

River grabbed in Patuakhali

700 structures built illegally

SOHRAB HOSSAIN, Patuakhali

Shibbaria River in Kalapara upazila of Patuakhali is getting narrower day by day as influential people are out to grab it by building structures on both sides.

Nearly 700 structures have been built over the years, while more are under construction on the 20-km river, which joins the Bay of Bengal in Kuakata.

In a recent visit to the areas, this correspondent found concrete structures erected on Mohipur, Alipur, Chaplee Bazar and Laxmi Bazar along the river bank.

The river plays an important role in the local economy. Fishermen used to count on the river to take shelter during floods, cyclones and other disasters. But it is losing its navigability these days due to indiscriminate grabbing.

Fishermen said they could not navigate their fishing trawlers into the river.

They also complained that they were facing troubles to reach the marketplaces at Mohipur and Alipur, famous for hilsa trading in the areas, due to the encroachment inside the river.

"The river will be unfit for use if the government does not take immediate steps to stop the grabbing," Fazlu Gazi, president of the Mohipur Fish Traders' Association, told The Daily Star.

Kazi Abul Hossain, an alleged grabber of the river, claimed he had built a shop on the land that he bought from another local man. He said he had the documents.

Some others also voiced the same.

Asked, Mahbubur Rahman, assistant commissioner (land) of Kalapara, said they would take steps soon to evict illegal structures from the riverside.



Encroachers have built several hundred illegal structures on the banks of the Shibbaria River choking the fishing port at Alipur and Mohipur in Patuakhali. Inset, construction going on unabated as of yesterday.

PHOTO: STAR

Bangladesh backward

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into credible allegations of unlawful deaths at the hands of its security forces, said the report released yesterday.

Measures to protect labour rights after a series of factory deaths fell far short of international standards, it said.

"This year has been tragic for Bangladesh, with political unrest leading to unnecessary deaths of protesters, security personnel, and bystanders," said Brad Adams, Asia director at Human Rights Watch (HRW).

"The government has failed to stem the cycle of violence by ordering investigations into violations by security forces, and instead has become increasingly intolerant of dissent, going to extreme extents to suppress opposition and criticism."

In its 667-page report, HRW reviewed human rights practices in more than 90 countries.

Violent street protests broke out in Bangladesh in February 2013 and have continued throughout the year, killing nearly 200 and injuring thousands, the report said.

The earlier protests were linked to decisions by the International Crimes Tribunal (ICT), a domestic court set up to put on trial those responsible for war crimes during Bangladesh's Liberation

War in 1971, it added.

Street violence continued after the main opposition party alliance decided to boycott the January 5 elections. While the political parties have failed to restrain their supporters from engaging in violence, state forces, on occasion, used excessive force to restore law and order.

The execution of Jamaat-e-Islami leader Abdul Quader Mollah led to further protests and violence at the end of the year. The authorities arbitrarily arrested members of the main opposition party, the BNP, said the report.

"Atheist" bloggers were arrested, as was a prominent newspaper editor, it said, adding that human rights defenders Adilur Rahman Khan and Nasiruddin Elan were arrested in August.

Despite pledges, the government failed to improve working conditions in garment factories and other industries after the deaths of more than 1,100 workers in the Rana Plaza collapse.

Under domestic and international pressure, the Bangladeshi parliament enacted changes to the Labour Act in July.

The amendments lifted some restrictions on union registrations but failed to effectively protect the right to freedom of association. Regular inspections of factories, due to start in

September, remained stalled by administrative delays.

The government's promised relocation of the tannery industries in Hazaribagh of Dhaka remained unfulfilled.

In a positive move, the authorities dropped criminal charges against several labour rights leaders that appeared to be politically motivated, the HRW report said.

The courts also ordered all charges to be dropped against Limon Hossain, a young man shot and maimed by security forces in a botched operation in 2011.

However, problems with the war crimes trials and the mutiny trial against the members of Bangladesh Rifles (now renamed Border Guards Bangladesh) remained unresolved. Many accused were sentenced to death in trials with serious due process concerns, said the report.

HRW and The Economist, journalists, and television show guests were issued orders by the war crimes court to show cause for critical remarks and reporting on the tribunal.

"The crackdown throughout this year on any form of dissent has been shocking, and has exacerbated the country's human rights crisis," Adams

Emergency declared in Thai capital

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ment in 2010, dozens of people were killed in a bloody military crackdown.

Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra said there was no plan to give the army a leading role under the decree, which will come into force from today.

"That's why we're focusing on the police force, to avoid violence like in 2010," she told reporters. "The authorities will start with negotiations."

Yingluck is under intense pressure from demonstrators to step down after more than two months of street protests aimed at ousting her elected government and installing an unelected "people's council".

They accuse her of being a puppet for her brother Thaksin Shinawatra, a controversial tycoon-turned-politician who was ousted as premier in a military coup in 2006 and who lives in Dubai to avoid jail for a corruption conviction.

Yingluck's supporters have accused the protesters of trying to provoke another coup.

It was not immediately clear how the government would implement the emergency decree, which enables authorities to impose a curfew, ban public gatherings of more than five people, detain suspects for 30 days without charge and censor media.

"We will not use force. We have no

policy to disperse them (the protesters) and we haven't announced a curfew yet," said Labour Minister Chalerm Yubamrung, who will oversee its implementation.

Yingluck has called an election for February 2 but the main opposition party is boycotting the vote.

The demonstrators have staged a self-styled "shutdown" of Bangkok since January 13, erecting roadblocks and rally stages at several main intersections, although their number has steadily fallen.

A defiant protest leader Suthep Thaugsuban--who faces an insurrection charge in connection with the protests, but has not been detained by police--vowed to keep up the rallies despite the state of emergency.

"We've been protesting for almost three months with no weapons and empty hands," he said. "We will not stop."

Dozens of people were wounded and one killed in grenade attacks by unknown assailants on opposition rallies on Friday and Sunday. There have also been violent clashes between police and protesters storming state offices.

"You could see the emergency decree as a sign the government is a bit desperate in trying to control the violence of the last few days," said Pavin

Chachavalpongwan, associate professor at the Centre for Southeast Asian Studies at Japan's Kyoto University.

He said it was unclear if protesters would respect the new rules.

The kingdom has been periodically rocked by political bloodshed since Thaksin's overthrow.

The latest protests were triggered by a failed amnesty bill that could have allowed him to return without going to prison.

Thaksin has strong electoral support in northern Thailand thanks to his policies to help the rural poor, but he is reviled by many southerners, middle class and members of the royalist establishment.

Mass rallies by his "Red Shirts" supporters in 2010 sparked street violence that ended in a bloody crackdown by soldiers firing live rounds and backed by armoured vehicles. More than 90 people were killed and nearly 1,900 injured.

Suthep, who was deputy premier at the time, faces a murder charge linked to those deaths, as does the then-prime minister Abhisit Vejjajiva.

The military, traditionally a staunch supporter of the anti-Thaksin establishment, has shown signs of reluctance to play a significant role in handling the current protests, saying it wants to

Get businesses back on track

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bank interest rates.

Latifur Rahman, chairman and chief executive officer of leading conglomerate Transcom Group, called for having a dedicated and toll-based Dhaka-Chittagong expressway to improve communications between the capital and the port city.

Suggesting an increased use of coal for power generation, he said the government should resolve gas and power crisis in industrial units.

Rokia Afzal Rahman, president of the Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce and Industry, said there should be regular coordination meetings between the commerce ministry, National Board of Revenue, Bangladesh Bank and the finance ministry for implementing the decisions timely and effectively.

Abdus Salam Mursedy, president of the Exporters Association of Bangladesh, said goods worth Tk 5,000 crore had to be shipped by air between September and December last year for political unrest. "We have to make sure that this episode never repeats."

"Bangladesh is now considered a model for businesses across the globe for its resilience and potential, but we are failing to make the best of it due to our domestic politics," said

BUSINESS LEADERS' KEY DEMANDS

- Immediate completion of Dhaka-Ctg four-lane highway
- Adequate energy supply to industrial units
- Export Development Fund for all export sectors
- Coordination meetings between ministries and business leaders
- Strengthening the WTO cell at the commerce ministry
- Reduced bank interest rates
- Taskforce to rebuild the image of Bangladesh abroad

would set up an advisory committee comprised of businessmen, and it would hold regular meetings to solve business-related problems.

He said the government would do everything possible to promote the business sector.

Former FBCCI president Salman F Rahman, Chittagong Chamber of Commerce and Industry President Mahbubul Alam and Bangladesh Knitwear Manufacturers and

Apologise for remarks

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sovereignty of country and conspires against our armed forces," AL spokesperson Syed Ashraful Islam said.

"No one has the right to play with the state security and sovereignty," he added.

Ashraf, also the LGRD minister, made the remarks while talking to reporters at a press briefing at AL president's Dhamondi office in the capital.

Issuing the 24-hour ultimatum to Khaleda, he said, "We think if actions are not taken in this case, our national integrity will be questioned."

At a rally at Suhrawardy Uddyan on Monday, the BNP chief said "unknown faces" were seen in the joint forces during the recent operation against Jamaat men in Satkhira.

Talking to reporters, Ashraf said there must be differences of opinion over politics between AL and BNP, but it was not acceptable that the state sovereignty was pushed towards threat with provocative remarks.

"I strongly condemn this statement. You [Khaleda] should seek apology the way The Daily Inqilab did. If Inqilab can, we hope you will also do the same," the AL general secretary said.

Through her comment, she has

instigated the neighbouring country and at the same time has undermined Bangladesh's armed forces, which is competent enough to protect its sovereignty.

"Please do not undermine our armed forces and play with our sovereignty. Don't hamper good relations with our neighbouring country," Ashraf said.

The Daily Inqilab admitted that it had published false news based on fabricated information and accordingly sought apology, he said.

"She [Khaleda] told the rally that Indian troops along with our armed forces took part in a military operation in Satkhira. Can it be a responsible political statement? Does she want Bangladesh engage in a war with its neighbour?" Ashraf said.

He also termed Khaleda's statement "seditious" and "dreadful".

About holding the dialogue, the AL leader said, "BNP is a two-headed political party. She [Khaleda] wants to sit for a dialogue with the government while her son doesn't. Who is in control of the party high command?"

"There are two high commands in BNP and there exist separate opinions in the party. If one (high command) wants something, another (high command)

opposes it."

People want to know who heads the BNP and whose statement is real, Ashraf said, alleging that BNP wanted to keep people confused.

ABOUT BNP RALLY

Ashraf claimed they had proof that a large number of Shibir cadres with firearms in their possession took part in the rally, although the BNP chairperson did not bring identified Jamaat and Hefajat leaders to the rally following pressure from home and abroad.

Alleging that the BNP chief has close contact with Jamaat and fundamentalist forces, the AL leader said, she would not be able to bluff people anymore.

ABOUT DIPLOMATS

Ashraf said no diplomat has the power to make political changeover in Bangladesh.

"The world has changed. Today's world is not a bipolar world. The world, in which the Soviet Union and the US used to stay in two sides, does not exist now. This is a democratic world," he said.

He criticised Khaleda Zia for depending on foreign diplomats for assuming power. "She completely surrendered to the envoys of her son doesn't. Who is in control of the party high command?"

"There are two high commands in BNP and there exist separate opinions in the party. If one (high command) wants something, another (high command)

ACC to probe into ex-judge's 'illegal wealth'

UNB, Dhaka

The Anti-Corruption Commission will launch a probe into allegation of accumulating wealth illegally by former judge Motahar Hossain.

"The ACC received a graft allegation against the former judge two to three weeks ago. After scrutinising the allegation, it has decided to launch an inquiry," Commissioner M Shababuddin told reporters yesterday.

It was alleged that Motahar Hossain had amassed huge movable and immovable wealth illegally and laundered the money abroad when he was a sitting judge, he said.

"The ACC in its preliminary assessment found inconsistency between his income and wealth statement," he said.

ACC sources said the commission had already appointed its deputy director as the inquiry officer to probe the allegation against Motahar, a former special judge of the Dhaka Metropolitan Sessions Judge's Court.

Necessary instructions have already been given to the special branch of police and immigration authorities so that Motahar cannot leave the country, the sources added.

Motahar acquitted Tarique Rahman, elder son of BNP chief Khaleda Zia, in a money-laundering case involving Tk 20.41 crore.

Those, who failed to become legal under the amnesty, do not qualify at all to live in Malaysia, he told BBC Bangla Service yesterday.

A handful of illegal Bangladeshis are spoiling the environment for the majority, the minister observed.

"We cannot let them destroy the work opportunities in that country of our existing manpower and aspirants."

KL detains 225 Bangladeshis

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He said the cost of deportation would be borne by the immigrants themselves, their employers or the missions of the nations they belonged to. These foreigners would not be allowed to enter Malaysia again as their identities would be recorded in the biometric database system, Zahid added.

Echoing Zahid's words, Mantu Kumar Biswas, labour counsellor of Bangladesh High Commission in

Kuala Lumpur, told The Daily Star that the Bangladeshi nationals detained in the crackdown would have to return home after they pay fines.

Earlier in August 2013, the Malaysian government detained more than 500 illegal Bangladeshi workers among other nationals.

As many as 5,000 Bangladeshis are now working in different sectors in Malaysia, Mantu said.

Among them some 2.7 lakh

Bangladeshis had been working illegally before Malaysia declared an amnesty in 2011.

Nearly 25,000 others, who failed to obtain legal status at that time, are in danger of being deported, according to the high commission.

The figure might have decreased as many returned home in the last three years, the labour counsellor said.