

Close river routes thru' Sundarbans permanently

Experts suggest at roundtable

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The river routes through the Sundarbans must be closed permanently to avert further accidents that might threaten the biodiversity and ecosystem of the world's largest mangrove forest, a number of experts have said.

They noted that the authorities failed to tackle the recent disaster in the Sundarbans after a tanker sank in the Shela river on December 9 and spilled thousands of litres of oil into rivers and canals of the forest.

The experts were speaking at a roundtable -- Sundarbans in great danger: the measures need to be taken immediately -- organised by Bangla Daily Prothom Alo at its office in the capital's Karwan Bazar yesterday.

The speakers urged the government to take both short and long-term preparations to stop recurrence of such incidents.

Criticising Shipping Minister Shajahan Khan for his remark that the forest wouldn't be affected by the spilled oil, they said there were reports of deaths of animals in the forest.

The oil spill would have adverse effects on the biodiversity of the forest in the long run, said the experts.

Eminent environmentalist Prof Ainun Nishat said the spilled oil could have been easily collected from the rivers and canals, using "booms", made of plastic pipes and nets, with the help of local fishermen.

But that didn't happen due to ignorance of the government organisations concerned, and oil spread over a vast area increasing the damage to the forest.

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Anti-govt movement aims to protect war criminals: PM

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina yesterday said the people of the country will not respond to the BNP-led 20-party alliance's ongoing anti-government movement aimed at protecting war criminals.

"During this month of victory [day], BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia along with anti-liberation forces the Razakars, Al-Badr and Al-Shams have been threatening anti-government movements to save the war criminals," she said.

Hasina, also president of ruling Awami League, made the remarks



while addressing a discussion marking Martyred Intellectual Day at the auditorium of Krishibid Institute in the capital.

AL Presidium Member Syeda Sajeda Chowdhury chaired the discussion.

The premier castigated the BNP chief for keeping Jamaat-Shibir men by her side during a rally in Narayanganj

on Saturday.

"With whom did she [Khaleda Zia] speak at the rally a day before the Martyred Intellectual Day? Who were at her side? They were Jamaat-Shibir men," Hasina said.

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Body of sunken vessel's master found in river

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The body of the skipper of Southern Star-7 was found early yesterday floating in the Shela river near Jaymuni of Bagerhat.

Moksed Matubar had been missing since the tanker sank in the Shela on December 9 with about 3.58 lakh litres of furnace oil. He is the son of Ijjat Ali, a resident of Laxmipasha of Bakerganj upazila in Barisal.

Mohammad Gias, manager of Southern Star-7, said fishermen spotted the body around 6:00am and informed the divisional forest office of the matter, UNB adds.

The other seven crewmembers of the oil tanker had managed to swim ashore.

Shahidul Islam, son-in-law of the deceased, claimed that Moksed had been tortured and his body bore the marks. He said, "Probably both of his legs were broken."



To remove furnace oil from the river Shela, about 500 boats have been deployed. The photo was taken yesterday.

PHOTO: BANGLAR CHOKH

Shipping ministry's

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to the shipping ministry several times seeking a permanent ban.

"A permanent ban on plying vessels through the route is imperative [to save the Sundarbans]," he told reporters following a meeting at the environment ministry just two hours before the shipping minister's press conference.

Asked, Shajahan Khan said, "It is neither a failure nor it is indifference of the shipping ministry. It is a cruel reality [that vessels take that route]."

According to him, the government allowed vessels to take the route as the Mongla-Ghasiakhali channel lost navigability and had been closed since 2004.

The government has started dredging the 31km channel that has been heavily silted. The siltation was caused by the construction of 13 polders surrounding the river, he added.

So far, six kilometres of the channel have been dredged, and the rest will be

done as quickly as possible, he said without giving any timeframe.

Now that the Shela route is closed, vessels need to ply an additional 100km or so to reach Mongla Port, which is causing a backlog of vessels at the Chittagong Port.

The Shela river route is also under the Bangladesh-India goods carrying protocol, the minister said. The number of vessels using the route has increased since 2012 when the protocol was revived.

Asked about the government priorities, Shajahan said, "It is the need of the people."

When a reporter pointed out that the government was failing to dredge the Mongla-Ghasiakhali channel because of some landlords who occupy vast parts of the channel, the minister agreed first and then quickly added the government had overcome it.

"Otherwise, we could not dredge the 6km we so far have."

Meanwhile, the government decided

to continue the clean-up manually. On Saturday, the forest department started the clean-up deploying 120 boats and 200 workers.

Abdullah Al Islam Jacob said the number of boats would be increased to 500 to complete the job at the earliest.

Also, a committee comprising environmentalists, water experts, botanists and officials will be formed to design a roadmap to protect the Sundarbans from any disaster.

The disaster management ministry will allocate relief to the people around the Shela river so that those depending on the aquatic resources for their living are not affected.

The health ministry will provide medical care to the people there, while the fisheries ministry would intervene to protect the fish in the river, Jacob said.

An inter-ministerial committee, headed by Prime Minister's Office Senior Secretary Abul Kalam Azad, will coordinate all these.



The unmarked killing fields at Shiyalbari and Kalapani, inset, in Mirpur. The significance of the places are realised by the few living witnesses of war crimes there.

PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON



Homage paid to

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Mourners from all strata -- children, elderly men and women, housewives, businessmen, children of the martyred intellectuals -- laid wreaths in tribute at the altar of the memorial marking the Martyred Intellectuals Day.

While they remembered the contributions of the illustrious citizens and vowed to build the country in the light of their ideologies, they also demanded justice for the systematic massacre in 1971 intended to cripple the nation that was soon to emerge as independent Bangladesh.

Not only the culprits but also the organisations that had links with the pre-planned killings must be brought to book, they said.

Being aware of the imminent defeat in the nine-month-long war, Bangalee collaborators, particularly from Al-Badr force, executed the Pakistan army's blueprint for elimination of teachers, writers, doctors, lawyers, journalists and other professionals in the then East Pakistan.

Al-Badr was formed by the leaders and activists of Islami Chhatra Sangha, the then student wing of the Jamaat-e-Islami that fought tooth and nail to thwart the birth of Bangladesh, according to historical documents.

It picked up professionals and eminent personalities in similar fashion from their residences, and tortured and killed them, just days before Bangalees' victory in the Liberation War on December 16, 1971.

Recalling the fateful day, Nuzhat Chowdhury, daughter of martyred physician Alim Chowdhury, demanded trial of the Jamaat-e-Islami as an organisation for its role during the war.

"Jamaat must be banned."

"Although we have achieved political victory, our ideological battle is yet to be over... We have to root out the ideology that drove the killers to kill my father," Nuzhat said.

Jamaat formed Al-Badr force that was particularly responsible for the killing of intellectuals, said Shomi Kaiser, daughter of martyred journalist Shahidullah Kaiser.

"The philosophy of Jamaat cannot be wiped out with the execution of one [convicted war criminal] Quader Mollah and some others... We have to fight continuously against the philosophy."

"We have to take the country forward fulfilling the dreams of its great sons," added Shomi, a prominent actress.

Asked how the government would proceed with the trial of Jamaat, Liberation War Affairs Minister AKM Mozammel Haque said the party identified as a party of war criminals should not have the right to continue doing politics.

A bill amending the relevant law to empower the International Crimes Tribunal to try and punish organisations for war crimes will be placed in the next parliamentary session for approval, he said.

"Those who committed crimes in 1971 in the name of religion should be tried. The people of the country also want their trial," the minister added.

Shekhar Mondal, a teacher and a resident of Rayerbazar, came there with his two children.

"I want my children to know the history of the Liberation War and the sacrifice these citizens made for the victory. That's why I brought them here," he said.

Kendrio Khelaghar Asar, an organisation that works for children, organised a mock mass killing of intellectuals at the Rayerbazar memorial. An exhibition of photos and paperclips of the war attracted people's attention at the graveyard.

Meanwhile, Projonmo'71, a platform of children of Liberation War martyrs, demanded that the government take back the Independence Award given to Sarsina Pir Shah Abu Jafar Muhammad Saleh.

Though Jafar was a leader of collaborators of the Pakistan Army and was arrested immediately after the war for his role, he was given the award in 1980 by Ziaur Rahman's government, it said holding a human chain at the graveyard.

MIRPUR MAUSOLEUM

Earlier in the day, President Abdul Hamid and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina placed wreaths at Martyred Intellectuals' Mausoleum in the capital's Mirpur. They then stood in solemn silence for some time as the bugle played the last post.

Flanked by senior Awami League leaders, Hasina placed another wreath at the mausoleum as the AL chief.

Speaker Shirin Sharmin Chaudhury, Jatiya Party Chairman HM Ershad, BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia, Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal President Hasanul Haq Inu and Workers Party President Rashed Khan Menon also laid wreaths to pay respects.

Different socio-cultural and political organisations, educational institutions as well as people from all walks of life then paid their tributes.

SECTOR COMMANDERS' FORUM

The Sector Commanders' Forum (SCF)-Liberation War '71 demanded trial of Jamaat as a criminal organisation for its role in the Liberation War at a human chain at Rayerbazar Martyred Intellectuals' Graveyard in the capital yesterday.

Placing wreaths at the graveyard, it also demanded that the war crimes trial and execution of the convicted war criminals be expedited.

SCF Chairman KM Shafiullah, its Vice-president Abu Osman Chowdhury, around a dozen of its leaders, family members of martyred freedom fighters participated in the human chain.

DHAKA UNIVERSITY

To mark the Martyred Intellectuals Day, black flags were hoisted atop different buildings on the university campus.

Students, teachers and staff gathered at the base of Aparajaya Bangla and laid wreaths at the memorials in Jagannath Hall and Shahidullah Hall.

Killing grounds left uncared for

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brothers, sister-in-law and two children fled on March 23. They first went to his uncle's home in Nilkhet but after March 25, they moved to Aricha.

Shahjahan left behind his father Sheikh Abdul Malek, 96, and brother Abdul Gani, 9, considering their age. Some Bihar families close to them protected the two for a while but eventually they had to give in to the overwhelming number of pro-Pakistan Biharis.

"The Biharis tied my young brother and father together, beat them up and set them on fire," said businessman Shahjahan, recalling the brutality of the Biharis on March 25.

On that very day, the Biharis had killed six of a family, including a day-old child, and dumped the bodies into a ditch close to what is now ECB Chattar on the Mirpur-12-Airport Road.

"Nearly 150 Bangalees were picked up from various places in Mirpur, brutally killed and dumped into that ditch," said Abdul Rahman, 56, of Kalapani, who witnessed recovery of skeletons of those killed.

The skeletons were buried at the Martyred Intellectuals' Graveyard in Mirpur in 1973, and now there is no trace of the dumping ground and none of this generation know about it.

"I lost my father and brother. We know the killing spot, but nothing is there to mark the spot. It is so painful," said Shahjahan.

Many such killing fields and mass graves have been left unprotected and unrecognised and unmarked for more

than 43 years.

According to the Liberation War Museum, there are 467 killing fields and mass graves across the country, and 22 are in Dhaka city alone. Kalapani was not even on the list.

The liberation war affairs ministry, however, has only record of 204 such places. There was no record of Kalapani there either.

The Daily Star correspondent visited 25 killing fields and mass graves in Dhaka city and found no mark or sign in at least 15. The memories of those who witnessed the killings, however, were still fresh.

In Alobdi of Mirpur, there were five wells that were filled with bodies during the war. At a low-lying paddy field there a few thousand Bangalees were killed, according to Ali Akbar, 54, a resident of Alobdi.

"I was forced to dump the body of my cousin into a well just after the Biharis and the Pakistan army killed him," said Akbar, a lucky survivor.

Alobdi is also not in the records of the government, even though a war crimes tribunal convicted Jamaat leader Quader Mollah for taking part in the killing of 344 people there.

Rustam Ali Mollah, a witness of the Mohammadpur Physical Training Institute torture cell, said, "Around 1,500 people, including intellectuals, lawyers, and doctors, had been tortured and killed there and many women were raped."

In 1971, he was working with freedom fighters as an informant.

and one at Dhanmondi Government Boys High School.

"Razakars and the Pakistan army used a then one-and-half-storey house at West Nakhhalpara as a torture cell. Many Bangalees, including Rumi, son of Shaheed Janani Jahanara Imam and Altaf Mahmud, lyricist of Aamar bhayier rokte rangano ekusse February, were tortured there, said freedom fighter Jahir Uddin Jalal, who also faced torture but managed to escape.

"When I was taken to the torture cell I saw all the fingers of the right hand of Altaf Mahmud cut off, the eyes of Rumi was damaged and his right leg and back were broken. Other freedom fighter were in similar condition," he said.

Md Alauddin Kazi, a cleaner of the Dhanmondi school in 1971, said the Pakistan army would bring in Bangalees from places and then take them somewhere else. "I often found blood stains in a room while cleaning," he said.

There is also no mark at the killing field where the Institute of Mental Health and Hospital now stands at Sher-e-Bangla Nagar. The staff quarters of the Agricultural Training Institute used to be there.

Abu Taher, former driver of the training institute, told The Daily Star that he had seen bodies, with their hands, legs tied and blindfolded, dumped inside the boundaries of two staff quarters. One of the 10 bodies had an EPR Comilla uniform, he added.

In Sayedabad, there were 14 jheels between Koratitola (now Sayedabad bus stop) and Dholpur. Bodies of Bangalees

were dumped in most of the waterbodies, said Mohammad Solim Uddin, a freedom fighter and a resident of Dholpur. There is no mark, sign, monument or memorial there.

The killing field at Shiyalbari in Mirpur is also unmarked.

"After the Liberation War, I along with many others found piles of several hundred skeletons at a family graveyard in Shiyalbari near Road-6 and a well between Road-6 and Road-7 in Shiyalbari almost full with bodies," said Md Abul Hossain, 65, who had escaped the Biharis' onslaught.

Mofidul Haque, trustee of Liberation War Museum, said a social initiative was necessary to protect these places and to preserve the memories of martyrs for the next generation.

He said it could be done through small and innovative ways.

Liberation War Affairs Secretary MA Hannan said they had sent a project proposal, to cost Tk 250 crore, for protecting the killing fields and mass graves across the country. The proposal was with the planning commission and they would start work after getting the approval of Ecneec.

The Thataribazar killing field, Bosila Etakhola (now Kaderabad housing in Mohammadpur), Shimirtek killing field, Lohar Bridge killing field at Gabtali (beside Amin Bazar bridge), several mass graves in Mohammadpur, the killing field in Rokeya Hall of Dhaka University, the mass grave in Adabor and the killing field in Sharengbari in Mirpur have no mark or sign of identification.