

Protect people from landslides

Seminar calls for action to stop recurrence of manmade disaster

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Speakers at a seminar in the capital yesterday called for the protection of the environment in the country's hilly areas by taking up long-term plans to tackle landslides.

They said manmade reasons like unabated cutting of hills, deforestation and development activities without precautionary measures triggered frequent landslides in the areas.

Bangladesh Poribesh Andolon (Bapa) in association with Bangladesh-China Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Bangladesh-China Cultural and Economic Centre (BCCEC) and Chinese embassy in Bangladesh organised the seminar held at Cirdap, says a press release.

Prof Shahidul Islam, of Dhaka University's Geography and Environment department, said construction of roads without taking preventive measures after cutting hills was a key reason behind this year's landslides.

Landslide is considered as one of the

key disasters around the world, but it is yet to be recognised as a "disaster" in Bangladesh, he said, stressing the need for forming a hill management cell for effective measures to control landslides.

Prof Badrul Imam of DU's Geology department said long-term plans needed to be taken up by identifying risky hills, and unplanned development activities had to be stopped.

Civil Aviation and Tourism Minister Rashed Khan Menon said Bangladesh achieved capability in disaster management.

He, however, said the recent casualty from landslides was an unfortunate incident and called for carrying out development activities in hills, taking into consideration the protection of the environment.

Columnist Syed Abul Maksud, Bapa General Secretary Abdul Matin, Director of DU Institute of Disaster Management and Vulnerability Studies Prof Mahbuba Nasrin and BCCEC General Secretary Shahjahan Mridha, among others, spoke on the occasion.



Fire service men and locals conduct a search and rescue operation following a landslide at Jungle Salimpur village of Sitakunda yesterday.

PHOTO: STAR

Disaster warning falls on deaf ears

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people for the sake of saving lives. And time has also come to relocate and rehabilitate the people living near risky hills," he said, adding that it might take some time.

The Chittagong district administration snapped the connection of utilities during the rainy season and locked 200 houses to prevent people from entering their houses, he said.

But locals say the administration never took any effective measures to relocate the people living in the hill slopes, which is why they continued to live in risky conditions.

After the death of 127 people in 2007 landslide, the government formed the Hill Management Committee (HMC) to protect the hills in the district and to avert future loss of lives from landslides.

The technical committee of the HMC gave 36 recommendations and identified 30 hills where around 666 families lived in the city and its adjacent Sitakunda upazila. A key recommendation was the eviction of the people living in risky

hills.

Ten years later, the number of people living there has only gone up. The exact number is not available, but thousands of people are believed to be living on and around risky hills.

Take the example Jungle Salimpur Bastuhara area, the very place where five people were killed yesterday. The area was identified by the HMC as vulnerable (No 6 on the list).

Even in the last meeting of the HMC on July 10, one of the five agendas was rehabilitation of the risky hill dwellers in Jungle Salimpur area. In the meeting, the DC gave the upazila administration 72 hours to update him about the area. But the upazila administration did not comply.

Contacted, Ruhul Amin, assistant commissioner (land) of Sitakunda, said around 8,000 families lived in the hilly area of Jungle Salimpur, where people started building houses on government Khas land in 2000.

Asked why they were not relocated, Ruhul said around 32,000 people lived

in the area. "Is it possible to evict so many people?"

There was an 1100kv power connection in the area. "How could the Power Development Board provide the power line in the illegal establishment?" he asked.

"We will now disconnect the power connection and water connection [from Wasa] so that the people leave the area," he said.

Chittagong Deputy Commissioner Md Zillur Rahman Chowdhury said around 600 families lived in the risky hills in the city area, but could not immediately say how many people live in hill slopes in upazila levels.

Asked how long it would take to rehabilitate the people of Jungle Salimpur, he advised this newspaper to visit the area and make that assessment.

After last month's landslide, the deadliest in the country, the government formed a 27-member strong committee, whose job is to determine the cause of the disaster and give recommendations as to how to prevent such disasters in future.

THE LANDSLIDE

It was around 3:00am yesterday. The family members of Rafiq were fast asleep in their tin-roofed house on the hill slope. It was raining heavily and the hilltop became vulnerable, but Rafiq's family members were sleeping like Samia, 7, and Lamia, 2.

Rafiq, his daughters Jannat, 14, and Salma, 11, and his brother Gias Uddin, 27, narrowly escaped death.

Locals said the family came from Noakhali around two years ago and built the house there. Fatema was a machine operator at Shirina Garments and Textiles Limited in Bayezid Bostami area.

"She [Fatema] worked till 7:00pm on Thursday ... When we came to know about the accident in the morning, it was

a blot from the blue. We instantly closed the factory and rushed here," said Sheikh Harunur Rashid, manager of the factory.

Nasima Begum, a neighbour, said they woke up to repeated knock at the door around 3:15am. "When I opened the door, I saw Salma in a distressed state," she said, adding, "She somehow told us what happened and asked for help."

Then her son, Imran, and other locals rushed to the spot almost on the top of the hill to rescue them.

Salma herself was rescued by her uncle Gias from under the debris.

"First, my son rescued Jannat and then locals recovered the bodies of others," Nasima said, adding, "Rafiq came out of the debris by himself."

Rabeya and her two daughters, three of the dead, actually came to visit Rafiq from Noakhali around a month ago. Rabeya was thinking about buying a piece of land to live permanently in the area, said Firoz Alam, Fatema's father.

Talking to The Daily Star, Imran, who was first to reach the scene, said he could

see nothing but pile of soil when he went there.

"All of a sudden, I heard a faint voice of a girl. Instantly, I started to dig the soil and found the hands of Jannat. I then dug further and rescued her," said the 19-year-old, also a garment worker.

"But I could not rescue anyone else live," he lamented.

RISKY LIVING

Around the accident spot, some 20 families still live on the hill slopes, including the family of Nasima.

Nasima and several other locals said they knew it was risky to live there but they had no other alternative.

"Does anyone want to risk his own life?" said Ambia Khatun, who too lives at the foot of the hill there.

"We bought the possession of the land from the leaders of Chhinnamul Samiti to build houses," she said.

Locals, however, admitted that the administration asked them to move out from the area through loud speakers but no one paid any heed, fearing they would lose their possession.

PM to open Hajj camp today

UNB, Dhaka

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina inaugurates the Hajj programme-2017 at the Hajj camp in the capital's Ashoknagar this morning.

She will go there at 10:00am to open this year's Hajj camp. After the inaugural programme, she will exchange greetings with the Hajj pilgrims.

This year, the Hajj flights carrying Bangladeshi pilgrims to Saudi Arabia will begin on July 24 and continue till August 26.

The first Hajj flight, carrying 419 pilgrims, will take off from Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport at 7:55am for Saudi Arabia, said Civil Aviation and Tourism Minister Rashed Khan Menon on Tuesday.

He said total 177 flights would carry the Hajj pilgrims till August 26. The return flight would start on September 6 and continue till October 5. The number of return flights would be 169.

Biman Bangladesh Airlines and Saudi Airlines will carry the Bangladeshi pilgrims.

Some 127,198 pilgrims will perform Hajj from Bangladesh this year under government and private managements. Of them, 4,230 pilgrims will perform Hajj under the

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Batons, teargas not enough

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around 11:45am.

Witnesses said it was a peaceful protest of around 500 youths who took position near Shahbagh intersection around 11:30am after forming a human chain in front of the National Museum, demanding announcement of exam schedules of different academic years.

Police asked them to leave as the demonstration was causing traffic congestion. As they refused to obey, police acted tough to disperse them.

Thirteen students were detained from the spot on the allegation of obstructing road and damaging cars though no vehicle was seen damaged by the agitators. They were released yesterday.

The injured, Siddiquar, a third-year student of political science, was being treated at the National Institute of Ophthalmology (NIO) yesterday.

Doctors said the condition of his both eyes was critical and a five-member medical board was formed for his treatment.

Dr Iftekhar Md Munir, an associate professor at NIO, also a member of the medical board, told The Daily Star that the medical team will examine him today.

The physician suspected Siddiquar's eyes were hit by some thick and heavy objects. His eyes and face were swollen due to the injury, Iftekhar added.

The student could not say how he was hurt. After an altercation between students and police, something hit his eyes.

He could only feel his eyes were bleeding before he blacked out, a friend quoted him as saying.

Siddiquar, from Tarakanda of Mymensingh, lives at a rented room in Khilkhet.

Police claimed he was wounded by objects thrown by the demonstrators.

In a video available on social media, it was seen that when police were trying to snatch away a banner, a scuffle broke out. Siddiquar was standing aside. When he ran to the front, suddenly a policeman fired teargas and he fell down.

Following the protest on Thursday, the authorities of the colleges - Dhaka College, Eden Mohila College, Government Shaheed Suhrawardy College, Kabi Nazrul Government College, Begum Badrunnesa Government Mohila College, Mirpur Government Bangla College and Government Titumir College - announced the exam schedules.

The colleges became affiliated with Dhaka University on February 16.

Talking to The Daily Star on Thursday night, Idris Selim Ullah, principal of Kabi Nazrul College, said the decision on exam schedules was taken at a meeting between DU vice-chancellor and principals of the seven colleges on Tuesday and the colleges were supposed to announce the schedules.

Students of third year and master's of 2013-2014 sessions had their registration done but no date of exam was fixed until

Tuesday's meeting.

Besides, there was no guideline from the university authorities regarding the exam process although four months have gone since they were affiliated with Dhaka University.

As per the meeting decision, master's final exams are scheduled to begin on September 10, honours third-year exams on October 16 and degree (pass) first and third year exams on November 4.

The meeting also decided to hold degree (pass) first-year exams and master's first year and final year exams for privately registered students between July 25 and August 29.

During a press conference at Madhur Canteen on Dhaka University campus yesterday, the students demanded withdrawal of the case, compensation to Siddiquar Rahman, a policy on the colleges affiliated with the DU and steps to ease session jams.

They said they will go for a tougher movement if the authorities do not take actions against the policemen who attacked students without any provocation.

They also decided to arrange protest programmes at the colleges and stage a rally in front of the Jatiya Press Club today.

Meanwhile in a statement, left organisation Gono Songhori Andolon condemned the police attack on students.

Congested Dhaka city

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the eastern half has the advantage of being within 5kms of prosperous areas like Gulshan, which can help support its growth through capital and human resource investments.

Speaking at the same conference, WB Chief Economist for South Asia Martin Rama said out of the 16 union parishad areas added to Dhaka city, 12 were on the eastern fringe and could accommodate a new city.

In his paper, Venables presented four simulation scenarios of Dhaka by 2035, depending on the actions that are being taken today.

These scenarios depended on businesses, construction of flood barrier on the eastern part, building of embankments along with investments in building transport infrastructure, and amenities in eastern Dhaka.

Venables and his colleagues found that construction of a flood barrier in eastern Dhaka would directly have a substantial impact on the Gross Value Added, which is a measure of the value of goods and services produced in an area, industry or sector.

But the development would be "informal residential and manufacturing, without further simultaneous strategies".

Adding extra roads and public transits would reduce traffic congestion, increasing connectivity to eastern Dhaka and improving communication throughout the rest of the city, Venables said.

He also said: "...if the government builds the dyke [on the eastern Dhaka], it has to make sure that planned development also takes place inside the area. There will be enormous appreciation of land values if it is developed."

The government also has to make sure it has a way of capturing the increasing values that would be used to finance the needed infrastructure, he said.

"Land can be taxed. Land use can be regulated. Development corporations can be set up to acquire areas of land for development. And that can be done by the state, by the government," said Venables, also a fellow of British Academy and of the Econometric Society.

Currently, Dhaka is suffering from extreme congestion and having

problems in supply of amenities and many dwellers fear that the city might be unlivable unless proper infrastructure is put in place.

Today, traffic congestion eats up around 3.2 million working hours every day and costs the economy several billion dollars every year. Average driving speed on Dhaka city streets has dropped by one third from 21kmph a decade ago to 7kmph.

Continuing on current trends would result in a further slowdown to 4 kmph, which is slower than walking speed, according to a WB estimate.

Despite such shortcomings, greater Dhaka, which accounts for 20 percent of Bangladesh's GDP, still attracts people from across the country for livelihoods, because of expansion of businesses and industrial activities over the years.

Venables said Dhaka creates a lot of jobs owing to the economic activities. But the quality of the infrastructure is not better than that of in China and other Asian cities.

"The city [Dhaka] is productive but it is not productive as it should be. I think, the real thing missing here is other public assets -- infrastructure, transport and ability to move around the city."

The second thing is lack of land for a well planned urban expansion, he said, suggesting policymakers to try to create additional urban space.

"Overall, urban population of Bangladesh is going to increase enormously in the coming years. So, a part of that will take place in Dhaka."

Dhaka's population is expected to double to 3.5 crore by the year 2035 from the 1.8 crore at present, according to the WB.

"Cities will continue to grow. The urban population share of cities in the total population will continue to increase as well. That is going to happen because cities are where job opportunities are," said Venables, who was also the chief economist at the UK Department for International Development.

"I think what you got to do is to do a diagnosis of what is holding cities back. You would expect a second city in the country to be quite a lot larger than Chittagong city. So, the second, third and fourth cities will seem a bit too small. It is important for those cities to grow fast," added the professor.

White House press secy Spicer quits

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