



The flimsy mud hut is what is now left of the 'royal house' of the 'king' of Urangs at Balurchar of Sylhet Sadar upazila. Right, powerful people have grabbed and walled off pieces of land of the ethnic group members. Some structures were also built on those lands. The photos were taken last week.

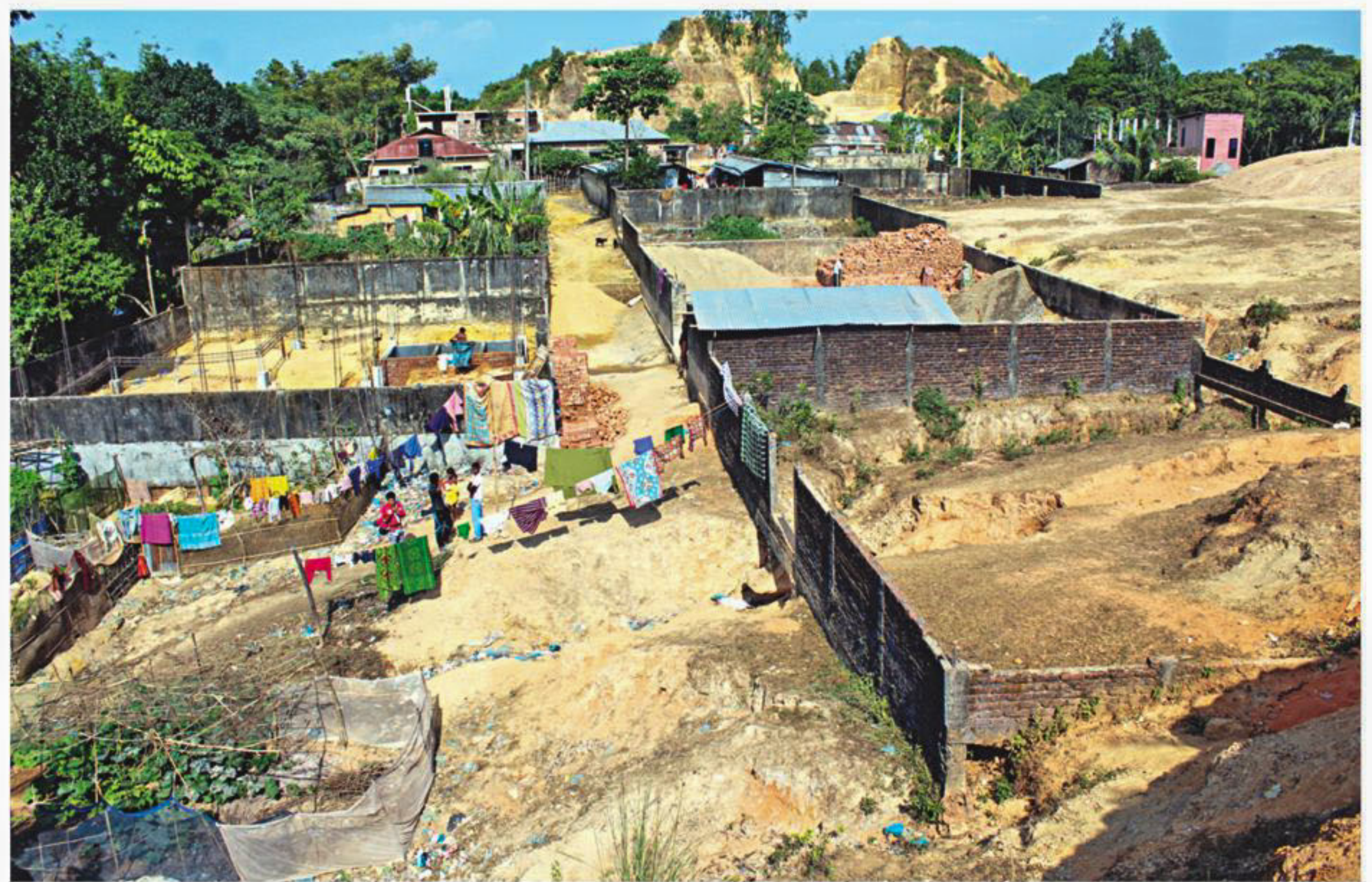


PHOTO: STAR

Land gone, so is his kingdom

FROM PAGE 1
They said that after grabbing all of their cropland, local influential people were now trying to grab the last remaining 3.52 acres of their land.

The king lives in a poorly walled house while his brother, Somra Urang, who too is treated as a king, lives in a hut with his family.

King Rathindra said the Urang people had come in Sylhet, led by king

Ravi Urang, father of the present king Rathindra, from Rachi district, India during British rule to work in tea estates in this region.

Most of the Urang people work in different tea estates in Sylhet region including Mirtinga tea estate, Shatgaon tea estate in Moulvibazar and Chandpur and Begumkhan tea estates in Habiganj district, he said.

All the children of "the royal fam-

ily", except for only two, are now working as tea garden workers.

Raja Rathindra told The Daily Star that "the royal family" had owned a total of 70 acres of land till 2000 but influential people had already grabbed almost all of his family's land.

He said others in the community had had similar experience and all the land owned by king Somra Urang had already been grabbed.

He said land grabbers had driven Ratan Urang, Narod Urang, Birasha Urang and Gohur Urang out of their land.

Earlier, UP chairman Abdul Mosabbir forced his cousins, Shorma Urang and Kumi Urang, out of their land, he said.

They are now sheltered in Daldali tea garden in Sylhet Sadar.

The Urang people now fear that

influential people would grab the last remaining bigas of land belonging to the community.

However, Abdul Mosabbir denied all allegations against him.

"I did not grab any land belonging to the Urang people. I actually bought the land," he said.

Contradicting the UP chairman, Faruq Mahmud Chowdury, president of Sylhet unit Sushasoner Jonno

Nagorik, said the basic rights of the Urang people were being violated.

"The responsibility of the state is to ensure the security of the Urang community. The government should take rapid action against the land grabbers," he said.

Sanjeeb Drong, general secretary of Bangladesh Adivasi Forum, said the Urang people must get justice as the land grabbed from them "belongs to them as per the ILO Convention-107".



Prof Abul Barkat speaks at a seminar on land laws of Bangladesh at The Daily Star Centre yesterday. Seated next to him are (left to right) Advocate Rana Dasgupta, Fazole Hossain Badsha MP, Land Minister Shamsur Rahman Sharif, Manusher Jonno Foundation Executive Director Shaheen Anam and lawmaker Sagufta Yasmin. PHOTO: STAR

Land rights lost in so many laws

FROM PAGE 1
are increasing every day, he said.

People have to spend around Tk 24,860 crore a year to resolve these cases. Disposal of a case takes nine and a half years on average, meaning it would require 2.70 crore years to dispose of the 25 lakh pending cases, he added.

Land Minister Shamsur Rahman Sharif, who was present as chief guest, said land is the main cause of conflicts and filing of cases.

The government is sincere in resolving land-related problems and establishing land rights of the poor and marginal people. But it has not been able to do so because of many age-old problems and legal tangles it inherited from its predecessors, he said.

Even in his constituency, there are Hindu families whose land became vested property, said the minister.

Citing an example, he said though the members of a Hindu family whom he knows personally still live in his constituency, their land was recorded

as vested property in official documents.

Rajshahi Lawmaker Fazole Hossain Badsha, who was present as special guest, said indigenous people have been going through untold sufferings over land issues.

It is difficult for marginal, poor and indigenous people to protect their land under the existing system, he said.

The government should make an arrangement which would protect the interest of poor indigenous people, said Badsha, also convener of the parliamentary caucus on indigenous people.

Advocate Rana Dasgupta, prosecutor of the International Crimes Tribunal, said the vested property act goes against the spirit of the Liberation War, but successive governments kept that law. And vested groups have grabbed lands of thousands of Hindu families, taking advantage of that law.

The present government seems eager to settle the issue and return

vested properties to their real owners. But bureaucrats created many problems and even ignored orders of the prime minister in many cases, said Rana.

Another special guest, lawmaker Sagufta Yasmin Emily, said it is not easy to resolve land-related problems. Bureaucrats don't want to resolve many problems because they wish to benefit from those.

Sagufta said she wanted to provide land to landless people in her constituency but couldn't do so in many cases because of some bureaucrats who didn't want that to happen.

Manusher Jonno Foundation Executive Director Shaheen Anam, who moderated the session, said a land grabber cannot be more powerful than the state.

Mentioning that the present government has already made many progressive laws, she hoped that the government would reform the land-related laws.

Khaleda draws flak

FROM PAGE 1
European countries' Holocaust Denial Act, with provisions of punishment for denial of historically established facts and settled issues.

The BNP chief, in her first public address in more than a year on Monday, said, "There are controversies over exactly how many freedom fighters were killed in the Liberation War. There are also many books and documents on the controversies."

Khaleda's comment came hot on the heels of Pakistan's denial last month of committing any war crimes or atrocities in Bangladesh during the nine-month bloody war.

Official figure of the war death toll is 30 lakh (three million). Some 2.5 lakh (a quarter million) women were raped by the Pakistani occupation forces and their local collaborators. About 10 million people fled the country to take shelter in India, while millions more were internally displaced.

Experts said in case of war that involved atrocities carried out in vast areas for a considerably long time, headcount can never be the basis for determining the number of casualties. The figure of genocide victims is always determined by the victims' country.

After the World War-II, the allied forces claimed that the Nazi forces had killed six million Jews. Though the lawyers for the Nazi war criminals at the Nuremberg Tribunal and later Nazi sympathisers questioned the figure, the official figure remains six million, as was provided by the allied governments.

To prevent distortion of history, 14 European nations enacted Holocaust Denial Act under which denial of the genocide figure of WW-II is a punishable offence. Even the countries which were among the perpetrators of the Holocaust, including Austria and Germany, have banned Holocaust denial, they said.

MA Hasan, convener of the War Crimes Facts Finding Committee, told The Daily Star that the number of martyrs was finalised considering

all the aspects. The findings of the committee's research also support the official estimate.

"There are some national issues which should not be debated. Like the national anthem, the national flag and the country's sovereignty. The figure of Liberation War martyrs is one such issue which no one should question," said Hasan, also a freedom fighter.

"In 1971, we fought for dignity, truth and justice and the martyrs laid down their lives for the cause ... By questioning the figure of martyrs, she [Khaleda] eventually questioned her own dignity and integrity," said Hasan.

"This [figure of martyrs] is not someone's kitchen talk that you can put a question mark over it," he said, adding that her comment would only serve the interest of Pakistan and its collaborators.

Mofidul Hoque, trustee of the Liberation War Museum, said the figure of martyrs must be treated with due sensitivity and respect.

"But her [Khaleda] comment shows utter disrespect to the millions who laid down their lives and perished in the black hole of genocide in 1971," he said.

Eminent war crimes researcher Shahrir Kabir on Monday said the stance of Pakistan, the Jamaat and the BNP regarding the 1971 genocide and the ongoing war crimes trial is the same. "I was not surprised by her comment."

"She simply reconfirmed her stance," said Shahrir, also executive president of Ektattor Ghatak Dalal Nirmul Committee that has been campaigning for war crimes trial for more than two decades.

In a press release yesterday, the committee said that through her comment, Khaleda proved that she was still loyal to Pakistan and demanded that she offer an apology.

After the Liberation War, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and the government which led the Liberation War repeatedly said that the Pakistan occupation forces and their local collaborators killed 30

lakh people and different international media also put the same number.

Referring to the example of Holocaust Denial Act in Europe, the Nirmul Committee said, "If such acts are not enacted in Bangladesh and the BNP comes to power in future, the history and the spirit of the Liberation War will disappear and the attempt to belittle the war martyrs will not stop."

Prosecutor of the International Crimes Tribunal Rana Dasgupta said, "Although Khaleda Zia is a widow of a freedom fighter, she is making comments in the tone of Pakistan and Jamaat."

He said perpetrators of such crimes always tried to question the figure of martyrs to create controversy over the issue and even the trial of such crimes. "Now, Khaleda Zia is trying to do so."

Another Prosecutor, Tureen Afroz, demanded that the government formulate a law immediately so that no one could deny historically established facts regarding the 1971 war.

Asif Munier, son of martyred intellectual Prof Munier Chowdhury, said Khaleda's comment was not only disrespectful for the martyrs' families but also for the entire nation. "However, I was not surprised because there is a trend to distort history in our country. And by such comments, we do not get confused because only truth will prevail."

Bangladesh Workers Party said Khaleda made the comment to make the atrocities of Pakistani army and their local collaborators look trifle. The party demanded Khaleda be brought to book for siding with war criminals.

The Central Command Council of Bangladesh Muktiyoddha Sangsad also blasted Khaleda for making "cooked up, false, fabricated, confusing and ill-motivated comment".

Besides, the social media was flooded with sharp criticisms of the former prime minister for the remark.

JU proctor

FROM PAGE 1
asked the BCL men to confine a pharmacy department professor to an auditorium until they get "justice".

Teachers and students are now demanding legal action against the proctor.

On December 18, the pharmacy department arranged a reunion marking its silver jubilee at the Zahir Raihan Auditorium on campus. During a cultural programme in the evening, some BCL activists locked in altercation with students over taking a sick student to hospital.

A group of students from Bangabandhu Hall, led by BCL activist Mohidul Islam Russell, a master's student of pharmacy department, then started beating up students with chains and belts. Russell later on fired two shots, students said in a complaint to the proctor.

Mydul Islam Sifat and Hasan Mahmud Farid of Mir Mosharrar Hossain Hall (MH) were injured.

When around 25 BCL leaders and

activists of MH met pharmacy department chairman Prof Sukalyan Kumar Kundu, the teacher asked them to inform the university proctor of the matter.

Bashirul Haque, deputy social welfare secretary of JU BCL unit, then called the JU proctor and recorded the conversation. Proctor Tapan Kumar Saha refused to take any action saying he was not aware of the programme and that he had not been invited.

During the 1 minute 27 second conversation, Proctor Tapan said, "Catch him [Prof Sukalyan] and confine him there. Sit there and say 'we would not leave the venue unless we get justice'."

Proctor Tapan told Bashirul: "Campus is our responsibility, but whom did he [Sukalyan] inform about the programme or whom did he invite?"

Contacted, Proctor Tapan said he did not say anything with ill motive or with the intention to create unrest on campus.

"I told them to go to Prof Sukalyan for a solution and so that none gets involved in any trouble," he told The Daily Star yesterday after his conversation was leaked.

Angered by the incident, teacher and student bodies of JU demanded legal action against the proctor.

Prof Mafruhi Satter, secretary of JU Teachers Association (JUTA) condemned the incident said they would hold a meeting of the executive committee today on next course of action regarding the issue.

In a press statement, JU Chhatra Union termed the telephone conversation "inflammatory" and demanded legal action against the proctor.

It said instead of taking measures to amicably solve the problem, the proctor instigated BCL men to foil a reunion programme.

Prof Amir Hossain of economics department said, "It should never have happened and further formal steps should be taken from our side after holding meetings with teachers."

Give refuge to Bangladeshi

FROM PAGE 1
The letter is signed by representatives of seven US-based organisations, including Pen American Center, and France-based Reporters Without Borders.

Expressing deep concern, the groups said dozens more were receiving threats publicly on social media or over the phone from identifiable non-state groups who have acted on their threats and rhetoric repeatedly in the past.

These writers are unable to seek protection from their own government that "at times asks them to resort to self-censorship for their security or leave the country", they said in the letter.

The groups suggested that the US grant "humanitarian parole" to a limited number of high-profile Bangladeshi secularists at imminent risk of attack.

The "dire situation" they are facing falls under the criteria for giving such opportunity, they said.

The US Citizenship and Immigration Services grant humanitarian parole based on "urgent humanitarian reasons or if there is a significant public benefit" for a temporary period or the length of the emergency or humanitarian situation, according to the official website of Department of Homeland Security.

"If the United States is unable to grant humanitarian parole to all writers facing these circumstances, we would urge you to mobilize likeminded governments so that other international placements can be secured, including in countries that can offer expedited refugee determinations."

Islamist groups have published "hit lists" of secular Bangladeshi bloggers, writers and publishers, which have names of those attacked or killed and those they named as their future targets, the groups said.

Amid such a situation, the organisations have received several requests from those at risk asking for help for their relocation to safety outside the country, according to the letter.

Until now, the Bangladesh government has proved unable to stop such attacks or provide necessary security to the bloggers and publishers. The letter also pointed out that they do not qualify for UNHCR assistance as they are living in their home country and "are not displaced."

"Should parole be secured, we stand ready to mobilize our networks to assist these writers once they arrive in the United States," the letter reads.

Human Rights Watch, Human Rights First, Freedom House, City of Asylum Pittsburgh, Center for Inquiry and International Freedom to Publish Committee Association of American Publishers are the six other organisations that signed the letter.