

# Brick kilns eating away farmland

S DILIP ROY, Lalmonirhat

Brick kilns set up on croplands have been adversely affecting the agricultural production in Lalmonirhat district over the years.

Around 33 brick kilns are running in the district, flouting the rules of the Department of Environment.

Department of Agriculture Extension (DAE) officials in Lalmonirhat said the toxic gas emitted from the brick kilns had been affecting rice farming on about 3,300 bighas of land and fruit farming, especially jackfruits and mangos, on about 600 bighas of land.

Abdul Mazid, deputy director of the DAE, admitted that almost all the brick kilns in the district had been running on croplands illegally, hampering the agricultural production.

"I used to get 32 to 35 maunds of rice from my two bighas of land eight years ago. But the yield came down to around 18 maunds soon after a brick field started operating near my land," said Abdul Sheikh, a farmer of Madonerchak village in Sadar upazila.

Moreover, he added, the kilns use topsoil of nearby croplands for manufacturing bricks.

Another farmer, Nazer Ali of Baraipara village in Hatibandha upazila, said he

used to receive 50 to 54 maunds of rice from his three bighas of land even four years ago.

"But the yield has been 26 to 28 maunds since a brick kiln was set up in the area three years back," he said.

Locals also complain that smoke that comes out of the kilns has been causing health hazard for their children.

Civil Surgeon Dr Jahangir Alam Sarker said, "Kids and elderly people are more vulnerable to the lung-related diseases caused by black smoke of the brick kilns.

"If anybody inhales that smoke for about 10 years, he is very likely to face lung complications."

Jalal Uddin, owner of the J&B Brick Kiln at Baraipara in Hatibandha upazila, said he along with other owners had been running the business taking permission from the DoE.

Abdul Mazid, DAE deputy director, alleged the DoE officials never met the agriculture officials before giving permission to set up brick kilns on croplands.

Quamruzzaman Sarker, senior chemist of the DoE Rajshahi division, said they gave the permission after consultation with the locals.

If any written complaint is submitted, the DoE would conduct investigation and take necessary steps, he said.



In violation of environmental rules, a brick kiln stands next to croplands of Doljor village in Lalmonirhat.

PHOTO: STAR

## BANGLA COLLEGE RAID Police detain 42, seize sharp weapons

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Police detained 42 people and seized a cache of sharp weapons from a dormitory of Mirpur Bangla College in the capital early today.

It could not be confirmed how many of the detainees were students of the college. Their political affiliations too could not be known immediately.

Rafiqul Islam, officer-in-charge of Darussalam Police Station, said their team had recovered 20 sharp weapons, a pistol, 14 rounds of bullet, a crude bomb and a dozen iron rods during the raid that ended at 1:00am. An executive magistrate and some top officials of the police's Mirpur division were present at that time.

Jasimuddin, additional deputy commissioner (Mirpur division), led the raid, which was conducted following up on a tip-off.

## New cancer cases

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The incidence of cancer globally has increased from 12.7m new cases in 2008 to 14.1m in 2012, when there were 8.2m deaths. By 2032, it is expected to hit almost 25m a year – a 70% increase.

The biggest burden will be in low- and middle-income countries, where the population is increasing and living longer. They are hit by two types of cancers – first, those triggered by infections, such as cervical cancers, which are still very prevalent in poorer countries that do not have screening, let alone the HPV vaccine.

Second, there are increasingly cancers associated with the lifestyles of more affluent countries "with increasing use of tobacco, consumption of alcohol and highly processed foods and lack of physical activity", writes Margaret Chan, WHO director general, in an introduction to the report.

Dr Christopher Wild, director of the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) and

joint author of the report, said when people know his job, they asked whether a cure for cancer had been found, yet few think about preventing the disease in the first place.

"Despite exciting advances, the report shows that we cannot treat our way out of the cancer problem. More commitment to prevention and early detection is desperately needed in order to complement improved treatments and address the alarming rise in the cancer burden globally."

His co-author, Dr Bernard Stewart from the University of New South Wales, talked of "the crucial role of prevention in combating the tidal wave of cancer" and called for discussion on how to encourage people to change their lifestyles, including a tax on sugared drinks, which could be one possible brake on cancers caused by obesity and lack of physical exercise.

The world had moved on from what Stewart called a "naive approach" to smoking, which causes lung and other cancers, and

once was limited to handing out leaflets and haranguing people to give up. He cited the WHO global tobacco control treaty, which incentivises governments to pass laws banning smoking in public places.

The World Cancer Report, an 800-page volume on the state of cancer knowledge, which is the first for five years, must open up the debate, said Stewart.

"In relation to alcohol, for instance, we are all aware of the effects of being intoxicated but there is a burden of disease not talked about because it is not recognised," he said.

The report shows that alcohol-attributable cancers were responsible for a total of 337,400 deaths worldwide in 2010, mostly among men.

The majority were liver cancer deaths, but drinking alcohol is also a risk for cancers of the mouth, oesophagus, bowel, stomach, pancreas, breast and others.

## Commonwealth for meaningful talks

Worried at political violence in Bangladesh

DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENT

Condemning the politically-motivated violence in the run-up to the January 5 election, the Commonwealth has called for a purposeful dialogue between the major political parties to agree on a framework for an inclusive election.

"It is a welcome development that leaders of the major political parties have expressed a readiness to talk, with early and inclusive elections in mind," said Commonwealth Secretariat spokesperson Richard Uku in a statement issued on February 3.

The Commonwealth is ready to support such a dialogue aimed at an election that "fully reflects the will of the people and respects the principle of democratic constitutionalism", according to the statement.

It says the Commonwealth, a voluntary

association of 53 independent countries, is also willing to assist the Election Commission in strengthening further its functions and effectiveness.

The Commonwealth is committed to upholding and promoting democratic culture, including the inalienable right of all citizens to participate in free and fair elections, the statement adds.

Richard Uku said the Commonwealth continued to follow political developments in Bangladesh closely after the election.

"The Commonwealth stands ready to provide whatever support may be considered helpful in the post-election period."

Attacks on the minority communities have also been criticised. The Commonwealth attaches the greatest importance to the respect for diversity and equality, said its spokesperson, appreciating

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## Investigate Bangladesh for 'crimes against humanity'

Islamic rights group to ICC; Toby Cadman files request on its behalf

ASSOCIATED PRESS

An Islamist rights group has urged the International Criminal Court in The Hague, Netherlands, to investigate the Bangladesh government for "crimes against humanity" in persecuting its political foes.

British lawyer Toby Cadman said he filed the request on behalf of the International Coalition for Freedoms of Rights.

Cadman has represented Jamaat-e-Islami in the past while the rights group was formed in Istanbul last year after a military coup removed Egypt's president

Mohammed Morsi from office.

The organisation is closely associated with legal efforts to prosecute the coup leaders.

International Criminal Court prosecutor Fatou Bensouda will decide whether to launch an investigation after studying the application.

Tejshree Thapa, Asia researcher for Human Rights Watch, said yesterday the group is concerned about the potential for escalating violence in Bangladesh, especially after the January elections. But she

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## 2 arrested for vandalising Hindu temple

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Bandarban

Some miscreants yesterday vandalised two idols of Hindu deities at a temple here in Lama.

Around 12 people entered Monindropara Mondir in Faitong union around 8:00am, and forced the devotees to stop performing rituals, local UP member Rakhai Chandra said.

At one stage, they damaged the images of two Hindu deities, he added.

While fleeing, locals held Abdur Rahman of Nilphamari and Ibrahim of Chakaria, and handed them over

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## Expat workers in trouble

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"A good number of Bangladeshis have entered Malaysia using tourist or student visas and then started working as labourers. These people have become the target of the raids," Mantu said.

Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment Minister Khandker Mosharraf Hossain believes around 25,000 Bangladeshis are currently staying in Malaysia illegally.

"We have repeatedly urged our people, who are in Malaysia illegally, to legalise their status or return home. If anybody is still staying there illegitimately, they have to face punitive actions taken by the Malaysian government," he told The Daily Star.

Meanwhile, the Saudi police are

also conducting raids across the kingdom to detain illegal expatriates and deport them.

According to Saudi newspapers, over 10,000 illegal foreigners, including Bangladeshis, were detained last month alone.

Though the Bangladesh embassy in Riyadh confirmed that there were Bangladeshi nationals among the detainees, it could not give an estimate of them.

However, an official of Bangladesh embassy in Riyadh, preferring anonymity, told The Daily Star that around 1,000 Bangladeshis were feared to be among the detainees.

Bangladeshi Ambassador to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia Shahidul Islam said the mission was working on ensuring safe return of 5,000 to

6,000 illegal Bangladeshi migrants living in the country.

"We are trying to resolve the difficulties of some of our people, who are staying illegally and do not have necessary documents, so that they can return home," he told The Daily Star over the phone.

Saudi police are conducting the crackdown against migrant workers, whose work permits have expired, as the two months' extended deadline for the workers to legalise their stay ended on January 2.

Earlier, the Saudi labour ministry extended the deadline for those who failed to complete their legalisation process during the previous seven months' amnesty period that ended on November 4 last year.

## Hawa Bhaban link

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she told parliament after her party lawmakers demanded Khaleda's trial for arms smuggling.

The name of Hawa Bhaban came up in the depositions of witnesses, she mentioned. "This means that Khaleda Zia, her son Tarique Rahman and some BNP leaders were involved in it."

Further inquiry is required to know the sources of the arms, money and who had brought the huge consignment of arms. An international inquiry into the arms haul is also under way, said the PM.

Unloading of such a huge cache of arms would not have been possible without patronisation by the government, she told the House.

Law enforcers had hauled the arms and ammo at the jetty of Chittagong Urea Fertiliser Limited in the wee hours of April 2, 2004.

Hawa Bhaban is the so-called alternative power house of the then BNP-led government.

The DGFI, added the PM, had informed then prime minister Khaleda Zia about the seizure of the arms, but the BNP chief was silent. "Her silence proves that she had given consent to the smuggling of arms," complained the premier.

She said probes into the arms haul cases have revealed that intelligence agencies

were involved in the smuggling. "If the intelligence agencies get involved in such an incident, then how will the state's security be ensured?" she questioned.

Citing the arms hauls in Chakaria of Cox's Bazar in 1996 and Bogra in 2004, Hasina said her government will probe every incidents of arms haul in the country.

In the past, Bangladesh's land was used to patronise separatist movements in a neighbouring country, she mentioned. "Khaleda Zia had labelled the separatist movement in seven Indian states as movement for independence," added the PM.

Hasina accused the past BNP government of allowing arms smugglers to use Bangladesh as a smuggling corridor. "As an independent and sovereign country, why Bangladesh will be used as the corridor?" she questioned.

The government, she said, will never allow anybody to use country's land to carry out any activity which would hamper people's security.

Post and Telecommunications Minister Abdul Latif Siddiqui, AL lawmakers Sheikh Fazlul Karim Selim, Jahangir Kabir Nanok, Abdul Mannan and JSD MP Mayeen Uddin Khan Badal demanded the government take legal action against Khaleda Zia and Tarique Rahman for their alleged involvement in arms smuggling.

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demanding an additional Tk 500 crore to finish the job, which is a gross violation of the contract.

Under the procurement rules, the company could be blacklisted for such a breach of contract. But the ministry has been trying to persuade the firm into finishing the job as per the contract.

The officials say cancelling the contract and giving the job to a new contractor will increase the project cost and delay its completion further.

Already, the project deadline had to be extended by a year. And its cost rose to Tk 3,190 crore from the original Tk 1,655 crore due to inclusion of three rail overpasses and five bridges in the project, changes in its design, price adjustments and the Chinese company's delaying tactics.

A 52-km stretch of the highway, known as the economic lifeline of the country, is being expanded by two local companies and their progress of work is much better.

The two firms -- Reza Construction and Taher Brothers -- have completed about 60 percent of a 37.7km stretch and 55 percent of the rest 15.3km stretch of the highway.

So far, the three companies have altogether completed only 37km of

the 192km highway.

Irrked by the Chinese firm's delay, Communications Minister Obaidul Quader in April last year spoke to the Chinese ambassador in Dhaka, urging him to mount pressure on the firm to do its job. But it yielded no result.

After the January 5 election, the communications ministry assessed Sinohydro's work progress and found that the company hardly made any headway in three out of its seven packages (portions of the job).

The abysmal performance prompted the ministry to hold another meeting with the Chinese diplomat two weeks ago.

"The diplomat assured the government of holding a meeting with the company officials in Dhaka and China soon to resolve the matter," said Communications Secretary MAN Siddique, adding that they were constantly putting pressure on the firm to complete the job.

About Sinohydro's claim for additional money, he said the amount was not acceptable. He, however, said the ministry may consider it if the company comes up with a logical demand.

"Their work in four packages is good," the secretary added.

Contacted, Obaidul Quader said they had sought the Chinese government's cooperation in resolving the issue.

Chinese ambassador in Dhaka Li Jun has assured the government of talking to Sinohydro officials, he added.

Obaidul had planned to have a part of the dual carriageway inaugurated by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina last year, but he had to abandon the plan because of the poor work progress.

The long delay has irritated the PM who wanted to talk to the top officials of the Chinese firm. She has already asked the communications ministry to call the company officials to Dhaka, ministry officials said.

Hasina has also asked the ministry officials to see if the contract for three packages could be cancelled and given to a new firm. But the officials told the PM that it might cause further delay in completing the project.

Before Hasina talks to the company officials, the communications ministry and the Chinese embassy will hold a meeting with the firm officials on their claim for additional money.

Although the government has been refusing to pay any extra money, it may accept the decision of the tripartite meeting, ministry officials said.

The project was initially undertaken by the BNP-Jamaat government in 2005. But due to a series of procedural hurdles and two failed tenders, the project did not see any light.

Assuming office in 2009, the Awami League government took up the project and floated a fresh tender to upgrade the highway, which is the most used road for exports and imports. Heavy traffic sometimes doubles the six-hour travel time on the highway, hampering foreign trade and causing public sufferings.

The government in January 2010 signed deals with the three firms to expand the highway in three years.

But the work began in 2011 as problems relating to the appointment of project's consultant ate up a year. However, the work did not get momentum for scarcity of dirt to fill the lanes, fund crunch and demand for money by local politicians and thugs from the contractors.

This led the ministry to revise the DPP (development project planning) and re-fix the cost at Tk 2,382 crore.

Later, the cost was raised to Tk 3,190 crore when the DPP was revised again, bringing some crucial changes to the project and changing