment (DoE) yesterday destroyed four illegal brickfields in Mymensingh and fined them a total of Tk 13.5 lakh for polluting the environment.

DoE also seized seven lakh bricks and about one metric ton firewood from them, said a press release.

The drive, led by DoE Director Mohammad Munir Chowdhury, continued for around six hours from 9:00am.

The brickfields are Ratan Brick, Siyan Bricks, Nur Bricks and HRB Bricks, all situated in Barera under Mymensingh upazila.

These brickfields, between 5-20 years old, caused serious damage to agricultural land, biodiversity and nearby residents.

Demands of locals went unheard, as the brickfield owners were influential, the release said.

Police, Rapid Action Battalion and local office of the environment department also took part in the drive.

Quader turns

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cabinet earlier this month, in the statement, mentioned every belonging he and his family own and submitted it to Sheikh Hasina on Monday, the sources added.

However, it could not be confirmed whether the statement would be made public or not.

Asked about it, Quader declined to comment.

Finance Minister AMA Muhith is the only minister who made his wealth statement public on September 5 last year. According to the statement, Muhith has net assets of Tk 1.27 crore and paid Tk 19,130 in tax against his income of Tk 3,49,496.

Student abducted

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Victim's elder brother Faruk Hossain Shawon recognised the body.

Talking to The Daily Star, Abdul Kader, father of the victim, said first the abductors demanded Tk 30 lakh; but later they claimed Tk 20 lakh. They told Kader to go to Binodia Park at Jessore with the ransom.

But as he told them that he could at best pay Tk 30,000, the abductors did not phone him again. Kader also informed the police and Rab about the abduction but they could not find Shahed.

Jhenidah Superintendent of Police Rezaul Karim claimed that it was not a matter of abduction. "It might have happened for three reasons -- land conflict, quarrel with his friends or love affair."

Police have arrested two suspects in this regard. They are Partho and Tarun of the same area, he said.

On December 19, the body of a ten-year-old girl, Shrabanti, was found tied in a sack under the bridge of Jhenidah town. She was also reportedly abducted for ransom.

Brick fields flout

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Many brick-fields still collect wood from forests but whenever they get caught they say the wood is meant only for lighting kilns.

Mohammad Joinul Bari, deputy commissioner of Cox's Bazar, told The Daily Star that they have been monitoring all brick-fields in the area. If any of those is found using wood illegally, its licence will be cancelled.

"We are not renewing or issuing licences for brick-fields as the government has decided to shut all conventional brick-fields by 2013," he said in his office last week.

Brick business boomed in the tourist destination with a rise in construction of hotels, cottages and apartments near the beach and in the town.

There are at least 49 kilns, including 29 in Ramu upazila, in Cox's Bazar.

According to a UNDP survey, these brick-fields produced nearly 14.70 crore bricks in 2010-11, causing air pollution, land degradation and deforestation in the district.

Some of the brick-fields have been using the topsoil for producing bricks turning vast tracts of land infertile. Once topsoil is taken away from a land, no crop can be grown there for several years, said farmers.

People living close to brick-fields complained of health hazards. "Children are the worst sufferers from harmful black fumes emitted by kilns," said Neyamat Ali, an elderly resident in Rupulia village.

According to Bangladesh Brick Makers Owners' Association, nearly 8,000 brick-fields -- over half of them illegal -- are in operation in the country. They produce about 8.66 billion bricks with an estimated value of \$450 million a year.

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) says these brick-fields still use 150-year-old

method, which causes huge carbon emission and is highly energy intensive.

About 33 percent of the fuel used for the kilns comes from trees. The ratio is 100 percent in some areas in Cox's Bazar that face serious environmental and health hazards, and destruction of farmland and forest.

The UNDP launched a \$14 million project in August last year to find an energy-efficient technology for the brick industry, help update laws and rules on brick production, and create awareness among people about the adverse impact of conventional brick kilns.

Global Environment Facility is contributing \$3 million to the project and the rest will come from the private sector.

As part of the project, the UNDP on December 13 organised a views-exchange meeting on brick-fields and their impact in Cox's Bazar. Amanullah bin Mahmud, monitoring official of Green Brick Project, presented a keynote paper.

Fifteen demonstration projects will be implemented across the country with the use of energy-efficient Hybrid Hoffman Kiln method, Project Manager Khondker Neaz Rahman said in his introductory speech.

"Apart from creating awareness, we will inspire financial institutions to fund energy-efficient brick-fields," said Amanullah.

He said an institution will be set up under the project for giving technical assistance to workers to make them familiar with the new technology.

Students, teachers, environmentalists and brick-field owners were also present there.

"We will adopt the new technology for producing bricks but we need financial incentives for that," said Gias Uddin, a brick-field owner.

President's talks

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joining the talks. The Bangabhaban, the president's office and residence, decided not to invite Jamaat-e-Islami to the talks for its anti-liberation role in 1971. The party's top leaders are detained in connection with crimes against humanity.

"Restoration of the caretaker government is now the top agenda of BNP. So, we want this issue to be resolved first and we are ready to hold talks with the government in this regard," said Lt Gen (ret) Mahabubur Rahman, a member of BNP's national standing committee.

"In the name of holding talks, the government is using the presidency for its own political gains. The talks will not be successful," he said, terming the dialogues eye-wash.

If the BNP finally boycotts the talks, possibility of forging a consensus on the formation of the new Election Commission will be very slim.

Like some political analysts, outgoing Chief Election Commissioner ATM Shamsul Huda on Tuesday also expressed his doubt about the success of the talks which were suddenly initiated by the president. All signs now suggest that political weather will be stormy in the coming days.

Meanwhile, ruling Awami League acting General Secretary Mahabubul Alam Hanif said the president made the move to constitute an Election Commission acceptable to all and all parties should join the talks. "For the first time in the country's history, the president made such a move," he said.

Asked about BNP's possible boycott, Hanif, also special assistant to the prime minister, said, "They [BNP] will lose the opportunity to make their opinion on the formation of the new Election Commission count, if they boycott the talks."

The Bangabhaban announced on December 18 that the president will begin the talks with political parties from December 22. It followed by sending invitations to Jatiya Party and Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal. On Tuesday it also sent invitation letters to six other political parties for talks in the coming week.

"We will send invitations

to other political parties gradually in the next week," president's Press Secretary AKM Nesar Uddin Bhuiyan told The Daily Star yesterday. According to him, the ruling Awami League and main opposition BNP will get invitations in the next week. He said 20 political parties will be invited to the talks.

Joining the talks, some political parties may propose enacting a law in line with the outgoing Election Commission's proposal that would require formation of an independent search committee whose job would be to find the right people for the commission.

The outgoing commission was also of the opinion that a law should be enacted with a provision for parliamentary scrutiny in choosing a new Election Commission.

Talking to The Daily Star yesterday, Workers Party's chief Rashed Khan Menon said his party supports the talks for forming the commission. Joining the talks "we will advocate the Election Commission's proposals," he said.

Ruhul Amin Hawlader, secretary general of Jatiya Party, said they will hear the president first and then give their opinions. "If the president seeks names of individuals for the post of chief election commissioner and other commissioners, we may propose so," he said.

After the talks, the president, on the advice of the prime minister, will appoint a new commission chief and other commissioners to form the new Election Commission that will conduct the all-important next parliamentary election slated to be held anytime in January, 2014.

However, the invitation letters signed by secretary to the public division of Bangabhaban, Mohammad Shafiqul Alam, said the president himself wants to make the final decision after talking to the political parties.

Zillur's predecessor Iajuddin Ahmed in October, 2006, opened a series of talks with political parties in the wake of a political stalemate over the appointment of the chief adviser to the caretaker government.

4 to die

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body was recovered from a flat in West Shewrapara ten days later.

After the sentencing, victim's brother Mohammad Shoaib, also complainant of the case, said he was satisfied with the verdict and called on the government to execute it immediately.

The men awarded death penalty are Abdur Rahim Sarder, Kazi Baezid, Ikram alias Masud and Murad Hossain. Mohammad Nazimuddin was sentenced to life term in jail.

Masud and Murad remain absconding while the others are in jail.

Judge Motahar Hossain of the Speedy Trial Tribunal-4 handed down the verdict in a packed courtroom yesterday.

He said the sentences of the fugitives will be effective from the day of their arrest or surrender. The death penalty convicts have 30 days from the day of receipt of the judgment copy in which to appeal to the High Court.

The verdict followed the cross-examination of 22 prosecution witnesses. It was found that Abdur Rahim had a dispute with Imam Ishaque over a salt factory. He along with Kazi Baezid sent Masud and Murad, residents in Malaysia, to Bangladesh to kill the imam.

Maulana Ishaque went missing after Zohr prayers on December 20. His hands and legs were in shackles and mouth sealed with scotch tape when police recovered his body on Dec 30.

During the investigation, Kazi Baezid confessed to the murder and disclosed the names of the others involved.

3 Dhaka rivers

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Abul Bashar Mohammad Fakhruzzaman, upazila nirbahi officer of Keraniganj, admitted that the structures recommended for exclusion were in the river as per CS records.

But those structures are now on private land as per RS and settlement records, he mentioned adding, the district administration has leased out shore areas of rivers to private individuals as the rivers changed course.

This has ultimately shrunk the rivers to a large extent.

Md Mohibul Haque, deputy commissioner of Dhaka, however, claimed that they have saved foreshores -- the soil lying between low-water mark and high-water mark of normal tide during dry season and monsoon.

The district authorities will set up 8,067 boundary pillars along the 198 kilometre banks of 99-kilometre long river stretching mainly from Pagla to Ashulia at an estimated cost of Tk 15 crore.

Md Rezaul Karim Hira, land minister, Abdur Mannan Khan, state minister for housing and public works, Qamrul Islam, state minister for law, Noor-e-Alam Chowdhury, chairman of the parliamentary standing committee on shipping ministry, local lawmaker Nasrul Hamid Bipu, Sanjida Khanom MP, and Md Shamsuddoha Khondker, chairman of BIWTA, attended the programme.

Mirpur slums

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for low and medium income people.

A total of 832 flats on 7.50 acres of land will be built under the Tk 248 crore Anandanagar Residential Flat Construction Project in Mirpur.

The HC in its order said the housing authority would not take any steps to evict the slum dwellers nor would they try to begin construction of the project before January 31.

Khurshid Alam Khan, counsel for the petitioners, told The Daily Star that as many as 15,000,000 people are living in the slums.

Abdus Salam and Abdul Jabbar, two slum dwellers, filed separate writ petitions on Tuesday challenging the legality of the notice.

Avacation bench of the HC comprised of Justice Mirza Hussain Haider and Justice Mojibur Rahman Miah came up with the order after disposing of the petitions.

Deputy attorney generals Razik Al Jalil and Al Amin Sarker represented the government.

Cold batters life

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remained stranded at Paturia ghat while four others at Daulatdia. At least 350 vehicles including buses and trucks lined up at Daulatdia side around 10:00am yesterday, while some 400 at Paturia, officials said.

In Pabna's Chatmohar upazila, at least three people died on Tuesday. They are Sana Mohuri, 65, Abu Jafar, 60, and Abul Hossain, 70.

Parshadanga Union Parishad member Md Asaduzzaman said Sana and Jafar died at their residences early Tuesday due to breathing problem while Abul Hossain died at his house Tuesday night owing to cold-related suffering.

In Gopalganj, sixty-five year-old Amena Begum of Kotalipara upazila died on Wednesday as she fell seriously ill due to severe cold. She died hours after receiving primary aid at her residence the same day, said Manik Hawlader, chairman of Bandhabari union.

Meanwhile, Md Kari, 55, who was suffering from serious cold-related complications, died at Muksudpur Upazila Health Complex with deteriorating condition on Tuesday night.

In Madaripur, at least

three people died in the last three days. Family sources said Jagadish Mondol, 35, died on Monday while Mahadeb Das, 45, and a 40-year-old unidentified woman Tuesday night in Rajoir upazila.

In Barisal, nine children died after being attacked by pneumonia, diarrhoea, skin and other cold-related diseases in the last five days all at Sher-e-Bangla Medical College Hospital (SBMCH).

Of the deceased, four died on December 16, one each on December 17 and 18 and 20, two on December 19 at the hospital's children ward. More than 150 children have been admitted to the hospital with the fall in temperature, SBMCH and district civil surgeon office sources said.

Biting cold, excessive dust and pollen are the main reasons behind the spread of the diseases, said Dr Abdur Rashid, director of SBMCH.

The air is carrying much dust due to lack of rain and increasing pollen in the air this season. For this, people are facing general respiratory problems and allergic infections, said medical officers at Barisal Tuberculosis Hospital.

7pc growth

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already crossed double digit.

According to Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS), the inflation crossed double digit in March this year while it was around 11.5 percent in the last two months.

Muhith claimed that the government had to go for excessive bank borrowing this year as prices of electricity and fuel were not adjusted timely.

Inadequate utilisation of foreign fund also led to a high bank borrowing, he said, adding, "A lot of aid was negotiated, but not utilised."

Between July 1 and November 17 this year, the government borrowed Tk 18,986 crore from banks, which is Tk 29 crore more than the current fiscal year's borrowing target of Tk 18,957 crore, according to

Bangladesh Bank.

In the current FY, the budgetary allocation for subsidy is Tk 20,477 crore. But different ministries demanded Tk 46,000 crore, finance ministry sources said.

Of them, the Power Development Board sought Tk 10,000 crore while the Bangladesh Petroleum Corporation Tk 16,700 crore.

The minister also defended production of electricity and import of petroleum products, including furnace oil, at higher costs, saying they would boost industrial growth.

Electricity is one of the elements that were bringing the economy down, he said, and added that the government had been purchasing electricity from rental power plants temporarily.

Contract suspended

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the firm, he said all he wanted was to resume the work, which felt more important to him.

However, at 8:39pm Quader called The Daily Star over the phone and said he had cancelled his afternoon's decision.

"I did not know about the history behind the cancellation of the deal in the first place until you [The Daily Star] contacted me. I have contacted the chief engineer, the project director and ministry officials and come to know about the background of the case. Now the work will remain stopped until the legal issue is settled," said the communication minister.

"I have directed the ministry to convey the message to Intraco right now [last night]. Thanks to The Daily Star for its repeated enquiry, as it helped me avoid many legal complications," said Quader, also a member of the Awami League praesidium.

Responding to another query, he said actions will be taken against Intraco if investigation reveals any of its wrong doing. Even the Anti-Corruption Commission may investigate the matter if it wishes to, he added.

The Daily Star tried to talk to the Intraco officials but could not reach them over the phone.

BACKGROUND The Awami League government in its electoral manifesto pledged to upgrade the Dhaka-Mymensingh highway into four lanes and accordingly took a Tk 904-crore project in 2010.

On January 27 this year, former chief engineer Shahab Uddin of Roads and Highways Department (RHD) and Sheikh Babar Ali of Intraco signed a Tk 330-crore deal to upgrade the 30km road from Joydevpur

to Mawna in two packages.

The deal was signed following recommendations of a six-member tender evaluation committee (Tec) headed by RHD Additional Chief Engineer Aminur Rahman Laskar. Intraco was handed over the sites on April 6 this year.

However, in the middle of the evaluation, Tec received a complaint against Intraco that it had forged documents on the joint venture partnership with Chinese firm Hebei Road and Bridge Group Company (HRBC) Ltd.

The Tec took the allegation into consideration but found that the name and address the complainant used were fake.

Anyhow, Tec communicated with HRBC head office in China which confirmed that the joint venture with Intraco was genuine, says the evaluation report of Tec.

"We did it to make the evaluation process transparent and accurate," a Tec member had told The Daily Star earlier.

Meanwhile, all of a sudden Firoz Iqbal, PD of the Joydevpur-Mymensingh 4-lane project, on May 25 wrote to HRBC that their work had not been satisfactory. He asked them to mobilise a team and expedite the work.

In reply, the Chinese firm on May 31 emailed the head of Tec, not the PD, saying that the joint venture partnership claimed by Intraco was forged.

Prof Dr Zahid Hossain, child specialist and former principal of SBMCH, said many mothers these days refrain from bathing their children for several days, which is unhygienic and may cause various skin diseases.

About the asthma patients, physicians observed that most of them do not continue the full course of medicine which causes serious infection and breathing problem with the change in season and in winter they suffer most, said Dr ANM Khairul Anam, divisional health director.

In Jessore, at least 22 people -- including 10 children, five women and seven men -- died from cold-related diseases in a week, our Benapole correspondent reported.

Captain Zubayer Hossain, in charge of Jessore Airport Weather office, said the cold is intensified by the almost-invisible sun amid dense fog. The temperature continued 9-12 degree Celsius on an average in the district.

The situation forces people to stay indoors disrupting normal life and businesses in the district.

"You must have the dual fuel system because we have the problem of gas," he added.

Saying that the investment rate in the country has remained static at 24 percent of the GDP for over a decade, the finance minister said it was still too low.

"The flow of investment is extremely low at a time when we're planning to achieve seven percent economic growth."

He suggested using more foreign resources and mobilising domestic resources for achieving the projected growth.

Presiding over the occasion, TN Srinivasan, chairman of SANEI Research Advisory Panel, said subsidy in South Asia is nothing new, but the problem is that a big chunk of it was not justified.

ments. On return, the duo confirmed that the documents were not genuine.

Sources in the communications ministry said Intraco was so desperate to obtain a big project that they quoted an amount 19 percent less than the estimated cost.

Four local firms, all having joint venture agreements with three Chinese companies, got the four-package upgrading work of the highway. Of them, Intraco got first two packages (Joydevpur-Rajendrapur and Rajendrapur-Mawna).

A joint venture of Project Builders Ltd and Major Bridge Engineer Company of China got the Tk 388-crore package-3 to upgrade 30-kilometre road from Mawna to Raimoni.

The Tk 266-crore package-4, upgrading work of 27 km Raimoni-Mymensingh road, was awarded to Shamim Enterprise Limited and Toma, who have joint venture with Metallurgical Construction Overseas Company of China (MCCC).

The work between Mawna and Mymensingh is going on in full swing. The contractors are now filling both sides of the highway and constructing bridges and culverts.

Power tariff

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regulator increased the average retail electricity tariff by five percent to Tk 4.20 per unit.

Bulk power price was increased by 16.79 percent to Tk 3.27 a unit on December 1. It will again go up by 14.37 percent to Tk 3.74 a unit from February 1 next year, Yusuf announced on November 24.

The tariff hike at end-customer level is normally around 60 percent of the increase at bulk level, BERC Member Salim Mahmud said.

Websites

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and obscene and if it threatens to smear the image of the country, the sites will definitely be closed down," he said at a BBC-Bangla dialogue titled "Freedom of information in the internet age."

He referred to some recent but unspecified incidents of photographs demeaning some people on the social networking site Facebook that, as he claimed, conveyed a wrong message about the country to the international community.

BBC-Bangla and Channel-i jointly organised the dialogue at BIAM foundation in the capital to mark the 40th anniversary of the liberation of Bangladesh and the 70th anniversary of BBC Bangla service, a Bangla radio service of the British Broadcasting Corporation.

Channel-i will telecast the dialogue at 7:50pm today. The dialogue will also be broadcast on BBC Bangla radio at 8:00pm on Saturday.

"Closing down a website happens to be the biggest advertisement for a website. People are the best judge to decide whether the information is to be consumed or not. People consciously refuse to accept obscene and vulgar contents on their own," said Abu Saeed Khan, secretary general of the Association of Mobile Telecom Operators of Bangladesh.

The dialogue also focused on issues which confused the concept of freedom or free flow of information with the concept of national security.

Many among the 200 audience alleged that flow of information had often been blocked on the pretext of national security. They also questioned the government decisions of shutting down Facebook temporarily, and closing down two television channels -- Channel-1 and Jamuna.

Replying to a query from the audience on the draft broadcasting policy, Imam said no policy curtailing the freedom of media would be enforced.

Reazuddin Ahmed, editor of News Today, supported blocking information that compromised national security, but suggested that the scope necessary for people coming by information not be abused.

Moderated by Sabir Mustafa, editor of BBC Bangla, the dialogue was also attended by visual artist Nazia Andalib Prima.

2 arrested

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and managed to reach the halting lounge to get on EK Dubai 585, airport sources said.

Despite repeated attempts, M Wahidur Rahman, chief security officer at the airport, could not be reached for comments on how the duo managed to duck modern security system.

In preliminary interrogation, the arrestees denied their involvement in carrying the currencies.

Saudi riyal, euro and UAE dirham are among the seized currencies worth Tk 4,70,41,785, Golam Mostafa Kamal, superintendent of customs of the airport (shift-c), told The Daily Star yesterday morning.