

Take action against dishonest agencies

TIB urges govt over hajj mismanagement

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Following recent media reports on irregularities in hajj management and conning hajis, Transparency International Bangladesh has urged the government to ensure exemplary punishment for the hajj agencies involved in the wrongdoings.

In a press release yesterday, the TIB also requested the government to find out irregularities and corruption in this sector through an independent and neutral investigation.

"Like every year, different types of allegations, including cancellation of hajj flights, delay in hajj flight operation, failure to send pilgrims to Saudi Arabia even after taking money from them and providing them with low-

quality food, have been brought against several hajj agencies this year," said Iftekharuzzaman, TIB executive director.

If strict action is not taken against the agencies for their wrongdoings, they would do those things on a large scale, while the pilgrims would be affected financially and their plight would continue, he added.

Unfortunately, the government's hajj management authorities and the hajj agencies were blaming each other for the mismanagement and irregularities instead of taking any effective measures to solve the problem permanently, Iftekharuzzaman observed.

"It is really very depressing that the complaints of the victim pilgrims are

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Law enforcers, reporters and onlookers near the scene in Mirpur's Rupnagar where a militant was killed in a police raid last night.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

Eid-ul-Azha

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National Moon Sighting Committee at the Islamic Foundation yesterday, with Bazul Haque Harun, chairman of the parliamentary standing committee on the religious affairs ministry, in the chair.

The Eid-ul-Azha is celebrated on the 10th of Zilhaj month of the Hijri calendar.

The committee's decision followed evaluation of data and reports from all district administrations and offices of Islamic Foundation, Bangladesh Meteorological Department, and Bangladesh Space Research and Remote Sensing Organisation.

The Muslims celebrate Eid-ul-Azha to commemorate the true spirit of the sacrifice made by Hazrat Ibrahim (AS). On this day some 4,000 years ago Hazrat Ibrahim (AS) had offered to sacrifice his beloved son Hazrat Ismail (AS) who willingly submitted to the will of his father to please Allah.

But the Almighty in His benign mercy spared Hazrat Ismail (AS) and instead sent a ram to be sacrificed.

Risk of losing Sundarbans

FROM PAGE 1

canals and tributaries. If water is contaminated at one point, the entire forest would suffer. We have reasons to be concerned. We have enough scientific evidence that the coal-fired plant in Rampal and many business projects inspired by this will kill the forest.

We first heard about the project back in 2010 from the locals in the Sundarbans areas. They were already protesting the government decision. When the land acquisition for the plant began that year, a land protection committee was formed. But they failed to stop the land acquisition. They contacted us.

We found anomalies as we went there. The land acquisition began without any site clearance or environmental assessment. Before acquiring land for a project, there are certain procedures to be followed -- serving notices, consultations, dialogues with people and so on. In this case, there was nothing of this sort. Instead, people were being coerced, terrorised and threatened with eviction. We even heard threat of "crossfire" was made.

The people there are mostly poor and a section of them are low-caste Hindus. Both groups are helpless. Low-caste Hindus suffer even more. So it was easy for powerful people to displace them.

After we learnt about the plant, we tried to find the details. Firstly, we tried to understand the environmental impacts of coal plants around the world, including India, China, US and Australia. They have decades of experience. That's why studies on these are available. Moreover, we went through scientific studies on the Sundarbans itself, its special features, importance, sensitivity as well as vulnerability. To what extent can a mangrove forest like the Sundarbans endure abuse? How sensitive is it? Gradually we became convinced that the Rampal plant will surely wreak havoc on the forest.

TDS: But in the case of the Rampal project, the prime minister claimed necessary measures will be taken; therefore, the coal-fired plant won't affect the Sundarbans. Officials also argue that it is a unique forest which cannot be harmed so easily. It is also being said that oil and fertiliser tankers have sunk there but did not have any lasting

effect.

Prof Anu: Studies on the Sundarbans and coal-fired plants do not support these claims. All this rhetoric goes against simple commonsense.

If the government is capable of protecting the Sundarbans, then why is it failing to save the Buriganga and many other rivers from grabbing and pollution? It is a much easier and achievable job. If NTPC has the technology to do the impossible then why does it have such a bad record in India?

In fact, the government spokespersons aren't saying things based on their own understanding. They are just parroting the company's marketing propaganda. This is shameful. It has become clear the government is not at all serious about the Sundarbans; they appear pretty insensitive about saving the forest. For example, one adviser said that if necessary another Sundarbans will be created. It was before our 2013 long march.

Another argument that there was no disaster even after the sinking of tankers is also irresponsible. We haven't forgotten how the government responded to the sinking of a coal-laden ship in the Sundarbans. The UNDP and other studies showed that these will have long-term disastrous effect on the forest. And for the Rampal plant, hundreds more ships will transport coal through the Sundarbans. Just one accident -- and it will be the death of the Sundarbans.

TDS: But it is also said coal cannot contaminate water and it actually works as filter...

Prof Anu: Yes, I heard this unbelievable statement from the prime minister. It is a simple fact that there is a difference between coal (natural mineral) and charcoal (obtained by burning wood). We used to clean our teeth with charcoal when we were kids, but the one which is a natural mineral extracted from mines, contains toxic substance.

TDS: The prime minister said that high-quality coal will be brought from South Africa, Australia... it would be transported carefully... coal will not cause pollution...

Prof Anu: There is no evidence to back these claims. There is no instance in the

world that coal is being transported on a ship and water is not being polluted at all.

For the Rampal plant, 12,000 tonnes of coal will be shipped through the forest every day -- about 500 ships and 47 lakh tonnes in 365 days. It is not a valid argument that there is no risk of accident or pollution.

Then there is another serious issue -- burning of coal, 47 lakh tonnes a year. And it will be 14km off the forest -- in fact 4km. Because the buffer zone of the Sundarbans is considered as Ecologically Critical Area (ECA). The plant is just 4km from the ECA.

So, 47 lakh tonnes of coal burned there will create more than nine lakh tonnes of ash, of which 80% will be dry fly ash and the rest 20% bottom ash. This ash will contain many heavy metals, including arsenic, lead, mercury, nickel, vanadium, beryllium, barium, cadmium, chromium, selenium, and radium, which are dangerous if released into the environment.

TDS: But it's super critical technology...

Prof Anu: The EIA (Environmental Impact Assessment) report says super critical technology will be used. What we learnt from countries like India or Australia is that such technology can reduce pollution only by five to ten percent. So 90 percent pollution will be there.

Now they are talking about ultra-super critical technology. There is a limit to attempts to fool people. What technology will be used is already determined in the EIA. It is linked with expenditures, investment, etc. The company which got the construction job and those who will provide loans will follow the deals already signed. They will not let the cost go up.

The government has been playing hide and seek from the very beginning. People are being fed wrong information. We still don't know exactly from where the coal will come. They say coal will be imported from Australia or Indonesia. But we have doubts for obvious reasons.

Exim Bank is providing loans for the plant against sovereign guarantee from the Bangladesh government. According to the bank's own policy framework, it lends only in projects which ensure export of Indian products. We have seen

this happen with its previous loans to Bangladesh.

At the same time, media reports say Coal India has shown interest in supplying coal to the Rampal plant. They have a surplus of coal as some coal plants have been shutdown in India.

Analysing all these factors, we doubt that high-quality coal from Australia or Indonesia or South Africa will be used here.

TDS: How do you explain the contract? Don't you think it is a friendship contract between two countries?

Prof Anu: Our Power Development Board and India's NTPC have formed a friendship company. To us, this is no friendship company; it's something that will create permanent enmity between the two countries.

On paper, Bangladesh and India have 50-50 ownership. But NTPC is in the management. An Indian company is handling the construction work. The construction materials will be duty-free. Imported materials will be tax-free. Profit will be tax-free. Exim India will have a business by providing a loan, and very likely an Indian coal company will supply the coal.

This is not a win-win project; it's a win-lose project. Only Indian companies are the winners, for Bangladesh there will be only disaster, only irreparable loss, loss of the Sundarbans and also a huge financial burden on Bangladesh.

TDS: But Bangladesh will get electricity at a lower price, right?

Prof Anu: No, not at all. It will be costlier. Already we hear about Tk 8 to 9 per unit. According to analysis of International Energy Institute, it's more than Tk 9 if we consider hidden subsidies. In Bangladesh, electricity generated from gas costs about Tk 2. Power from rental/quick rental plants costs from Tk 12/13 to 16/17.

In the case of Rampal, coal electricity, which is supposed to be the cheapest, is going to cost about Tk 10. And the way project cost increases in Bangladesh and the way the whole process lacks transparency, the price would go up.

Besides, we don't yet know the price of the coal.

And if we follow standard cost-benefit analysis and include environmental and

social cost into the calculation, electricity from coal becomes the costliest electricity.

TDS: But whatever the government is doing is not illegal after all.

Prof Anu: The problem with existing laws is that those are not updated enough. Still, the plant won't be acceptable if we consider laws about water bodies, water, forest or river properly.

In fact the government has a lot to learn from India. They have long-time experience of coal-fired power plants. Because they know the impact better, they formed national green tribunal to scrutinise coal power projects. They also have formulated environmental guidelines in 2010 to check major loss from setting up thermal power projects. Even projects by NTPC in a number of cases were halted by the tribunal.

TDS: The prime minister has claimed that the Barapukuria coal power plant is not causing any damage to the environment. Why do you think Rampal plant will affect the Sundarbans?

Prof Anu: Evidence from the ground contradicts this claim. We got many field studies pointing to many issues like water pollution and problems relating to underground and drinking water and cultivation. Moreover, it is practically producing maximum of 125 megawatt; the Rampal plant is 10 times bigger. Most importantly, the Rampal plant is close to the Sundarbans.

TDS: If the plant is moved from Rampal will you still oppose it? Do you have any other alternative suggestions?

Prof Anu: Proper site selection requires transparent steps, people's consent, independent EIA and environmental and site clearance. But the government chooses coercion, muddling facts, and manipulating the EIA. If they can follow the right conditions and select site elsewhere, we have no problem. But people will never accept projects of corruption and destruction.

We also suggest exploring alternatives to coal. Since Bangladesh is densely populated, its land and water resources are all-important. Therefore, the impact of the coal power project is extraordinary here.

If the government can set up a power

plant by importing coal then what's wrong with importing gas? Its environmental and social costs are much lower. Secondly, we have huge potential of gas resources offshore, but the government is showing reluctance to develop national capability to explore and use gas for building big power plants. Thirdly, it is urgent to bring renewable energy to mainstream from the periphery. New technology is developing fast, cost is coming down and Bangladesh has high potential for that.

TDS: But countries like China, India and US are using coal plants. Don't we need development?

Prof Anu: Yes, we need development. And yes, these countries use coal as major source of power. But the present trend in those countries is that they are doing everything to phase out coal. We should not copy a hundred-year-old development model. When better technology, solar technology, etc were not available, they relied on coal. They were not fully aware of the impacts of coal. Now people across the globe are more aware and they are looking for alternatives.

We should not make ourselves a dumping ground of rejected technology; rather we should take advantage of newer ones.

Besides, we don't have the capacity the developed countries have built over the years to tackle disaster. We can't afford to spend billions of dollars if our water is polluted.

Another argument is that the level of our carbon emission is low -- so why worry? This is a stupid argument. You may compete over carbon emission. But how can you do it after attempting to destroy the Sundarbans?

The Sundarbans has a special role in the fight against climate change effects. The government is signing deals over climate change, bringing in funds but destroying the country's strongest shield in this battle -- the Sundarbans. We can't afford to lose the Sundarbans.

(Prof Anu Muhammad teaches economics at Jahangirnagar University. A political activist and writer, he is the member secretary of the National Committee to Protect Oil, Gas, Mineral Resources, Power and Ports. He is currently the frontman of the movement against the Rampal power plant being built close to the Sundarbans.)

Crisis turns into opportunity

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farming for dairy products and fattening cattle in order to become self-reliant," said Mohammad Shah Emran, who runs a farm at Trishal in Mymensingh.

The trend started after farmers made profits following the crisis in cattle supply from India, he said.

Emran started his farm, Shopno Dairy and Fisheries, with only three cows in early 2015. Today, it has 32 cows, and 14 of them are being fattened for beef.

Emran, also an administrator of Facebook group "Amra Dairy Farmers", said as far as he knew, 500 people started cattle farming in the last year.

"The total number of new farmers in this sector across the country would be huge," he said, adding that at least 60 people in his village in Trishal raise bulls and the number of cows there has also grown in recent years.

The Facebook group has around 3,500 members.

DLS estimates say nearly 88 lakh cattle are slaughtered annually in Bangladesh, of which almost 50 percent or even more are slaughtered during the Eid-ul-Azha, the second biggest religious festival of the Muslims.

In the past, over 20 lakh cattle were informally traded through the borders of Bangladesh and India every year, due to lax monitoring. It accounted for nearly \$1 billion annual business.

During that time, local farmers used to be less enthusiastic about cattle farming, fearing losses due to the huge influx of Indian cattle. Prices of sacrificial cattle remain low if the supply is high.

The flow, however, has become a trickle in the last two fiscal years because of a crackdown by the Indian authorities.

Bangladesh from neighbouring countries, mainly from India, in fiscal year 2015-16, down from 14 lakh the previous year, according to National Board of Revenue (NBR) data.

The number was around 21 lakh in 2013-14.

Following the fall in the supply of Indian cattle, beef prices rose in the domestic market in Bangladesh, encouraging local farmers to rear cattle, said farmers and traders.

"It seems locally reared and fattened cattle would be enough to meet Bangladesh's demand for meat this Eid," said Abu Ahmed Abdullah, owner of Ahmed Farmhouse, which has 150 cows, in Narayanganj.

Apart from areas adjacent to Dhaka, farmers in various other districts, particularly in Pabna, Sirajganj, Nilphamari and Patuakhali, have reared and fattened bulls for profit.

Low-cost loans, with a five percent interest rate, provided to farmers under Bangladesh Bank's refinance scheme also encouraged cattle farming.

DEPENDENCE ON INDIAN CATTLE DECREASING

Meanwhile, trade body leaders claim the dependence on Indian cattle would come down to 10% of the total demand from about 40% in recent past.

Robiul Alam, secretary general of Bangladesh Meat Merchants' Association (BMMA), said the dependence on Indian cattle has been going down for the last two years, adding that supply of locally-reared cattle was around 40 lakh or some 70 percent of total 55 lakh bulls and buffaloes slaughtered during the last Eid.

The supply of locally-farmed cattle would rise further this year, he said,

expecting that similar number of cattle would be slaughtered this year.

"Our dependence on Indian cattle will be only one-tenth of the demand the next year," said Robiul.

Department of Livestock Services said the supply of locally-reared cattle may rise to 44 lakh in the forthcoming Eid. It was 41 lakh during the Eid last year.

The number of cattle being fattened has increased 10 percent from last year to 33 lakh.

The supply of 44 lakh home-reared cattle would be around 80 percent of the total demand which DLS and association of tanners, meat, hide and skin merchants estimate at 50-55 lakh.

DLS DG Ajay Kumar Roy claimed that the number of locally-grown cattle that are ready for slaughtering rose to 1.14 crore this year from 1.09 crore in 2015.

"There will be no crisis [of sacrificial animals] ahead of Eid," he said.

DLS said the total number of cattle in Bangladesh increases every year.

The number rose to 2.37 crore in fiscal 2015-16 from 2.36 crore the previous year. Production of beef and milk also increased.

Total milk production rose four percent to 72.75 lakh tonnes in fiscal 2015-16 from 69.7 lakh tonnes the previous year, it said.

However, deficit remains. For example, milk deficiency stood at 74.16 lakh tonnes in fiscal 2015-16, said the department.

The country has to import huge amount of powdered milk and depend on Indian cattle for beef to meet domestic demand throughout the year.

Farmers and traders say the shortage can be reduced if the current enthusiasm for farming continues. But it depends a

lot on the restriction on informal cattle flow from India.

FEAR OF LOSSES

Many farmers incurred losses in the past years because of low prices after low quality Indian cattle were brought in ahead of Eid, said Mohammad Imran Hossain, owner of Sadeeq Agro near Mohammadpur Dam in Dhaka.

He said farming for beef and milk production has expanded in areas around Dhaka, encouraged by the reduced flow of cattle from neighbouring country.

"Not all of them [engaged in farming] are farmers. There are some big businessmen who have invested in cattle farming. Once they settle in, this will become an industry," said Imran, who has raised 350 bulls targeting the coming Eid festival.

Last year, his farm fattened 250 bulls.

"It seems that an industry is developing. But it will not sustain and grow unless we feel confident. Farmers fear losses following the arrival of a huge number of cattle from India. This fear has to be removed," said Ahmed, the owner of the farm in Narayanganj.

However, Bangladesh Meat Merchants' Association President Golam Mourtaza said there might be a crisis of sacrificial animals if cattle do not come from India.

He added a large number of cattle have been brought along the Indian border and are expected to be pushed into Bangladesh ahead of Eid.

Traders said the flow of cattle from the neighbouring country has increased in the recent weeks.

Some 6,000-7,000 cattle are being brought through borders in Lalmonirhat every day ahead of the festival, reports

our correspondent there.

BMMA Secretary General Robiul said 2-3 lakh cattle entered through various borders in the past weeks.

"Farmers had suffered losses for huge influx of cattle during the last three Eids. If this happens again, they will be discouraged to continue farming," he said.

PROSPECT FOR SELF-SUFFICIENCY

Farmers, traders and livestock officials said India's restriction on cattle flow has created scope for Bangladesh to become self-sufficient in milk and beef production.

The development of cattle farming is also expected to contribute to the \$1 billion leather and footwear industries.

They have urged the government to restrict informal import of cattle from India. They also demanded better veterinary and extension services along with increasing artificial insemination to improve milk and beef yield.

They have also urged the government to impose higher taxes on powdered milk and low cost cattle feed to discourage their use.

There is also demand for increasing the amount of loans from Bangladesh Bank's low-cost loan scheme.

The central bank launched the scheme for dairy farmers this January after forming a Tk 200 crore revolving fund, to make the country self-sufficient in milk production.

Ahmed, the owner of the farm in Narayanganj, said more and more cattle farmers should get funds from the scheme for a faster development of the sector.

Permission for import of semen of

improved breeds of cows should also be given to boost beef production, he added.

"With the required support, I am very much hopeful that we will be self-sufficient particularly in beef production within the next three years," he said.

BMMA Secretary General Robiul said Bangladesh is moving towards self-sufficiency in beef production and government's support is must in this regard.

He also suggested allocating fallow land for cattle farming and ensuring government funds for the development of the sector.

Imran, the owner of the farm in Mohammadpur, said the sector suffers from because of a crisis of veterinarians and poor extension service.

The issue should be addressed to prevent disease among cattle and to ensure their healthy growth. "A reduction in mortality will be a big boost for the sector," he said.

DLS DG Ajay said the number of cattle, including cows and calves, in the country is rising every day. Yet, the country has not been able to meet the demand.

The livestock department targets to increase cattle population by 10 percent and artificial insemination by 15 per cent a year for the development of the sector, he said.

"The recent trend of domestic production is gratifying. Given the current pace of growth, we expect to be self-sufficient in seven-eight years," Ajay added.

(Ahmed Humayun Kabir Topu, Anwar Ali Himu, EAM Asaduzzaman, Sohrab Hossain and S Dilip Roy contributed to the report)