

# Grabbers feast on Bakkhali river

*Lax legal process encourages encroachers in Cox's Bazar*

MOHAMMAD ALI JINNAT, Cox's Bazar

Bakkhali river in Cox's Bazar is getting narrower day by day as the land grabbers are out to encroach on both sides of the river by erecting illegal structures.

Many of the grabbers have either built structures or hung signboards on the encroached land along the banks of the river, stretching over an area of five kilometres from Uttar Nuniachhara to Majhirhat in the town.

The grabbers are also active to grab about 15 kms of river banks in the suburbs, locals sources said.

At least 1,000 illegal structures have been set up on the banks of the 50-km-long river, said Anwarul Islam Chowdhury, coordinator of Bangladesh Environmental Lawyers Association (Bela), Chittagong, citing a recent survey conducted by the organisation.

According to the Coastal Forest Division, Chittagong, the district

administration is the custodian of the river. Taking permission from the district administration, the forest department grew mangrove forest along the banks of the river.

This correspondent found that the grabbers had already destroyed the mangrove forest in Nasirtek area.

Enamul Haque Bhuiyan, assistant forest conservator in Cox's Bazar, said a total of 12,000 acres of land in the district under coastal forest division had been returned to the district administration.

The forest department was forced to return the land planned to raise mangrove forest due to mindless grabbing by the local influential quarters, he said, adding that at least forty people had been sued for this illegal practice.

In 2008, the Coastal Forest Division, Chittagong, prepared a list of alleged grabbers, and filed cases against them, which are still pending with the court.

Nasir Uddin, a lawyer for the division, said the grabbers had been threatening him to refrain from running the cases. Some of them had even obtained stay order from the High Court in this regard, he said.

Md Ruhul Amin, deputy commissioner (DC) of Cox's Bazar, said the grabbers would be evicted from the land before the re-excavation work begins.

Cases have already been field against the grabbers, the DC added.

Apart from the grabbing, rampant dumping of garbage in Kustura Ghat renders another blow to the dying river.

Admitting this, Sardar Sariful Islam, assistant director of the Department of Environment in Cox's Bazar, said the random cultivation of tobacco, setting up of dockyards and throwing rubbish into the river are posing threats to the ecology of the river.



Building an embankment on the Bakkhali river in Cox's Bazar, land grabbers make a shrimp enclosure near Khadda Gudam area while others build houses, inset, at Uttar Nuniaychhara occupying the riverbank.

PHOTO: STAR

## Trench warfare

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have the task of overseeing the election, which must be held by late January (January 9th is said to be favoured as voting day). It is merely a slimmed down version of the existing government of Sheikh Hasina, made up of the AL and assorted smaller allies, including the Jatiya Party of a former dictator, Mohammad Ershad.

The government is constitutional, but hardly popular. Opinion polls suggest four-fifths of Bangladeshis would prefer a non-party caretaker arrangement. The BNP calls the current set-up a "farce". No members of the 18-party opposition alliance led by the BNP are included. Meanwhile the election commission has confirmed a court ban on Jamaat-e-Islami, Bangladesh's largest Islamist party, taking part in elections.

Khaleda and her allies met the president on November 19th and requested him to "ask the government to shun the path of conflict and create an atmosphere conducive to holding dialogue". She says a non-party caretaker

would guard against rigging and warns of an election boycott unless she gets her way. A constitutional provision for caretaker governments was erased only in 2011. The BNP would consider a boycott legitimate payback for two AL boycotts—in 1995 and 2007—that both ended up, eventually, propelling the AL to power.

The AL's popularity has been sliding, however, and a BNP boycott would prolong its rule at least for a while. In addition, Sheikh Hasina can retort that the current set-up is constitutional and that the BNP declined an offer to join the interim government. Complicating matters for Khaleda, most of her BNP politicians are desperate to take part in the election. If Khaleda opts for a boycott, she would have to convince them it would suit their self-interest, as the first step to a big win in a second poll. Otherwise, she risks having them run as independents, splitting her party and lending legitimacy to the January poll.

A compromise may be possible. Tarique Rahman, Khaleda's eldest son and heir appar-

ent, has been acquitted in a case of money laundering. That decision could ease some of the tension between the country's two leading ladies. How independent are the courts? The line between the judiciary and politicians looks dangerously blurred. Four prosecutors of Bangladesh's war-crimes tribunal and the head of the court's investigation agency have applied to be Awami League candidates. No judges in the war crimes court have applied for party tickets, yet they are expected to deliver the punishment sought by the prosecutor-turned politicians—with death sentences likely for some of those convicted—probably next month.

If the voting goes ahead, the BNP would appear strongly placed. Despite the Jatiya Party sitting in the interim government, it this week snapped its electoral alliance with the AL. Threats of electoral violence would probably help the BNP too: low turnout hurts the AL especially. If the evidence mounts in favour of the BNP it may yet blink and decide to take part in January.

## GLOBAL WEB INDEX

# Bangladesh does better in internet use

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

More people in Bangladesh are now using internet for work like many where in the world, particularly in the areas of development and human rights, according to a global web index report.

The country has ranked 64th among 81 countries surveyed this year by the World Wide Web Foundation. The survey is done to see internet's growth, utility and impact on people and nations.

Scores are given in the areas of access, freedom, openness, relevant content and empowerment, said the report released in London yesterday.

Last year, when the index was first published, Bangladesh ranked 55th among 61 countries surveyed.

This year, Sweden has topped the Web Index while Yemen lies at the bottom. Among other neighbouring nations, India ranked 56th, Pakistan 77th and Nepal 71st.

The internet and social media are increasingly driving real world change. However, unequal access to knowledge and speech online denies millions the necessary tools for free and informed participation in public life. Censorship and surveillance are on the rise and pose a severe threat to the internet's future, the report observed.

According to Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission, internet subscribers in the country reached over 3.65 crore in September this year. It was about 2.80 crore two years ago.

## UN climate talks drag

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process before the Paris conference. But some countries, including China, the world's biggest carbon polluter, have been reluctant to set a deadline.

"We should talk, and we should deliver and announce during the process of negotiations," Chinese delegate Liu Zhenmin told reporters. "I don't know when. I cannot say a timeframe."

He suggested that China shouldn't be expected to make emissions cuts on the same level as industrialized countries, which built their economies with fossil fuels. The EU and the US want to get rid of the rich-poor division that has guided the talks in the past, saying China's rapid economic growth means it no longer can compare itself with poorer developing countries. "This is not the time to go backward and reinstall walls we have been trying to tear down," European Union Climate Commissioner Connie Hedegaard told reporters.

Venezuelan negotiator Claudia Salerno, a spokeswoman for a group of "like-minded" developing countries, including China and India, accused Hedegaard of starting a "blame game" through the media.

"We are shocked by the brazen attack against our group by Connie Hedegaard of the European Commission. It is incredible that she has chosen to accuse our group" of blocking the process, Salerno said in a statement.

The U.N. climate talks were launched

in 1992 after scientists warned that humans were warming the planet by pumping CO2 and other heat-trapping gases into the atmosphere, primarily through the burning of fossil fuels. Though governments agree global emissions need to come down, they've been unable to agree on how to divide those cuts.

In Warsaw, negotiators were trying to lay the foundation of a 2015 deal that would take effect five years later, but were bogged down by recurring disputes over who needs to do what, when and how.

Deputy Environment Minister Beata Jacewska of host nation Poland, predicted a "sleepless night" ahead. "But we are still hoping to close the meeting as soon as possible," she said.

Countries made progress on advancing a program to reduce deforestation in developing countries, an important source of emissions because trees absorb carbon dioxide.

Disputes persisted on climate financing. Rich countries have promised to help developing nations make their economies greener and to adapt to rising sea levels, desertification and other climate impacts.

Island nations that fear being submerged as the seas rise also demanded a new "loss and damage mechanism" to deal with weather disasters made worse by climate change.

Developed countries resisted that proposal, fearing they would be held liable for damage caused by extreme weather events.

## BNP threat lacks power

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formation of Dhaka city unit, said party insiders. Both the leaders join rallies but keep themselves away from the streets.

On May 14, 2011, Khaleda formed a convening committee of the city unit, headed by Khoka. She directed it to announce the full committee within six months, but that never happened.

Frustrated at the delay, city leaders no longer feel encouraged to join agitations. If accommodated in the committee, they would have even liked courting arrest, said a party policymaker. "It's frustrating that a devoted activist who would like to sacrifice anything for the party doesn't hold any post."

BNP leaders are also unhappy with the performance of Jatiyatabadi Chhatra Dal, sources say. The student body's central and Dhaka University committees, which could have become a major force in the movement, are virtually inactive.

On Wednesday, BNP acting secretary general Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir said Chhatra Dal activists have to do much more than just vandalising one or two vehicles.

"Many of our leaders, including the JCD general secretary, are in jail. The party activists cannot stay at home at this time. They must take to the streets in their thousands," Fakhrul said during a discussion at the Jatiya Press Club.

Talking to The Daily Star, some senior leaders blamed the tough stance of law enforcers for their absence from the streets.

"It's not possible to be in the line of fire. It's too risky to be confronting police now," said a top leader of Dhaka city BNP.

At Khoka's Gulshan residence on Tuesday night, Mirza Fakhrul sat with a number of "reformist" leaders who have kept themselves from politics for the last five years. On Khaleda's instructions, Fakhrul urged them to become active again, sources say.

Also, the party's overdependence on the muscle of key ally Jamaat-e-Islami has proved counterproductive.

A city BNP leader said the party high-ups believed Jamaat would make BNP's agitation successful. But in reality, Jamaat made no significant contributions to the movement for reinstatement of the caretaker system. Rather, it keeps pressing for the release of its top leaders facing war crimes trial.

The BNP high command has conveyed its displeasure to the Jamaat policymakers about their "poor performance" during hartals in the capital.

The BNP-led 18-party alliance launched the movement after parliament scrapped the caretaker government provision through the 15th amendment in June 2011.

With the opposition maintaining it would not participate in polls if not held under a non-party administration, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has formed an interim cabinet to oversee the election.

Triggering further protests from the BNP-led alliance, Election Commissioner Shah

Nawaz said they might declare the schedule for the 10th general election by Monday.

Mirza Fakhrul at a rally in the capital's Suhrawardy Udyan yesterday said, "The country would be paralysed from the very moment the [election] schedule is declared."

He announced that the opposition will stage protest rallies in thanas, upazilas and municipality areas throughout the country tomorrow.

A top BNP leader said, "To beef up the movement in the capital, BNP high-ups have divided the city into eight zones and assigned one senior leader for each."

The leaders and their areas are Goyeshwar Chandra Roy for Mohammadpur, Shyamoli, Adabor and Dhanmondi; Nazrul Islam Khan for Tejgaon and Banani; Mirza Abbas for Motijheel, Khilgaon and Sabujbagh; Khoka for Sutrapur, Bangshal and Wari; ASM Hannan Shah for Gulshan, Cantonment and Kafrul; Salauddin Ahmed for Shyampur, Sutrapur, Jatrabari, Kadamtali and Demra; Barkatullah Bulu for Mirpur, and Amanullah Aman for Lalbagh, Hazaribagh and Nawabganj.

Khaleda also asked her party leaders to play their roles in the anti-government movement in their own areas if they want to contest the next parliamentary and Dhaka city corporation polls with BNP's backing.

"Those who perform satisfactorily will be awarded party nomination," a top party leader told The Daily Star yesterday.

## Heyday for robbers on bus

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that their sigh of relief would soon turn into a pang of regret.

"Soon after we left the stop, the driver turned off the lights and around 20 people got up from their seats, pulling guns and sharp weapons on us," a visibly shaken Jahid described.

"The conductor of the bus himself took me at gunpoint, tied me and forced me to give up my ATM card. The driver too seemed to be a part of the gang, judging from the way he was talking to

the robbers."

They also forced him to give away the PIN of his ATM card.

Later, the concerned bank officials revealed to Jahid that Tk 4,000 had been withdrawn from an ATM booth in Karwan Bazar using the card between 12:00am to 12:30am that night.

From the other passengers, the robbers took away 15 cell phones and about Tk 20,000 in cash.

They also blindfolded the passengers while

the bus roamed the Dhaka streets for over an hour before dropping all off at Sher-e-Bangla Nagar around 12:30am.

None, however, was hurt except a government official who was assaulted while trying to dissuade the robbers by showing his identity card, Jahid added.

The officer-in-charge of Airport Police Station, however, told The Daily Star that no such incident was reported to them.

## Bangladesh's interest first

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and oversee the next general elections in a fully transparent manner, support the recognition of new political parties and meet reasonable criteria for political participation and representation, said the resolution.

Expressing its grave concern over the continuing paralysis in everyday life due to general strikes organised by the BNP and Jamaat-e-Islami, the EP urged all political parties to refrain from committing any violence during the electoral process.

The resolution also acknowledged the need for reconciliation, justice and account-

ability for the crimes committed during the Liberation War in 1971.

It expressed alarm over the increasing numbers of people on death row and the mass death sentences handed down in the trials of those involved in the 2009 border guard mutiny.

The EP called on the government to restore the enabling environment for civil society organisations and human rights defenders so that they can carry out their activities freely.

It urged the authorities to carry out

prompt, independent and transparent investigations into cases involving violations of the rights of human rights defenders, in particular the cases of labour leader Aminul Islam and journalists Sagar Sarowar and Meherun Runi.

The EP in its resolution also urged European and other international clothing brands to fulfil the promises and pledges made in the aftermath of the Rana Plaza factory collapse, including under the Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh.

## Developers now

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which they have done to others," alleged Khaleque.

"They just make people hostage and force them to sell their land," said Khaleque, who now has no land except his homestead and has become jobless.

Two men were seen fishing on a boat fastened to a big signboard of Amin Mohammad Foundation near Bara Shikarpur village. The billboard reads, "Modern city with all facilities, only five kilometres away from Babu Bazar bridge..."

The older of the men said, "Now rivers, wetland, cropland -- everything is turning into housing projects. Here, the depth would not be less than five to six feet. Our beel too is turning into a housing scheme."

Dr Ishrat Islam of Department of Urban and Regional Planning, Buet has recently showed that nearly 10,000 acres of wetland was filled up in Dhaka city and its fringes every year between 1999 and 2010. Before that, around 13,000 acres of wetland was filled up each year between 1989 and 1999.

The Bangladesh Environment Conservation Act, 1995 (Amended 2010) and other related laws prohibit converting

any land into housing estates without prior permission. But in most cases the land was filled up without permission.

Not only the outskirts of Dhaka but all the last remaining cropland, wetland, forestland, ponds, rivers in any direction about 100 kilometres off the capital centre have been changing into housing schemes fast.

The laws have turned into a mockery as the government agencies themselves neither comply with nor enforce those.

The Rajdhani Unnayan Kartripakkha (Rajuk) itself fills up land for housing projects or approves private housing projects in the areas, which are supposed to be preserved as flood flow zone.

The present trend of losing agricultural land and other open spaces was very alarming, said Shamshul Huda, coordinator of Association for Land Reform and Development (ALRD). "The government should enforce the laws very strictly to stop this practice," he said.

The ALRD has conducted a study which shows every year 72,077 acres of agro-land is being converted to non-agricultural land with 90 percent of it being used for housing.