



A slum, top, a makeshift toilet, bottom left, and an area fenced off by Liberal Democratic Party chief Oli Ahmed, all on the Cox's Bazar beach, one of the best tourist attractions of the country. The photos were taken about a month ago.

PHOTO: STAR

Sight to forget

Beautiful jhau woods along the beach now a torture to eyes

MOHAMMAD ALI JINNAT, Cox's Bazar

The jhau woods along the Cox's Bazar seashore are in decline, putting the future of the world's longest sea beach in jeopardy.

Setting up of illegal structures, indiscriminate felling of jhau trees [tamarisk], and leasing of land adjacent to the beach stand out as contributing factors to the decline of the woods.

Around 1000 people, mostly Rohingyas, are living in two slums and a village inside the jhau forest that stretches over a four-kilometre area from Naziratek in the north to Hotel Sea Inn in the south, locals said.

These people are not only destroying the forest to build structures and collect firewood but are also polluting the environment by leaving urine and excreta on the open space very close to the beach.

On a recent visit to the area, this correspondent found that unplanned toilets had been set up beside the walkways along the beach, filling the air in the area with a fetid stench.

Locals said the illegal dwellers had managed to live in the woods by bribing a section of the forest guards and police, and some officials in the district administration.

Admitting the existence of the illegal settlements, Additional Deputy Commissioner of

Cox's Bazar Syed Md Nurul Bashir said the local administration undertakes regular drives to evict these illegal dwellers inside the jhau forest.

Such drives would be conducted again, he added.

Meanwhile, a band of influential persons have leased the jhau forest, intending to construct concrete structures, hotels and the like in the area.

But the site falls in the ecologically critical area (ECA), where any type of construction is prohibited by Bangladesh Environment Conservation Act 1995 (amendment 2010).

This correspondent recently viewed the nameplates of Liberal Democratic Party chief Oli Ahmed and former secretary Hasanat Abdul Hye attached to the boundaries of two pieces of land fenced by corrugated sheets inside the jhau woods at Diabetic Hospital point.

On the land leased by Abdul Hye, a tin-shed house was erected inside the boundary where a caretaker lives. Several jhau trees were felled indiscriminately during the process.

The Daily Star ran a report on February 22, 2012 titled "Oli's Castle on beach".

Oli Ahmed, communications minister in the BNP government between 1991 and 1996, had been allotted a five-katha plot in the jhau woods on the beach near the airport during the tenure of

the four-party government in 2002, according to the report.

He had signed a deal with Impulse Properties, a real estate company, to construct the building, and unveiled the foundation stone of "IPL-Sandcastle" in November 2010, the report added, quoting a signboard attached to the site.

The Department of Environment had barred an attempt to build a multi-storey structure on the land leased by Oli Ahmed, said Sardar Shariful Islam, assistant director of the DoE in Cox's Bazar.

In spite of that, the present signboard speaks the same language as reported by The Daily Star in 2012, with no change in its approach.

There is another signboard attached to the fence of a grabbed piece of land adjacent to the beach that reads "Bangladesh Police Kalyan [welfare] Trust".

When contacted, officials of the district administration said they had not leased any such land to the police trust.

Fazlul Kader Chowdhury, president of the Bangladesh Poribesh Andolon (Bapa) in Cox's Bazar, expressed concern over the mindless destruction of jhau forest.

He demanded that the jhau woods be saved from the clutches of influential quarters and illegal dwellers.

Grabbing 'legalised'

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nearly 21,000 boundary pillars and has set up most of those along the 220-kilometre-long banks of 110-kilometre-long rivers over the past two and a half years.

But the district administration along with BIWTA and land record department has drawn the river boundary lines on a dry-season lean water flow merely on RS records excluding the extensive foreshores.

Taking full advantage of the excluded river areas, land grabbers embarked on a frenzy of earth filling in these rivers in Rugganj, Demra, Tongi, Ashulia, Fatullah and Dharmaganj.

As a result, the rivers are to remain officially thinner than what they were though the aim of the HC judgement was to reclaim the rivers to their actual state evicting grabbers and encroachers.

Official sources say the district administration, despite having no authority, over the years leased out river foreshores along with shoals to powerful private individuals in violation of river laws and now they are unable to reclaim the rivers to their original state.

As per the river laws, the BIWTA is the conservator of an entire river and foreshore areas of any officially declared

limit of a river port, while the district administration cannot lease out the land within such limit.

Monoj Kanti Boral, DC of Narayanganj, said, "The BIWTA estimate and definition of foreshores are not correct. There may be some anomalies in Rugganj, but otherwise we have demarcated the river accordingly."

It may be noted that the Shitalakkhya estimate is based on official records and foreshore is defined by the law.

But Monoj's predecessor M Shamsur Rahman told The Daily Star in June 2011 that they did not take foreshores into consideration while demarcating the river as per the RS records alone.

The district administration and the BIWTA jointly evicted nearly 3,000 illegal structures to recover the Buriganga foreshores in Kamrangirchar, Lalbagh, Keraniganj, Fatullah, Shashanghat, Shyampur and Shyambazar on the basis of the CS records a decade ago.

But the river areas reclaimed then are now occupied with private ownership and have been excluded from the boundary pillar lines, said a BIWTA official requesting anonymity.

Following the court order, the Dhaka district administra-

tion and the BIWTA identified 4,029 illegal structures on foreshores of the Buriganga as per the CS records.

But the district administration later excluded 3,160 structures squeezing the river area on the plea that those were on "private land" as per records and long-term lease issued by them.

DC of Dhaka Sheikh Yusuf Harun said, "Interest of political quarters was a foremost hindrance to river reclamation. The river laws had never been complied with in the past."

He added they would explain to the HC the practical inconveniences of reclaiming the rivers as per the CS records and why they could not do the job accordingly.

DC of Gazipur Nurul Islam said they had tried to save the "main stream" of the Turag but could not include the foreshores accordingly, as the river laws were not complied with in the past.

Shipping Minister Shajahan Khan, who heads the national taskforce on river conservation, said, "I agree that anomalies occurred in river demarcation in many cases."

"There are vested interest groups against river conservation and I cannot say everything on record," the minister added.

Outrage in India

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Her male companion was also beaten up before both were thrown bleeding from the bus.

The teenager, who was 17 at the time of the attack, was given the maximum penalty yesterday after he was tried as a juvenile, and the three years will include the time he has already spent in custody.

The teenager's conduct will be observed during his time in a special juvenile home, and his sentence reviewed and possibly reduced for good behaviour, his lawyer Rajesh Tiwari told AFP.

The perceived leniency of the sentence sparked further anger in India where the suspects, some of whom have been beaten up in jail, are public hate figures.

Outside the court, up to

20 protesters screamed "Hang the juvenile too" and "We want justice."

The separate trial of the four adult suspects in a fast-track court is hearing closing arguments and is expected to wrap up in the next few weeks, with the men facing a possible death sentence if convicted.

The fifth adult, the suspected ring leader, died in jail in an apparent suicide.

The attack brought simmering anger about endemic sex crime in India to the boil, and sparked weeks of sometimes violent street protests in the country.

The outrage pushed parliament to pass a new law toughening sentences for rapists, while there was a round of public soul-searching over the rising tide of violence against women.

Perfect wife

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become his wife. But he did. The beautiful brunette was 40lbs heavier and was so unhappy with the way she looked that she couldn't even look him in the eye during their first conversation.

But David didn't see her extra pounds, he just saw her potential and asked her if she was willing to go through a "Wonder Woman Makeover" which included liposuction of the chin, arms and thighs as well as a "Brazilian Butt" lift. She opted for everything he suggested and put her body in his able hands.

After he was done, Dr Matlock asked Veronica out and proposed to her on their very first date. He has been helping her improve her physique ever since, also encouraging her to stick to a healthy diet and strict exercise program.

Questions aplenty

FROM PAGE 1

speeches of its leaders, the 13-point demand, its anti-women and anti-constitutional stance clearly go against the spirit of community harmony. It is against the secular education policy and has staged violent demonstrations against the government's avowed policy of equal rights for women.

Hefajat is no longer a non-political organisation. Practically, it is now a political force -- very much aligned with the BNP, Jamaat and other Islamist and smaller political parties.

In the second paragraph, Odhikar says the Hefajat's protest was "instigated by some bloggers and activists that mobilised at the Shahbagh movement", and who were making "vulgar, humiliating, insulting and provocative remarks in the social media sites and blogs against Islam, Allah and Prophet Hazrat Mohammad (pbuh)."

The report, however, doesn't mention how it came to such a conclusion or how it had found that the organisers of the Shahbagh movement, who are also "bloggers and activists", were actually involved in such activities.

The human rights organisation doesn't say whether the allegations made by Hefajat were true, or whether it conducted any investigation into the matter before coming to such a partisan and politically-motivated conclusion. Odhikar simply believed in what Hefajat leaders had claimed to be true.

It went on sympathising with the Hefajat's stance by saying, "In some cases the Prophet was portrayed as a

pornographic character, which infuriated people of all walks of life." Odhikar then mentions a High Court directive, and the obligation under Article 39 of the constitution that demands that the government prevent such blogs and defamatory comments. But the government took no action in this regard.

But it is not true. Since the issue was brought before the public earlier this year, the government blocked nearly a dozen blogs. But many others had popped up. The Daily Star found that several websites had articles in the names of bloggers, who support the Shahbagh movement. Actually, those bloggers didn't post the articles on the websites.

Four bloggers were arrested allegedly for hurting religious sentiments but Odhikar remained silent about it.

Islamist fanatics, who have been demanding execution of "atheist bloggers", killed a blogger and injured another. These incidents were part of the whole development that Odhikar didn't mention.

It says the combined forces launched a brutal attack on the Hefajat rally despite being aware of the presence of adolescents and children from madrasas. It claimed some of them had been missing after the crackdown, while some others reportedly lost their lives.

Odhikar tried to justify bringing in the children to the Hefajat rally by saying, "Presence of children at political rallies is also found in government and opposition party programmes."

body kept mum about how Hefajat violated the rights of the minors and risked their lives by bringing them to the rally and using them for their petty interests.

The Odhikar report is also silent about the fact that the minors were forced to come, lied to, and lured with money. This is a clear violation of the UN Convention on the Rights of Children and Children Act 2013, which mentions that children should not be engaged in any risky work or job that can jeopardise their health.

In order to prove the innocence of the fanatic organisation, the report quotes Hefajat leader Azizul Haq Islamabadi, "Hefajat strictly asked its members not to bring children or minors to the rally, but some minors were too enthusiastic and joined the movement."

The report contains interviews of 24 people, but not of a single minor. Odhikar couldn't interview any minors to know about the facts. The report was zealous in mentioning that most of the minors were students of Qawmi madrasa and orphans, and they came from non-affluent families, and were not provided with any help by the government.

The report gives a wrong message that the Hefajat men's only intention was to offer "doa and zikir", and they hurled brickbats at law enforcers and set fire to objects around the stage to save themselves from police action. But it has made no mention of the instigation and anti-government speeches by Hefajat leaders.

Odhikar said the telecast of Islamic and Diganta

television was stopped at 2:30am and 4:27am to make sure that the May 6 incident didn't go on air. But it didn't say that the broadcast of the two channels was stopped for airing misleading death figures.

The two TV channels claimed that hundreds of Hefajat men were being killed in police attacks and the bodies were kept at Al-Baraka and Islami Bank hospitals. But the claims later turned out to be false.

The Daily Star on that night called both the hospitals that declined to say anything about the bodies. The following day, a reporter from The Daily Star visited both the hospitals to get names of the deceased. But they again failed to show any proof.

Police flushed out the Hefajat men around 2:40am and Diganta TV continued broadcasting the happenings till 4:27am.

DEATH FIGURES
Odhikar claims 61 people died in the police crackdown on the Hefajat rally at Shapla Chattar, which is misleading and confusing. Odhikar collected a list of 16 deceased from the DMCH morgue and put it in its report. But The Daily Star found that at least three of them had died in clashes between Hefajat men and police in Narayanganj.

Odhikar didn't give a full list of the victims on the plea of security of their family members. However, it gave identities of two other persons along with the interviews of their relatives. It also gave identities of 69 injured people but didn't mention that any of them were attacked or received threats after the disclosure of their identities.

Odhikar's death claim didn't tally with the death toll published in different national dailies and the count in The Daily Star's investigation.

The report mentions the death of 66-71 people, referring to Hefajat activists, victims' relatives, some unnamed witnesses, a photojournalist, and hospital sources. Three of them died in firing by police and ruling party men on May 5 afternoon while the rest at night.

It also quotes an anonymous Hefajat member, who claimed to be informed of 202 deaths, and another anonymous witness, who said seven people had lost their lives. It also quoted Jewel, an injured, who claimed to have seen 27-32 bodies during the crackdown.

The report quotes a madrasa student, Majedul Islam, who saw seven to eight bodies at the Sonali Bank premises. Five people among those, who were severely injured, died at different hospitals, claims the report.

Odhikar interviewed an unnamed photojournalist who alone saw 16 bodies in and around Shapla Chattar on that night. He first saw four bodies wrapped in white cloth near the Hefajat stage, two near Modhumita Cinema Hall, seven at Sonali Bank premises and one each at a petrol pump and in a pick-up van. He also saw two persons carrying a body.

The four bodies found near the stage were actually of the victims of daytime violence. Hefajat men demonstrated in the afternoon carrying the bodies. But the Odhikar report tries to prove they were killed during the

crackdown at night.

The Daily Star has been able to find the photojournalist whose name is Naim Parvej Apu of Banglar Chokh.

"I told Odhikar everything I saw that night but many things were not included in the report," Apu said.

"I spoke of seeing only four bodies at the Hefajat stage. I didn't say anyone else was dead. I said they were either bullet-hit or injured."

On the use of Banglar Chokh's photos in the Odhikar report, he said all types of photos, including those of the destructive activities of the Hefajat, were available on the website.

"We used the word 'dead' only in the photo caption of the four bodies near the stage. We did not use that word in the captions of other photos," Apu told The Daily Star.

Quoting the international media and Al Jazeera, the Odhikar report says 50 people were killed but it makes no mention of any local media that covered the event entirely.

Creating confusion over the deaths, it says, "Considering the circumstances it was very difficult to know how many people were killed and where the bodies were taken. Odhikar prepared this fact finding report on a primary basis by carrying out its own fact finding missions. The number of deaths mentioned here only confirms and highlights the identities of people killed that night."

Interestingly, when asked by The Daily Star, Odhikar changed its position and claimed the dead included

those killed in the daytime on May 5, but it failed to say how many died during that time.

The report doesn't say how many died in the attacks by pro-AL men and whether those were included in the list of 61 dead.

It portrays many Hefajat men lying on the ground as dead. Actually, they were pretending to be dead. They later got up and left the area.

ODHIKAR'S RESPONSE
The Daily Star talked to Odhikar's Senior Research and Programme Coordinator Taskin Tahmina and Director ASM Nasir Uddin Elan on the points mentioned above.

Asked why the report was silent about Hefajat's destructive activities and why it had portrayed the fanatic organisation as a peaceful, modest and innocent one, Taskin said the fact finding was done to enquire into the allegations of extra-judicial killings.

"In doing so, we needed to tell the story from the beginning. Our point of consideration was that extra-judicial killings took place, irrespective of whether Hefajat was innocent or not."

She said the majority of the media was against Hefajat and reported it had carried out the destruction, but when Odhikar talked to Hefajat leaders they completely denied it.

"As we were not there, we decided in principle not to say anything on this point."

Taskin claimed that Odhikar's report was not one-sided; rather the reports of the majority of the media on the Hefajat rally and the Shahbagh movement were biased.

On the issue of not disclosing the full list of the dead, Nasir Uddin Elan said the families of the victims were under tremendous pressure not to say anything about the incident.

"They were forced to complete the formalities and bury the bodies in a hurry. AL men are keeping an eye on the families of the victims. We cannot put them in danger."

About finalising the list of 61 deceased, Taskin said they made the list after talking to the family members of the victims and hospital authorities.

Taskin, however, said she didn't support Hefajat's bringing children to its programme through lies and promises of payments.

Asked why it was not mentioned in the report, she claimed that Odhikar could not contact any of them.

On the methodology of its investigation, she said a five-member fact-finding mission worked on it while Odhikar staff across the country helped the mission to take interviews of the persons concerned, including the family members of the victims.

About using two death figures -- 46 and 107 -- in incidents of political violence in May, Taskin and Elan claimed the first figure didn't include the victims of extra-judicial killings that took place involving the Hefajat rally as their investigation was underway. They claimed the death figure was updated in June and it stood at 107.

Asked why the 61 deaths were mentioned as political killings in the May report, Taskin said those should have been put in the section for extra-judicial killings.