

# Indigenous women still insecure

Speakers tell Int'l Women's Day rally

STAR COUNTRY DESK

Women in Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) feel insecure as they are still victims of violence, torture, rape and killing even after CHT Peace Accord.

The violence against indigenous women is increasing day by day, said speakers at a programme in Rangamati town on the occasion of International Women's Day yesterday, reports our correspondent.

They also demanded impartial investigation into the rape of a Marma girl and sexual harassment of her sister.

Parbattya Chattagram Mahila Samity and Hill Women's Federation jointly organised the programme at Shilpakala Academy hall in the town.

Parbattya Chattagram Mahila Samity Vice President Sona Rani Chakma presided over the programme.

Meanwhile, United People's Democratic Front (UPDF) Hill Women Federation, Ghilachari Nari Nirjaton Protirodh Committee and Parbattya Chattagram Nari Sangha held a rally in the town on the occasion.

In Gaibandha, Santal community in Gobindaganj upazila at a rally vowed to establish rights of women on the occasion of International Women's Day, reports our correspondent.

Voluntary organisation Abalambon with the cooperation of UNDP organised the rally.

The speakers said indigenous women are being deprived of proper education, medicare facilities, jobs and shelter and they face disparity in all respects.



Minara Begum feeds her ducks at Birnagar village in Tahirpur upazila of Sunamganj. Like her, many women of the haor areas in the upazila are now helping ease the life of their poverty-stricken families by rearing ducks. PHOTO: MINTU DESHWARA

# CEC ON 11TH JS POLLS No new move for all parties' participation

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Brahmanbaria

Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) KM Nurul Huda yesterday said the Election Commission (EC) will not take any new initiative for participation of all the parties in the eleventh Jatiya Sangsad polls as the Commission had already invited all during dialogues to take part in the polls.

He was addressing as the chief guest a meeting of law and order at the Brahmanbaria Deputy Commissioner's Office, ahead of Nasirnagar by-election to be held on March 13.

Assuring a free and fair election in the by-polls, he said, "We are working for achieving confidence of voters and political parties. Every election under this present Election Commission has been held free and fair."

EC Secretary Helaluddin Ahmad, Additional Divisional Commissioner of Chittagong Shankar Ranjan Saha, BGB Comilla Sector Commander Col Md Zubair Hasnat and Additional DIG of Police of Chittagong Range Mohammed Abul Foyez were present as special guests at the meeting presided over by Brahmanbaria Deputy Commissioner Rezwanur Rahman.

# Duck farming now a saviour for many haor women

MINTU DESHWARA, back from Tahirpur

Many women in haor areas of Sunamganj have found alternative source of income in duck rearing after losing their crops to last year's recurrent floods.

One of them is Minara Begum, 46, of Birnagar village in Shanir Haor area of Tahirpur upazila.

"After losing Boro crops last year, our six-member family including my sick husband faced starvation. Anxious to save my family, I bought seven ducks including their feed with Tk 2,000 that I borrowed from someone," Minara told this correspondent during the latter's visit to the area a few days ago.

"Now I have 70 ducks. I also employed a female worker here. Now I am very happy to be self-reliant. I have a plan to

extend my farm," she said.

This correspondent found several other women at the village feeding ducks. "Seeing Minara's farm, I also bought four ducks nine months ago. The small income from duck rearing has helped to ease our struggle for survival," said Shukria Begum, 18, of the same village, who stopped study after Class X due to poverty.

Mahmuda Begum, 34, a housewife of Sreepur village, said she set up a duck farm adjacent to her home with the help of her husband Muhibur Rahman.

"Now I earn Tk 150 to 200 daily and it serves as a contribution to our poor family," she said.

The couple has a plan to expand the farm. Like them, many people of seven neighbouring villages are rearing ducks as the means of livelihood.

"I had to work as a housemaid after the Boro paddy on my husband's land was destroyed by flood in 2014. Then I started rearing ducks. With the earning from selling eggs and ducks, now I am maintaining our six-member family. My children also help me in the farm," said Popy Begum, 38, a housewife of Baradal village.

Md Kamruzzaman, chairman of Tahirpur Upazila Parishad, said, "After losing crops during last year's floods, many people in haor areas are going to different areas in search of work. However, some villagers have found means of livelihood in duck farming."

Duck farming bears good prospect for people in haor areas, said Bindu Talukder, member-secretary of Haor Bachao, Sunamganj Bachao Andolon.

# Bullet-hit BCL leader dies in hospital

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Mymensingh

A former Bangladesh Chhatra League leader, who was shot, died at a Dhaka hospital yesterday 11 days into the incident.

The victim was Ashfaq Al Rafi Shawon, 28, former vice president of the district BCL, said Khandaker Shaker Ahmed, officer-in-charge (investigation) of Kotwali Police Station.

Police said criminals shot Shawon in Mymensingh Zila Parishad area on February 26 when he was hanging out with some of his friends.

Police arrested three friends of the victim, said the OC. They are Sanjay Dutta, 26, SM Ariful Haque, 27, and Md Saddam Hossain Himel, 28.

Son of Abdul Quddus, Shawon was admitted to Mymensingh Medical College Hospital and later shifted to a hospital in Dhaka as his condition deteriorated, the OC said.

# Child marriage foiled

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Lalmonirhat

The bridegroom and five others were arrested for arranging child marriage at Durakuti village in Sadar upazila in the early hours yesterday.

The 15-year-old girl was happy as she was saved from the curse of child marriage.

The arrestees were produced before the Judicial Magistrate's Court that sent them to jail, said Sadar Police Station Officer-in-Charge (OC) Mahfuz Alam.

The arrestees include bridegroom Anwar Hossain, 26, son of Nur Jamal.

Marriage registrar Omar Farooque, 50, of Durakuti village, went into hiding after the incident.



Grocery store employee Ershad Ali paying back the dowry money his parents took from his widow mother-in-law Rabeya Begum during the marriage four years ago. PHOTO: EAM ASADUZZAMAN

# An unheard tale of dowry

EAM ASADUZZAMAN, Nilphamari

A helper at a grocery store in Nilphamari, 26-year-old Ershad Ali lived a nondescript life.

Whatever little earnings he had was sufficient to lead a simple life with his wife and toddler daughter. Yet, from every pay check, Ershad set aside a portion for a reason only he knew about.

Four years ago, his father Atiur Rahman, 60, of Sabuj para in the upazila town, who was a rickshaw puller, arranged his marriage with Rozina Begum and demanded a dowry of Tk 1.5 lakh.

Rozina's widowed mother Rabeya Begum, 50, bargained and reduced the amount to Tk 90,000; she took a loan from an NGO to pay the amount.

Ever since, Ershad has seen his mother-in-law toil as a domestic help to pay the loan instalments.

"Even when she was ill, she sometimes worked till midnight," he said. "She never complained and insisted on bearing all the

medical expenses herself when my daughter was born in 2016, despite my objection."

It gnawed on Ershad that he had done injustice towards Rabeya by taking the dowry. In the mean time, he observed the anti-dowry campaigns of the government and listened to the khutbah (Islamic sermon) before the Friday prayers at the local mosque that condemned the practice of paying dowry.

"Without informing anyone, I decided to pay back the amount. I gathered the amount by withdrawing money from a matured fixed deposit in a bank, personal savings and a small loan from a local NGO."

Last week, Ershad bought a milk-yielding cow and calf for Tk 40,000, and took Tk 50,000 in cash to his mother-in-law's house.

"While my husband was alive, I saw him pay the dowry to marry off my first daughter," Rabeya recalled. "I only thought it was natural to pay the same for my second daughter as well."

"I could not believe it when Ershad came in the morning with my daughter and grandchild to my house. Now I can leave work and make a living by selling the milk, and pay off the loan as well," she added.

"I am very lucky as the Almighty blessed me with such a good son-in-law," Rabeya said in a choked voice.

Word of Ershad's noble act quickly spread in the neighbourhood and a few local journalists were summoned to take a photograph.

However, not all in Ershad's family were supportive.

"I got my daughter married off by paying dowry, why should I not ask the same of my daughter-in-law?" asked Atiur, his father.

When contacted, Rashedul Huq Prodhan, upazila nirbahi officer of Jaldhaka, said, "I hope this selfless act inspires others in the locality to abolish the practice. Ershad has set an example for all."

# BAD IMPACT OF TOBACCO FARMING ON HEALTH Rangpur farmers turn to other crops

KONGKON KARMAKER, Dinajpur

Cultivation of tobacco, which used to be grown on a vast area in Rangpur, has seen a decline this year in comparison with previous seasons as the farmers realise its bad impact on the health of the growers and the consumers.

Rangpur Department of Agriculture Extension (DAE) Senior Agriculture Officer Sajidur Rahman said around 1,388 hectares of land has been brought under tobacco farming in Rangpur in 2017-18, while it was 1,595 hectares in 2016-17.

Around 4,500 hectares of land was brought under tobacco farming in Rangpur in 2012-13, which was the highest ever in the district in recent years. But, after that the area of tobacco cultivation started dropping.

In 2013-14 the land area dropped to 2,522 hectares, and it was 2,130 hectares in 2014-15.

Tobacco is produced in Sadar, Mithapukur, Pargachha, Kaunia, Haragachh, Taraganj, Badarganj and Gangachara upazilas of the district.

DAE official in Badarganj upazila Kanak Roy said around 38 hectares of land was brought under tobacco

farming in the upazila this season.

Sirajul Haq of Pakarmatha village in the upazila said he cultivated tobacco on 50 decimals of land this year. The area was double last year. "I cut the area to half this year after learning about negative impact of tobacco on the body, although it is a profitable crop," said Sirajul, adding that he would not cultivate tobacco from next season.

Manik Roy of the village said he dropped tobacco farming this year, adding that he had been growing tobacco for the last ten years. He planted maize instead on 75 decimals, he added.

"Tobacco is really a profitable crop, but not good for the health of the growers," he said.

Kanak said most farmers in his upazila cultivated maize, potato and mustard on their land instead of tobacco this season.

"Farmers are learning that tobacco is not good for the soil even," Kanak added.

Abu Bakkar, a farmer of Shathibari village in Mithapukur upazila, said he did not cultivate tobacco on his land this year despite knowing that it is a profitable crop. He told this corre-

spondent that farm workers often refuse to work on tobacco fields as they fall sick whenever they work there, adding that the soil on which tobacco is grown loses fertility very fast.

"So, morally we should not cultivate tobacco. We can earn high profit, but it has bad impact on health," he said.

He cultivated maize on his one acre of land this year, Abu Bakkar said.

Dulu Mia of Borobeel village in Gangachara upazila said he cultivated tobacco on his 33 decimals this year. "I cultivated tobacco this year because I need money," he said.

He is thinking of giving up tobacco farming from next year. "It is quite difficult to give up tobacco farming as various companies lure farmers with lucrative offers," he said, admitting that growing of tobacco is not good for the health of the growers.

Things started changing because of counselling, said Tanmoy Sanyal, coordinator of Rajshahi region of Bangladesh Environmental Lawyers' Association (Bela). Farmers will not cultivate tobacco in future if such trend continues, he said.



This farmer of Borobeel village in Gangachara upazila of Rangpur has cultivated pumpkin instead of tobacco this year as tobacco is bad for health and also for the soil. A tobacco field is seen behind him. PHOTO: KONGKON KARMAKER