

Tangail Sal forests continue to shrink

Madhupur exception

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Tangail

Indiscriminate and illegal felling of trees, often in connivance with local influential people, has largely denuded the Sal and Gajari forests in Madhupur and adjoining upazilas in Tangail.

But recently a government-run welfare programme and self-employment training organised by the forest department have turned a part of the forests green again, visitors and officials said.

However, the large scale theft of trees in deep forest areas of Madhupur, Ghatail, Sakhipur and Mirzapur areas was still continuing with local influential people grabbing the deforested land and using them for cultivating spices and vegetables. Some valleys are now producing turmeric, which grows there abundantly.

Tree felling further increased in the upazilas over the last few years due to setting up of numerous brick kilns and sawmills, mostly illegal, near the forests, sources said.

The forests in Tangail once stretched over 122,876 acres of land in five upazilas, including 47,220 acres in Sakhipur, 21,855 acres in Ghatail, 7,576

acres in Mirzapur, 669 acres in Kalihati and 45,565 acres in Madhupur. Of the total, 55,476 acres were reserved forests.

But officials and locals say almost around 80,000 acres of forests in Tangail have already disappeared.

The forest officials, however, expressed their inability to act promptly against abuse of the forests due to shortage of manpower and logistics.

To save the traditional forests from gradual extinction, the forest department in 2010 made a list of 700 tree plunderers and provided them with a two-month self-employment training aimed at lessening their dependence on the forests for livelihood.

Since then, they have been serving as community forest workers, participating in forest development activities and assisting forest guards to protect the forest resources and getting Tk 300 each per week.

Tree felling now has come to a halt in Madhupur though destruction of forests continue in other upazilas.

"It is not possible to protect the forests with just 40 to 50 staff available to us," said Asit Ranjan Pal, divisional forest officer in Tangail.



Local influential people now grow turmeric on a piece of land in Dhalapara Range of Ghatail upazila in Tangail that was once the Sal forest. Inset, the tree roots are all that is left behind after criminals have chopped them down.

Death claim still unfounded

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About the Hefajat claim regarding casualties, The Daily Star yesterday talked to seven Hefajat leaders, including its spokesperson Ashraf Ali, central office secretary Moulana Forkan, adviser of Hefajat's Dhaka city unit Abdul Latif Nejami, an assistant of Junaid Babunagari, secretary general of Hefajat and an assistant of Nur Hosain Karimi, convenor of Hefajat's Dhaka city unit.

They all expressed ignorance about a "big list" of dead or missing Hefajat men. They even were unable to identify 70 missing activists, reported by Bangla daily Prothom Alo yesterday.

Abdul Latif Nejami,

Hefajat's adviser and chief of Islami Oikya Jote, indirectly admitted exaggeration in their original claim about the Shapla Chattar casualties. "Primarily it was presumed that many Hefajat men went missing as we could not find them immediately after the incident. They could have taken shelter in different places and later returned to their bases."

On May 6, Hefajat leaders pledged to form enquiry committees in various districts led by their local chiefs to find out people who disappeared from Shapla Chattar.

"We are yet to receive report from any of the district leaders," said Hefajat spokes-

person Ashraf Ali on Tuesday.

Ali had no explanation for the long delay in preparing a list of the missing. He asked The Daily Star to talk to his office secretary Moulana Forkan.

Forkan said he was not looking into the matter and suggested talking to another Hefajat leader. That Hefajat leader kept his phone off.

Asked whether the claim of 2,500 Hefajat men being killed was false as was termed by the government, Ashraf said, "I am busy. Talk to our other leaders."

Hefajat leader and international affairs secretary of Bangladesh Khelafat Andolon Abul Kasim Kasimi claimed that he had

collected some names who were "martyred" on May 5. But he could not give The Daily Star the names of the victims.

Following the May 5 mayhem, in which Hefajat and Jamaat-Shibir men resorted to wide-spread violence, affected businessmen and the police filed 36 cases against Hefajat leaders. But so far police made no headway in these cases.

Home ministry officials admitted to The Daily Star that police were not pursuing the cases. "Since the incident, police have remained busy with handling political activities and have temporarily shelved the cases against Hefajat," said a high official.

Growth concern

FROM PAGE 1

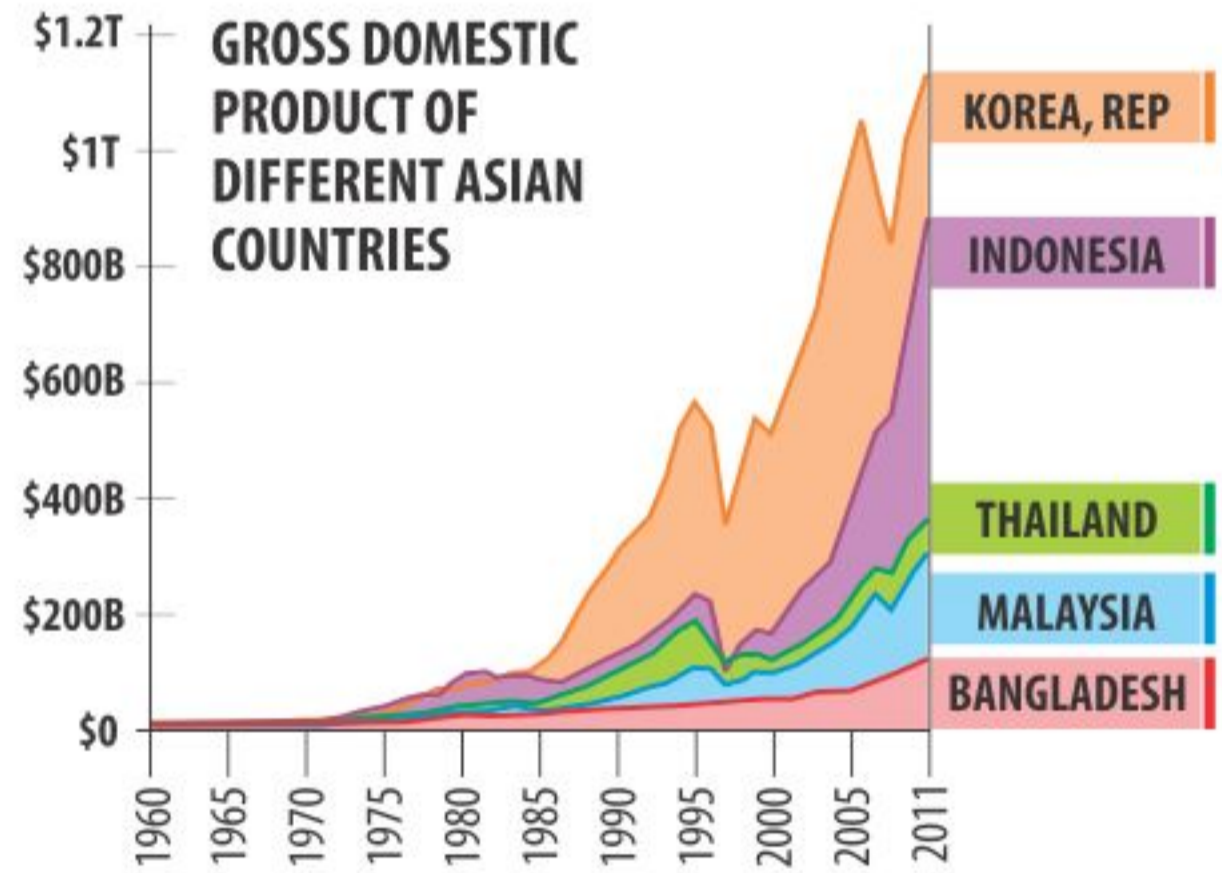
economic growth slowed to 6.03 percent in the outgoing fiscal year from 6.23 percent last year.

Also, we see a worrying dip in private investment unprecedented in the last six years.

Why investment has fallen is known to all. In addition to the age-old problems of inadequate infrastructure, corruption and poor governance, great political uncertainty coupled with the dangerous trend of religious extremism and violence has enveloped the business climate. Hartal after hartal is gnawing away at business.

Last year, Bangladesh slipped five ranks from the previous year to end up at 129th position in the World Bank's Doing Business report that studies 185 countries. This meant it was already extremely difficult for a private company to do business here. And, mind you, this index did not consider political unrest as a barrier.

If we add up what has been happening for the last eight months or so, we can feel how badly poised the investment climate is. Without investment, growth will not come. If growth does not show up, we will



remain mired in the bottom where we are today.

We rather need an extra bit of investment to get the same growth results, say, of India or China because our incremental capital output ratio shows our capital productivity to be quite low. If we have to get the 8 percent growth we have no way but to smarten the economy, infuse technology and get the workers skilled. The last one would require a huge public investment in quality education. The question is: are we doing it correctly?

Growth we need so much now to sustain the achievement we had in poverty reduction.

If we look at the income-based Gini coefficient that looks at inequality in soci-

ety, we find that it is quite high compared to that of our peers. In this region, only Sri Lanka is in a worse situation than Bangladesh.

This calls for swift actions to increase income of the lower- and middle-income classes. Any effort for such income increase would be politically correct for the finance minister as they constitute the bulk of the votebank.

With the election in mind, Muhith will come up with some vote-winning but expensive goodies, which may make him popular but will surely fail to spur economic growth.

But the budget should have another role -- to care for those who cannot participate in the labour market

and thereby not get benefited by growth.

Here the effectiveness of social protection programmes will come into question. We already have some 80 social safety net programmes. They need to be assessed (a big project by the World Bank is already underway) to evaluate their impact.

However, we have to repeat that whatever actions the budget may propose, nothing will work unless political violence stops. And this year's budget should keep in mind the turmoil that grimaces at us in future.

If revenue collection is affected because of shutdowns, would we have the fiscal space to absorb the shock? We need to have a well-thought out plan to cut expenditure in the right places.

So, can the placement and subsequent endorsement of a mere budget change anything? The answer is a simple "no". Unless those persons who as our elected representatives pass the budget change their behaviour in the field of politics, growth will not come.

But growth must come if we want to take a leap forward.

Kerry may visit Dhaka June 25

DIPLomatic CORRESPONDENT

US Secretary of State John Kerry might visit Bangladesh briefly on June 25.

Sources at foreign ministry said Kerry might come here after completing his maiden trip to India to join the 4th Indo-US Strategic Dialogue on June 24.

"We want to welcome Secretary Kerry.... We are in the midst of a discussion with Washington," a senior foreign ministry official told The Daily Star yesterday.

However, the US embassy in Dhaka said they have not yet received any information from Washington regarding Kerry's trip to Dhaka.

"We don't have any travel announcements to make at this time," Kelly S McCarthy, press and information offi-



cer at the embassy, told this newspaper.

It would be very significant if the US secretary of state visits Bangladesh within a span of a year of the visit by former secretary of state Hillary Clinton to Bangladesh, said another official.

Foreign Minister Dipu Moni had invited the US secretary of state to visit Bangladesh when she met the latter in Washington on May 17.

Asked if the two countries would sign the Trade and Investment Cooperation Framework Agreement (Ticfa) if Kerry visited Bangladesh, a foreign ministry official said the trip was not linked to the deal. But he did not rule out the possibility of signing of the agreement with the US.

JRC to focus

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The agreement got shelved since September, 2011, during Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's Dhaka visit, as West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee had raised objections and refused to come to Bangladesh with the Indian premier.

Since then, the two countries had been exchanging documents on the history of the Teesta flow and reviewed them. Mamata formed a one-man commission to assess the water flow of the river.

Meanwhile, Bangladesh had also been asking India for a convenient date to hold the JRC meeting. But India had not responded to the call until recently, said a source in the water resources ministry.

The ministry's Senior

Secretary Altaf Ali said, "Our minister sent his Indian counterpart a formal invitation. However, we are yet to know the size of the Indian delegation."

Terming the upcoming JRC meeting a significant move forward, he said India and Bangladesh had exchanged drafts of the interim agreement on principles of sharing the water of the Teesta.

Both the sides had also agreed to mandate the secretaries of the water resources ministries to examine the drafts and facilitate an early conclusion, he added.

India and Bangladesh share 54 common rivers. So far, India has signed only one treaty on sharing the water of the Ganges in 1996.

Japan tests

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The first five cars of the new train, which has a distinct aerodynamic "nose" at the front, were displayed on a test track in Yamanashi Prefecture.

The carriages, which are propelled by magnetic forces, were pulled along the track by a special maintenance vehicle as part of preliminary trials, with wide-scale tests due to commence in September.

The new train, designed by Central Japan Railway Co (JR Tokai), will initially link central Tokyo with Nagoya station, cutting current bullet train journey times by more than half, from 90 to 40 minutes.

The final train will consist

of 16 carriages carrying up to 1,000 passengers at a time, with plans under way to extend the line to Osaka by 2045.

The plan is ultimately to create a high-speed mass transit maglev network across the country.

It was in 1964 that Japan was propelled to the forefront of transport technology after it unveiled its first bullet train -- known as "shinkansen" -- to coincide with its hosting of the Olympic Games.

Since then, Japan has become famous as home to the world's most sophisticated rail network system, with bullet trains travelling at speeds of up to 199 mph across more than 1,400 miles of tracks.

False dawn

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that a number of contracts for oil-based rental power would expire this year.

But what if the Petrobangla fails to increase gas supplies? "In such a case, we will be compelled to go for liquid fuel once again and resort to some planned load shedding," the official added.

Since last year, the PDB has been lucky due to cooler weather. "For instance we forecast a demand for 1,700 megawatts of power for irrigation during March-April. Due to cooler weather, the demand was just 1,200 MW," he said, adding if this trend continued, the situation would not be too bad.

Petrobangla Chairman Hossain Monsur in August last year gave an updated forecast where he said 155 million cubic feet per day (mmcf) of gas would be added by December (2012) and another 550 mmcf by December this year.

But in reality the addition was only 55 mmcf, and that too started only a few months back.

Talking to The Daily Star, the chairman said that between June and

COSTLY POWER

Cost of power generation
2013: Tk 6.02 per unit
2009: Tk 2.5 per unit

How much PDB gets paid?
2013: Tk 4.7 unit
2009: Tk 2.37 unit

How much do you pay?
2013: Tk 6 unit (averaged)
2009: Tk 3.83 unit (averaged)

Subsidy for PDB
2009-10: Tk 993 crore
2010-11: Tk 4000 crore
2011-12: Tk 6356 crore
2012-13: Tk 5140 crore

Use of primary fuel
2012-13: gas based 74% power
oil based 21% power
2009-10: gas based 87%
oil based 6%

December this year, there will be another 330 mmcf of gas.

Experts, however, said given the serious under-performance in the sector, the increase would be a maximum of 150 mmcf.

The chairman blamed Russian company Gazprom for the under-performance.

Oh no, judge!

FROM PAGE 1

Bangabandhu Bridge Police Station (West) on Justice Hasan's instructions. Police then sent Asaduzzaman to Sirajganj jail, according to media reports.

The chief justice yesterday discussed the matter with justices Surendra Kumar Sinha and MA Wahhab Miah of the Appellate Division of the SC at his office, and expressed his displeasure at the incident involving justice Hasan, according to the SC sources.

SC Registrar AKM

Shamsul Islam told The Daily Star that he didn't know whether the chief justice had taken any decision on the matter.

He said Justice Hasan was on a two-day leave, and he would join office on Thursday.

The sources said the registrar's office at the SC had asked the Sirajganj administration to provide Asaduzzaman with legal support to help him get bail as soon as possible.

TUESDAY'S INCIDENT
A Sedan car carrying

Justice Hasan arrived at the east toll plaza of Bangabandhu bridge around 11:55am. A microbus with some of his entourage was ahead of the car. When the toll collector asked for toll, the judge's gunman got down from the car and told him that they never paid any toll, according to security personnel at the bridge.

He got into an altercation with the toll collector, who tried to make him understand that everyone had to pay toll for crossing the bridge.

As the queue of vehicles got longer, the gunman asked the toll collector to lift the toll plaza barrier so that they could discuss the matter by the roadside. As soon as the barrier was lifted, both the vehicles drove off.

The toll collector then informed the west toll plaza on walkie-talkie.

The judge and his entourage stopped in the middle of the bridge and took photographs, which is not allowed in a key point installation without permission. As the vehicles reached the west

side of the bridge, Asaduzzaman and security personnel stopped them.

The justice then wanted to pay toll, but Asaduzzaman told him to go to the toll plaza and pay on his own. An angry Asaduzzaman informed his superiors on walkie-talkie that he had halted the judge's car. This enraged the judge, who then asked police to file a general diary and arrest Asaduzzaman.

The bridge officials requested Justice Hasan to forgive Asaduzzaman. The

judge then left for Pabna giving them Tk 1,000 as toll.

On his way back to Dhaka from Pabna yesterday, the judge paid toll, and wanted a receipt for the money he paid the previous day. He also spent some time with bridge officials to know about the toll collection procedure.

Some security personnel, who witnessed the Tuesday's incident, said Asaduzzaman misbehaved with Justice Hasan, prompting the judge to take action against the toll plaza supervisor.

Factory workers

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He also heard that around 300 to 400 workers took medical assistance from Tairunnesa Medical College and a private clinic in the capital's Uttara.

More than 6,000 workers are employed in the factory owned by Labib Group.

Quoting the factory owner, Mosharraf Hossain, ASP of Gazipur Industrial Police, said the number of sick workers might be around 400.

The garment authorities sent the sick to Gazipur Sadar Hospital, Tongi Hospital and

other local private clinics after they started vomiting," said Mohammad Selim, sub-inspector of industrial police.

To find out the real cause of sickness and exact number of ill workers, a committee-led by some doctors had been formed, the civil surgeon said, adding the committee had already started its investigation.

Deputy Commissioner of Gazipur Nurul Islam said the conditions of the hospitalised workers were gradually improving.