



Hills being cut at night in Pahartali, Chittagong, to make plots for Model Palli and Shapla Residential Estate. Over the years, the hills of the port city have been systematically destroyed by influential grabbers. The images were shot in August last year. PHOTO: FILE

UNAUTHORISED HOUSING PROJECTS

Ctg hills in peril

MINHAJ UDDIN, Ctg

Hill cutting goes on unabated at North Pahartali in Chittagong city in the name of unauthorised housing projects.

Two such housing projects named "Shapla Residential Area" and 'Model Palli' had been developed there by razing more than a dozen hills, locals said.

Several more hills were also in the process of being razed, they complained.

While visiting the areas yesterday, this correspondent found the name of "Model Palli" written on various walls in the area.

The locals said that influential quarters had gradually been developing the projects by cutting away the hills at night.

Asked about the two projects, Sarwar Uddin Ahmad, deputy chief town planner of the Chittagong Development Authority (CDA), said: "None of the residential areas has approval from the CDA, which is a prerequisite for development of residential areas in the city."

When contacted by this correspondent in the guise of a land buyer, Badsha Mia, a local land broker, told him that they had been developing the projects to turn them into residential areas, as there were forest and hills even 15 to 20 years ago.

He said: "Various government officials, businessmen, and other influential people buy hills in the area in the names of differ-

ent associations, and appoint local goons as caretakers, who cut the hills at night."

"When the plots are ready, the owners divide the plots among themselves or sell those to others at high prices."

In August 2013, police arrested three men and seized an excavator from "Shapla Residential Area" while the hills were being cut at night. But sources at Akbar Shah Police Station said the main culprits remained untouched.

Zafar Alam, director of the Department of Environment (DoE) in Chittagong, said the department files cases if any such incidents come to its notice.

But the locals cast doubts over the role of law enforcers.

Md Yasin, a resident of Pahartali, said the law enforcers had turned a blind eye to the illegal practice upon receiving bribes.

Several complaints were lodged against "Shapla Residential Area" in 2007 and "Model Palli" in 2010 with the DoE, he said.

He added that the hill cutting had been going on unabated.

"Most of the incidents of hill cutting remain unnoticed as the hills, which are located in the remote areas, are razed at night", said Mohammed Kamal Hossain, professor of the Institute of Forestry and Environmental Sciences at Chittagong University.

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'Gunfights' kill 3 Jamaat men

STAR REPORT

During "gunfights" between joint forces and Jamaat-Shibir men in Jhenidah and Satkhira early yesterday, two Jamaat leaders and an Islami Chhatra Shibir activist were killed and six policemen were reportedly injured.

Finance affairs secretary of Kotchandpur upazila Jamaat Enamul Haque Biswas, 55, also a school teacher, was killed in Jhenidah, while Debhata upazila Shibir general secretary Abul Kalam, 21, and Jamaat activist Maruf Chhoto, 25, were killed in another "gunfight" in Satkhira.

Jhenidah Jamaat has called a half-day hartal in Kotchandpur and Moheshpur upazilas of the district today to protest the killing of Enamul.

Our Satkhira and Jhenidah correspondents report that three sub-inspectors and three constables sustained minor injuries during the "gunfights".

Officer-in-Charge Shahjahan Khan of Kotchandpur Police Station said Jamaat leader Enamul was killed in a "gunfight" on Noidagram Secondary School ground around 2:00am.

He claimed that the gunfight began when joint forces personnel raided the area and the Jamaat-Shibir men who were holding a meeting there opened fire on the law enforcers and hurled

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Cop role comes

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But a number of villagers seeking anonymity said police were informed about the matter in the morning on January 8 and a team of Monirampur police did come to the spot twice on the day -- in the afternoon and evening.

Meanwhile, Mir Rezaul Hossain, officer-in-charge of Monirampur Police Station, has been closed for making irresponsible comments to the media. Mizanur Rahman took over as the OC yesterday.

When a group of journalists went to meet Rezaul on January 14, he said the women made it up as a political quarter might have offered them money or aid.

The Daily Star has got an audio clip of the remarks.

"They [Rishi community people] make a mountain out of a molehill. They lie a lot," said the officer.

"The question is whether the rape had taken place at all. Does a husband lie with his wife the next day she was raped?"

He said even if the rape had taken place it's no big deal for them. "The Rishi community people do not take such an incident very seriously. They often do it by

mutual consent."

Contacted yesterday, Rezaul Hossain said his statement has been taken out of context by the media.

Joydev Bhodro, Jessore superintendent of police, told The Daily Star yesterday that a three-member probe committee led by an ASP has been formed to investigate the allegations against Rezaul.

"He has been closed for making irresponsible and racist comments regarding a community and a sensitive case which is under investigation." Asked about police negligence, the SP said he had been aware of the allegation and he would look into it.

Also yesterday, Bangladesh Dalit Parishad (BDP), an organisation working for low-caste Hindus, formed a human chain in Jessore town demanding punishment of Rezaul.

In 2010, then officer-in-charge of Kashabpur Police Station, Rezaul Hossain abetted a group of land grabbers in a bid to evict some Rishi families, said leaders of BDP and Paritran, an NGO for dalit rights.

However, the attempt was foiled following a movement by pro-dalit organisations, they told The Daily Star.

NK executes entire family

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December for plotting to subvert the regime, which presaged the purging of many with ties to the disgraced elite, who had a wide network of associates in the ruling Workers' Party, military and state organs.

The reports said Jang's sister Jang Kye-sun and brother-in-law Jon Yong-jin were executed in early December, while Jang's nephew Jang Yong-chol met the same fate last month. Jon was the North's ambassador to Cuba while Yong-chol served as the top envoy to Malaysia.

Multiple sources also said state agents had killed all direct descendants of Jang's older brothers, who were onetime general officers in the North Korean military before dying of natural causes. Children were among those killed, the sources said.

Seoul's Unification Ministry neither denied nor confirmed the reports.

North Korea traditionally purges all family members over the age of 15 after executing a government official in fear of future revenge against the regime, said Ahn Chan-il, director of the World North Korea Research Center.

Pointing to Jang's role in fostering economic cooperation with China, Ahn added

that the recent execution of Jang's associates and relatives could help explain why Pyongyang is eager to mend fences with Seoul.

"North Korea is suffering from a partial oil embargo imposed on them by China," Ahn said.

"Pyongyang officials are genuinely scared because they have barely enough fuel to run their tanks and airplanes while the South and the US get ready for a military exercise," he said, referring to the annual South Korea-US military drills slated to begin in late February.

Last Friday, Pyongyang proposed holding the reunions of families separated during the 1950-53 Korean War. The proposal came after it rejected South Korean President Park Geun-hye's proposal on January 6 to hold family meetings unconditionally.

North Korea expressed eagerness for peace on January 6 when they asked the South to mutually refrain from slandering each other. After Seoul officials demanded the North show their sincerity through actions rather than words, the North sent an open letter on Friday expressing again their wish for enhanced inter-Korea ties.

Yawning gap between pledges and delivery

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organisations.

The think-tank yesterday organised a dialogue titled Rana Plaza Tragedy and Beyond: An Update on Commitments and Delivery, at the Brac Centre Inn in Dhaka to present the latest developments.

More than Tk 100 crore has been put into the Prime Minister's Fund, but only Tk 18.85 crore has been spent so far, Moazzem said.

The government pledged long-term support of Tk 10-15 lakh for the seriously injured, but only 40 have received the payment so far.

On reemployment and training of workers and their able-bodied family members, Moazzem said there had been slow progress in the initiatives jointly undertaken by the government and local and international organisations.

About the government's pledge to ensure reemployment of 100 workers in the leather industry, he said only 32 of them were to take training for the job.

Of the 100 jobs promised by the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA), 70 Rana Plaza victims have been recruited at member factories in Savar.

Two initiatives at local and global levels to provide compensation are halfway, as both are facing complexities over participation by retailers and suppliers, legal issues, methods for estimating the compensation, collection of funds and its disbursement.

"Since the workers and their

families are in distress, the discussion on compensation should be completed immediately," Moazzem said.

At the dialogue, MM Akash, a professor of economics at Dhaka University and also a member of the committee responsible for setting compensation packages for the victims, said the 31-member committee has fixed Tk 14.51 lakh as compensation for the dead workers' families or those permanently disabled.

The amount will be Tk 7.5 lakh for workers who have lost one limb, Tk 4.5 lakh for workers who will be unable to work for a long period and Tk 1.5 lakh for workers suffering mental trauma.

He, however, said the committee, which was formed following a High Court order, could not come up with a package for the rescuers who have been injured. "But if they have suffered the same level of injury as the workers, they will fall in the same category."

Hamida Hossain, chairman of Ain o Salish Kendra, criticised the compensation-fixing committee for slashing the amount by 25 percent to Tk 15 lakh from an initial Tk 20 lakh.

She said the direct dependants of the victims should get the compensation as the existing Inheritance Law might see the assistance end up in the hands of the victims' parents.

Mohammad Hatem, acting president of the Bangladesh Knitwear Manufacturers and Exporters Association, said the Tk

15 lakh as compensation should be a "one-off incident" and not be made the norm for compensation in case of future disasters.

CPD Chairman Rehman Sobhan said the 40 lakh garment workers were vital to the country's economy. "So, this is a concern for all in Bangladesh, as our bread and butter depend on them."

Debapriya Bhattacharya, distinguished fellow of the CPD, said the questions of transparency, accountability and free flow of information would come back again and again. "Ultimately, the government will have to take the final responsibility."

"Is there any website which can inform us who have donated how much to the fund and who have received from the fund and how much? If we have regular flow of information, there will be less confusion and finger-pointing and it will be clear to us where we will have to take a position."

Shaheen Anam, executive director of Manusher Jonno Foundation, called for ensuring transparency in handing out compensation. She said there should be proactive disclosure under the Right to Information Act about the Prime Minister's Fund.

Labour Secretary Mikail Shipar, however, said the government was very open and transparent about its work. "It cannot be said that there is no improvement -- there have been some. And we will need more time."

He said he would look into the matter as some people were claim-

ing to have not received anything.

Shipar said although a trust fund of \$40 million was said to have been formed by four retailers, the government was yet to receive a single taka from it.

Atiqul Islam, president of BGMEA, said the garment factories were improving their workplace conditions, but they were yet to receive any financial assistance from abroad although "promises were abundant".

At the discussion, some injured workers spoke of their current situation.

Mariam Begum, who has lost her right hand, said she had received Tk 12 lakh from the government. "But I cannot use the artificial hand as it is too heavy. As a result, I can't do any work."

Shumita, who was rescued five days after the building caved in, suffered injuries to her right hand and back, leaving her too weak to be able to work. She said she had received Tk 60,000 from an international buyer and was struggling to run her family of three.

Mukul Begum, whose husband Mozammel Hossain died during the building collapse, said she was finding it impossible to run the family and bear the educational expenses of her daughter, who is currently studying in Class VII.

Khoaz Ali, who worked for 22 days as a volunteer rescuer, said many civilian rescuers were struggling to return to normal life following their first-hand experience at the disaster site. "But we have not received any help."

An exception

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the last five years as the prime minister has authorised me to do so," Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah, also religious affairs secretary of central committee of the AL, told The Daily Star yesterday.

In addition, he has been playing other roles of an MP regarding carrying out development activities in Gopalganj-3 constituency.

"Since the prime minister remains busy with the state activities, she has officially authorised me to act on her behalf in her constituency," he claimed.

Abdullah, who was also a leader of Gopalganj district unit of AL, said a gazette notification was issued to that effect in early 2009 after MPs were made advisers to the upazila parishads by amending the law.

"I have been signing all documents requiring signature of the MP in Gopalganj-3 constituency," he said.

The first gazette notification was issued in 2009. Hasina has been elected as an MP from Gopalganj-3 again in the January 5 polls and has been sworn in as PM on January 12.

Asked if a fresh gazette was published to authorise him afresh to act as the representative of the premier, Abdullah replied in the negative. "I am continuing with my job as per the gazette notification issued in 2009."

Talking to The Daily Star over the phone yesterday, Solaiman Biswas, chairman of Tungipara upazila parishad, and Bimal Krishna Biswas, chairman of Kotalipara upazila parishad, also said Abdullah had been working as the representative of the PM.

"Whenever we need an official signature of our local MP [Hasina], Sheikh Abdullah signs the documents," said Solaiman.

Bimal Krishna echoed the same. Both of them said they sometimes met Hasina when she visited Tungipara and discussed development activities with her.

The Upazila Parishad Act, 1998, says something otherwise. The law makes the MPs advisers to the upazila parishads in their constituencies. According to the law, each upazila parishad will take advice from its adviser to carry out its activities. The law also does not allow upazila parishads to send development plans to the government for implementation without recommendation of the adviser concerned.

Sheikh Abdullah does not find anything wrong with his functions. But legal and local government experts strongly oppose the delegation of powers to him.

"No lawmaker can delegate their powers to anybody to act as an adviser to an upazila parishad. The upazila parishad law does not allow lawmakers to do so," jurist Shahdeen Malik told The Daily Star yesterday.

Local government expert Prof Tofail Ahmed expressed the same view.

Solaiman and Bimal, chairmen of Tungipara and Kotalipara upazila parishads, however, said they did not face any difficulties in the last five years to carry out their activities.

However, upazila chairmen across the country have been blasting the government since MPs were made advisers to the parishads and demanding scrapping of the provision.

Local government experts and civil society personalities also strongly criticised the government move. In their views, the government has allowed MPs to meddle in upazila parishads' functions by making them advisers.

Empowering MPs to meddle in the functioning of upazila parishads also runs counter to a High Court verdict.

"The members of parliament are entitled to ask for any information and raise grievance against any of their electorates before the House but cannot interfere with the local administration," asserted the HC in the verdict delivered on April 27, 2006.

6 BNP leaders get HC bail

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with the same police station for vandalising a police box at the capital's Motijheel the same day.

Hannan Shah secured bail in five cases, including these two cases.

Three other cases were filed with Motijheel Police Station on different days last year on charges of vandalising vehicles and arson attacks, a lawyer for Hannan told The Daily Star, requesting anonymity.

He said Hannan is accused in another vandalism case filed with Banani Police Station but he was not shown arrested in the case yet.

If Hannan is not shown arrested in this case, he will have no bar to walking out of jail, the lawyer said.

Anwar, Moudud, Rafiqul and Shimul, however, will not be released from jail despite yesterday's bail order as they have been shown arrested in some other cases, their lawyer AKM

Ehsanur Rahman said.

Nasir Uddin got bail in a case filed for vandalising a taxi in Chittagong and now there is no legal bar to his release from jail, said Nasir's counsel Bodruddoza Badal.

The HC bench of Justice Borhanuddin and Justice KM Kamrul Kader granted bail to the BNP leaders after hearing 14 separate bail petitions filed by the accused.

Meanwhile, BNP Vice-chairman

Sadeque Hossain Khoka has again been denied bail in two cases for vandalism and instigation.

Metropolitan Sessions Judge Md Jahurul Haque passed the order after hearing two bail petitions by Khoka's lawyer Mohsin Mia.

The BNP leader filed the petitions on January 16 challenging the legality of the Chief Metropolitan Magistrate's Court rejection of bail prayer.

On January 7, the court denied him

bail in the two cases.

Of the cases, one was filed with Sutrapur Police Station after a man was killed as miscreants set fire to a human haulier in front of Victoria Park in old Dhaka on November 9.

The other case was filed on December 7 with Paltan Police Station accusing him of making a seditious remark during a programme in the capital on October 14 last year.

On that day, Khoka directed BNP

leaders and activists to be armed with machetes and axes to counter any attacks while joining the opposition's October 25 rally in the capital.

Earlier on Thursday, the same court rejected his bail petitions in four other cases filed for hartal and blockade violence.

With a total of 10 cases filed against him, Khoka is currently behind bars.