

RANGAMATI LANDSLIDES

Homeless people kept in wait

HASAN JAHIID TUSHER

Over a month after the Rangamati landslides, the people, who were rendered homeless, are eagerly waiting for permanent settlement as the government is preparing a “comprehensive” policy for their rehabilitation.

Until yesterday, they were not allowed to build or repair houses as their land still remained vulnerable to the recurrence of the disaster.

The Rangamati district administration formed two committees on July 16 to prepare plans for the rehabilitation of the victims, many of whom have been staying at different shelters in the town since June 13.

On that day, landslides, the deadliest in recent times, killed at least 120 people and damaged some 1,300 homes in the district.

Fearing recurrence of the incident, the government forbade the district administration to allow anyone to live in the risky hill slopes. However, the administration now finds it difficult to rehabilitate the victims as there is hardly any plain land left in the town area.

Currently, about 1,500 people are living in seven shelters in the town, KM

Ikhtiar Uddin Arafat, spokesman for the district administration disaster control room, told this correspondent yesterday.

The government formed a committee on June 15, comprising senior officials from different ministries and experts from different public universities and institutions, to work out plans for the rehabilitation in the quickest possible time.

The 27-member body, led by Satya Brata Saha, an additional secretary of the ministry for disaster management, were visiting the landslide-hit areas in the hilly districts and trying to find out the reasons behind the disaster.

The committee would also put forward recommendations to avert the loss of lives from future landslides. It would also identify the reasons of the recent landslides.

Based on the reports, the government would take necessary decisions in this regard, say officials.

“Unless we submit our report to the government, the homeless people will continue living in the shelters. The local administrations have been asked to ensure that the people don’t return

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Landslide victims in Rangamati Gymnasium after being moved there from earlier shelters set up in schools and colleges. They might have to stay there for a while as the government is making a “comprehensive plan” for their rehabilitation. The photo was taken last week.

PHOTO: ANVIL CHAKMA

BARGUNA UNO'S ARREST

Six policemen closed over negligence

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Barisal

Six policemen of a Barisal court were closed to police lines last night in connection with negligence of duty over the arrest of Tariq Salman, upazila nirbahi officer of Barguna.

Barisal Metropolitan Police made the move following severe criticism that followed the arrest of the UNO on Wednesday.

Tariq was released on bail Wednesday afternoon in a case filed for distributing invitation cards with an allegedly distorted portrait of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

The portrait was made by a child in a drawing competition on the occasion of Independence Day last year at Agailjhara upazila.

Obaidullah Sajju, religious affairs secretary of Barisal Awami League and president of Barisal Lawyers’

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What can we do?

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people because they were living on the hills with the blessings of influential people.

The building of houses there began around 20 years ago with protection from political and other influential people. “If the government makes any decision in this regard and people from all quarters cooperate [in the implementation], the administration can evict and rehabilitate the people.

“Do you know how much power a deputy commissioner has?” Zillur Rahman asked in response to queries about eviction drives conducted before the latest incident.

“In our country, a deputy commissioner doesn’t have much power...I cannot do many things, even if I wish to do.”

Risky hill settlers do not want to leave their houses and belongings, the DC said, adding, “If someone puts his own life at risk, what can we do? We conducted awareness campaigns in the area to move the residents from risky hill slopes but our action went in vain.”

The local administration has not yet formed any probe body to look into the

recent incident.

Power and water connections to the area have been snapped following Friday’s landslide killing five people so that those still living on the hill slopes feel compelled to leave the place.

But no one left their risky settlements. According to officials, as many as 8,000 families live in Jungle Salimpur area with more than 32,000 people.

“It is not possible to evict so many people,” Sitakunda Upazila Assistant Commissioner (Land) Ruhul Amin said, adding that he was preparing a database of people living on hill slopes to help the government take further course of action.

Jungle Salimpur: A death trap for people on hill slopes

Meanwhile, this correspondent visited Jungle Salimpur area yesterday and found no road communication to the place from the upazila headquarters.

To reach the area, one at first has to go to Sher Shah Bangla Bazar in Chittagong city. A dilapidated, uneven and muddy road goes through the hilly area from Bangla Bazar to Salimpur School Field. The distance is more than seven kilometres.

Some old auto-rickshaws are the only vehicles to go that distance. One will experience a bumpy ride throughout and it’s very risky for patients and elderly people.

Lotkan Shah Ghona is one and a half kilometres from the school field, and there is no way but to walk from there.

Walking up the hills on the journey, one will find houses built on slopes, which may face any disaster anytime during monsoon. Hills have been cut down indiscriminately to make rooms for them.

It’s like a death trap.

Locals in the area said they had bought the possession of the land to build houses from the Chhinnamul Samiti.

Imran Hossain’s house is just 40 feet below the house of Rafiq, which was smashed on Friday by mud that fell from the hilltop due to heavy rain.

Imran said he bought the land about four years ago and built the house.

“Most of the people here are from Noakhali, Lakhkipur, Feni, Barisal and Rangpur,” he said, adding, “All are poor—some work in readymade garment factories, some pull rickshaws or drive auto-rickshaws.”

Erratic rainfall

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Harunur Rashid, senior adviser at the Srimangal Meteorological Centre confirmed to The Daily Star that rainfall from April to June has been double this year, compared to the last three years. “In the three-month period this year the area received around 1,921 millimetres of rain. It is usually closer to half that amount,” he says.

Yet the region’s tea gardens have also suffered from dry spells, a problem exacerbated by a shortage of shade trees needed to protect the crop during sunny, dry conditions. “Some wood smugglers are cutting shade trees, taking advantage of lax security in the gardens,” observes Shahjahan Akondo.

Milton meanwhile suggests river and canal excavation is crucial, to bring more water into the tea gardens, where at times there have been insufficient reserves to allow for much needed irrigation. He also notes the problem of too few shade trees. “Each acre should be covered by more than 65% in shade trees,” he says. “Now the average is less than 20%. It’s a factor that really hits production.”

At the time of interview, director of the

Bangladesh Tea Board, Dr Mohammad Ali, was also lamenting a lack of rain. “If there is no rainfall in the next few days it will cause colossal harm,” he says. “Under the scorching heat new tea saplings are dying. Good rainfall is crucial for their growth.” He notes that efficient irrigation to compensate is difficult due to the low water levels in rivers. “On the other hand, if the rainfall is too heavy it is also problematic,” he adds.

Central president of the Bangladesh Tea Labour Union, Makhon Lal Karmakar, has echoed the concerns of others about production this year. “Most tea workers cannot achieve their targets due to sick tea leaves,” he says. “Global warming is largely responsible.”

Dr Mohammad Ali states that last year the industry produced 85.05 million kilograms of tea leaves. The target for this year is 110 million kilograms. “Due to adverse climate conditions it will be hard to achieve this year’s target,” he says.

Any shortfall is likely hit tea exports the hardest. With domestic demand for tea on the rise, less Bangladeshi tea is available for sale abroad.



Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina exchanging greetings with pilgrims after inaugurating this year's Hajj Programme at the Ashkona Hajj Camp in the capital yesterday.

PHOTO: PID

Muslim world

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The premier said the government took initiatives to remove all the irregularities and disorders in the hajj passengers’ transportation management and housing system in Makkah and Madinah and their healthcare services. “We’ve been presenting the pilgrims with a smooth hajj management system since 2009.”

There were irregularities, corruption and indiscipline in renting houses and transportation of pilgrims during the tenure of the BNP-Jamaat government and the Awami League government put an end to these through introducing a digital hajj management system, she said.

As a result, the number of hajj pilgrims has increased to 1,27198 this year against 47,983 in 2006 and this has been possible due to implementation of massive development programmes by the AL government, the PM added.

Civil Aviation and Tourism Minister Rashed Khan Menon, Religious Affairs Secretary Abdul Jalil and Saudi Charge de Affaires Abdullah HM Al-Mutairi addressed the programme, among others, with Religious Affairs Minister Motiur Rahman in the chair.

Later, the PM exchanged greetings with pilgrims.

This year, hajj flights to Saudi Arabia will begin tomorrow and continue till August 26. The first hajj flight, carrying 419 Bangladeshi pilgrims, will take off from Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport at 7:55am.

A total of 177 flights will carry the hajj pilgrims. The return flight will start on September 6 and continue till October 5.

The number of return flights will be 169. Biman Bangladesh Airlines and Saudi Airlines will carry the Bangladeshi pilgrims.

Some 127,198 Bangladeshis will perform hajj this year. Of them, 4,230 pilgrims will perform the pilgrimage under the government management.

From this year, hajj flights will also go to Madinah.

Stern city governance

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“There must be a common authority on Dhaka city development instead of multiplicity of authorities that only causes clash and overlapping,” she said, adding, “Good governance is something achieved through corporation among authorities and not by confrontation.”

The central government does not have the time to look into the micro issues of city management, as it has so many other things to take care of, she said on the sidelines of a World Bank-sponsored international conference.

The 79-year-old, who was the chief minister for three consecutive terms between 1998 and 2013, also recommended a set of separate laws, which she termed constitution, for Dhaka city’s development and urban management.

Delhi is absolutely a planned city; one cannot build even a room without an approved plan, she said.

Delhi’s green spaces are conserved with great care and the Dikshit government introduced Bhagidari (public participation) movement with Delhi dwellers to promote civic participation in local governance.

The stated goal of the movement was to create transparency and accountability in the administration to improve the quality, efficiency and delivery of public services.

In Delhi, the government led by the chief minister is responsible for almost all city development and civic service deliveries.

Any aggrieved citizen goes to the elected chief minister for remedy, not to the lieutenant governor.

They do not know the water supply authority or the home ministry; they file complaints with the Delhi government that takes up the issue with the relevant authority and gets it solved.

“So we are like a link between the public offices and the people,” said Dikshit, who was known to have unyielding influence as the Congress Party supported administrator in Delhi.

She spearheaded enhanced power generation with privatisation to give Delhi dwellers uninterrupted electricity, controlled air pollution with CNG conversion of public transport vehicles, constructed Delhi metro rail, set

up new hospitals, schools and universities, and built 78 flyovers to ease the public transportation system.

Public transport services like metro rail, bus and taxi services were all taken care of by the Delhi government. As to building 250km of metro rail lines, she said they just demanded it from the central government arguing otherwise Delhi would collapse.

And they started building it.

Delhi changed a lot during her 15-year tenure. Be it education, transport, pollution control, greening of Delhi building more hospitals, founding more schools and universities.

“We took a holistic approach to touch upon every aspect of civic life,” she said, adding, “A person living in poor colony would be as happy as the one living in affluent colony.”

For instance, during winter, which is severe in Delhi, the Dikshit government would build small tents for the poor so that they do not have to sleep under the open sky.

It got girl children to go to school and introduced a stipend programme in which the girls would get Rs 1 lakh if they studied up to class-12.

She said such public service action makes a big difference in society. They interact with the people to provide them with the services they require.

As to how the urban poor were supported in Delhi city, she said the government provides housing for them and they get ownership of it after a period and they get electricity and water at a cheaper rate.

“We have to act within whatever powers we have and all our actions have to be rectified by the home ministry and urban development ministry and by the lieutenant governor also,” said Dikshit, adding, “We just manage doing everything by being cooperative to each other.”

Dikshit enjoyed the support of a Congress-led UPA government at the centre for nine of the 15 years as Delhi chief minister but had to negotiate with the opposition BJP-led central government for the other six years.

In the December 2013 elections to the Delhi Legislative Assembly, Dikshit was defeated in New Delhi constituency by Aam Aadmi Party leader Arvind Kejriwal.

AL, BNP differ on EC roadmap

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Health Minister Mohammed Nasim yesterday said the next parliamentary elections would be held in accordance with the roadmap announced by the Election Commission.

“I hope all the political parties, including the BNP, will participate in the polls.

The Election Commission already has announced its roadmap and is preparing to hold the elections in a neutral manner,” he said yesterday during a programme at Shaheed Suhrawardy Medical College Hospital in the capital.

That election will be held under Sheikh Hasina-led administration, he said.

BNP Standing Committee Member Moudud Ahmed, meanwhile, alleged the main motive behind the EC roadmap was to ensure that ruling Awami League returns to power

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SC lawyer sued

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the CHT through those posts, the OC said.

Asked about Shafiqul, the OC said he was from Dighinala upazila and currently living in Khagrachhari town. “As he came to file the case, we recorded it and started the investigation. If the allegation is true, we will press charges against the accused.”

Shafiqul Islam, a trader, said he has no affiliation with any national political parties or local organisations. “I have filed the case as his posts hurt me,” he said.

Imtiaz told this newspaper that he did not get the copy of the FIR and did not know any details of the allegations made against him.

On the law, he added, “As per my opinion, section 57 is unconstitutional. But as the act is still there, I have to face it [the case] legally.”

Rights activists and journalists have been demanding repeal of section 57 saying it contains vague wordings,

allowing its misuse against newspersons and social media users.

They said the section goes against the people’s right to freedom of expression and free speech. It also has been used as a tool to muzzle the press and freedom of expression, they added.

Amid widespread criticism, Law Minister Anisul Huq on several occasions said section 57 would be removed. The minister on July 9 said the government would make a decision about it while finalising the draft of “Digital Security Act” next month.

But cases filed under the section are on the rise.

According to a source at the Cyber Tribunal in Dhaka, around 700 cases have so far been filed under section 57 since 2013 when the act was amended with stringent punishment.

Twenty-three journalists were sued under the section since March 1 and most of them were sued for their reports.