

SAVING RIVERS

Pillar demarcation for whom?

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PROBIR KUMAR SARKER

ARE the top government officials, specially the public representatives and public servants, all aware of the significance and importance of the four rivers around the mega city Dhaka? Do they have any long-term plans to save these rivers from still unabated encroachment and pollution? "Yes" should be the answer in both the cases. For this is what is supposed to be satisfactory to the people, who want to know that the people's government is not turning a blind eye to the issue.

But did the government take measures to check the water of these rivers from going unusable or the river banks grabbed by unscrupulous businessmen and individuals? Or, are they now sincere in their effort to recover the losses that have already been done to these rivers? Undoubtedly the high-ups of the previous governments and the administrations concerned were not sin-

cere, and unfortunately, the present government, too, is following the path trodden by its ancestors.

Recently, people's frustration deepened when they observed an unexpected conduct of the government officials in demarcating the Dhaka rivers -- Buriganga, Balu, Turag and Shitalakkhya -- to ensure that the encroachers are removed and no potential threats reappear. Demarcation is also ongoing along Dhaleshwari, on the outskirts of the capital.

The task, began last year, is almost done by now under supervision of several government bodies and assisted by law enforcers. But it is now clear in sight that the task has been a total farce. It has rather facilitated the established and ongoing encroachment of the rivers.

Many are frustrated to see that this government too, like the previous ones, has shown reluctance in being tough against the encroachers who can be other way

described as local influential people with political backing and are rich or "investors".

Even though the green groups have been outspoken against this indulgence and have presented evidence to justify their claims, the government officials continue to not admit their wrongdoings, and are trying to justify their stance in different ways.

Ironically, the stance of the officials of all the government agencies and the encroachers is similar -- they all perhaps like the rivers to be narrowed down as if those are useless flows. However, all others, including the green groups, like the opposite.

But it was not supposed to happen when the prime minister has been keen to save the country's rivers, especially those around Dhaka, from encroachment and pollution. Several ministers and top officials of the BIWTA and the Department of Environment (DoE) have echoed with her stance.

Nothing of those statements has been translated into reality as yet.

The green groups and media have recently sought the intervention of the prime minister to this end since the deputy commissioners of Dhaka, Narayanganj,

Fatulla, Narayanganj

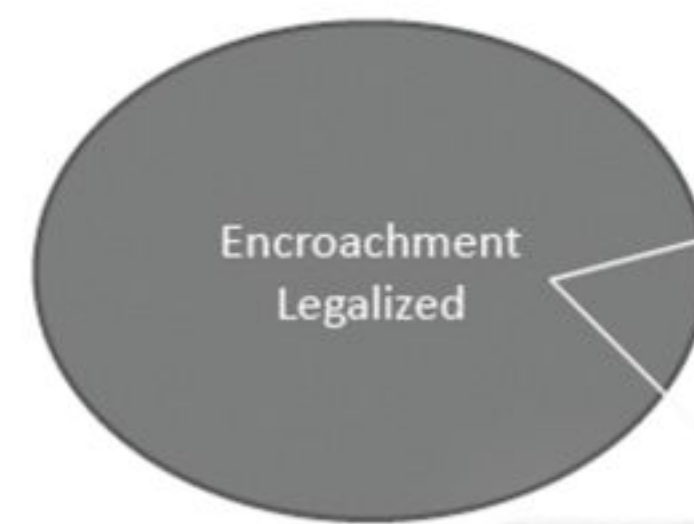


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Pagla, Narayanganj



PHOTO COURTESY: BAPA

Gazipur and Munshiganj are not complying with the order and directives pressed by the High Court at different times, the latest being in 2009.

The HC ordered the four district administrations to follow Cadastral Survey (CS) of 1913, and Revised Survey (RS) of 1983, to ascertain the original positions of the rivers and demarcate those, including foreshores. It also cautioned that deputy commissioners of the districts would be held responsible in person for any negligence in the demarcation work.

But we have seen that the government officials in collusion with grabbers and under influence of political quarters demarcated the rivers in intentional wrong width. In most places, the boundary pillars have been pitched close to the water and even in the middle of the rivers. The situation is worse in Narayanganj area where the HC directives have been totally flouted.

Even though the pillars were supposed to be set up considering the water level of rainy season, the authorities concerned did the opposite. It evidently awarded the unscrupulous individuals and influential people to establish their grip on the encroached lands and foreshores. If the

pillars are approved by the authorities, other greedy people across the country will also take the advantage of lax execution of laws and follow suit. This is unacceptable.

Meanwhile, the taskforce working on the rivers several months back formed review committees -- headed by the deputy commissioners -- to monitor the demarcation activity. The taskforce seems to be a mockery of HC directive as for negligence or malpractice in the demarcation work, it is the deputy commissioners who will be responsible! Then how these review committees can ensure justice?

It seems that these destructive activities against the rivers, as well as the environment as a whole, would continue with the (unofficial) assistance from the government officials who are supposed to be against the violators of the laws.

Yes, this is what frustrates most people while inspires some to join the evil's team since impunity would be awarded to "investors" and who knows even laws may be revised to let them continue destruction, in the name of doing business! But should it happen this way?

The writer is a journalist.

Where have the vultures gone?

In 2006, the governments of India, Pakistan and Nepal introduced a ban on the manufacture of diclofenac and pharmaceutical firms are now encouraged to promote an alternative drug, meloxicam, which is proven to be safe for vultures. Recently Bangladesh also formally banned this drug. But it is still sold by pharmacies illegally to treat cattle.

SOURAV MAHMUD

AT the very beginning of the month (September 1) we also observed the International Vulture Awareness Day, along with others across the world. But to what effectiveness, is yet to be judged. The vulture is a big size bird of prey and also referred to as important scavenger. Previously, it was a commonly sighted and well-known bird in our country. But at present, it is not seen usually in locality dump sites with the exception of the zoo and some remote parts of the country. Vulture is a strong-bird that feeds on carrion. They have broad wings, riding on which they soar high while looking down for carrion. They have no feathers on head or neck, for which they look bit ugly, but are very gentle and simply harmless.

Bangladesh ornithology counted about seven species of vultures. They are Egyptian vulture, White-rumped vulture, Griffon vulture, Himalayan vulture, Slender-billed vulture, Cinereous vulture and Red-headed vulture. Egyptian vulture, Griffon vulture, Himalayan vulture, Cinereous vulture are vagrant to Bangladesh. Only two species -- White-rumped vulture and Slender-billed vulture -- are resident to Bangladesh while Red-headed vulture is extinct in the wild.

If someone would ask about the status of White-rumped vulture (Gyps bengalensis) in Bangladesh, the confident answerer would be it is 99% declined and one percent surviving and the number is 800 (M.H. Khan). During my childhood in early 1992, I used to see hundreds of vultures at my village Hobinagar, Shaiestabad,

Barisal along the river Arial Khan and Kirtonkhola. After that in 2008 I saw a pair of vultures on way to Tanguar Haor and lastly at Dumuria of Khulna in 2010 a group of 21 white-rumped vultures.

What's really happened to vultures? Poaching, habitat loss, lack of food or any environmental change are not all the real causes for vanishing of vultures. The most important cause of their disappearance is the veterinary use of pharmaceutical diclofenac, a widely used painkiller and anti-inflammatory drug administered to livestock and humans. Research on decline of vulture population in Pakistan by the Peregrine Fund, who joined forces with Washington State University and the Ornithological Society of Pakistan (OSP), has shown that the diclofenac can cause mortality in vultures. If a vulture feeds on a carcass which still contains diclofenac then it causes kidney failure of the vulture and in most cases it dies within 24-48 hours. By mid-2000, Gyps vultures were being found dead and dying in Nepal, Pakistan, and throughout India. The anti-inflammatory veterinary drug diclofenac, used to treat domestic livestock, identified as the cause of mortality, with renal failure resulting in visceral gout in the vast majority of examined vultures.

Gyps bengalensis occurs in Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and southern Vietnam, and may be extinct in southern China and Malaysia (BirdLife International 2001). It disappeared from most of South-East Asia in the early 20th century and the only viable populations in the region are found in Myanmar and

Cambodia, mainly in the north (probably in low hundreds). This species qualifies as Critically Endangered because it has suffered an extremely rapid population decline primarily as a result of feeding on carcasses of animals treated with diclofenac. It occurs mostly in plains and less frequently in hilly regions where it utilizes light woodland, villages, cities, and opens areas. It feeds on carrion, both

for each participating organization to carry out their own activities that highlight vulture conservation and awareness.

According to BirdLife International, in 2006, the governments of India, Pakistan and Nepal introduced a ban on the manufacture of diclofenac and pharmaceutical firms are now encouraged to promote an alternative drug, meloxicam, which is proven to be safe for vultures. Recently Bangladesh also for-

in Nobigonj, Habigonj, a group of 20-30 at Dumurai, Khulna and a smaller group of 5-10 in Mymensingh. More than 97 per cent of vultures have disappeared from this region's skies in the past 15 years -- the fastest decline ever recorded in a bird population anywhere in the world. Only about 10,000 still exist in the wild in the sub-continent, down from millions in the 1980s.

Vultures also play a key role in the wider



21 White-rumped vultures at Dumuria, near Khulna city, 2010

PHOTO: NAIMUL ISLAM

putrid and fresh. While feeding considerable aggregations can form, and regular communal roost sites are used. It is social and usually found in flocks. It breeds in colonies on tall trees, often near human habitation.

The International Vulture Awareness Day has grown from Vulture Awareness Days run by the Birds of Prey Programme in South Africa and the Hawk Conservancy Trust in England, who decided to work together and expand the initiative into an international event. On September 1st 2012, the aim was

mally banned this drug. But it is still sold by pharmacies illegally to treat cattle.

Populations of three species of vultures have declined by more than 95 per cent in the last 10 years across the Indian subcontinent. The White-rumped vulture was once considered comparatively common and widely distributed in all districts of Bangladesh. Currently there are only a few breeding colonies known to occur in Bangladesh one in Maulvibazar near Hakaluki Haor where a group of 13-15 have been recorded along with a group of 15-20

landscape providing ecosystem services, and were previously heavily relied upon to help dispose of animal and human remains in India. The government needs to develop an up to date action plan to conserve the species. We need also to support our conservation partners, showing farmers that there are alternative drugs to diclofenac that are just as effective in treating cattle.

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