

# WORLD WETLANDS DAY How to develop our 'Jalmahals'

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WORLD Wetlands Day on February 2 every year reminds us of the importance of conservation of wetlands and wise use of their resources. Ramsar Convention marks the date of the adoption of the Convention on Wetlands on February 2, 1971, in the Iranian city of Ramsar. Every year since 1997, the Convention has been working with government agencies, non-governmental organisations and groups of citizens to undertake actions aimed at raising public awareness of wetland values and benefits.

This year's theme is "Wetlands and Water Management," which highlights integration of policy approach on water and wetland management together. This integration is very much needed to save wetlands from degradation and minimise water use conflicts among various sectors of development. World Wetlands Day emphasises the interdependence between wetlands and water management to sustain environmental and social benefits at national, regional and global levels.

Wetlands play a vital role in the lives of millions of poor people worldwide by providing subsistence livelihoods. Among many other resources, fish and fisheries are important components of wetland ecosystems and, for a very long time, they have played a significant role in the nutrition and economy of the country. The fisheries sector alone provides nearly 60% of the rural communities' dietary protein requirements and accounts for more than 4.57% of the national Gross Domestic Product.

In Bangladesh, formal institutions are structured in a top-down, command-and-control, bureaucratic system of wetland resources management. The state established legal ownership on all kinds of wetlands, such as rivers, haors, beels, baors, canals, streams, lakes and large ponds, and took control over their management aspects. Wetlands are considered as a means of revenue earning in the formal systems.

The Ministry of Land leased out seg-

ments of rivers, haors, baors and beels that had potential as a *jalmahal* (fishery estate) through an open bidding system. Usually, wetlands are leased out for a three to five-year period. Local communities are not allowed to establish their customary rights on *jalmahal* after leasing. The leasing out of open water bodies has been detrimental to the well-being of poor fishermen, created conflicts and chaos, and reinforced the

approach.

The Jalmahals (Wetland) Management Policy was enacted in 2009 with the intention of ensuring leasing of *jalmahals* to Fishermen Cooperative Societies (FCS) of genuine fishermen. Provisions had been made for the inclusion of two members from registered FCSs in the Upazila as well as District Jalmahal Management Committees to represent poor fishing com-

system as it kept the same structure of lease fee and collection methods that were stipulated in the *jalmahals* management policy-2005. Without significant changes in lease fee and collection methods, it cannot ease the financial burden of local poor fishers to engage in the leasing process. The 2009 policy did not emphasise the involvement of the Department of Fisheries in the management of *jalmahals*, which is very critical

Gesellschaft für international Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH on behalf of the German government, while designing the project for sustainable management of wetlands. This project is being implemented in different wetlands of the country for scaling up co-management approach to ensure participation of local communities in the management.

- Leasing of *jalmahals* to local elites with political connection must be stopped and facilitating an easy process for CBOs to enjoy use rights of *jalmahals*, including renewal of 10-year reserved leases of pilot co-management sites, to the existing CBOs;
- Legal identity of CBOs to become permanent unit for *jalmahal* management within the formal institutional structure to ensure access rights to local fishers;
- Mainstreaming of co-management approach in wetland management to stop degradation of *jalmahals* and ensure environmental, economic and social benefits of poor local resource users.

Wetlands are a resource base for millions of poor fishermen of the country and co-management approach significantly demonstrated its advantage by minimising grabbing of wetlands by the elite and improving governance in wetlands management, which is critical for ensuring sustainability. Benefits of co-management must not be lost due to grabbing by the elite and loopholes of existing policy while better ways of wetland management have already been identified and practiced in the country.

However, existing procedure of wetlands administration should not compromise on sustainability and restoration of productive wetlands and good governance, both of which are best achieved through community participation in co-management.

Therefore, World Wetlands Day 2013 would be best observed in Bangladesh if co-management approach is adopted in the policy milieu of wetland management for sustaining its goods and services for now and in future.

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SHAFIQ ISLAM/ DRK NEWS

power hierarchy in the society.

From the mid-1990's, the government and NGOs piloted and expanded "community-based co-management" through various donor and government supported projects, spreading co-management to about 300 *jalmahols*. It has been established that local resource users have the potential to contribute towards maintaining properly functioning wetlands that significantly enhance productivity and biodiversity. Despite its advantages in effectiveness and in access of the local resource users, "community-based co-management" approach has been adopted only in experimental development projects and has not yet been mainstreamed as a formal management

communities in the leasing process. Also, the policy indicated that FCSs must be formed by genuine fishers to be eligible in the leasing process.

However, there were limitations in the policy, which include the following: (i) as the selection of representatives of genuine fishers in the Upazila and District Jalmohals Management Committees will be carried out by bureaucratic decision, not by fishers' community, there could be bias and/or manipulation in the implementation of this article, and (ii) as many poor fishers are not organised as registered FCS, they would be excluded from the leasing process.

The policy shift, thus, did not actually change the revenue aspects of the leasing

for wetland management.

Lessons learned from previous development projects that were focused on co-management approach in wetland management provided sufficient grounds to consider co-management approach for sustainable management of wetlands. However, political aspects of co-management to ensure involvement of community in the decision-making process by establishing community based organisations (CBOs) are critical and must be considered seriously.

Based on cumulative experiences from various development projects, the following political challenges were identified by the Wetland Biodiversity Rehabilitation Project, which is supported by Deutsche

**BITTER TRUTH**

## A return to 'barbarism'?



Md. ASADULLAH KHAN

TRAUMATIC, humiliating and frightening. For victims of sexual abuse, the experience can be all these and more. But as the cases reported in the newspapers indicate, there is no dearth of villains and monsters willing to target women of all ages anywhere in the country. In the couple of weeks till January 20, newspaper reports quoting Bangladesh Mohila Parshad indicate that in 2012, 5,616 women were victims of torture, 771 women and girls were raped, and 157 were gang raped.

Another report quoting Bangladesh Shishu Adhikar Forum said that there were 201 child murders and 90 child rape cases in 2012. Activists and human rights organisations say that this is only a fraction of such crimes, and only the most glaring cases come to light. Economic compulsions and fear for their reputation force most victims to sweep their cases under the carpet, especially when the perpetrator is an affluent and influential member of the society or a political party.

The murders of a 5 year old girl at Rajbari and 10 year old Ritu in the capital, and of Chadni of Mirpur after rape have shocked the nation. There was a feeling of revulsion about the macabre crimes committed on these minor girls. To violate girls aged 5 to 10 years is simply barbaric.

The spurt of violence against children is more than alarming. Crimes and criminality exist in every society but sexual violation of minors manifests a depravity which unless checked will tear apart the entire social fabric. People might recall that in 1997 two such incidents of rape of a 6 year old girl in the Dhaka court compound and another of Mousumi in Sutrapur area provoked violent outcry. In both the cases, the actual offenders could not be apprehended, nor was there any attempt to bring them to book.

In Ritu or Chadni's case, the poor victims were put to death when they tried to resist the violation or told the culprits that they would divulge their names. True, the resentment generated in the conscious citizenry and the outrage stoked are far from ebbing even now. Not even the harshest words could reflect the indignation felt throughout the country. These acts occurring with such alarming frequency prove that a sizeable section of the society is being criminalised rapidly, and this is happening because the perpetrators of such crimes have always evaded punishment through means known to all of us.

The question one tends to ask is "What ails our society?" Why are such criminal and murderous

instincts increasingly getting the better of self-restraint, ethics and religious virtues? Something seems to have gone awfully wrong with our society, leading to ever increasing instances of depraved behaviour. It is not very unusual that every time such dastardly acts of sexual abuse of minors, often leading to death, take place, people are naturally outraged and loud protests are voiced by all, especially human rights activists. But as it often happens, when the alleged offenders go away with impunity they are emboldened to commit crimes of greater enormity. And not infrequently, the reluctance of law enforcers and indifferent attitude towards tackling the crimes makes the situation worse.

The society as a whole must try to root out the

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fast spreading cancer threatening to unsettle the very foundations of morality. Some human rights groups and women activists voice their protests and indignations the moment reports of any such violence are published in the newspapers, but unfortunately the policy makers and law enforcers do not seem to have been seriously perturbed. Rather, the country's political leaders are locked in a duel of words and street battles, and bringing in issues not related to burning problems like deteriorating law and order situation and escalating occurrence of crime. The security of children is the most essential part of ushering in growth of a democratic, healthy and vibrant society and should be considered "sine qua non" for any civilised order and guaranteed by the state. Protecting them from violence and abuse is the first step to good governance, peace, and stability.

Sexual abuse hurts children both physically and psychologically and the violence becomes doubly repulsive when the victim is a minor. When such violence keeps on occurring, one is led to think that apart from individual aberrations a lot of other things are wrong with the society and the social culture that lead to such perverse propensity. People are led to believe that the

increasing drug-crime nexus in the urban shanties and the criminal underworld that has now spread to rural places are exacting their toll. It may be that due to social conflict and political unrest some individuals are being fast dehumanised.

The other reasons -- population pressure, joblessness and unwholesome living conditions -- are making people insensate to all tenderness and human values to the point that animal lust is getting the better of the inhibitions they had inherited. Though the High Court had issued guidelines in 2009 to frame laws for the protection of women and children from all types of violence and exploitation, the policy makers have shown little interest in carrying them out.

For identifying the criminal through DNA profiling, sweat, swab, blood, semen or hair left on the victim's body or clothes by the alleged offender must be collected immediately after the murder or rape incident. Matching that with the suspect's specimens provides the most accurate proof of the identity of the criminal.

It makes us shudder with shock and trepidation to see how innocent people are suffering owing to a malignant growth -- the emergence of musclemen almost in every corner of the country. Their sphere of activities is expanding day by day as people remain silent because they are scared of retaliation. Moreover, the inaction of the local government councilors and upazila parishad members contributed largely to the festering malaise. That means a vast number of people are hostage to these evil forces, since the law enforcers have so far failed to make any dent in the crime situation.

That these gangsters derive their strength from and dominate the scene allegedly under the protective umbrella of their godfathers has only made the situation worse. But the hard fact is that lawlessness is sure to cost the society dearly in the long run, and has already exacted a heavy toll and marred the image of the government. No effort to dislodge the professional criminals can succeed unless all parties agree to unleash an attack with intention to rein in the criminals, rapists and looters regardless of their party affiliations.

Unless and until we can stop repetition of such grisly crimes, every Bangladeshi shall consciously remain guilty of the sexual abuse and murder of minors. This calls for every man, woman and child in the country to be united as never before, by a collective sense of revulsion. The country and its legal machinery must not betray the hapless victims.

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## The imperious foreigner trick



LAST night I finished a speaking engagement late at night in the middle of nowhere. Everyone else was still partying. I had no idea how to get home. I quite often find myself in that sort of situation.

A major part of an author's life is talking. It seems as if writing a few books gets you a sort of invisible sticker that stays This Person Can Be Tapped For Speaking Duties. Anyway, writing is such a solitary activity, and public speaking is exactly the opposite -- doing them both must be good for the character.

The event went well -- it was a talk on creativity (I shared the stage with Cedrick "Star Wars" Chan) -- and everyone was so high on red wine and good company that everything we said got a laugh. And it helped that the host, Chris Graves of Ogilvy, is a born comedian.

I was tired and decided to leave as soon as the gig was over. I stepped out, strolled down the road -- and found myself in the middle of nowhere. The restaurant was on a tiny side street which was a cul de sac in a forest. (Sixty per cent of the city in which I live is non-urban, green land.)

What to do? I walked around, but the place was dead. No bus stops, no taxis, no vehicles moving of any kind.

I decided to do the Imperious Foreigner Trick. This works almost anywhere in Asia, and is a marvellous bonus of living in this part of the world. The logic is this: many Asians are mild, polite people, and if a foreigner asks for help in a manner which implies that they deserve it, they will be treated like a king.

I walked into a nearby housing estate, a big, dull upper-middle class cluster of condos. I went up to the guard and politely asked for a taxi. Immediately he and his fellows snapped into action. They led me to their office, and asked me where I wanted to go. Then they summoned the taxi -- they did all the talking, saving me from practicing my clumsy Chinese -- and provided me with a written sheet telling me the registration number of the taxi which would be coming. They tipped their hats and kept me company with polite conversation until the car came. A few minutes later, I was being driven home.

Now can you imagine doing that in the West? Can you imagine a foreigner barging into a condo in upper Manhattan and asking, in Chinese or Hindi or Swahili, for a taxi? And can you imagine all the staff tipping their hats, and running around to organise transport for him?

It wouldn't happen.

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