

Recycling of ancient bricks endangers Mahasthangarh

AFP, Mahasthangarh

When Abdus Sattar built his house in Mahasthangarh village in northern part of the country, he used materials that once laid the foundations of one of the world's oldest and greatest cities.

"I shovelled into the ground and just found these bricks and used them for my new house," said Abdus Sattar, 38, adding, "All three rooms of the house were made of the old bricks we found here in the village."

Mahasthangarh sits on what was once the ancient city of Pundranagar, built 2,500 years ago, whose monasteries attracted monks from China and Tibet and trained them to spread Buddhist teachings across South and East Asia.

The ruins of the once fortified city, which is the oldest archaeological site in what is now Bangladesh, are a major tourist attraction but experts fear there will soon be little left for the visitors to see.

The stripping away of sections of the ruins by residential encroachment and the casual looting of artifacts has threatened to erase the remains of a city that stood for millennia.

In May, the Global Heritage Fund, which promotes the preservation of historic architectural treasures around the world, listed Mahasthangarh among Asia's top 10 most endangered sites facing "irreparable loss and destruction".

After a Bangladesh court handed down an order

against illegal squatters early this year, houses like Sattar's began to be demolished but archaeologists say much of the damage already done is irreversible.

"The villagers destroyed some of the ruins so badly that it is now impossible to say what exactly was on this site," said Shafiqul Alam, former head of the government's archaeology bureau.

"Many of the mounds described in cartographic sources have since disappeared," he said.

Despite the court order the destruction continues and villagers steal antiquities and bricks from the ruins to sell them in the market, he added.

Antiquities found at the site suggest the city was founded sometime in the 4th century BC and came to prominence during the great Mauryan dynasty that ruled over much of the Indian subcontinent until 185 BC.

Its golden period stretched from the 4th to the 7th century when, as part of the Gupta and Pala kingdoms, it was one of the largest cities in the world and a major centre of Buddhist teaching and studies.

The fortified area was still in use as late as the 18th century but its influence had waned and it was eventually abandoned and consumed by the surrounding vegetation.

The site was rediscovered in 1879 by British archaeologist Alexander Cunningham.

Acknowledging that early warning signs of serious degradation of the site were ignored, M. Sadequzzaman, the current chief government

archaeologist at the site, said encroachment began around 50 years ago.

While some 500 houses were built inside the ancient city walls themselves, mostly using excavated materials, numerous villages sprung up in adjoining areas of equally important archaeological interest.

"The houses were built before the authorities could take a serious stand on conservation," Sadequzzaman said. "We were late to wake up. Had we tried to stop this before, we could have saved many valuable artifacts."

Mahasthangarh's modern-day residents, like Sattar, believe they have been unfairly treated and deny that they took over the land illegally.

"My three children were born here," Sattar said pointing to the bulldozed remains of his home.

"If we were illegal encroachers, why did they allow us to build the house in the first place?" he asked.

Sattar said his father purchased the plot from a farmer and argued that scavenging on the site had always been an accepted way of making a living.

"Hundreds of houses were built from these old bricks. We didn't steal them, they are found everywhere here. Everyone does it. Nobody barred us from doing it," he said.

"Families have always picked things like beads, stones and coins that come to the surface after heavy rains. They are like endless resources, they never end," he added.

Khaleda talks to Ilias's family on Eid day
STAFF CORRESPONDENT

BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia on Eid day talked to the family members of missing party leader Ilias Ali over phone and consoled them.

The former prime minister made a phone call to Ilias's mother and wife who were staying at their residence in Biswanath of Sylhet.

Musfiqul Fazal Ansaree, former press secretary to the prime minister, was present at Ilias's home during the phone call.

Contacted, Musfiqul said the chairperson talked to Ilias's mother Surjobanu Bibi, wife Tahsin Rushdina Luna and brother Askir Ali.

During the conversation, Surjobanu burst into tears and said they want Ilias and his driver back unharmed.

BNP central organising secretary Ilias Ali, also president of the party's Sylhet district unit, went missing from the capital on April 17 this year.

Law enforcing agencies have not been able to trace his whereabouts and Ilias's family expressed unhappiness over activities of the agencies.

Dhaka city still in holiday mood

Thin presence at offices

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

A bustling Dhaka city is still to get its usual look though the city dwellers have started returning to the capital after a one-week Eid vacation.

Most of the shopping malls, business centres, schools, colleges and universities did not re-open and may take a few more days to resume activities.

The government, semi-government, and private offices, including banks and financial institutions, opened yesterday but there was a low presence of staff.

The scene was no different in the Dhaka courts as well.

This Eid the weeklong holiday began with National Mourning Day on August 15, followed by the occasion of Shab-e-Qadr and a two-day weekend.

Many others who took a leave of two more days on August 22 and 23 will join their offices on August 26, as Friday and Saturday are weekly holidays.

People's presence at the secretariat, the administrative hub of the country, was also very thin yesterday. More than half of the officers and employees have yet to return.

Festive mood was prevailing at most of the offices. Officials and staff were seen exchanging Eid greetings with colleagues by embracing each other.

There was low traffic on the unusually empty city streets. Unlike the other days, the public buses were running across the capital with a few passengers, as most of the city dwellers are still out of Dhaka.

The amusement parks were packed with visitors as a huge number of city dwellers went there with their family members to spend the holidays.



A worker demolishes a house made with bricks which once laid the foundation of one of the world's oldest and greatest cities in Mahasthangarh. The 2,500 year old city Pundranagar, at its height, was one of the largest cities in the world rich in Buddhist monasteries. Experts say the ruins of the city are in danger of disappearance. The photo was taken last month.

PHOTO: AFP

28 die in Dinajpur hospital during holidays

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Dinajpur

At least 28 patients, including 11 children, died at Dinajpur Medical College and Hospital (DJMCH) during the weeklong vacation.

The vacation, which included National Mourning Day and Eid holiday, started on August 15 and ended Tuesday night.

According to hospital sources, on average at least four persons died every

day in the hospital's different wards during the vacation.

Before the Eid vacation roughly three persons died daily, indicating that the number had gone up during the vacation.

Relatives and family members of patients alleged that the number of deaths had increased due to shortage of doctors and nurses as many of them had gone home to celebrate Eid with their families.

Intern doctors under three specialist doctors and 13 nurses attended to patients of 14 different departments round the clock, hospital sources said.

"There are 36 nurses for the 14 departments but 23 of them were on holiday," said a DJMCH official.

Admitting staff shortage, Md Abu Bakar Shiddique, director of DJMCH, said he formed a special medical team comprising specialists and interns to treat patients during the vacation.

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AUG 21 GRENADE ATTACK Accused BNP leaders are innocent: Rizvi

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

A senior BNP leader yesterday claimed innocence of the party leaders accused in the August 21 grenade attack case and alleged that Awami League (AL) itself had been involved in the incident.

He also said, "The BNP-led four-party alliance government had made the highest effort to identify the attackers in a bid to bring them to trial."

"Local and foreign intelligence agencies were involved in conducting the investigation but the Awami League did not cooperate," BNP Joint Secretary General Ruhul Kabir Rizvi told a press briefing at the party headquarters in the capital.

The briefing was organised to counter the statements of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and LGRD Minister Syed Ashraful Islam who, at a discussion at Bangabandhu Avenue on Tuesday, implicated BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia and Senior Vice Chairman Tarique Rahman in the 2004 attack, which had killed 24 AL leaders.

Rizvi said the military-backed caretaker government had tried its best to find BNP leaders' involvement in the incident to no avail.

"But the present Awami League government has submitted a supplementary charge sheet accusing the BNP leaders, including Tarique Rahman, which is nothing but a part of a conspiracy against BNP leadership."

Asked why the then BNP government tried to implicate one Joj Mia in the attack, Rizvi said it was not a drama.

In 2004, police held a hapless Joj Mia from Noakhali responsible for the attack. The media later exposed that police were paying his needy family monthly in exchange for his posing as an attacker.

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