



PHOTO: STAR
The Shashi Lodge, popularly known as Mymensingh Rajbari, built by the zamindars of Muktagachha in 1880.

Heritage building caught in red tape

MORSHED ALI KHAN and AMINUL ISLAM

Preservation of Mymensingh's palatial treasure the Shashi Lodge suffers due to dillydallying by the education ministry in formally handing over the property to the Department of Archaeology (DoA), a process initiated in 1989.

Popularly known as Mymensingh Rajbari, the iconic lodge was built by the zamindars of Muktagachha in 1880. It was declared a 'protected archaeological monument' in 1989 and was slated to become a major tourist attraction in Mymensingh.

The 24-room lodge is architecturally unique and of historic importance, boasting a wide facade,

arches and colourful glass panes that bring a sense of majesty to the site. A life-size marble statue of Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of love, beauty, desire and pleasure, adorns the nine-acre garden and features inside include old chandeliers, winding staircases and a museum of various items collected by the zamindars from different countries.

At the time of the declaration in 1989, the education department was running a teachers' training college in the building, but today it is barely occupied, serving as the office of college principal, Rokeya Akhtar Khanam and two staff members. The current casual usage of the premises carries a risk of theft and vandalism.

Despite a series of meetings between the ministry and the DoA since 1989, a formal handover has yet to be achieved.

Rokeya Akhtar said she has no mandate to hand over the building. "The Ministry of Education should formally do the handover," she said.

Early this year the ministry formed a four-member committee headed by its additional secretary Iqbal Khan Chowdhury, to oversee the handover. The committee held just one meeting in January in Dhaka and then went into hibernation.

Shirin Akhtar, director general of the DoA, who attended the meeting, said she was very hopeful of a resolution following the meeting. "But so far nothing has happened despite our

written reminders," said Shirin Akhtar.

Education Minister Nurul Islam Nahid told The Daily Star he would personally look into the matter and resolve the problem as soon as possible.

Iqbal Khan Chowdhury said he had been unable to speed up the matter due to hartal and other business.

"The education ministry formally asked the college authority to hand over Shashi Lodge before the formation of the committee," said Chowdhury, "But the college authority told us it would severely disrupt day to day business of the college. As the head of the committee it is my duty to find out the truth."

Meanwhile the pride of Mymensingh and potential boon to tourism waits.

Farmland fast disappearing

FROM PGAE 1
land for cultivating fish.

Housing companies were offering good price to lure the villagers. Taking the bait, Yasmin and her neighbours have become virtually landless.

"They gave us good price, much higher than ordinary buyers would offer," said Yasmin when asked what prompted her to sell the land.

Developer companies, industrialists and also wealthy people entice villagers to dispose of their land, thus shrinking the country's agricultural land, officials and experts say.

In Shyamlahashi village, farmers used to grow vegetables and other crops just a couple of years ago.

For many, things have changed, may be forever.

On what used to be farmland, Mohammadnagar Housing has developed plots for sale.

Every day, the country is losing roughly 225 hectares of land due to urban sprawl. But the government seems indifferent to the disturbing developments.

According to the land ministry website, the country is losing nearly 82,000 hectares of land annually on an average, of which 55 percent is used for housing followed by industrial and other commercial use.

As per the Planning Commission data, cropland is decreasing by one percent every year. In recent years, per capita agricultural land has come down to only 12 decimals (.05 hectare in 2009). It was 42 decimals (.17 hectare) in 1961, researchers say.

In neighbouring India, per capita cropland is 32 decimals (.13 hectares) while it is 2,718 decimals (11 hectare) in developed

countries.

Researchers also predict the cropland in Bangladesh would go down below 6 decimals by 2050 if the trend continues.

In a study on agricultural land, Abul Quasem, a researcher of Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies, estimated that the annual conversion of farmland is 0.56 percent and the country's loss of rice production stands between 0.86 and 1.16 percent.

Correlating the demographic pressure with food production, a World Bank study on "Climate Change and Food Security" published in 2011 states that Bangladesh would have to increase agricultural production by 4 percent after 2015 due to increased demographic pressure.

Analysing the present urban growth rate, Hossain Zillur Rahman, coordinator of Bangladesh Urban Institute, told The Daily Star that the unplanned urbanisation rate is so high that the whole country would turn into a city-state by the end of this century if any intervention is not made.

The country is losing cropland also due to salinity and waterlogging in the southern part, and due to river erosion in the northern part.

A study by Soil Research Development Institute showed that salinity-hit land in 2009 was around 22 percent more than that in 1973.

The land use policy, made 12 years ago, emphasised on making a new law for protection of agricultural land.

Asked, State Minister for Land Mustafizar Rahman said the government is giving top priority to the issue since it is

related to crop production and food security.

Explaining how developers are exploiting the law, he said as per the existing law none can possess more than 20 acres of agricultural land.

"But anybody can buy hundreds of acres of agricultural land if he declares that he would use the land for industrialisation," Mustafizur said.

The draft of the agricultural land protection law envisages a provision for a few years of imprisonment and a fine of up to Tk 10 lakh for flouting any rules concerning agricultural land.

Mustafizur said the government would make the law once the land-zoning map is completed.

"The first phase of zoning work in 21 districts has been completed (between 2006 and 2011)," he added.

Under the land-zoning project, total land area would be divided in different zones.

However, Shamsul Huda, coordinator of the Association for Land Reform and Development, said the government should have made the law before starting the land-zoning map.

"How the government is going to determine and mark any land as agricultural land if it is not defined under the law?" he asked.

The protection of agricultural land is necessary not only for food production but also for many other reasons.

It would save livelihoods of marginal farmers, and also of women who work for crop production. Any delay in enacting the law will benefit the rich and the influential, said Shamsul.

Moudud regrets skipping budget presentation at JS

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

BNP senior lawmaker Moudud Ahmed yesterday "regretted" the boycott of parliament by opposition MPs on June 6 when the finance minister placed the next fiscal year budget.

Finance Minister AMA Muhiith in his budget speech termed the boycott a tragedy.

While speaking on supplementary budget in the House, Moudud said, "I am sorry that we did not attend the sitting.... We all should shun this [boycott] culture."

Amid clapping by the treasury bench lawmakers, Moudud, who leads oppo-

sition MPs in the absence of Leader of the Opposition Khaleda Zia, said, "I admit that this is a bad culture [boycott of parliament on the budget proposal day]. But we just followed the Awami League that while in opposition during 2001-2006 set the trend."

The BNP-led opposition was absent from parliament on all the five budget proposal days since 2009.

In response, Awami League senior MP Tofail Ahmed said they had not boycotted all the sittings when budgets were placed during the past BNP Jamaat-led government.

Free polls

FROM PAGE 1

They add the AL would not mind if any of its candidates is defeated in the city polls.

The BNP finds itself a step ahead of the ruling AL as the party has managed to have a single mayoral candidate for backing in each of Khulna, Rajshahi, Barisal and Sylhet city corporations. The AL has yet to manage its rival candidates in Barisal and Khulna, which puts the party apparently in an uncomfortable position.

"The main focus of the government is to ensure that the elections are free, fair and neutral and the voters cast their votes freely and fearlessly. It's not a big deal who wins or loses in the elections," AL Joint General Secretary Mahbubul Alam Hanif told The Daily Star.

Asked what the AL was

thinking about the four city polls, he said the city corporation elections were not partisan polls, so partisan votes might not reflect in the results. People would vote the candidates considering their family status, relatives, manners, and position in the society, he observed.

"So, we are not concerned about the election results. We hope people will elect those who have contributed to development of their respective city corporations and will be capable of doing so in future," he headed.

AL Organising Secretary AFM Bahauddin Nasim said, "We want to set a standard and model through the city polls for the next parliamentary elections, which too will be free, fair and neutral with spontaneous participation of all parties."

BNP standing committee member Lt Gen (retd) Mahbubur Rahman said, "City election is our prime focus now. We have taken the elections with utmost importance as many things including the anti-government movement, next parliamentary elections and our organisational strength are related to it."

The BNP leader said they had targeted victory in all four city polls and many of their top leaders were working in the respective city corporations to achieve that goal.

The ongoing anti-government movement would remain suspended until the elections were over, he said, adding if BNP did well in the elections, people would send a clear message to the government that it had lost public support.

New rail track to connect Jessore with Sundarbans

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The government is going to construct a new rail track from Navaran of Jessore to Munshiganj, adjacent to the Sundarbans, via Satkhira.

The cabinet committee on purchase yesterday approved the feasibility study on the project. SMEC International Pty Ltd and its associates will conduct the study at a cost of Tk 11.11 crore.

A cabinet division official said there was a rail line already running through Navaran to Benapole border. The new line would link Navaran with Munshiganj.

Finance minister AMA Muhiith presided over the meeting held at the cabinet division.

The minister also presided over another meeting of the cabinet committee on economic affairs where the draft of the public-private partnership (PPP) law was approved. The draft law will be placed in the cabinet meeting after law ministry's vetting.

On this, prime minister's Principal Secretary Sheikh Md Wahid-uz-Zaman told The Daily Star that the PPP law would be enacted to bring the private sector investments within a legal framework.

He said the law aimed at increasing private sector investment. Currently, 31 projects including the Mayor Mohammad Hanif Flyover at Jatrabari are being implemented under the PPP.

"Once the law is enacted, the confidence level of the investors will go up and their investments will be safeguarded by the law," said the principal secretary.



PHOTO: STAR
Election officials show voters how to use electronic voting machines at Barisal Zilla School yesterday.

Qamrul eats

FROM PAGE 1

It said the minister had actually meant to say if the Jamaat leaders wanted to "have their sentences cancelled, they would have to surrender before the tribunal and appeal to the Appellate Division of the Supreme Court".

Interestingly, Tajul Islam, lawyer for Jamaat leader Selim Uddin who was also convicted along with Azad and Rafiqul on Sunday, said there was no provision for appeals regarding the matter and that he would file a writ petition with the High Court against the tribunal's verdict.

Qamrul yesterday told The Daily Star, "Hamidur Rahman Azad can now either surrender before the tribunal or move an appeal to the Appellate Division of

the Supreme Court, challenging his conviction, or suffer in jail for three months."

He said Azad could take part in the parliamentary elections as per article 66 (2) (D) of the republic's constitution.

The article says a person would be disqualified to run in the elections if he or she is sentenced to two years or more in jail.

On Sunday, the Tribunal-2 sentenced Selim Uddin, assistant secretary general of Dhaka city unit Jamaat, to simple imprisonment until the court ended its session for that day.

Selim had apologised to the court for his contemptuous comments but Azad and Rafiqul never showed up before the court.

Campaign peaks

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leaders, including Goyeshwar Chandra Roy, for Moniruzzaman Momy.

BNP senior leader Nazrul Islam Khan yesterday visited some areas in Rajshahi city and campaigned for his party backed mayoral candidate Mosaddek Hossain Bulbul.

AL leader Abu Sayeed Al Mahmud also visited some areas of the city and sought support for his party backed candidate AHM Khairuzzaman Liton.

The Barisal city also witnessed yesterday campaigning by some senior AL and BNP leaders for their candidates.

AL leaders, including AFM Bahauddin Nasim and Abul Hasnat Abdullah, campaigned for Shawkat Hossain Hiron while central BNP Vice President Abdullah Al Noman and Selima Rahman for Ahsan Habib Kamal.

holiday for June 15 in the four cities for the city corporation polls.

BNP DELGATION TO EC
The seven-member BNP parliamentary party delegation, led by party lawmaker Mahbubuddin Khokon yesterday submitted a complaint to the Election Commission against Petrobangla Chairman Hussain Monsur.

It accused him of violating the electoral code of conduct.

Monsur, who inaugurated gas connection in Rajshahi on Friday, sought vote for AL-backed mayor aspirant Khairuzzaman.

Khokon said, "It is a clear violation of the electoral code of conduct and it may influence the poll."

In response, the CEC said the returning officer concerned also found it as a violation and issued Monsur a show-cause notice.

"We will consider on the steps after his [Monsur's] reply," said the CEC.