

## Rangpur Santals place 10-point demand

Form human chain, lay siege to DC office

KONGKON KARMAKER, from Rangpur

Indigenous Santals from Rangpur region formed a human chain and laid siege to the Deputy Commissioner's office in the city yesterday protesting the eviction of Santals from Sahebganj-Bagda sugarcane farm of Rangpur Sugar Mills in Gobindaganj upazila on November 6 last year.

The Santals from Rangpur, Dinajpur, Gaibandha, Lalmonirhat and Nilphamari under the banner of Jatiya Adivasi Parishad (JAP) gathered near Shapla intersection in Rangpur city in the morning and declared a 10-point demand to the government.

Around 11.30am they marched towards the DCs office in Kacharibazaar area carrying traditional Santal bows and arrows. There they formed a human chain and besieged the office till 1:30pm to press home their demands.

Their demands include withdrawal of cases filed against evicted Santals; stop harassment of the Santals;

SEE PAGE 11 COL 5



With their traditional drums, and bow and arrows, the santals of Rangpur region bring out a procession in Rangpur city yesterday protesting the attack on and eviction of Santals in Gobindaganj of Gaibandha.

PHOTO: STAR

## PM flies to Switzerland for WEF meet

DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENT

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina left for Switzerland last night to attend the 47th Annual Meeting of the World Economic Forum (WEF) in Davos, which is expected to encourage multinational companies and foreign investors to invest in Bangladesh.

Hasina is the first "elected" Bangladesh leader attending the prestigious event at the invitation of WEF's founder and Executive Chairman Prof Klaus Schwab.

She was leading a 57-member delegation.

The delegation members include Foreign Minister AH Mahmood Ali, State Minister for ICT Junaid Ahmed Palok, 11 high officials from the PMO, eight officials from the foreign ministry, 13 advance security personnel, nine accompanying security members and 11 members from PM's official press and media team.

The four-day annual meeting of the WEF will be on January 17-20 under the theme "Responsive and Responsible Leadership".

As per the programme schedule, the PM on January 17 will attend the opening plenary of the WEF the Congress

SEE PAGE 11 COL 1

## Dumping sand on farmland

FROM PAGE 1

Enayet Ullah Mollah, who is organising the affected locals to protect their agricultural land, said, "Now, with the developer carrying on their work in spite of the order of the High Court, who should we turn to?"

Over 12,000 inhabitants of 10 villages in the six moujas are dependent on the agricultural land, he said. Of the total 2,350 bighas of arable land, 1,500 bighas are under 11 IRRR rice cultivation schemes of the government.

Three IRRR schemes are already damaged in Char Bhabanathpur and Bhatibandha -- thanks to sand filling by the same company between 2009 and 2011, he said. With the fresh sand filling, the farmland in Kandargaon now faces obliteration, Enayet added.

In 2009, Unique Property Development Ltd, another company of Unique Group, embarked on a massive sand filling project in a portion of the Meghna river, adjoining low-lying wetlands, and multi-crop agricultural land in the six moujas to make way for its real estate venture named Sonargaon Resort City.

This project had not obtained any environmental clearance from the authorities concerned.

This act of destruction was thwarted in late 2011, when the HC issued the injunction. A mobile court of the department of environment also slapped a hefty fine on the firm for causing colossal damage to agriculture,

environment, and aquatic ecology.

Two years on, the same conglomerate returned to the scene with the same objective. Only the names of the firm and the project were different. In late September last year, this firm of Unique Group started earth filling work in the same farmland.

The HC in its order had not only asked the developer to not cause any further damage to the villagers' land, but also ordered the developer to restore the damaged area to their original state.

The managing director of the developer company in response to the HC injunction had then told the court that they had removed the sand that they used to fill up the land in that area till that date and that they would ensure that the environment and the agriculture were preserved in their future projects.

"We have undertaken tree plantation and other environment-friendly activities to ensure environmental equilibrium at the site," reads an excerpt from the statement the company had submitted to the court.

The company meanwhile obtained a pre-qualification certificate from Bangladesh Economic Zone Authority in late August last year with 12 preconditions for final licence and it also had a gazette notification issued in its favour.

Of the preconditions, the salient one is that the company will provide an environmental impact assessment along with an environmental manage-

ment plan to the BEZA.

However, an official gazette notification issued by the BEZA on August 4 last year said the private economic zone is proposed in

Charbhabanathpur and Bhatibandha moujas with 63 acres of land in its ownership and it called upon people to lodge complaints if they had any.

According to BEZA officials, the conditional pre-qualification certificate given by BEZA and the official gazette can, in no way, allow a developer to start filling arable land, especially when there is an HC injunction.

"The act of filling farmland with the HC ban in effect is illegal," said Rubayet Hayat Shiplu, local assistant commissioner for land, "To my knowledge, there is no licence for a private economic zone at this site."

He said he wrote to local police to take action. "There is a verbal instruction of higher authorities not to take any action against it," he said.

Rabbi Miah, deputy commissioner of Narayanganj, said, "I have given formal instruction to stop the illegal act and I will talk to the assistant commissioner to know who forbade him."

He said he wrote to Sonargaon upazila nirbahi officer, officer-in-charge of the local police station and Unique Group managing director on January 10 to stop the illegal earth filling.

In early August last year, executive chairman of BEZA issued the pre-qualification certificate in favour of Sonargaon Economic Zone. For final

licence, it requires environmental impact assessment, feasibility study, undisputed land ownership, site master plan, and rehabilitation plan.

The department of environment exempted the company from initial environmental examination in a letter issued in December last year but it said without the clearance in the environmental impact assessment, the project authority shall not be allowed to conduct earth filling or any kind of physical intervention on the proposed project site.

The Narayanganj DC in a letter in October, however, informed the BEZA executive chairman that there was no scope for allowing the filling of agricultural land for the economic zone in the said moujas.

Syeda Rizwana Hasan, chief executive of Bangladesh Environmental Lawyers Association which had filed the writ petition with the HC and won the injunction against the land filling, said it was a businessman's brazen defiance of the HC.

"Some people consider themselves above the law and they have proved time and again that they are above the law," she said, adding, "It only gives an alarming message to the society."

"And the remedy is to ensure the highest punishment for contempt of court, restoring the farmland to its original state, and providing compensation to the affected villagers and farmers," said Rizwana.

Officials who failed to monitor and take action should also face the music,

she said.

Mohammad Noor Ali, managing director of both Unique Hotel and Resorts Ltd and Unique Property Development Ltd, claimed that it was a priority project of theirs and that they were developing a housing scheme no more.

"The land is not agricultural anymore," he claimed, adding, "The government has issued gazette notification for an economic zone at the site and there is no court injunction on sand filling there."

"We will obtain the environmental approval after filling up the land," said Noor.

Japanese investors are interested in this economic zone and it will be an economic hub with thousands of jobs, he said.

"In case some people are affected and if they come to us with complaints, we will compensate them ...," said Ali.

According to Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics findings, the country is losing agricultural land at a rate of around 1 percent every year and is feared to lose a third of its agricultural land in the next 25 years unless the trend is halted.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in April last year at Krishibid Institution said the government would not allow indiscriminate industrialisation destroying cultivable land and forests.

She also said industries would be accommodated in 100 special economic zones to be built across the country.

## 1,200 students face uncertainty

FROM PAGE 1

"permissible number," he told The Daily Star yesterday, adding that the BMDC cannot register students bypassing the rules.

"We have given them [USTC] chance several times but they have not corrected themselves. The situation has become horrible now."

Asked about the foreign students, he said, "We are thinking about them and will try to find a solution."

Contacted, USTC Registrar Badrul Alam Bhuiyan said they got a letter from the government in 2015, which asked them to admit 75 students every year. But before that, there was no restriction on admission of students.

"We had 387 students in the 24th batch [2010-2011 academic session], and all of them got registered with the BMDC. So, we admitted around 400 students in each of the next three batches."

"After getting the letter, we have not admitted excess students."

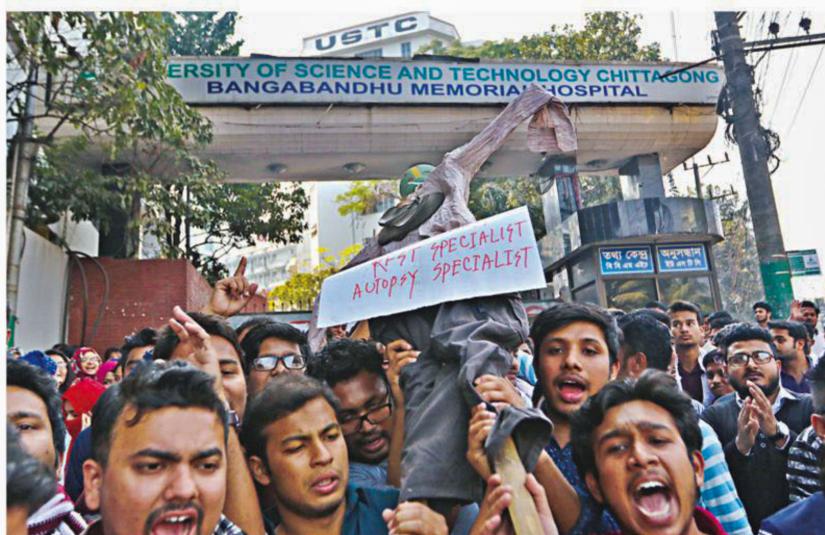
Referring to registration of the 1,200 students, he said, "We are trying to solve the problem through discussion with the BMDC."

Contacted, Dr Md Zahedul Haque Basunia, registrar of the BMDC, said they refused to register the students because the USTC violated the rules by admitting more students than permissible.

Asked how 387 USTC students of the 24th batch got registered with the BMDC in 2012, he said it was done following intervention of the higher authorities.

About this, the health minister said they did it on compassionate grounds. "We showed them [USTC] mercy because of the foreign students, but they [USTC] continue to resort to irregularities year after year."

"When I go abroad, foreign friends ask me about them... I went to Sri Lanka recently and the health secretary of



Foreign medical students of University of Science and Technology, Chittagong, boycott classes and bring out a procession protesting the Bangladesh Medical and Dental Council not allowing them to get registered for a mistake the university had made. Inset, the locked gate of a university building where classes are held.

PHOTO: ANURUP KANTI DAS

that country politely raised the issues regarding the USTC," Nasim said.

Of the 600 foreign students at the USTC medical faculty, around 300 are from India, about 250 from Sri Lanka, 30 from the Maldives and 10 from Bhutan.

Many of the students from India, Sri Lanka and the Maldives told The Daily Star that they already contacted their embassies in Bangladesh through emails, and the officials concerned told them that they were keeping a close watch on the matter.

In three separate posts on Twitter yesterday, India's External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj said, "I have received the report from Harsh Shringla, Indian high commissioner in Bangladesh. The university has admitted more students than permissible. He is in touch with the university and Bangladesh Medical and Dental Council (BMDC)."

"To find a satisfactory solution,

Indian students should remain in touch with our mission in Dhaka."

She said the Indian government is in contact with the Bangladesh authorities.

The Indian minister made the remarks in response to a news report of The Hindustan Times.

Talking to this correspondent yesterday, Dr Faisal Iqbal Chowdhury, general secretary of Bangladesh Medical Association, Chittagong, said, "The future of around 1,200 students is now uncertain because of the USTC management's greed."

"The government should have taken stern action against the USTC authorities long ago." That would have prevented it from admitting more students than permissible, he said.

"When institutions such as Dhaka Medical College and Chittagong Medical College admit around 200 students every year, how could the USTC admit more than 400 students a

year?" he asked.

**PLIGHT OF STUDENTS**

Sara Rahin from Kashmir said many of the Indian students contacted the Indian High Commission, and the officials there said they were discussing the matter with the Bangladesh authorities.

Several other Indian students said they paid nine lakh rupees during admission and around three lakh rupees a year in tuition and accommodation fees for the last five years.

"Each student paid more than 25 lakh [Indian] rupees in five years but the authorities are yet to complete our registration," said an Indian student of the 25th batch, seeking anonymity.

"When we were second-year students, we contacted the authorities for registration. They said it would be done in the fifth year."

He is now a student of fifth year, which is nearing its end.

The final professional examinations

of the 25th batch are scheduled to start on January 23. But like other students of the batch, he is yet to get registered with the BMDC.

"We must get registered [with the BMDC] for pursuing internship," he said. Some students from the Maldives said each of them had to pay \$14,150 during admission and \$4,500 every year.

On condition of anonymity, a Sri Lankan student said she paid \$20,000 during admission and \$3,000 a year for the last five years.

A Bangladeshi student, Jahedul Bahar Badhan, said the registration should be completed in the first or the second year, but the university authorities couldn't have them registered even in five years.

"Whenever we asked the authorities to get us registered, they just gave us assurance," he said.

(Our New Delhi correspondent contributed to this report)

"I have come to the Ijtima venue at 10:00am on foot from near the Radisson Hotel in the capital," said Azadul Haque, a resident of Mirpur-12.

Around 7,804 foreign devotees from 91 countries, including India, Pakistan, Iran, Iraq and Egypt, also attended the first phase of the Ijtima, said Mominul Islam, inspector of Special Branch of Police in Gazipur.

**PRESENCE OF VIPS**

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina took part in the prayers with her family members and relatives from the Gono Bhaban, while BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia joined the final prayers from her Gulshan house.

Apart from Hasina and Khaleda, ministers, state ministers and political leaders also joined the Akheri Munajat.

**DEVOTEES DIE**

Seven devotees died during the first phase of Ijtima.

**MOBILE COURT**

Rahenul Islam, additional district magistrate of Gazipur, said five executive magistrates led mobile court drives in two shifts at the Ijtima ground and its adjacent areas.

The courts filed 12 cases and fined different restaurants Tk 47,500 during the drives.

**FREE FOOD AND WATER**

As hundreds of thousands of devotees walked miles to join the Akheri Munajat and return from the Ijtima venue, different organisations and individuals distributed juice, water and dry food among the devotees at different points on their way to home.

## College teacher

FROM PAGE 16

"Primarily, we suspect that it was a case of robbery as a big steel almirah and a cabinet were found broken," SI Tapas said.

Chittaranjan was at home alone during the incident, said his nephew Bappi Babin.