

Laundrymen, helpless to relocate, use contaminated canal water; they too urge the government for help.

A WORSENING WASTELAND

ZAHIR HASSAN NABIL **PHOTOS: PROBIR DAS**

The tannery capital in the city's Hazaribagh area has been hogging the headlines for more than a decade now. It is widely known how this industry is a severe threat to all elements of our environment. The Buriganga river alone reportedly takes in 21 thousand cubic metres of untreated tannery wastes via scattered channels every day. The unabated pollution in the Buriganga river does not need new description as its black water has been a clear manifestation of its terrible state for more than a decade, an indicator that has failed to call for any solution.

A little rain and the westward wind spread the nauseating smells of Hazaribagh as far as Dhanmondi and Mohammadpur. To spare the environment, green activists, the government and even the tannery owners themselves have been vocal, apparently, about shifting around 150 tanneries to the 200-acre leather estate in Savar after a High Court verdict in 2001. Due to the uncertainty about bearing the cost of the project, the relocation had been delayed for more than 10 years since missing the deadline in 2003.

After considerable foot-dragging, it is still uncertain who will bear the expenditure of shifting the factories to Savar and the cost of setting up an Effluent Treatment Plant (ETP) for treating the tannery waste.

Shaheen Ahmed, president of Bangladesh Tanners Association (BTA), claimed the government in 2003, signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) that said the government would bear the cost. "As per the MoU, the government should take the responsibility of funding. We do want to leave, the European Union (EU) has been mounting pressure; there is no way to build an environment-friendly tannery industry here. If the government cannot relocate us, it's their failure," he says.

Reports say the cost of the project has multiplied almost five times to around 827.99 crore by now. Industries Minister Dilip Barua says, the tanners are supposed to bear the cost according to a MoU signed in 2007, "They are quite aware of it but they have been defending themselves saying the government was supposed to take the charge of construction alone."

Green activist MA Matin, general secretary of Bangladesh Poribesh Andolon (BAPA), says the government's proposition to bear the cost in 2003 was not approved by the Executive Committee of National Economic Council (Ecnec). "The tanners association claims to have not known this and