

Indiscriminate hill cutting

CHT board constructs road defying ban

SANJOY KUMAR BARUA with ANDREW EAGLE

As recently as June this year landslides in the Chittagong Hill Tracts claimed the lives of more than 150 people, with indiscriminate hill-cutting largely to blame for the disaster. Thus it comes as a surprise that just six months on and despite a government ban on cutting hills, in Bandarban's Rowangchhari upazila, contractors of the Chittagong Hill Tracts Development Board are doing precisely that, in the name of road construction.

"We don't need approval from the environment department to cut hills because we are working for the ruling party," says Ujjal Das, a contractor of the project and an Awami League leader.

The Bangladesh Environment Preservation Act 1995, as amended in 2000, prohibits the cutting of hills without the approval of concerned authorities. The penalty for cutting hills without approval is up to two years imprisonment, a fine of Tk 2 lakhs or both for a first offence. For a subsequent offence the penalty is up to ten years imprisonment, a fine of Tk 10 lakhs or both.

"We are working for the contractors, Ujjal

Das and Taposh Das," bulldozer driver Saber Ahmed told The Daily Star during a visit to the spot, where large-scale hill-cutting activities were underway.

When asked about the project, Sub-Assistant Engineer Ershad Mia of the Bandarban unit of the Chittagong Hill Tracts Development Board says, "We are building the seven-kilometre Kaintarmukh to Baiddopara Road under the auspices of the Chittagong Hill Tracts Rural Development Project. We have to cut hills to implement the project."

"The problem is," observes Zumlian Amlai, chairperson of the Bandarban chapter of the Pabatya Chattagram Forest and Land Rights Protection environmental organisation, "the Department of Environment and law enforcement agencies are not sincere in preventing the menace of hill-cutting. Over the years many hills in Bandarban have been destroyed by this practice. If it is not stopped the remaining hills will surely vanish soon."

Hill-cutting not only exacerbates the risk of landslides that threaten human life and property, it also results in environmental degradation that undermines the region's biodiversity.



Hills are being razed for construction of a road from Kaintarmukh to Baiddopara in Rowangchhari upazila under Bandarban. The photo was taken from Kaintarmukh area a few days ago.

PHOTO: SANJOY KUMAR BARUA

Bed-ridden by road crash, cries for help

MD AMINUL ISLAM, Mymensingh

"The accident shattered all my hopes. It was my dream to improve our life through receiving education as I belong to an ultra poor family," said a sobbing Hajera Akhter, lying bed-ridden following an accident on November 12.

Hajera Akhter, 13, daughter of Ayub Ali of Sirta Chaupara village in Mymensingh Sadar upazila, was a JSC examinee from local Char Sirta High School.

Ayub Ali is a mental patient for long.

Hajera met the tragic accident in Char Kharicha Madrasa area on Mymensingh-Paranganj road as a battery run auto-rickshaw hit the rickshaw-van carrying her and her classmates Fatema Khatun and Anjuman Ara to their JSC examination centre at nearby Char Kharicha High School on November 12.

The rickshaw van skidded off the road and fell on the girls, injuring them.

Local people rushed to the spot and took the three girls to Mymensingh Medical College Hospital.

Fatema and Anjuman were released from the hospital in the evening the same day while seriously injured Hajera had to remain hospitalised, family sources said.

"Doctors released Hajera from the hospital after a week, saying that she should be taken to India as two bones of her backbone got serious fractures. Bed sores have developed in her back as she has remained bed-ridden for over a month," said Hajera's elder brother Aynul Islam, a garment worker.



PHOTO: STAR

Hajera Akhter lies bed-ridden, following serious spine injuries in a road accident on November 12.

"We have already spent Tk 50,000 for her treatment. We had to sell our goats and hens and borrow money for the purpose. We cannot take her to India for treatment as it would need around Tk 6 lakh," said Aynul.

"We have left everything to fate as we are too poor to arrange her treatment," lamented the girl's mother Safia Akhter.

Mohammad Abdus Selim, headmaster of Char Sirta High School, said, "The girl belonging to an ultra-poor family was a good student but the accident has ruined her life. We have taken initiative to help the girl and urge affluent people to extend support as the treatment cost would be high."

'Stop grabbing land of minorities'

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Chapainawabganj

People of Hindu community and ethnic minorities urged the authorities concerned to take immediate action to stop grabbing of their lands.

They also submitted a memorandum to the deputy commissioner (DC) in this regard.

The demand was made at a rally in front of the DC's office in the town.

Members of Hindu community and ethnic minorities in the district joined the rally organised by Bangladesh Hindu-Buddha-Christian Oikya Parishad, Bangladesh Puja Udjapon Parishad and Adivasi Samonnoy Parishad.

Speakers at the rally said land grabbers have been encroaching on the arable lands, residences, ponds, graveyards, cremation grounds and temple lands.

They alleged that some land grabbers are active in Tong para village of Sadar upazila and Dhop Pukur of Gomostapur upazila where many indigenous families are living.

The land grabbers harass them regularly and try to grab their lands, including cremation ground.

The speakers also demanded to free the land of Shyam Roy Debottar estate of Rohonpur municipality in the district from grabbers.

Uncared for

Mass killing ground and memorial in Bagerhat are still lying neglected

A CORRESPONDENT, Bagerhat

A mass killing ground and a memorial for the Liberation War martyrs in the district town lie neglected throughout the year, except during special national days.

Freedom fighters, politicians and students said the witnesses to the great Liberation War should be properly preserved. They demanded proper care of the killing ground and memorial monument throughout the year.

Freedom fighter Habibur Rahman said Pakistani collaborator Rajjab Ali Fakir launched the biggest massacre at Dakara village in Parikhali union under Rampal upazila on May 21 in 1971. They killed more than 200 civilians on that day.

Nimai Chandra Das, another freedom fighter, said the Razakars shot dead

unarmed Bengalis and slaughtered them in Shakharikati, Maghiya, Kachua Sadar of Kachua upazila as well as Dakbungalow Ghat and Kandapara of Sadar upazila.

Emranul Haq Munsif, a member of Munsibari family in Chitalmari, said many people, including two members of his family, were killed by the Razakars.

"Today, we are independent due to the sacrifice of the martyrs," he said, adding that the government built a memorial to preserve the memories of the martyrs but it remains neglected throughout the year.

"We urge the administration to take care of the memorial and the killing ground throughout the year," he added.

Joyanta Das, a student of PC College, said the martyrs are remembered with flowers on the special national days and remain forgotten during the rest of the year.

Salma Khanam, a former student of Bengali literature at the college, said people are shocked when they see that the places where their near and dear ones were killed by the Pakistani collaborators are lying neglected.

Farrukh Hasan Jewel, Bagerhat district unit general secretary of Communist Party of Bangladesh, said the mass killing ground of Dakbungalow Ghat on the bank of the Bhairab river is known as one of the slaughterhouses of Razakars during the War of Liberation.

He urged the government to build a memorial pillar there.

Commander of freedom fighters of the district Shahinul Alam Chhna said at least 700 people were killed by Razakars in the district in 1971. The monuments must be protected by a wall, he added.

Deputy Commissioner Tapan Kumar Biswas said the mass killing places and memorial monuments in the district will be preserved. The government is giving allocation for protecting those areas and the local administration will keep them in good condition, he added.



This memorial for the Liberation War martyrs lies neglected at Dakbungalow Ghat on the bank of the Bhairab river in Bagerhat town.

PHOTO: STAR

Bangladeshi shot dead by BSF in Naogaon

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Dinajpur

Indian Border Security Force (BSF) shot dead Bangladesh national near a border in Patnitola upazila of Naogaon early yesterday.

The deceased was identified as Ershad Ali, 30, son of Gazim Uddin of Ambati village in Dhamoirhat upazila.

Quoting the villagers, Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB) officials in Naogaon said Ershad along with seven to eight other local drug peddlers went to India through Shimutoli border in the upazila on Wednesday night to bring contraband drugs.

BSF members of 122 Bhatsala camp opened fire on Ershad while he was returning home in the early hours, leaving him critically injured.

Later, the BSF team rescued bullet-hit Ershad and took him to a local hospital, where he succumbed to his injuries around 11:30am, BGB officials said.

Lt Col Khizir Khan, commanding officer (CO) of BGB 14 Battalion in Naogaon, said BGB sent a letter to BSF protesting the killing and urging their counterparts to return the body.

Students depict eco-friendly Jessore

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Benapole

Students of Khulna University (KU) have unveiled an eco-friendly future plan of Jessore during an exhibition at Munshi Meherullah Maidan in the district town on Wednesday.

A group of students of the university sketched the high profile eco-friendly plan for a better Jessore in future, covering areas that include the dying Bhairab river, Jessore Collectorate, Jessore Road and Jessore Railway Station.

After comparing and studying Jessore and some other cities across the globe, Papiya Ghosh, Imtiaz Ahmed, Sadiquzzaman, Tapati Biswas, Asif Ahmed and Lifat Rahman, students of Architecture Department of the university, with the help of their teacher Tapan Kumar Dhar developed the plan.

While, talking to reporters, Tapan said Jessore has the potential to become a city like any other European city.

FATWA ON WOMEN AT AGRI WORK

Situation still tense in Kumarkhali

AMANUR MAN, Back from Kumarkhali

Many women of several villages in Kushtia's Kumarkhali upazila are still passing their days in fear while working in fields, nearly two weeks after a fatwa (edict) was issued forbidding women to work in fields.

The victim women as well as the general farmers are afraid that a vested group may create an unpleasant situation for the women who work in the fields.

"A vested quarter is still running propagandas against the women who work in the fields," said a 33-year old woman, on condition of anonymity.

The woman, wife of a day labourer of Kalyanpur village in the upazila, said she helps her family by rearing goats in open fields.

She alleged that some people in her locality are talking in favour of the fatwa issued by a local mosque imam.

While visiting the area on Monday, this correspondent saw a small number of women were working in different fields of Kalyanpur, Arpara and Khorshedpur villages.

Forty-five-year-old Samed Ali of Khorshedpur village said his two daughters help him in fields as he cannot hire labourers from the market.

Samed said his daughters are not assist-

ing him anymore in the fields since the fatwa was announced about two weeks ago.

Moshiur Rahman, president of a girls' school managing committee, said, "I do not see any trouble if women work in the fields."

Azhar Ali Mondol, 68, one of the headmen of Kalyanpur village, said the imam did not bar working of women in fields, rather he told about increase of anti-social activities due to men and women working together in the fields.

On December 13, a Kushtia court granted one day's remand for three people, including Mohammad Abu Musa, imam of Kalyanpur Jame Masjid, in connection with a case for issuing a fatwa (edict) forbidding women to work at fields.

On December 8, some people led by the imam sat at a closed-door meeting and later announced through the mosque loud-speaker that no women in the area would be allowed to go to field for work.

After local people reacted against the fatwa, Sub-inspector Biplob Kanti Sarker of Kumarkhali Police Station filed a case against six people in this connection on December 11.

The following day, police detained Abu Musa, Altaf Hossain, Motiar Rahman, Ansar Ali, Abul Hossain and Abu Daud and produced them before a court on December 13.



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