

Rohingya 'shot in Myanmar' dies in Teknaf

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Cox's Bazar

A Rohingya man who entered Bangladesh from Myanmar with bullet injuries died yesterday in the unregistered Leda Rohingya camp in the district's Teknaf upazila. The man was allegedly shot by Myanmar army on Sunday.

The victim is Shah Alam, 47, of Mangala village in Myanmar's Mongdhu.

Talking to journalists, his sister Fatema Begum, 40, said a group of armed Rakhine youths and Myanmar army surrounded their Mangala village around 6:00pm on Sunday and asked the people who were at home at that time to come out of their homes.

The army personnel shot her brother Alam after she and her brother had come out of their house. With bullet wounds, her brother was heading towards a nearby forest to take shelter there, but fell on the ground on the way. She also followed her brother, Fatema said.

When the attackers left the village, she and her brother reached near the Naf river with the help of some villagers to enter Bangladesh.

SEE PAGE 10 COL 6

BNP to step up

FROM PAGE 1
of the next national elections.

Amid such a situation, they believe there is no alternative to a strong EC and reforms in the electoral laws to contain the government's influence on the parliamentary polls.

The party, however, will not move away from its demand for a neutral administration during the elections, they said.

Describing Sunday's talks with the president as their primary success, the party leaders said the head of the State opened the dialogue on EC formation following the proposal of party Chairperson Khaleida Zia.

"We are happy that the president is sincere in forming a strong election commission. He also said dialogue is the only way to resolve a problem," Amir Khosru Mahmud Chowdhury, member of the BNP standing committee, told this correspondent yesterday.

On Sunday, a BNP delegation led by Khaleida met President Abdul Hamid at the Bangabhaban and held talks on EC formation.

After the talks, the BNP said the president told the delegation that he would examine procedural issues for constituting a search committee by next month.

During the talks, the president assured them of forming an EC, acceptable to all, through talks with other parties.

Today, the president holds dialogue with the main opposition, the Jatiya Party, over EC formation.

Khosru yesterday said the party will hold roundtables, seminars and other programmes on the issue.

"People from all walks of life believe that a strong Election Commission is a must for a credible election... It is our primary success that people are talking about the issue," Khosru said.

He said the party would intensify its campaign to ensure that a neutral and strong EC is formed by February. After that, the party would focus on the issue of polls-time administration.

"A neutral and strong Election Commission and fair polls go hand in hand. Without one, it's impossible to have the other," said the BNP leader.

Lt Gen (ret'd) Mahbubur Rahman, member of the party's standing committee, said, "The meeting went well. We are happy but the meeting's success depends on the outcome."

"We are now focusing on the Election Commission. Once a strong and neutral Election Commission is formed, we will talk about the election-time government."

In a statement on Sunday, the BNP chairperson said, "Only the formation of a neutral Election Commission on the basis of consensus is not enough to hold a free, fair, participatory and credible election..."

"Without a neutral election-time government, it is not possible to hold a free, fair and credible election. We shall present the framework of a neutral election-time government before the nation at a convenient time."

JP TO MEET PRESIDENT

An 18-member delegation led by JP Chairman HM Ershad holds talks with the president today on EC formation.

"The meeting is scheduled to start at 3:00pm at the Bangabhaban," GM Quader, co-chairman of the party, told The Daily Star.

He said the party may propose some names for membership of the search committee and make some recommendations on how a neutral and strong EC could be formed.

A few days ago, Ershad said they would submit a proposal for the formation of an independent and impartial EC.

"We hope that the president would make a bold decision," he added.



With a child on her lap, a woman sits outside a shabby makeshift hut beside a road at Betbhita village in Jessore's Abhaynagar. Taking some utensils, a few belongings and cattle, her family started living in the shanty in a miserable condition after their house had gone under waist-deep water following heavy rains. **Top right**, an elderly woman, sitting on a piece of bamboo, doing the dishes in floodwater at Dohor Mashiahati in the upazila. Although floodwater receded in the area, people use bamboo bridges, **bottom right**, to move around, as the soil below is muddy. The photos were taken on October 23.



PHOTO:
RASHED SHUMON

Sorrow of Jessore

FROM PAGE 1

Until mid-October, hundreds of families, including his, lived in such shacks and ate whatever food they had managed to store during dry season. The floodwaters now have receded from most homesteads, but not from their farmlands.

"If the water stays a few more months, we will have to go unfed," Hari told The Daily Star in late October.

BHABADAH'S PLIGHT

His anxiety is shared by thousands of families in the three upazilas known as Bhabadah area, between Jessore and Khulna in southern Bangladesh. The area is crisscrossed by seven main rivers -- the Mukteshwari, Tekka, Hari, Sree, Aparbhadra, Harihar and Buribhadra -- and many canals.

Aptly called the "Sorrow of Jessore," much of Bhabadah remains inundated for months during rain almost every year.

This year, about 600,000 people in 286 villages have been affected in various degrees, according to Bangladesh Water Development Board (BWDB) officials in Jessore.

With all the rivers and canals silted up over the last three decades, the rain waters have nowhere to go now. So they get trapped in these beels, submerging homesteads, farmlands, roads and educational institutions.

When the waterlogging is at its worst, normal life comes to a standstill in these beels spreading over 487 square kilometres. There is hardly any work. Living space becomes so scarce that sometimes a whole family shares a single room with their cattle. Others sell out their domestic animals at nominal prices. Water gets contaminated, causing various skin and water-borne diseases. Fishes die.

Sometimes water snakes, frogs and other poisonous bugs, looking for a dry place, enter their huts, creating panic.

This year, at least 11 people, mostly children, drowned or died from snake bites, media reports said citing government officials.

Angered and shocked, hundreds of Bhabadah people travelled to Noapara, some 10km away, on October 5 to take to the streets, demanding government action. They were met with police action instead, in which some 50 people, including women and elderly campaigners, were injured.

Bhabadah's waterlogging problem began in the early 1980s when all its rivers started drying up, after the construction of costal embankments and sluice gates in the region. The embankments and sluice gates were built to prevent saline water from intruding into the beels. The saline water stopped, and so did the natural flow of currents in the process.

Successive governments have taken up various projects worth hundreds of crores of taka to solve this, but they only brought brief relief. Many of the projects were faulty. But more than that, every time the government initiated any projects, powerful locals blocked those to protect their interests, including the multi-million dollar shrimp farms.

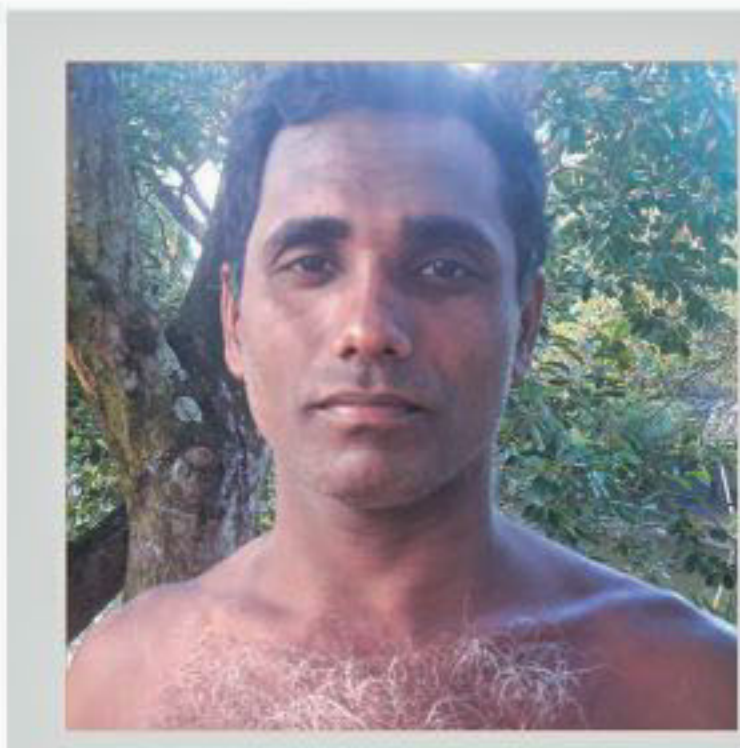
NO PLACE TO BURY THE DEAD

This year, the problem turned acute. In the last three years, nothing was done to keep the rivers navigable. So when the entire area went under water, the BWDB installed an excavator to flush out waters by making a channel on the Hari river on August 30. It was too little too late.

Before this temporary measure could have an impact, some 73,400 hectares of land went under water. As a result, all of Bhabadah's 15,000 hectares of Aus and Aman farmland were damaged and some 300 schools and colleges had to stop educational activities for about a month, officials said.

Last month, local MP Shawpan Bhattacharjee estimated farmers won't be able to grow crops on half their land this Boro season.

Contacted on Sunday, Emdad Hossain Sheikh, deputy director of the Department of Agriculture Extension in Jessore, admitted some croplands were still under water. However,



"If the water stays a few more months, we will have to go unfed."

HARI CHAND MANDAL
a farmer from Abhaynagar

farmers would be able to cultivate their land by pumping out the water by shallow pumps.

But farmers and a local journalist who visited two beels on Sunday said that would be extremely difficult, even impossible, for many given the height of the water.

When The Daily Star visited the affected areas in Abhaynagar and Manirampur in late October, some families were still marooned in their shabby huts with waters all around. Many were still living on the roads while many others were repairing their badly damaged houses.

As floodwaters devoured her earthen house in Digholiya village in Abhaynaga's Paira union, Nurjahan, a 43-year-old widow, sent her grandchildren to her sister's in Noapara. Her two sons made a six by seven feet hut with bamboo and straw on a road. There, she lived with her sons and their wives for two months. She kept her cattle inside her hut.

"The life we lived was not at all a human life," she said.

Drinking water was scarce; there were no proper toilets, only makeshift ones built on roads. Women used

those mostly at night; many drank little water during day to avoid going to toilets. People struggled to take the sick to hospitals or bury their dead.

"There was water everywhere. We buried our sister-in-law in another village, three kilometres from ours," said Abdul Wahab Majumdar, also from Digholiya.

But those that still live are trapped; they have nowhere to go. Thousands, if not lakhs, of marginal farmers, day labourers, small vendors have had little income for the past four months. By now, they have run out of their savings and food stocks.

As they count their losses -- livelihoods, homes, loved ones -- floodwaters in some beels are showing little sign of receding from their farmlands, and it's not clear when they will be able to work again and start a normal life.

THE BEGINNING

Bhabadah's deep-seated waterlogging problem has its origin in the 1960s. The region had a different problem then. This low-lying area would be inundated during rain by the rising waters of the major rivers that crisscross this marshy land before falling into the Bay of Bengal about 60km to its south.

This extremely saline water posed a serious threat to crops, cattle, fish and human alike.

So the then Pakistan government took up a huge project funded by the Asian Development Bank and assisted by the USAID. Under this Coastal Embankment Project, around 1,500 kilometres of embankments, 282 sluice gates and some 35 polders were constructed along the rivers from 1961 to 1967. On the Sree river alone, a 21-vent sluice gate was built at Bhabadah point to turn the vast swamps into arable land.

Initially, the project was a hit; the area saw a bumper food production, said Jahangir Alam, member of the executive committee of Bangladesh Economic Association, who has been working on the waterlogging issue for years.

Farmers were so happy that they

gave Abdul Monem Khan, the then governor of East Pakistan, a "gold scythe" as a gift, said Jahangir, who wrote a research paper on the problem and its solution.

But the whole project turned out to be a catastrophe within two decades.

Before the polders were built to trap the saline water, tides used to flow inland, depositing sediments at high tide, creating a balance with the natural land subsidence.

Polders (a Dutch word) are a low-lying tract of land enclosed by dikes that forms an artificial waterbody. They have no connections with outside water other than through manually operated devices.

However, after the construction of the embankments, sluice gates and polders, silt started to deposit on the riverbeds, while subsidence of the land within the polders continued. The natural process of land formation inside the polders came to a halt in the 1980s.

At the same time, currents in the upstream rivers -- mainly the Padma (Ganges in India) and its tributaries, particularly Bhairab which flows through Abhaynagar -- grew weak after India built the Farakka Embankment on the Ganges and started withdrawing water in the 1970s, said Prof M Shahjahan Mondal of the Institute of Water and Flood Management at the Buet.

In addition, the Coastal Embankment Project did not pay attention to silt management and so there was no long-term plan for river dredging in the area to clear the deposited silt. As a result, currents of these rivers lost force and the rivers started drying up and eventually the exit points of the sluice gates got blocked.

"In fact that [the embankment project] was the beginning of the ever-present calamity for the people, environment and nature," said Iqbal Kabir Jahid, chief adviser of Bhabadah Pani Nishkashon Sangran Committee, a platform campaigning for a solution for over a decade.

'Crimes against humanity'

FROM PAGE 1

The fate of Rohingya minority took centre stage as regional ministers held crisis talks over a security crackdown that has drawn rare criticism from neighbouring nations.

More than 27,000 Rohingyas have reportedly fled northwestern Myanmar for Bangladesh since the start of November to escape a heavy-handed counterinsurgency campaign.

The exodus has sparked a rare dispute within the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the 10-member bloc that prides itself on consensus diplomacy and non-interference.

Foreign ministers from the bloc yesterday met in Yangon for an emergency talks, a gathering Malaysia said was the result of pressure building on Myanmar to resolve the crisis.

"Constant pressure from both the international community as well as Malaysia has led us to this point and to the retreat to be held," Malaysia's Foreign Minister Anifah Aman said ahead of the talks.

Anifah also urged full humanitarian access to the locked-down area, where more than 130,000 people have been without aid for two months.

He warned the crackdown could trigger a repeat of last year's boat crisis, when thousands of starving Rohingyas were abandoned at sea by traffickers as they tried to flee southwards to Malaysia.

"We believe that the situation is now of a regional concern and should be resolved together," he told the meeting, according to a statement from Kuala Lumpur.

"Myanmar must do more in trying to address the root causes of this problem."

Malaysia called for an independent ASEAN-led investigation into the allegations of army abuse.

NEW WAVE OF ANGER

The latest crackdown in Rakhine generated a fresh wave of public anger, particularly in Malaysia, where tens of thousands of Rohingyas eke out tough and often dangerous lives as undocumented workers.

Earlier this month Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak accused Myanmar's de facto leader Aung San Suu Kyi of allowing "genocide" on her watch -- an unusually strong rebuke by one ASEAN state of another.

Myanmar, which has vehemently denied the allegations of abuse, responded by angrily summoning Malaysia's ambassador and banning its workers from going to the country.

At yesterday's talks, ministers warned of the risk of a "spillover effect on Myanmar's neighbours in terms of security and stability" from the Rakhine violence, a diplomat told AFP.

Ministers also took aim at Nobel

laureate Suu Kyi for not doing more to rein in the military, which still has a quarter of parliament seats and controls key levers of power in her elected government.

"Her hands are tied because of the military, but she has to shoulder her responsibility as a leader of Myanmar," said the diplomat, who asked not to be named.

Suu Kyi has pleaded for time and international understanding over the incendiary issue.

In a statement after yesterday's meeting, Suu Kyi said talks were "candid and transparent" but also "emphasised the importance of strengthening ASEAN unity and resolving the differences between ASEAN family members".

Myanmar has also faced a cascade of criticism from outside the region over the Rohingya crisis, including from the United States and the United Nations.

Last week, UN rights commissioner Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein criticised the government's "callous" handling of the crisis, describing it as "a lesson in how to make a bad situation worse".

Ong Keng Yong, a former secretary-general of ASEAN, said neighbouring nations feared the Rohingya crisis could spiral.

"This kind of issue, if it's not well managed, will impact on the general picture of our peace and security in ASEAN," he told AFP.

'ETHNIC CLEANSING'

Between 76 to 400 Rohingyas have been killed in a military crackdown since October 9 attacks on police stations left nine officers dead.

Myanmar says at least 93 people -- 17 police officers and soldiers and 76 alleged "attackers" (including six who reportedly died during interrogation) - have been killed and some 575 suspects arrested.

Rohingya advocacy groups, however, claim about 400 Rohingyas -- described by the United Nations as among the most persecuted groups worldwide -- have been killed in the military operations, women have been raped and Rohingya villages torched.

Malaysian Foreign Minister Anifah Aman said events in Rakhine state were a matter of regional security and stability, noting that about 56,000 Rohingyas now live in Muslim-majority Malaysia having fled previous unrest in Myanmar.

Malaysia has heavily criticised Myanmar's government and military over the violence, with Najib Razak and his cabinet referring to it as "genocide" or "ethnic cleansing".

"Many analysts are expecting ASEAN leaders to push for some of the things that the international community has been asking for, the most important of which is the full resumption of aid to Rakhine state where an estimated 160,000 people are in need

of aid," Al Jazeera's Florence Looi said, reporting from Kuala Lumpur.

Myanmar has denied the accusations, saying many of the reports are fabricated and it insists the strife in Rakhine state is an internal matter.

In addition to fending off diplomatic pressure over the crisis, the Myanmar government has also invited a handpicked media delegation to visit the affected region this week.

Amnesty cautioned that the scale and extent of the violence is unclear, as the military has closed Rakhine to outside observers, including aid workers. But witness accounts detail specific cases of murder, looting and rape.

In one incident on November 12, following an alleged skirmish between the army and villagers armed mostly with swords and other simple weapons, helicopter gunships descended on a village and sprayed bullets indiscriminately, killing civilians fleeing in a panic, Amnesty said.

This was corroborated to an extent by Myanmar army officials, who said helicopters opened fire that day and killed six people, who officials said were "insurgents".

Refugees told Amnesty that the military is torching villages. Satellite images Amnesty obtained show 1,200 burned structures, which they say is in line with images released by Human Rights Watch in November that showed 1,500 burned homes.