

Tales of a lucky escape, grim ends

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It is being called a miracle: a single moment that offers some semblance of hope in this bleak period.

Mohammad Yunus, 40, who lives on the slopes of the hill around 50 feet below the main road adjacent to a Manikchhari army camp, can count his blessings, unlike many others.

When heavy rains unleashed a massive landslide near the camp on Chittagong-Rangamati highways on Tuesday, Yunus, along with 15 army personnel, happened to be right there. Four army men, including two officers, were killed on the spot and 10 others were injured, with one still missing.

The force of the mudflows washed those in its way 30 feet down below the road. Yunus was tossed all the way down into a pond while the army personnel were pushed onto a number of homes located on the slopes.

"I was watching the army's road clearing operation at around 9:30am. I came to the road after shifting my family members from my home to a safer place. 10 minutes after the army men began clearing up the road, a huge landslide took place and washed all of us away," Yunus narrated his horror tale to The Daily Star.

He said he was lucky to still be alive. "I fell in the pond and I managed to get out of the water. I got hurt on my back only, but that is minor," he said, adding that if he fell where he was, he would not have been so lucky.

"I express my gratitude to the almighty as I am still alive. I have seen death closely," he said while standing at the exact location where the horror unfolded.

Yunus rented home on the slopes, where he had been living for seven years, was washed away in the landslide.

DESPAIR STILL REIGNS

Mohammad Nabi, a driver by profession, was married to his wife and arranged the marriage of his second daughter to take place after Ramdan. His joy was to be short-lived though, as the events of Tuesday transpired.

Living with five family members in a rented house in a village in Rangamati town, Nabi's unaware home after Fazz Prayers returned that soon a landslide from the adjacent hills would bury his home and kill all five of his loved ones including his beloved second daughter. Neighbours rushed to the spot and took them to the hospital with critical injuries.

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Firemen using a high pressure hose to wash away the mud to recover bodies at a house in Jubo Unnayan area of Rangamati town yesterday. Bangladesh Army personnel conducting rescue and recovery operations, top right, in Lemujiri area of Bandarban. A mother and daughter reach Ghagrabazar near Rangamati town, bottom right, from Dhaka. They rushed there after hearing that three of their relatives were killed in Monday night's mudslides.

It was written on the wall

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percent of the GHT population. But the number rose to 88.57 percent in 1991 from 35 percent in 1981 and 10 percent in 1951.

In his book 'Alienation of the Lands of Indigenous Peoples', researcher Shapan Adnan mentions that around four lakh people from different parts of Bangladesh were given the opportunity to settle in the GHT under a strategic population transfer plan during 1978-1984.

Within a decade from 1981, the GHT population increased by 67.95 percent.

During the period, the hill population grew by 6.79 percent annually compared to the annual national population growth of 2.17 percent.

Earlier in the 60s, the government built the Kaptai dam, leading to displacement of one lakh indigenous people and inundation of one-fifth of the cultivable land in Rangamati and a large portion of the nearby forest. More than half of the people in the area had to take shelter in the forest.

"It was a major blow to the environment of Chittagong Hill Tracts," says a research paper published by the

Association for Land Reform and Development in 1995.

Phillip Cain, author of a number of books on environmental issues, said the landslides and subsequent casualties in the GHT are "a kind of reprisal of nature against humans, who have exhausted it too much."

"In recent times, vegetation on hills has been cleared indiscriminately and the hills have been sporadically cut to accommodate people and to promote commercial plantation. Such human activities have upset the nature. Now we see the severe consequences in landslides, damages to houses, and deaths. I have no doubt that more scourge of nature is yet to come," he said.

Development activities such as construction of roads without enough impact assessment are also factors in landslides occurring in the GHT, he said.

Forests have been cleared in most parts of Rangamati town and also areas around it. Thousands of people are now living there at a grave risk.

The Rangamati town was developed on hilltops. Thousands of people live on slopes of hills on both sides of roads in Rangamati town and sur-

rounding areas. If those people are not moved from risky hill slopes, it would be hard for the government to improve the situation," said Md Rafiqul Islam, divisional forest officer in Rangamati.

In reply to a query, he said the forest department didn't plant trees in the GHT region in the last 50 years.

"The hills that belong to the forest approval is banned under the Bangladesh Environment Conservation Act 1995 (amended in 2010). But this illegal activity goes unabated as the authorities concerned appear reluctant to take necessary action."

People build houses on risky hill slopes right under the nose of the administration but it hardly takes any action.

Zuamlin Amlai, president of Chittagong Hill Tracts Forest and Land Rights' Protection Movement (Bandarban Chapter), said, "Almost 20 percent of the GHT population lives

on hill slopes or at the foot of hills."

The recent influx of Rohingyaas from Myanmar has made matters even worse.

"It's the settlers, not hill people, who cut hills to build houses. Recently, Rohingyaas have moved to these areas in Bandarban and built houses on hill slopes, he said.

Md Muzaffar, who lives on a hill slope in Rangamati's Islampur area, said, "I have come here from Barisal. I know it's dangerous to live here but I have no other place to go. I am a poor man."

Like him, many people live on hill slopes in Bandarban's Kalaghat, Lemujiri, Banorupa Para, Lungi Para and Fatong areas.

In Cox's Bazar, around one lakh people live on slopes of hills that belong to the forest department.

There was a dense forest in Borochhona area near Kalatoli a few decades ago. Elephants were spotted there at that time. But now around 5,000 people live in around 1,000 houses there and most of them are at risk of landslides, he said.

Deepak Sharma Dipu, president of Forest and Hills Conservation Society, said, "Already 40 percent of the

forestland in Cox's Bazar has been grabbed. Around one lakh Rohingyaas are illegally living in hills and in forestland."

Saiful Islam Chowdhury, secretary general of Bangladesh Poribesh Andolon, said there is not even one unpopulated hill in Cox's Bazar.

Sardar Shariful Islam, assistant director of the Department of Environment in Cox's Bazar, said six teams of the department have been asking people to move to safer places from risky hill slopes in the district.

But they were not getting good response from the dwellers.

Contacted, Bir Bahadur U Shwe Sing, state minister for Chittagong Hill Tracts Affairs, said, "It was a manmade disaster that cost more than a hundred lives in the Chittagong Hill Tracts."

After Cyclone Mora, we directed the district administration of the three hill districts several times to alert those living on hill risking their lives."

It was the administration's responsibility to ensure safety of these people, but it failed, he said.

Our Bandarban and Cox's Bazar correspondents contributed to this report.



PHOTO: PRABIR DAS/ SAHARJIT KUMAR BARUA

Costlier import gets nod

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Food processing tenders in May, the government awarded two companies based in Dubai and Singapore two import shipments at \$406.48 and \$427.85 a tonne of white and parboiled rice respectively.

At yesterday's meeting, the government sealed the deal with Vietnam at \$430 and \$470 a tonne for two lakh tonnes of white and 50,000 tonnes of parboiled rice.

The government would spend Tk 996.85 crore to buy the Vietnamese rice, spending Tk 66.53 crore more compared to contracts in the international market.

In May, the government had sanctioned Tk 346.24 crore to buy one lakh tonnes of rice through Dubai-based Shukhbir Agro and Singapore-based Agro Corp.

Food ministry sources told The Daily Star apart from Bangladesh, at least six other countries sought to import rice from Vietnam in recent weeks, putting a domestic pressure thereby hiking the price. These countries are the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Indonesia, Cuba and China.

Besides, the sources said, though Shukhbir's and Agro Corp's price offers are competitive, that one lakh tonne consignment was highly unlikely to reach Bangladesh ports in two months.

On the other hand, on Bangladesh's insistence, Vietnam agreed to dispatch

Govt approves 2.5 lakh tonnes rice import from Vietnam at higher prices

It could buy only 1% of targeted purchase from domestic market

Millers declined to sell rice to govt at lower than market price

Govt mulls lowering rice import tax, blacklisting such millers

Experts blame govt for stock depletion of rice

The first rice consignment in just 15 days. Bangladesh's such desperate move comes at a time when rice stock in public granaries touched a nadir at 1.98 lakh tonnes this week from over five lakh tonnes in June last year.

As millers of home declined to sell rice to the government during the current Boro procurement season saying its price offer was not lucrative enough and price of coarse rice hit an all-time high of Tk 48, the authorities are mulling reducing a 25 percent duty now in place on rice import.

For the situation, experts blamed an imprudent food stock policy that the government pursued this year thereby allowing market manipulators to pick up the prices of coarse rice up to 42 percent comparing to last year's price.

According to Badrul Hasan, director

general of the food directorate, they could buy only 15,000 tonnes of rice in first month of a four-month (May-August) domestic rice procurement programme, as against a target of purchasing 15 lakh tonnes.

With millers declining to sell rice to the government at low price offer of Tk 34 a kg, the government was threatening that those millers would be blacklisted for future trade.

Agricultural economist Jahangir Alam told The Daily Star that although some rice was lost in the haor flashfloods, the price should not have jumped so high. He questioned why the government allowed its rice stock to deplete in the first place.

"Why they [food ministry and food directorate] have failed to keep the minimum security stock of rice in the granaries?" asked Iahji Dad Khan, a former director of the food directorate who witnessed and had crucial crisis management role during 2007-08 global economic meltdown and 2011 rice shortage.

"They should have noticed well in advance that how fast the food godowns were drying out due to continuous operations of open market sale since January and exhausting of stock through distributions under Tk 10 a kg rice dole programme."

He said during his time in the food directorate an effort was always there to

keep one million tonnes of food (rice and wheat) stock reserve in the godowns. But this time around, Khan noted, the government failed to keep a crisis stock and market is now at the mercy of rice millers and traders.

Food ministry and directorate sources said that on top of already existing various food dole programmes like text relief (TR), vulnerable group development (VGD), open market sale (OMS), government introduced a Tk 10 a kg programme for 5 million ultra poor people in late last year putting a huge pressure on the rice stock.

They said they thought a dried up stock would be soon replenished through domestic procurement during the current Boro season, which never happened.

Contacted, Bangladesh Rice Mills Association President Abdur Rashid said, "We've told the minister many a times that it's not possible to supply rice to government at Tk 34 a kg when we were getting Tk 39 a kg in the open market. Who would bear the Tk 1 lakh loss in each 100-metric-tonne lot of 20 tonnes?"

Abdur Rashid, managing director of Rashid Agro-Food Products, who represents over 1,500 rice millers in the country, did not acknowledge any hoarding taking place but said rice price may come down with government and private importers bringing in shipments from international markets.

There were reports that some leapt out of windows. Other witnesses spoke of children including a baby being thrown to safety from high windows.

"Tamara, one witness, told the BBC: 'There's people, like throwing their kids out. Just save my children, just save my children!'"

Prime Minister May said her thoughts were with all those affected. Opposition leader Jeremy Corbyn said spinler systems should be installed in such blocks and called on the government to make a statement in parliament.

Khan, the London mayor, said questions needed to be answered about the safety of tower blocks after some residents said they had been advised they should stay in their flats in the event of a fire.

Hills howl in grief, pain

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Rangamati in Rangamati town where his sisters lived.

His shrill cries echoed through the hills. At one point, he stopped running as the ambulance carrying the bodies of his loved ones disappeared into the hills. He buried his face in his palms, and began to sob violently, his body shaking.

Cries like his now hang heavy in Rangamati and other hill districts, after the county's deadliest landslide struck the region. The death toll now stands at 143, up from Tuesday night's 130, and is likely to rise further.

In Rangamati, the worst-hit district with 105 confirmed deaths, it's hard to find signs of everyday life.

Much of the district with a population of some 6 lakh remains without power since Sunday, as many electric poles got uprooted following incessant rain and landslides. No one is sure when the power connection would be restored.

Large chunks of soil that fell from the hills still block most of the roads. Rescue workers, including army and fire service men, are struggling to wash the mud away with hose pipes. As there is no electricity, they are using generators to power the hose pipes.

A local journalist said the fire service there did not have adequate manpower and equipment required for the operations.

In some parts of the district, food shortages have already set in. The crisis may deepen as supply trucks struggling to reach there with road communications between Rangamati and other districts still cut off.

The Department of Disaster Management (DDM) has allocated Tk 50 lakh 300 tonnes of rice and 600 bundles of corrugated tin sheets for the victims.

Officials said they already began relief distribution, but many affected people said they did not get anything.

For their missing colleague until they found him. Some 12m stretch of the road from Cadutra to Manikchhari has been badly damaged. Parts of roads collapsed, making it almost impossible for anyone even to walk on it.

Some 40 army personnel were involved in the rescue work at Manikchhari.

Rescuers in the district yesterday found seven more bodies, mostly children, Rangamati Deputy Commissioner Manzul Mannan told reporters.

The rescue operation would continue today as several people were reported missing, he added.

In Bandarban, where at least nine people died, rescue operations ended around 2:00pm yesterday.

Rehamul Hossain, District Relief and Rehabilitation Office Project Implementation Officer, said they were distributing Tk 20,000 to the family for each of the dead, Tk 5,000 to each injured and 30kg rice to each of affected families.

Reaz Ahmed, director general of the Department of Disaster Management, said, "The government is assessing the total damages caused by the landslides. We will rehabilitate the affected people."

Meanwhile, the Jajira Sangsad yesterday adopted a condolence motion, expressing shock at the loss of lives in the disaster.

The European Union, Canada, the UK and India also expressed shock.

Night of horror in London

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estate overlooking upper parts of the Kensington area.

"We could see a lot of children and many parents shouting 'Help! Help!' and putting their hands on the windows and asking to help them," Amina Sharif told Reuters.

"We could do nothing and we could see the stuff on the side was falling off, people were shouting 'Help! Help!' and screaming and they were jumping." SCRYING SHEETS TOGETHER.

More than 16 hours after the fire started, crews were still trying to douse flames as they sought to reach the top floors.

But London police commander Stuart Cundy told reporters he did not believe further survivors would be found in the building.

At a nearby community centre used to house some of those rescued, tensions were rising as occupants waited for news. "The fire, which was unprecedented in its scale and speed, will be subject to a full

fire investigation," said Steve Apter from the London Fire Brigade. "Any lessons learnt from this will be borne out not just across London, across the UK - and lessons learnt globally."

The building had recently undergone an 8.7 million pound (\$11.08 million) exterior refurbishment, which included new external cladding and windows.

CHILDREN THROWN TO SAFETY
Residents who escaped how they woke up to the smell of burning and rushed to leave through smoke-filled corridors and stairwells.