

JAMUNA NEAR BANGABANDHU BRIDGE

14 punished for illegal sand lifting

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Tangail

A mobile court yesterday awarded punishment to 14 people for illegally lifting sand near the Bangabandhu Bridge in Bhupur upazila of Tangail.

Of them, 12 were both fined and jailed for different terms and two others were fined only, said Mohiuddin Faruq, commander of Crime Prevention Company-3 of Rapid Action Battalion-12.

The court fined the 14 sand lifters Tk 21,50,000. Of the amount, Tk 9,50,000 was realised instantly, he added.

Executive Magistrate Kaiser Khasru, who led the court, handed out punishments to the sand lifters for defying the Balu Mohal O Mati Babosthapon Aina, 2010 (Sand Fields and Soil Management Act, 2010).

Earlier in the day, the elite force raided eight sand ghats (places for gathering extracted sand) in Pathaikandi and Govindasi areas, arrested the sand lifters and produced them before the mobile court later.

Organised syndicates of influentials

have been extracting sand from the Jamuna river near the bridge in Bhupur, violating the government order.

Though using dredger or lifting sand within five kilometres of the bridge is banned, they are using powerful dredgers there, posing a threat to the country's biggest bridge.

The mindless sand lifting near the sensitive spots stopped only for a few days after the district administrations sealed those spots through mobile court drives around three months ago, sources said.

The influential syndicates having ruling party clout again started lifting sand worth crores of taka from the same spots. They give a share of the money to a section of the ruling party powerful leaders, locals alleged.

However, the sand lifters claimed that they are using the spots as places for gathering extracted sand which they took from Sirajganj.

While visiting the area on Monday, this correspondent found that sand was being lifted from eight spots in Sirajkandi, Nikrail and Govindasi areas at the east end of the bridge.

40 dead tigers found

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response to international pressure over suspected trafficking and abuse.

The Buddhist temple in Kanchanaburi province west of Bangkok had become a tourist destination where visitors snapped selfies with bottle-fed cubs.

But the temple has been investigated for suspected links to wildlife trafficking and abuse. A raid that began on Monday is the latest move in a tug-of-war since 2001 to bring the tigers under state control.

Tiger parts are used in traditional Chinese medicine.

The 40 dead tiger cubs were found in a freezer in a kitchen area, said Adisorn Nuchdamrong, deputy director-general of the Department of National Parks.

"Foreign volunteers at the temple today told us about it and showed us the freezer. Perhaps they felt what the temple is doing isn't right," Adisorn said.

"They must be of some value for the temple to keep them," he said. "But for what is beyond me."

Officials wearing protective masks displayed the bodies of the cubs to media at the temple. Also on display was the body of a Binturong, a protected species commonly known as a bearcat, which

the authorities found with the cub carcasses.

The temple said in a comment on its Facebook page that wildlife authorities had already been aware that the carcasses were in the freezer. The carcasses of cubs that had died had been kept, rather than cremated, since 2010 on the instructions of a former vet, it said.

Adisorn told Reuters the department had not previously known about the cubs.

"The temple has notified us when grown tigers die, but never the cubs," he said.

Officials have moved 61 live tigers from the temple since Monday, Adisorn said, leaving 76 still there.

Thailand has long been a hub for the illicit trafficking of wildlife and forest products, including ivory. Exotic birds, mammals and reptiles, some of them endangered species, can often be found on sale in markets.

"It's clear that the welfare of the tigers is not a priority and their lives are full of abuse and commercial exploitation for the entertainment of tourists," said Jan Schmidt, Asia-Pacific Wildlife Adviser at World Animal Protection, in a statement.



Guardians of children have a good time at the school after dropping the children, inset, there. PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON

Times well spent

TAMANNA KHAN

When Farida Akhter, 65, first took up the responsibility of accompanying her granddaughter between home and school, she had no idea of the things she would gain from this otherwise tiring, five-days-a-week journey between Dhanmondi and Bailey Road.

But look at her as she perches on a short brick boundary wall while munching peanuts and chattering away happily with guardians of other children.

"I have now so many daughters like these two sitting on either side of me," she says introducing two young mothers waiting for their children outside a school gate at Dhanmondi.

"My time passes by easily chatting with them about a lot of issues from children's problems to our lives."

She made friends with a lot of guardians, mostly women, of other kids. But it is not just

friendship that the guardians make here as they wait outside the school gates for their kids' school to end.

Take Farida's friend Shahnaz Hossain, 29. She uses her time to

says the young mother.

So the three hours she spends every day waiting to take her child home is time well-spent for her.

However, it is not entirely out of their choice that the guardians spend their time, rain or shine, outside the school gates.

"On regular school days, I drop my children and go home and later come back to pick them up. But during exams, going back home in Green Road and coming to get my son from his school in Dhanmondi, is a total waste of time and money," said Zakia Salekin, 40, referring to the perennial traffic and high rickshaw fare.

"We chat, we walk, go window shopping and sometimes we actually shop necessary items," says Zakia. "This friendship we develop here becomes so strong that sometimes we spend more time with them than with our relatives."



advertise her boutique house in Mohammadpur.

"We have a group of 15-20, mostly mothers. They come to my shop at least once a week,"

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Much ado about budget briefcase 'Mega' challenge

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Lord Callaghan was the first chancellor to break with custom in 1965 when he used a new box.

Chancellor George Osborne used the Gladstone's briefcase for his first budget in 2010 but used a new one in 2011.

This tradition has been followed by some commonwealth countries, including Bangladesh and India.

With a briefcase in his hand, Finance Minister AMA Muhith will enter parliament this afternoon. All eyes will be on him; what he brings out of his briefcase.

Even though it is not a magic box for sure, everyone will be expecting some good news from his briefcase.

Some of his proposals may generate praise and criticism. He is the finance minister, not Father Christmas and his briefcase carry no chocolate or gifts.

A finance ministry official close to Muhith said this year the minister would use a brown (chocolate colour) briefcase instead of the black he used in last six years.

Ministry officials used to bring some sample of briefcases from Baitul Mukarram market before every budget. Muhith chose one among them. This time he preferred the chocolate colour one, the official said.

All the briefcases he had used are preserved in his home with care. A finance ministry official said, adding that he might give them to a museum.

Muhith's predecessor late Saifur Rahman had placed 12 budgets in parliament during the governments led by Ziaur Rahman, Abdus Sattar and Khaleida Zia.

A former finance ministry official who was close to Saifur said all his briefcases were preserved at the home of the former minister.

Saifur used a new briefcase every time to carry budget statements to parliament. The finance ministry officials collected them from different markets in the capital, said the former official.

India has also been following the Westminster tradition. But unlike in Britain, there is no single briefcase being passed on from one Indian finance minister to the next.



Gladstone's Budget Box, made around 1860.

In early 1900's, one Canadian finance minister followed the Westminster tradition by entering the House of Commons with his "little red dispatch box".

The next four finance ministers of Canada did not continue the practice. Since 1960s, Canadian finance ministers started wearing new shoes on budget day. And it has become a practice there.

Budget day is crucial as well as special for any finance minister. He alone runs the show for the day.

By tradition, the British chancellors may drink alcohol during the budget speech if they wish. In the past, some have chosen to drink mineral water while other opted for whiskey, gin and tonic, and brandy.

Drinking something except water is prohibited inside our parliament. One may drink water taking permission of the Speaker. Muhith may drink water after he starts the budget speech.

There is a fundamental difference in dealing with the budgetary proposals between UK, India and Bangladesh.

In UK and India, MPs get adequate time to discuss and scrutinise the proposed budget both in the

chamber and in the committee levels.

They give high importance on the proposals. It is because the national budget is not just a technical instrument compiling income and expenditure. It outlines the government's views of the socio-economic state of the nation.

The budget is a critically important document in ensuring transparency, accountability, comprehensiveness and good governance.

By providing a detailed description of proposed expenditure, this allows parliament and the people to "know where the money goes" and thus increases transparency.

But the practice in Bangladesh is different. No parliamentary committee is allowed to scrutinise the budgetary proposals. MPs get scope to join the discussion on the budget in the chamber.

Yet, MPs speak little on the issue as they spend most of the time either by launching verbal attack on their political opponents or praising their government and top leaders.

This practice keeps destroying the significance of placing budgetary proposals in parliament, turning the Jatiya Sangsad into a rubber stamp.

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thanks to the global slump; interest rate -- a main contention of the businesspeople -- has come down considerably; foreign exchange reserve is good; and debt burden is low.

A perfect happy story altogether. Very welcoming. Except if you glance at the gathering gloom under the boom. Somehow, these positives of the economy are not being translated into investment.

Public investment in mega projects is growing fast, however. But each and every vital mega project is taking more than their estimated time to complete. And with time, their costs are rising.

This spells serious repercussion on their economic rate of return and our fiscal management. We are getting the same road but at a much higher cost; the same flyover at an exorbitant price. We could build almost two Padma bridges with the cost of one. This simply does not make any business case.

There is no doubt that Bangladesh needs a big budget to get on to higher growth. But it does not have to mean waste of resources. The concern should now be whether we can do more projects with the same money.

The method of investment is also debatable. The government is going for relatively costly source, namely savings certificates, while cheap money is lying idle in banks.

At the core of this delay are the inefficient bureaucracy and procedural cumbersomeness.

Bangladesh has been unsuccessful in galvanising its bureaucracy that has been politicised heavily over the years. The inefficiency is now costing heavily as our development budget gets bigger and bigger. One may be well-trained to fly a small Cessna. But you cannot expect him to fly the Dreamliner with the same training. Otherwise, how can you explain the delays? Or the pathetic 50 percent implementation of the Annual Development Plan in 10 months?

In the following two months, a big chunk of the ADP will be pumped out, leaving out the question of quality. In the end, everybody would look at the figures; the real roads and markets will turn into

projects and the projects into figures of 90 percent or so.

Talking about figures, who cares if figures do not reconcile with other supporting numbers as has been the case of GDP growth this year. The World Bank was the first to point out that the growth indicators do not support a 7.05 percent GDP growth this year.

Whether numbers reconcile or not, some serious matters are surfacing on the horizon in the fiscal side because of the trends. Revenue collection has fallen short of target -- and there is little chance of any future jump -- while expenditure has increased quite a bit. Exports have declined, and the weak global conditions imply risks for exports and workers abroad. As debts pile up on account of big projects, incomes fall.

For the first time in history, Bangladesh is going to enter a high debt trajectory with poor income situation (its revenue intake as percentage to GDP is the second lowest after Nigeria, as FitchRatings measures). This may pose a serious fiscal problem and maybe the possibility of a debt overhang although many would debate that Bangladesh still has a lot of fiscal space. The big \$28 billion foreign exchange reserve is also a breathing space, for now at least. But what would happen when payments on the debts begin is something to ponder about.

On top of this, unemployment, especially of the educated class as faced by Minhaz's son, is nagging constantly. Every year, about 3,00,000 jobs are being created but that's hardly enough for the two million new entrants in the job market. Jobless educated youths pose political and security risks to any country.

Unemployment has its roots in the lack of investment and the nature of investment. Not very surprisingly private investment has dipped as public investment has gone up. Entrepreneurs are weary to invest and you cannot blame them when Bangladesh fares poorly in the World Bank's governance indicator (it ranks 174th among 189 countries in the Bank's Ease of Doing Business report).

MP assaults

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describing those as false and fabricated. He made a counter allegation that the upazila election officer was collaborating with Jamaat-Shibir men.

Election Commissioner Shah Nawaz said, "Action will definitely be taken against anyone, whoever they are, for committing crimes."

Talking to The Daily Star, Zahid said the lawmaker's Personal Secretary Tajul Islam, also an AL-nominated chairman aspirant of Baharchhara UP, gave him a list of around 200 people and asked him to appoint them as polling officials a few days ago.

He said some of them, who were eligible, were given election duties, but Tajul was not happy and demanded appointment of all the 200.

Following this, the lawmaker verbally abused him over the phone for not complying with his directive and threatened to teach him a lesson, he alleged.

"I informed this to the officer-in-charge of Banshkhali police by phone and wanted to file a general diary. But he said everything would be all right.

"In the morning [yesterday], the lawmaker asked me over the phone to go to the UNO's office. I went there around 11:30am accordingly."

As soon as he reached the UNO's office, supporters of the lawmaker locked the door from outside and the lawmaker started abusing him verbally and kept him asking why he was not following his instructions.

"When I protested against it, he became furious and started to beat me up," said Zahid.

Contacted, the lawmaker said, "There is no question of beating up the election officer and I have never abused him verbally.

"We have seen that 50 percent of the election officials have been appointed from Chakaria and Pekua upazilas of Cox's Bazar although there are sufficient eligible people in Banshkhali.

"We learned that Election Officer Zahid is collaborating with Jamaat-Shibir and appointed election officials as per their suggestion."

Asked, Md Alamgir, OC of Banshkhali Police Station, said the election officer did not tell him about the threat and did not discuss anything regarding filing a GD.

Earlier in December, AL lawmaker of Mymensingh-2 constituency Sharif Ahmed threatened a returning officer with dire consequences for not working in favour of a mayor candidate in Phulpur municipality poll.

Cost of doing business is high as rent seeking or in simple words corruption pervades. This is eroding competitiveness and making investment cumbersome and risky. No wonder capital flight continues unabated and companies from Singapore, Canada and Dubai regularly hold seminars in top Dhaka hotels about how to get citizenship through investment.

An interesting feature of this year's estimated growth shows a major part of it would come from the service sector which probably explains the unemployment question partly. As we know service sector does not generate as many jobs per every dollar as industries do. So growth comes but not jobs.

For populous countries like Bangladesh, it is important to have activities that employ people. While the economy has to be modernised, the development has to come in a balanced way. Against the background of the global torpor it would be important for the government to perk up industrial activities, especially in the small and medium category.

But these fiscal deficit, debt overhang or rent seeking matters little to Minhaz who worries about his own long retired life ahead. Bangladesh's demographic change is dramatic. With improved healthcare and higher nutrition intake, people now live up to 70 years.

But that has posed another kind of problem. As they retire at 60, they still remain active for a long time to come with health cost increasing.

With no pension scheme for the private sector -- both formal and informal -- and meagre sums for the public sector, the retirees slump into hardship as the capital market is anything but reliable and strong, deposit rates are low and other scopes of income limited.

Beyond various safety net programmes introduced by the government to help various disadvantaged groups, it is becoming a serious concern as to how to take care of the grey population.

So while we go on a joyride there are bumps ahead. Unless we have the seatbelts fastened the riders could be tossed off the trail.