

SPOTLIGHT

The people set afloat by the flash floods of the haor areas are not blaming their luck—or some supreme being. The only omnipotent force they are naming is far nearer, in the Sylhet metropolis and goes by the name of the Water Development Board.

They were supposed to build embankments before the rains came. They did not.

This allegation is definitely easy to believe once you drive a few kilometres away from the tiny provincial town of Sunamganj and see the water. The water stretches on as far as the eyes can see, brilliant in the summer sun. Calmer towards the mainland, crashing in waves the deeper into the haors you go.

Where are the dykes the government doled out crores to reconstruct? *The Star Weekend* could not independently verify the total budget allocated, but documents obtained show that the Water Development Board floated tenders worth Tk. 48 crores 49 lakhs at least, to contractors, solely for the purpose of rebuilding the dams.

Mohammed Siddik Ali, a farmer of Tahirpur Upazila, had waited for the promised dykes before he realised they weren't happening, and picked up the shovel himself.

He lives in Shonir Haor. According to the budget documents we got, contractors in Shonir Haor were allocated at least Tk. 1 crore 60 lakh for dam reconstruction in five places. Three contractors, Messrs Goodman Enterprise, Shamsur Rahman and Messrs LL Contractions, were hired to do the job. The projects were being overseen by two union parishad members at least, who were paid Tk. 20 lakhs in total for it, according to a document signed by the executive engineer of the board.*

Shonir Haor is completely under water.

"I got together with other villages and patched up one of the dams. We were donated sandbags by the leaders of the locality," describes Ali.

It didn't work. Men with shovels and charity sandbags did not ultimately have the kind of impact that infrastructure construction done by the local government could have had.

"Our dam held until four days ago," says Ali. He pointed towards the blue expanse. "My land is over there. My rice is ruined," he laments.

When I meet Siddik Ali, he is one of the hundreds of farmers drying out rotten, soggy rice on the road that leads into the heart of Tahirpur. With the fields under water, all the farmers crowd onto the tarmac, leaving barely enough space for the occasional three-wheeler CNG to pass through. It is a typical scene of the harvest season, but the only *nobanno* being brought home is green and tart, damp and of no value. Not to mention inadequate in quantity.

"We are trying to sift out the kernels which are somewhat edible from the ones which are absolutely rotten," says Ali. He adds that he lost around 60 percent of his crop. Ali's condition is still

better than those who live deeper into the Shonir Haor.

Mohammad Kala Miah and his son are having to haul their rice from under the water. Balanced on a slim dinghy, the two hurl a five-pronged plough into the water. The end is tied to a spool of rope, to be towed in like a harpoon. Kala Miah rakes up strands of putrid rice stalks. This then is taken back to land, dried and sorted out.

"I don't even know how much I will be able to salvage. Probably less than 10 *mons* (400kg) when it is usually six times that amount," he says. The market prices for a *mon* of rice is as low as Tk. 500 right now. This was the last harvest before monsoon comes and all the lands are under water until fall. Unlike many other places in the country, the wetland *haor* area is an ecosystem where an annual harvest of Boro rice is all that most farmers have to subsist on.

Sajima is a young mother of four, who now lives in an islet surrounded on all sides by water. The flood waters have eaten their way to the very brink of the bank that her corrugated tin house stands on, and are gently lapping away at her back wall. Even in February, this area was a village called Nisimpur. Now there is barely any land.

"I doubt I'll get even 10 *mons* of rice this year. I got around 100 *mons* last time," she explains. She works as bonded labour, and will have to give half of whatever meagre amount she gets to the owner of the land. The strip of earth her home stands on is the only land she owns.

"We've been selling all the cows because there is no grass to graze, and there is no hay to feed them," she says. She still has one medium-sized calf left and I ask her what it has been eating.

"Rotten hay. It hates the taste of it but hunger forces it to eat. Just like hunger is making us eat the green grains of rice," she adds with a laugh. I ask her what she will do if the water floods her home.

"I'll go take shelter in the school. The waters come in every year—it's just that I can usually harvest my rice in time," she shares.

Petty politics, local corruption costing lives

The same sentiments were echoed by the *upazila* chairman Kamruzzaman Qamrul. "The corruption with dam reconstruction happens every year and they can never get the job done in time. The contractors usually do enough to go through the harvest season, and then wash their hands off the job," he rants.

"The only reason they stick around that long is because they too own rice fields. As for the flooding of homes—theirs are all further inland, so who cares about the poor farmers of the *haors*?" fumes Qamrul.

His upazila has 23 haors and all them are under water.

According to the documents received by *The Star Weekend*, in this area, Naluar Haor were supposed to get a Tk 2 crore 8 lakh makeover. This is the highest amount of money given out to contractors in any of the haors of Tahirpur.

Shanir Haor comes right after,



ZYMA ISLAM

PHOTOS: ORCHID CHAKMA

An islet surrounded by water.



Grains ruined by the water, some before ripening.

followed by Matian Haor with a Tk 1 crore 54 lakh allocation for contractors. The Matian haor reconstruction was being done by ten union parishad members heading committees which were given Tk 1 crore 20 lakh in total for operative costs.

"I myself rounded up villagers to

build dams for a month. I gave Tk 2 lakh out of my own coffers, the District Commissioner gave Tk 4 lakh and Tk 3 lakh was drawn out of the emergency budget of the upazila. The rest were donated by influential people of the area. In total we had Tk 15 lakh worth of sandbags," he claims.



Villagers in line for subsidised rice.

Qamrul identifies with the BNP and finds it in his interest to fill up the gaps left by the politicised, corrupt local government. His political affiliation, however, may be the very reason why he could not supervise any of the dam reconstruction work being done.

"I often do not get direct information

about what kind of dam reconstruction is done where and who is doing it," he alleges, "Just that other day, somebody secretly sent me a document showing that a committee headed by a union parishad member was supposed to do a dam reconstruction worth Tk. 14 lakh 50 thousand, that I had no idea about."

His claims are not entirely unfounded. A lack of transparency combined with politicised nepotism, spurred by a shared greed for corruption, seems to be the norm in these parts. During the interview with him, the Upazila Nirbahi Officer (UNO) and the Fisheries Ministry secretary walks into the premises to hold an ad hoc briefing for journalists and the locals. After they leave, a frustrated, fuming Qamrul returns back to the interview.

"The UNO just told journalists and villagers that relief is being brought in, and will be doled out by Awami League men," he says. "Why do I need local cadres to give relief to my people? What are my upazila administration staff here

being sold.

Why was the work not done? Aatur Rahman is a former contractor and he has a theory.

"The contractors have to fight a corrupt system from the get-go. It makes them think, they too can cut slack," says Rahman. He now has a workshop in the market, where we met him.

"I once took up a tender to build a dam in Matian Haor. The work was worth the same amount of money as 32 *mon* of rice," he adds. Rahman uses the weight of rice as a unit of estimating money. "I was asked to pay Tk 5000 to the Water Development Board for every *mon*'s worth of work I did," he states.

MONEY GIVEN TO CONTRACTORS TO BUILD DAMS IN SUNAMGANJ

TK 48 CRORES 49 LAKHS

Budget for dam construction in Tahirpur Upazila:

- a) Naluar Haor – Tk 2 crore 8 lakh
- b) Shonir Haor – Tk 1 crore 60 lakh
- c) Matian Haor – Tk 1 crore 54 lakh

All haors in Tahirpur are under water

for?" he exclaims.

The case is similar for the subsidised rice being sold in the markets by the Directorate General of Foods, he alleges.

The DGOF has been selling rice for the price of Tk. 10 per kilograms approximately, in the central market of the upazila. Lines of hungry, weather beaten villages extend up to a kilometre.

"The rice is being sold in the village centre but not being taken to the villages deeper into the haors where people are marooned in their islets, often without boats. They are not involving us in the process and are not getting to know the real picture," says Qamrul.

The DGOF do not have a proper estimate of the amount of rice that was needed. Everyday 400 people receive rice from the village market outlet but there are thousands affected. This brings us back to the real problem—the petty politics of local administrative representatives cost lives and livelihoods.

Rupbanu's face is lined like newly furrowed earth. Her body is a sack of skin and bones. "I woke up at *fajr* and came here. I did not even make the bed," she says. The sun was nearing the highest point of the sky when *The Star Weekend* was talking with her, and she is still standing in a line with no end in sight. All her rice was lost in the floods.

"I was returning home from the *bazar* at 2 am last night after finishing work, and I saw people reserving spots in the line," quips another relief-seeker. Everyday crowds of hungry villagers return home empty-handed after a whole day wasted standing in line. That is only those who have boats and could make it to the mainland where the rice is

Did he? "No, I did not, so they cut out 3 *mon* worth of money from me when making the final payment," he asserts. He alleges that he even bribed the messenger Tk. 5000 out of pocket to let him off the hook for the clandestine payments.

Ready to tackle climate-change?

The attitude of the local government shows that the nation is ill-equipped to tackle the effects of climate change. The flash flood in the haors this season takes place intermittently every couple of years—with the last one being four years ago—and experts believe this will not be the last one.

A 2014 research by the Institute of Water and Flood Management of Bangladesh University of Engineering Technology (BUET) took rainfall measurements from 1961 to 2010 to examine the link between climate change and heavy rainfall. They showed that rainfall intensity will increase in the future causing more flash floods.

When we leave Tahirpur around dusk, the farmers are still on the road, sifting the bad grain from the good. The air is dank and sticky from the rotten harvest, giving off a smell that is the complete opposite of the musky scent of fresh hay.

That night, it rains again. It rains so hard the skies light up.

Additional reporting by our Moulvibazara correspondent Mintu Deshwara.

* The engineer, Mohammed Afsar Uddin oversaw the Sunamganj zone and was suspended by the Water Development Board at the time of writing the report. This issue went to print on Tuesday, May 2.