

Over 1,600 trees cut down in a day

MIRZA SHAKIL, Tangail

Some 1,650 Sal trees on nearly 15 acres of land inside Madhupur reserve forest were cut down in a single day.

The incident happened in Chandpur area under Aronkhola Mouja of the forest (sadar range) in Madhupur on November 30. But this correspondent learnt about it lately.

Forest officials blamed some people from adjacent villages in Mymensingh's Muktagachha upazila for the incident. The Daily Star, however, could not verify their claim.

Visiting the spot, this correspondent saw tree stumps all over the place. He also came across some youths whose identity or intention could not be known as they refused to talk. They were holding heavy knives with handle.

Sadar Beat Forest Officer HM Ershad along with a forest guard was seen patrolling a nearby area in the forest.

There, Ershad said several dozen people started cutting down the trees around 3:00pm on November 30. The destruction continued until 10:00pm that day, he said.

"On information, local forest officials along with forest guards rushed to the spot. But they could do nothing but witness the destruction".

Talking to The Daily Star, Sadar



Some of the stumps of around 1,650 Sal trees in Tangail's Madhupur reserve forest. The trees were cut down on November 30 allegedly by some villagers following a dispute with forest department officials. The photo was taken recently.

PHOTO: MIRZA SHAKIL

Range Officer Khasru Alam said, "We could not take any action as the villagers, including women and children, heavily outnumbered us. Besides, they were carrying sharp weapons meant for cutting trees."

Ershad filed a case with Madhupur Police Station and four prosecution office reports (PORs) the same day,

accusing several named and over 100 unnamed people of chopping down the trees.

The accused did not take the chopped trees with them. Those were later collected and brought to the forest range office.

This correspondent saw piles of the trees on the office premises.

Forest officials and locals said chopping down trees in the forest had totally stopped after the forest department started implementing a project titled "Revegetation of Madhupur Forest through Rehabilitation of Forest Dependent Local Ethnic Communities" in 2010.

Under the project, 700 locals,

believed to have been involved in cutting down trees, were trained up to save the forest as community forest workers (CFWs).

Identity cards, uniforms, boots, weekly allowance of Tk 300 and several other facilities were provided to them.

Felling of trees and grabbing of forestland, however, resumed just after the Tk 22 crore-project ended in December 2015.

Some of the trained CFWs started stealing trees again, saying the forest department did not keep its promise of withdrawing cases filed against them before the project began.

In this situation, the forest officials organised a meeting with the villagers at the range office around 11:00am on November 30.

The meeting aimed at reassuring the villagers that a fresh project employing them would start again soon, added the officials and the locals.

However, the move was foiled as some plain-clothes men went to the meeting and tried to pick up some of the CFWs.

"The CFWs thought it was a plot to hand them over to the law enforcers," said MA Hasan, assistant conservator of forests in Madhupur.

Later, the angry CFWs and other villagers started cutting down the trees, chanting slogans against the forest department, he added.

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GAS PIPELINE INSTALLATION Govt to fell 13,356 trees in Gazipur

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The government is going to cut down 13,356 Sal and Gajari trees for installing gas pipelines in 3km area between Sreepur and Joydebpur of Gazipur.

The decision was made in a cabinet meeting after the forest department placed the proposal. State-owned Titas Gas Transmission and Distribution Company would install the line, said Cabinet Secretary Mohammad Shafiq Alam.

Talking to reporters after the meeting chaired by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, Shafiq said the gas company would have to plant double the number of trees in the area to compensate the loss of trees.

The decision came at a time when the Sal Forest of Gazipur, popularly known as Bhawal Sal Forest, is facing a threat of severe depletion of trees due to poor government policy and inaction of the forest department.

According to the cabinet decision, about 4,011 matured trees and 9,345 saplings would be felled for the supply line installation.

The meeting also gave the final approval to the draft of the Ansar Battalion (Amendment) Act-2016.

Shafiq said after enactment of the law, job of an Ansar member would be confirmed after six years of his service, which is still nine years.

The cabinet meeting adopted an obituary resolution expressing profound shock at the death of former ICT minister and civil servant Mostafa Faruque Mohammad.

Brac ranked

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to empower people living in poverty. We are committed, now more than ever, to keep looking for answers to poverty and deprivation -- to find out what works and apply the lessons."

This is the third NGO Advisor best-in-class ranking for Brac in four years. Brac was praised for its holistic approach to fighting poverty, treating it as a system of interrelated barriers that must be addressed concurrently.

The ranking also highlighted the organisation's systems-based structure, ensuring sustainability through a variety of revenue streams.

"Again in 2017, Brac is the leading organisation in the Top 500 NGOs World rankings, meaning number one in terms of innovation, impact, and governance. The agile giant keeps challenging itself to serve more and more communities around the world," said NGO Advisor Editor-in-Chief Jean-Christophe Nothias in a statement.

Veg output grows fast

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Experts, however, warned about the widening gap between vegetable production cost and the prices consumers pay. They blamed illegal tolls and middlemen's profit-mongering for such a widening gap.

They said this would negatively impact further growth of the sector.

According to the Ministry of Agriculture and Department of Agricultural Extension, some 142 types of home-grown and exotic vegetables were grown in Bangladesh with the output hitting 14.34 million tonne from 0.8 million hectares of land in the last fiscal year.

Of the 14.34 million tonne, some 10 million tonne is just potatoes. Though classified as vegetable, potato is seen as starchy food like rice and wheat.

Bangladesh's yearly vegetable output was 1.74 million tonne in 2003, according to the World Vegetable Centre.

"Still we're lagging behind if you translate it into the level of per capita vegetable consumption. As against standard 220 grams a day, each person in Bangladesh is consuming 62 grams of vegetables a day [according to the BBS data

of 2015]," Shahabuddin Ahmad, immediate past director of Horticulture Research Centre, told The Daily Star.

For a land-starved country where most farmlands are occupied by rice, it is hard to expect growth in vegetable production from area expansion, noted Shahabuddin. He emphasised the need for changing the rice-centric dietary habit.

On the farm level, farmers sell vegetables at a fairly low price. But the prices spike manifold by the time they enter the urban markets, he said. "We [consumers] are paying but they [growers] are not getting the money because of illegal tolls in the whole chain."

Supply of quality vegetable seeds -- particularly the high-yielding and hybrid varieties -- had a huge impact on production growth, said Jahangir Hossain, who heads the Tuber Crops Research Centre at Bangladesh Agricultural Research Institute (BARI).

"Besides, farmers now can grow vegetables during off season and all seasons thanks to the development of varieties suitable for yearlong production," said the BARI director, giving an example of BARI seem-7, a bean variety that can be grown during the summer.

VEGETABLE OUTPUT	
YEAR	MILLION TONNES
2016	4.34
2003	1.78
1990	1.09

"Increasing off-season vegetable production is part of the effort to diversify the rice-reliant agriculture in Bangladesh. Farmers who produce tomatoes, aubergines and other high-value crops during the hot and humid kharif season, traditionally when rice is grown, can see dramatic improvements in their crop output, land productivity, profitability, and net income," said the World Vegetable Centre.

Shahabuddin said against 4,500 tonne of yearly seed requirements, local companies and public institutions meet 30 percent of the vegetables seed demand, 15 percent is imported while the rest are the seeds saved up by the farmers.

Some of the local well-known seed companies, like Lal Teer and ACI that used to import seeds, are now producing and marketing quality seeds at home and they have good research and

development (R&D) hubs established too, experts noted.

Amid a huge outcry over hybrid seeds in the latter half of the 90s, the then government allowed import and local production of hybrid seeds, initiating a huge growth push in vegetable production, they recalled.

Different literatures published by the Taiwan-based World Vegetable Centre mentioned roles of non-government organisations like Brac and Hellen Keller International in the promotion and training in vegetable farming and home gardening.

Experts said farmers in the country now have the knowledge to utilise every available inch of land for growing vegetable. They just do not cultivate vegetables on plain land and during favourable conditions like they used to, rather they have the know-how of hydroponics, fertigation, terracing, roof gardening and floating gardens.

Hydroponics is a method of growing plants without soil, using mineral nutrient solutions in water solvent while fertigation is the injection of fertilisers, soil amendments and other water-soluble products into an irrigation system, and terracing in agriculture

Signs of improvement but mess yet to clear

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scams such as Hallmark loan scams at Sonali Bank and the fall of BASIC Bank from grace.

The stockmarket also suffered its worst crisis in 2010 mainly due to abnormal rise in values of shares and misuse of rules and regulations. The banks had been given a free hand to invest in the market, leading to the boom and bust.

But after assuming office for the second consecutive term through the January 2014 polls, the AL-led government took steps to prevent the crisis in the financial sector from worsening.

Since then, it has largely stopped appointing directors of the state-run banks on political consideration. Most of its picks have been former bankers or civil servants, economists and government representatives, including bureaucrats from the finance and banking divisions.

For example, Zaid Bakht, a former research director at Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies, was appointed chairman of the Agrani Bank.

Well-known IT entrepreneurs, women entrepreneurs, retired

United Nations executives, former deputy managing directors of private banks and chartered accountants have been appointed directors of boards of the state-run banks.

In May 2014, the government sacked BASIC Bank Managing Director Kazi Faqurul Islam for presiding over a period of serious irregularities at the state-run scheduled bank while the then chairman Abdul Hye Bacchu, largely blamed for the bank's current situation, stepped down.

The government reconstituted the board in July that year. Alauddin A Majid, who led the bank as its chief executive when it was a healthy lender, was appointed its new chairman.

But the bank is still in trouble: it has capital shortfall and a large number of bad loans. And the government has to inject a huge amount of money from the national coffers to keep it alive.

Alauddin said the bank has traced most of the borrowers whose whereabouts were said to be unknown. Loans of Tk 3,800 crore were rescheduled till November last year, and the bank has recovered Tk 871

crore.

"The clients' confidence in the bank is returning. Good clients are coming back."

Sonali Bank and the Anti-Corruption Commission have filed several cases against fraudsters, including those related to the Hallmark scam, for siphoning Tk 4,000 crore from Sonali Bank.

Sonali Bank officials said the bank has narrowed its liability by Tk 500 crore through various measures, including seizure of export proceeds of borrowers.

Some loans have been written off. But the chances of getting back the embezzled money are very slim, they said.

Pradip Kumar Dutta, who retired as managing director of Sonali Bank in June last year, said a new policy has been put in place at banks for loan classification.

Besides, banks have stepped up compliance on anti-money laundering and credit approval.

The central bank has also beefed up its monitoring, he said.

However, large loan restructurings by the banks have so far failed to produce the intended results.

In the current tenure of the AL government, the central bank has allowed restructuring of loans of Tk 20,000 crore for long terms. But the waiver may not be paying well, as bankers said many beneficiaries don't repay instalment in time. They repay it at later dates to retain the benefit.

The banking sector, which dominates the financial sector in Bangladesh, is still plagued by bad loans, known as non-performing loans.

Till June last year, default loans amounted to Tk 63,365 crore, which was 10.06 percent of the total outstanding loans, according to the latest BB data.

If the written-off and rescheduled loans are taken into account, the sum would easily cross the Tk 100,000 crore mark.

The \$81 million cyber heist in the BB account at the Federal Reserve Bank of New York in February last year dimmed the central bank's achievements.

It is not yet clear who -- from the BB or outside the country -- committed the cyber crime, but it has become evident that negligence of the BB played a role.

Since the stockmarket crash in fiscal 2010-11, the government has taken several steps, but equity markets still have not been able to lure back retail investors at previous levels.

Both Bangladesh Securities and Exchange Commission and the BB have tightened rules so banks cannot go for excessive lending for investing in the stockmarket.

Overall, the macroeconomic stability has continued over the last three years as it did in the previous term of the AL-led government.

The economy grew above 7 percent after being trapped in 6-plus percent for a decade. Foreign currency reserves are setting new records every year, crossing \$32 billion in December last year. Inflation has dropped below the government's target.

However, private investment has not gone up. As a result, job creation for more than 20 lakh people joining the workforce every year has become a challenge.

The falling remittance is also a concern, as the poor and the low-income groups rely on the money sent by their relatives living abroad.

Rohingya slum

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CROSSED into Bangladesh through Tumbru border and took shelter at the Kutupalong slum with her four children -- Mariam, 7, Tahera, 5, Sohana, 4, and Rehana, 2.

She built a shanty with the money she had but got evicted by forest officials. She then took shelter on the forest land with the help of a union parishad member.

No money is left with her now.

On Friday morning, Palongkhali UP Member Nurul Absar and some other locals divided the Balukhali slum into seven blocks.

A "majhi" (sardar or leader) was appointed to oversee 50 to 60 families. Seven majhis were given the responsibility of managing seven blocks in the slum.

Karam Ali, majhi of block-1, and Khalilur Rahman of block-4 on Saturday said that in the last five days more than 5,000 Rohingyas had gathered at Kutupalong.

Many of these Rohingyas built shanties there. Evicted by forest department officials, they took shelter in the Balukhali forest area, the two added.

Contacted, Nurul Absar said, "If Kutupalong Rohingya slum can exist, what is the problem with having this slum? The Rohingyas have been allowed to stay here temporarily on humanitarian ground."

Md Monirul Islam, an official of Ukha Forest Range under Cox's Bazar South Forest Department, said Nurul Absar sheltered the Rohingyas on the forest land for personal gain.

The higher authorities have been informed about the matter, he added.

Gafur Uddin Chowdhury, chairman of Palongkhali Union Parishad, said if the government does not take action against those who are patronising undocumented Rohingyas, the situation will take a serious turn.

Locals said some NGOs are behind the setting up of the new Rohingya slum by grabbing forest land. The NGOs do not work directly; they use people like Nurul Absar.

Talking to this correspondent on Sunday, Cox's Bazar Deputy Commissioner Ali Hossain said the allegations against Nurul Absar are being looked into and steps will be taken based on the findings.

BNP won't take tough line now

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crucial for its political survival. The party will decide its stance on the 2019 national election considering the neutrality of the EC, party sources said.

The party wanted to hold a rally in Dhaka, marking the third anniversary of the January 5, 2014, polls, which the BNP dubbed as "democracy killing day". But police denied them permission.

In protest, the party announced countryside demonstration programmes for Sunday. But in many districts police did not allow the party leaders and workers to take to the streets.

"In the current situation, if we go for any tough protest, our initiative for the formation of a neutral Election Commission will suffer a

setback. So we will refrain from waging any tough programme right now," said a BNP leader, asking not to be named.

After the January 5 "one-sided" election in which 153 AL lawmakers were elected uncontested, the BNP waged a nationwide movement. The almost yearlong street demonstration led to the death of over 100 people. Many of them were killed in dozens of arson attacks on public transports allegedly carried out by BNP-Jamaat men.

However, the movement failed to budge the government to meet the opposition demand for a fresh election.

Late last year, BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia placed a proposal before the media on the constitution of the new Election Commission.

She also promised to come up with her proposal on the formation of an election-time neutral government in time.

After that, President Abdul Hamid has initiated talks with different political parties. The BNP joined the talks and placed its proposals before the president on December 18.

Contacted, BNP Standing Committee Member Abdul Moyeen Khan said his was a "liberal democratic party" which believed in resolving political conflicts through negotiations and discussions.

Within the norms of democracy, there is no other option available to the players, who are committed to the principles of peaceful transfer of power through a free and fair election conducted by an independent

EC, he said.

"The BNP has already initiated this process with a view to strengthening the forthcoming Election Commission and creating an appropriate government during the election process," he said yesterday.

In the past, the party countered any government action with blockade, hartal and other street programmes.

But now party leaders are concentrating on the incoming EC and are also trying to drum up public support for their demand.

On Sunday, for example, Pabna BNP did not hold any protest rally. Instead, the district BNP leaders and workers joined a seminar titled "Ensure people's voting right, form a stronger Election Commission", Party Standing Committee Member