

# Criminals prey on Khasi people

## Cut 3,500 betel vines in Amuli punjee of Moulvibazar

MINTU DESHWARA with ANDREW EAGLE

The 162 residents of the indigenous settlement of Amuli punjee in Kormodha union of Moulvibazar's Kulaura upazila are deeply distressed following an attack by a gang of criminals who targeted the punjee's betel leaf plantations. During the October 2, 2016, attack, miscreants cut around 3,500 betel vines.

Punjee residents believe the attack was instigated by Noldori village residents Palash Mia and Babul Mia, following an earlier altercation between residents and the duo on September 27, 2016.

On that day, according to residents, up to 15 people led by Palash and Babul entered the punjee with sharp weapons to fell trees. When the group started to cut down a large tree, punjee residents obstructed the activity. The miscreants then threatened the punjee-dwellers and took the tree anyway.

Subsequently, on September 29, local indigenous people submitted a written complaint about the incident to Khormodha union chairman MA Rahman Atiq. According to local sources, Palash and Babul regularly cut trees from the forest reserve, while out of fear locals do not protest the illegal activity.

As betel leaf cultivation is the mainstay of the Khasi and Mandi community's economy, the loss of the vines in the latest attack is devastating.

"Betel leaf is our only income source," says resident Polin Mandia. "When the criminals cut my betel vines they destroyed my dreams. Having lost my main economic asset, I don't know how to support my six-member family."

"Many Khasis in our punjee have no other employment," says neighbour Philip Khonglah. "Growing crops on surrounding land is a matter of survival.



Dejected Khasi women sit beside baskets full of betel leaves in Amuli punjee area of Moulvibazar's Kulaura on Friday. On October 2, criminals attacked and destroyed around 3,500 betel vines there. Inset, locals holding some of the vines. PHOTO: MINTU DESHWARA

Without this land and our betel vines it's impossible for many families to live."

Octogenarian punjee resident Arvil Rema breaks down to remember the attack. "We live insecure lives. We live from hand to mouth. What is our fault that Babul and Palash should harass us

constantly? They threaten us and tell us to get out from this land. I wish I would die to end this suffering."

Head of the punjee, Protush Asakra, says grave fears of further attacks persist.

"Palash Mia and Babul Mia are out to evict the Khasis who have been

cultivating betel leaf in the area for years," alleges Abdul Karim Kim, general secretary of Sylhet chapter of the NGO Bangladesh Poribesh Andolon.

Human rights defender of NGO Indigenous Peoples' Development Services Joyanto Lawrence Raksham

agrees. "Cutting betel vines is one kind of strategy to dispossess indigenous people of their land. Without the livelihood of the vines they are vulnerable, so miscreants take the opportunity to repeatedly attack. A comprehensive solution to this ongoing problem is needed."

"Some influential people do not consider indigenous people as the integral part of society and equal citizens that they are," says Bably Talang, general secretary of KUIBORAZ Inter Punjee Development Association of Khasi people. "Such attacks violate the basic property rights of Bangladeshi citizens, and as such, security forces should be deployed, bearing in mind that the rights of indigenous people should not be further violated in the name of establishing security."

"When Khasis are evicted from their land," agrees central committee member of Bangladesh Poribesh Andolon, Father Joseph Gomes, "we Bangladeshis are effectively attacking ourselves. It's a matter of national shame for any Bangladeshi citizen to be treated in such a way; and the state's responsibility is to ensure the security of all, including Khasi communities. Immediate action should be taken against the perpetrators and Khasi life security guaranteed."

President of the Moulvibazar district unit of the Bangladesh Human Rights Commission, Kishori Pada Deb Shyamal, also demands proper investigation and prosecution of all instances where indigenous communities are attacked.

Shamsuduha, officer-in-charge of Kulaura Police Station, says police investigation has found that criminals cut the betel vines, and that a case has been filed by the head of the punjee against Palash Mia, Babul Mia and 15 unnamed persons in this regard. "We are trying our best to arrest the culprits," he says.

The Daily Star attempted to contact Palash Mia and Babul Miah several times but their mobile phones were switched off.

## Gagging law to hurt democracy

FROM PAGE 1

constitution and constitutional bodies. It had also proposed for stringent punishment—the registration of an NGO will be cancelled for committing such an offence.

The sub-committee led by Suranjit Sengupta, who is the chief of the main committee, had placed a set of recommendations including the controversial one to the main committee.

Endorsing the suggestions, the main committee had placed the report in parliament with recommendation for passage of the bill.

During passage of the bill on Wednesday, the minister accepted all the recommendations of the committee including the controversial one and MPs voted for it to become law. There was no opposition to any provision of the bill as main opposition Jatiya Party MPs preferred to toe the government's line.

From now on, foreign funded NGOs can work for democracy, good governance and human rights alongside many other social issues.

But they will lack the freedom to make any critical observation even based on their findings on the performance of the parliament, the election

commission, and other constitutional bodies. It is because an NGO may face tough actions for any critical comment if it annoys the government policymakers or MPs.

The words "inimical" and "derogatory" were not defined in the bill and there was no indication as to who would determine whether and how any comment was "inimical" and "derogatory." The vagueness will give the government free rein to take actions against an NGO for any critical remarks on the parliament or any other constitutional bodies calling them "hostile" and "derogatory."

The provision has created an atmosphere of fear and concern among NGOs. They have been denouncing the provision. Their outcry is not irrational. The way the provision has been introduced is nothing but an example of using the state's legislative power to unleash revenge on its critics.

Aimed at empowering the NGO bureau to inspect, monitor and assess activities of NGOs, the original bill placed in parliament in September last year did not have this controversial provision.

But a parliament watch report by TIB and its executive director's remarks

on the role of the main opposition in the House in October last year irked lawmakers of both the ruling party and the opposition who demanded punitive action against TIB at that time.

In its report, the anti-graft watchdog pointed out a "low-level of participation" of MPs in lawmaking and question-answer sessions, discussions on important issues, and frequent quorum crises in the current parliament.

Based on the findings, TIB Executive Director Iftekharuzzaman had called the Jatiya Party "so-called opposition" in parliament and said it was rather working as "B-team of the government."

Replying to a query, he had called the main opposition's role a "puppet show."

TIB's findings and Iftekhar's remarks on the role of the main opposition revealed nothing new.

The JP is a unique case in the contemporary history of parliamentary democracy in the world. Three of its MPs are ministers in the Sheikh Hasina-led government; its chief, HM Ershad, is the special envoy to the prime minister with the status of a minister. The JP has been so rewarded because of its participation in the last

parliamentary election which was vital in the face of BNP's boycott.

Because of this cosy relationship with the party in power, the JP does not play its expected role in the parliament. In the last two and a half years, JP MPs have never voted against any of the 93 government's bills passed.

During the passage of the 16th constitutional amendment bill in 2014, some JP MPs spoke against it. But they had finally voted in favour of it. The JP, despite being the main opposition, never challenged and opposed the AL on any crucial issue.

Due to its docile role in the parliament, the JP does not enjoy people's confidence as the main opposition party. While speaking about JP's role in the parliament, TIB executive director termed the main opposition's act in there as a "puppet show."

Neither the ruling party MPs nor the opposition MPs liked the remarks. The MPs who had blasted the TIB in the parliament could not oppose any findings and observations of the TIB. Instead, they picked a comment made by TIB's executive director regarding the role of the main opposition and launched a scathing attack which was

out of context.

In its parliamentary watch reports since 2001, the TIB has consistently focused on many issues. It has also made dozens of recommendations about how to overcome the quorum crisis or the practice of House boycott. Like always, the ruling party MPs blasted TIB for its report. They did not choose to improve their parliamentary culture.

During the bill's scrutiny, the parliamentary sub-committee on the law ministry picked the issue and proposed inclusion of punitive provision in the bill.

Introduction of the harsh punitive law following one individual's remarks expose the government's intolerance of freedom of speech and its strategy to prevent others from making any critical comments on the parliament and other constitutional bodies. At the same time it shows their blasé disregard in failing to deliver on their mandates. This will send a wrong signal to the country's development partners who provide funds to the NGOs.

In this chilling environment, NGOs working as watchdogs on parliament and other constitutional bodies will not be able to do their jobs independ-

ently.

If the watchdog bodies can not make critical assessment on the performances of the EC and come up with constructive suggestions then how the electoral system could be improved?

If watchdogs can not work in details on the performances of constitutional bodies like the Public Service Commission and office of the Comptroller and Auditor General, how the people would know whether the respective bodies are performing their jobs properly?

The controversial provision is also a double standard as a foreign funded NGO will face risk of making critical assessment on any constitutional bodies but not the NGOs that are funded locally.

Critical inspection of the democratic institutions is one of the fundamental rights promised in democracy. But once the law takes effect, this right would be taken away.

By gagging the watchdogs' critical voices, can the government protect the image of the parliament, the EC and other constitutional bodies if they do not perform properly? Would that brighten its own image?



TIB Chairperson Sultana Kamal speaks during yesterday's press conference at the Dhaka Reporters Unity. From left, Oxfam Bangladesh Country Director Snehal V Soneji, TIB Executive Director Iftekharuzzaman, Nijera Kori Coordinator Khushi Kabir, Manusher Jonno Foundation Executive Director Shaheen Anam, Bela Chief Executive Syeda Rizwana Hasan and Federation of NGOs in Bangladesh Director Tajul Islam were also present. PHOTO: STAR

## NGOs term it oppressive

FROM PAGE 1

Section 14 and other "undemocratic, risky and impractical provisions".

The statement, read out by human rights activist Sultana Kamal at a press conference, said remarks by a foreign-funded NGO can be misinterpreted and labelled as "inimical" and "derogatory". And therefore, the provision is oppressive and contrary to democratic practices.

Such provision curbing the right to freedom of speech and thought doesn't exist in any similar law in any democratic country in the world, it reads.

It is totally unacceptable to the NGOs, which are contributing greatly to the country's socio-economic development and establishment of good governance, Sultana Kamal said at the press conference at Dhaka Reporters Unity.

The provision says if any foreign-funded NGO engages in anti-state activities and finances or patronises extremism and terror activities, those would be considered as offences, and the NGO and its officials concerned would be tried under the country's existing laws.

It also empowers the NGO Affairs Bureau to cancel or withhold the registration of a foreign-funded NGO or ban its activities for committing the offences.

If the bill remains unchanged, it will not be acceptable to the international community as well, said Sultana Kamal, also chairperson of Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB).

If the bill is amended, recognising

the right to freedom of speech and organisation, it would help the NGOs work more effectively and improve the image of the government, she said.

The government had set a good example by having consultations with the NGOs on the draft bill. It made them optimistic that the law would be more democratic than the ones framed by dictatorial regimes.

The optimism, however, was not reflected in the bill. The government actually wants to discourage voluntary initiatives and control the NGOs, especially by curbing freedom of speech, said Sultana Kamal.

"This is very risky for the NGOs, especially for those working on human rights and good governance."

Bela Chief Executive Syeda Rizwana Hasan said the punishment for the offences mentioned in the provision is already there in other laws, and there was no need for incorporating this in the bill.

The NGO Affairs Bureau would be responsible for implementing the law though it doesn't have any mandate to deal with terror issues, she told reporters.

The bill doesn't differentiate between an offence by an individual and that by an NGO. For example, 600 individuals can work in an NGO, but the involvement of an individual in a crime doesn't mean that the NGO is involved in it, Rizwana said.

TIB Executive Director Iftekharuzzaman said there are specific laws on money laundering and terrorism. Yet, these issues were included in the bill. This is irrational.

As a citizen of the country, one has the right to freedom of speech. If anyone's comment constitutes an offence, the individual can be tried under law, not the organisation he works for, he noted.

International donor agencies have also voiced concern over the provision.

CARE Bangladesh Country Director Jamie Terzi expressed solidarity with the NGOs regarding the bill.

Manusher Jonno Foundation (MJF) Executive Director Shaheen Anam said no NGO can get foreign funds, bypassing the NGO Affairs Bureau. The Bureau carefully looks at the details of project plans before approving those.

"If any NGO gets registered without proper verification, we cannot take blame for them," she said.

Nijera Kori Coordinator Khushi Kabir said the government can take stern action against any NGO if it is found guilty of irregularities, but the government cannot violate the constitutional right to freedom of speech.

The press conference was organised by Ain O Salish Kendra, BRAC, Campaign for Popular Education (Campe), Nijera Kori, MJF, Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust, Federation of NGOs in Bangladesh, ADAB, Association for Land Reforms and Development, PRIP Trust, Bangladesh Nari Progoti Sangha, Action Aid, Concern Worldwide, Water Aid, Oxfam International, CARE International and the TIB.

## Proxima b 'likely' to support life

FROM PAGE 16

Scientists have previously suggested it could be the first exoplanet - a planet outside our solar system - to one day be visited by robots from Earth.

In the new study, published in the Astrophysical Journal Letters, the researchers described how they had calculated its dimensions and the possible nature of its surface.

They suggested the planet could be covered by "a single liquid ocean 200 kilometres deep".

Proxima b is much closer to the star it orbits than Earth is to our sun but because Proxima Centauri is a red dwarf - a much cooler type of star - it could still be temperate enough to sustain life.

The CNRS team said: "This planet, called Proxima b, is in an orbit that would allow it to have liquid water on its surface, thus raising the question of its habitability."

"It is likely to harbour liquid water at its surface and therefore to harbour

life forms."

Bastien Brugger, who led the research, told The Independent: "Among the thousands of exoplanets we have already discovered, Proxima b is one of the best candidates to sustain life."

"It is in the habitable zone of its star, [and] even if it is really close to the star the fact that Proxima Centauri is a red dwarf allows the planet to have a lower temperature and maybe liquid water."