



Trees on the rolling hills of Ukha have been razed to make way for an extension of a Balukhali Rohingya refugee camp in Cox's Bazar. The photo was taken in early March.

PHOTO: MOKAMMEL SHUVO

The risky refuge

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all the trees around their makeshift camps have been felled.

"The Rohingyas people are clearing forestland equal to four football fields every day for collecting fuel wood," said Refugee Relief and Repatriation Commissioner (RRRC) Mohammad Abul Kalam.

Because of the indiscriminate tree felling, the hills have become barren, increasing the risk of landslide, he added.

"So we are relocating them from the hill tops and slopes to safer places. We have to move about 1.5 to 2 lakh people within the next one to two months before the monsoon begins. So far, we have relocated 10,000 of them."

Since August 25 last year, Kalam said, nearly 6,92,000 Rohingyas arrived, raising the total number of refugees to over one million. The government officially allocated 5,800 acres of forestland for their settlement.

The RRRC was speaking at a seminar titled "FDMN (forcibly displaced Myanmar nationals) influx impact among host community: approach for mitigation emphasising next monsoon crisis".

Public representatives, government officials and representatives of international non-government organisations were present at the seminar, organised by Coast Trust and held at a hotel in Cox's Bazar yesterday.

The local community is also facing serious problems because of the unprecedented refugee crisis.

The water streams in the areas are getting polluted by waste from the

refugee camps. A large number of refugees have also been settled in agricultural land, leaving many local farmers worried.

As the public representatives are enraged by troubles resulting from the refugee influx, the commissioner said, the government has taken up a scheme to compensate 3,36,000 people out of half a million host community members.

"But you have to be patient as we were not ready for this problem. It was created by Myanmar and it just fell upon us."

Regarding the repatriation process, he said, Bangladesh has signed an agreement with Myanmar. So far a list of around 8,000 refugees has been handed over to Myanmar and the country has recognised 556 of them as their citizens so far.

"So the repatriation process is going on. But it will take time."

It took 13 years, from 1992 to 2005, to send back only 2,36,000 Rohingya refugees earlier. So it is easily understandable that it will take a while to repatriate over one million people.

The RRRC said it is the duty of the international community, including the UN bodies, to persuade Myanmar to take back their nationals as soon as possible, he said.

Maruf Barkat from Coast Trust presented a situation report while Rezaul Karim Chowdhury moderated the session.

Nayeem Gowhar Warah of Dhaka University and Disaster Forum; Sumbul Rizvi, senior coordinator of ISCG, Elisabeth Pelster of UNHCR and Manuel Moniz Pereira of IOM also

spoke at the programme.

Dr Ainun Nishat, professor emeritus of Brac University, and Dr Atiq Rahman, executive director of Bangladesh Centre for Advanced Studies, presented their observations about the Rohingya camps.

They said several thousand camp dwellers will face environmental disasters during the monsoon and if cyclone hits. The camps, made mostly with polythene and bamboo, will be wiped out if nor'wester strikes.

KM Abdus Salam, director general of the NGO Bureau, who was present at the seminar as the chief guest, said international non-government organisations would have to involve locals in their work and inform them about the progress to earn their trust and respect.

Public representatives who

KEY POINTS

- 5,800** acres of forest land allocated to Rohingyas
- Rohingyas clearing up forest equal to **4** football grounds every day
- 380** hectares of agriculture land ruined by Rohingyas
- 11** canals and streams found fully polluted
- 2,250** tonnes of firewood burnt every day
- 70pc** shallow tube-well running out of water

SOURCE: COAST TRUST

attended the event, mostly union parishad chairmen and members from the areas in Ukha and Teknaf where the Rohingyas camps are located, expressed their grievances.

"All the streams in my areas are polluted now. People used to drink water from the natural streams in the forest. But Rohingyas people have polluted those. They also cleared the forest, set up camps in the agricultural land," said M Gafuruddin Chowdhury, chairman of Palongkhali Union Parishad.

NGOs have been razing the hills in his areas to make refugee camps, he said. "If they do not stop hill cutting, I'll go to court and file cases against them," said Gafur.

"They were our guests but now it seems that we have to leave the area as they have become the majority and are carrying out anti-social activities in the area," he said.

Noor Ahmed Anwari, chairman of Hoaiyang Union Parishad, said locals are facing problems in different sectors like communications, education, environment and agriculture.

"The government should compensate the local people immediately otherwise the situation would go beyond control."

Aziz Uddin, chairman of Baharchhara Union Parishad, said teachers of primary schools and madrasas are quitting and taking jobs at non-government organisations for higher salary.

"Students are facing severe teacher crisis in the schools. The government should immediately address the issue," said Aziz.

The rise and fall of Blair

FROM PAGE 20

They together dropped the communist sounding words "common ownership of the means of production" from the party's constitution. They made the party look modern and pro-capitalist.

Blair, the more charismatic of the two with excellent oratory skill, was projected by the Labour as its next candidate. He was, after all, their best bet after losing four consecutive elections. A fifth time would be an existential crisis for it.

Tony Blair, with his campaign "New Labour, New Britain", drew attention around the UK. Britain's economic torpor under Thatcher and John Major made his job even easier. Finally, his efforts paid off as Labour won the biggest electoral victory in its history in the 1997 elections. Brown's economic policies buoyed economic growth and the job market. UK's health care system was revamped.

With Labour firmly back in the lead in opinion polls, it won again in the next 2001 election with the second biggest margin.

Internationally, Blair became an important leader as well, not only because of Britain's economic comeback, but also for his charisma and forward-looking vision. He led Britain to a leading position in the European Union.

After the World Trade Centre attack in 2001, Blair took it as his mission to remove Saddam Hussein from Iraq, not through any negotiation but by force.

He used the spectre of Weapons of Mass Destruction of Saddam and drew up the plans of attacking Iraq. He found his natural ally in the US president George Bush. He became so sycophantic to the US president that he earned the nickname of "poodle" and "lap-dog."

He made his case against Saddam and Iraq violating international laws on a doctored dossier called "The 45-minute from doom" that falsely said Saddam had the capability to launch WMD attack within 45 minutes of an order.

The world was still in the dark about Blair's claims. The media, if it at all had any doubt about WMD, had no time or willingness to seriously corroborate the claims independently. On the other side of the pond, New York Times reporter Judith Miller filed story after story about Iraq's WMD that were used by the Bush administration officials to justify their pro war position. Miller's reports were later found to be based on unreliable sources. As The New York Times itself mildly put it, her reports were "inaccurate". But the wind of war had started to blow and the world swayed with the wind.

Soon after the war was over, doubts began to emerge on the WMD claims as meticulous searches failed to unearth any proof of the dreaded weapons. And finally, the worst fear came true - there was no such thing as Iraqi WMD.

Right from that moment, Blair's already waning credibility took a sharp nosedive. The House of Commons was sharply divided over the invasion. As Blair took parliamentary vetting to go to war, 83 MPs of his own party had voted against him.

UK foreign secretary Robin Cook had resigned just a few days before the Iraq invasion to protest Blair's Iraq policy and said "...history will be astonished at the diplomatic miscalculations."

International development secretary Claire Short became critical of Blair, saying he had not told the truth about Iraq.

Although Blair had another win in the next election in 2005, Labour's seats dropped drastically from the previous 419 and 413 to 356. In parliamentary and municipal elections, Labour took a beating in Scotland and

Wales, a debacle, analysts attributed to Blair's Iraq adventure.

Before that, MPs from Scotland and Wales started a campaign in 2004 to impeach Blair for "misleading parliament and country over Iraq, negligence and incompetence over WMD, undermining the constitution and entering into a secret agreement with Bush." In UK's parliamentary history, such impeachment power exercised for "high crimes and misdemeanor" was used last time in 1848 against Foreign Secretary Palmerston, who was accused of concluding a secret treaty with Russia.

Politics for Blair became tough as he lost trust of his cabinet members too. A poll reflected that more than half the Britons considered him dishonest. In summer of 2006, junior ministers and MPs wrote to Downing Street demanding his resignation. There were more desertions from the cabinet as a junior minister and seven other low-ranking members of the government, some of them Blair's best backers, resigned. They said Blair's holding on to office does not serve either the party or the country.

His one-time friend Gordon Brown also wanted him to quit and finally Blair announced his early resignation, ending his long charismatic career.

"The fundamental cause of his demise is the Iraq war", Time wrote after his resignation announcement. While Americans seemed to forgive George Bush, the revelation that there were no weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, despite his promises to the contrary, Blair's authority never recovered."

The fall-out events of the Iraq war have now left the Arab world fragmented, caught in vicious sectarian wars with millions dead and wounded,

many millions fleeing the flashpoints as refugees and a worldwide spate of Islamist attacks much of which is to avenge the roles that the UK and the US had and has taken in relation to the Arab world. Blair cannot but share the blame for all this.

Much later in 2017, an Iraqi ex-general appealed to the UK high court for trial of Blair for the "crime of aggression." But the case was thrown out because the UK does not recognise any such crimes.

On his part, Blair never ever gave any indication of a moment of remorse or repentance even after all the leaked and published documents proved his use of untruths for the sake of the war and he remained steadfast to his view that it was right of him to invade Iraq.

After the damning Chilcot report was published, Blair in a press conference in July 2016 said, "I did not mislead this country. I made the decision in good faith and I believe it is better we took that decision."

By this time, to many, Blair's image had transitioned from that of a hero to that of a war criminal. No less a person than South Africa's Archbishop Desmond Tutu had felt Blair should be tried for war crimes. In 2016, a petition was uploaded on the UK parliamentary website for the arrest of Blair for his role in the destruction of Iraq. Over 20,000 signed the petition in favour before it was removed.

In August 2015, Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn suggested that Blair should be tried for the "illegal" war. After the Chilcot report, Corbyn apologised to the Iraqi people on behalf of the Labour Party and said those responsible for the war should face the consequences.

The Chilcot report mentioned that the evidences and testimonies collected in the report may well lead to prosecution. However, the Rome Statute under which the International Criminal Court runs does not allow "aggression" to be grounds for trial.



Tony Blair

No negative reporting!

FROM PAGE 1
meeting at the BAB office in the capital's Gulshan on Friday.

"To prevent negative publication of the media, an organisation can be established through promulgation of Financial Information Act under the finance ministry and Bangladesh Bank," reads a letter, signed by BAB Chairman Nazrul Islam Mazumder, handed over to the minister.

Emerging from the meeting, Nazrul told reporters that the media should publish reports taking different issues into consideration as even "accurate information" could harm the sector. He did not explain how.

He came down hard on the media as a whole, saying one newspaper published "false" information about EXIM Bank's defaulted loans, which harmed the bank's reputation.

Asked, Nazrul, also chairman of EXIM Bank, said they would discuss the promulgation of the Financial Information Act with the finance minister and the BB governor at a meeting today.

Premier Bank Chairman HBM Iqbal also requested reporters not to write anything negative about the sector.

Over the last two years, the banking sector has been hit hard by a series of loan scandals. The central bank investigations are revealing on a regular basis how different shady organisa-

tions had taken out huge sums in fake loans.

Some flagship names in business with long dubious reputations have viciously schemed to get new loans in the name of repaying old loans which they then usurped up as well without paying a penny.

BASIC Bank, which was once considered the best government bank, had huge loan irregularities amounting to Tk 4,500 crore between 2009 and 2012.

Bismillah Group embezzled Tk 1,100 crore from five banks between 2011 and 2012.

The loan forgery in Sonali Bank is still in public discussion. In 2012, Hall-Mark and five other companies took loans of over Tk 3,500 crore from the bank against fake documents.

Farmers Bank and NRB Commercial Bank became the latest examples of how money was taken freely and liberally out of the system. Now Farmers Bank is unable to pay off depositors' money.

Even, two banks that were established 35 years ago, are in serious trouble because of loan scams.

All these issues have put the banks and their customers in trouble.

Non-performing loans increased to Tk 74,303 crore at the end of December last year from Tk 62,172 crore a year ago.

Experts said businesses in

Bangladesh rely massively on banks for supply of equity. And, when the banking system's health gets deteriorated for continued loan scams, it becomes a threat not only for the financial market but also for the entire economy.

EXPERTS' TAKE ON BAB DEMAND
Salehuddin Ahmed, former governor of the central bank, told The Daily Star yesterday that there was no need to formulate any such acts as people had the right to know what's happening in the banking sector.

"An individual or bank can go to the Press Council if any newspaper publishes any false report," he said.

The BAB's demand is completely illogical as the existing act is enough to take action against false media reports, Salehuddin said.

Khondkar Ibrahim Khaled, former deputy governor of the central bank, echoed the view of Salehuddin, saying newspapers published "negative reports" because the sector was hit by financial scams.

"The banking sector will face a dire consequence if the media is not allowed to broadcast and publish financial scam-related reports. I completely oppose the demand of the directors," he said.

AB Mirza Azizul Islam, former finance adviser to a caretaker government, said the media should continue

to publish scam-related report in the interest of the people.

The customers can choose the bank to deposit his hard-earned money by getting information from the media reports, he said.

"The banks publish their annual financial reports every year, but the clients usually do not read those. They mainly depend on media reports to deposit their money with the banks," he said.

On the nine-point demands by the private commercial bank directors, the finance minister informed them that the government would allow state agencies to deposit 50 percent of their funds with the private banks, up from the existing ceiling of 25 percent.

The BAB requested the finance minister and the central bank to slash the cash reserve requirement (CRR) to 3.5 percent from the existing 6.5 percent so that they have more funds.

This measure will help banks to get an additional Tk 30,000 crore in liquidity, Nazrul told the reporters.

Also, the directors demanded the government slash the percentage of agriculture sector investment to one percent of their total loans instead of 2.5 percent.

The ceiling for deposit pension scheme should be increased to encourage customers to keep more money in banks, according to sources.

KHULNA, GAZIPUR

City polls on May 15

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Elections to Gazipur and Khulna city corporations are scheduled to be held on May 15.

Chief Election Commissioner KM Nurul Huda announced the election schedule at a press conference at Nirbachan Bhaban in the capital yesterday.

According to the election schedule, the deadline for submission of nomination papers is April 12. Election officials would scrutinise the documents on April 15-16, while candidates can withdraw their candidacy till

April 23.

Gazipur City Corporation is formed with 57 general wards and 19 reserved wards with around 11.64 lakh voters. Dhaka Regional Election Officer Rakibuddin Mandol has been made the returning officer for Gazipur City Corporation polls. The last election in GCC was held on July 6, 2013.

Khulna City Corporation is formed with 31 general wards and 10 reserved wards with around 4.93 lakh voters. Regional Election Officer Md Yunus Ali has been made the returning officer for this election. The last election was

held on June 15, 2013.

BNP-backed candidates won both the city corporation elections the last time around.

In 2013, four city corporations including Barisal, Sylhet, Rajshahi and Khulna were held on the same day and BNP-backed candidates won all four mayoral posts.

Polls to Barisal, Sylhet and Rajshahi city corporations would be held by October this year, said election commission officials, adding that a decision to that end would be taken after Ramadan.

Responding to a query, CEC Huda

said they talked with the Local Government Division and found that there were no legal complications in holding elections in Gazipur and Khulna.

In response to another query, the CEC said the commission was collecting new electronic voting machines, which would be used experimentally in some centres of those elections.

He also said that election commission would be very careful in the national election and law-enforcement agencies would take preparations to avert any untoward incidents.

on Friday morning.

"If he could utter those words in such a state of shock, disobeying him would amount to dishonouring him," Prabal Roy Chowdhury, the sub-divisional officer of Asansol, said.

Former Trinamool Congress Lok Sabha MP Kabir Suman lauded the cleric and said Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee should not only organise a public function to honour him, but also recommend the Bharat Ratna for him.

"Mamata Banerjee, why aren't you saying it out loud that Bharat Ratna should be bestowed on this imam... We should all go and touch his feet," Suman said in his Facebook post.

The industrial towns of Raniganj and Asansol hit the headlines after clashes between Hindus and Muslims erupted in West Bengal since Ram Navami, the birthday of god Rama, celebrations on March 25.

A man was killed and several injured after Ram Navami procession allegedly tried to enter a Muslim-dominated locality in Raniganj on March 25. Three others also lost their lives in related incidents across North 24 Parganas and Purulia districts around that time.

There have been no further incidents of violence over the past two days as the state government ensured heavy police presence in the affected areas and suspended internet services.

'If you strike back I'll leave'

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Navami celebrations last Sunday.

The body of Maulana Imdadul Rashidi's son, Sibtulla Rashidi, was found on Wednesday after he went missing following a clash on Tuesday in Asansol's Railpar area.

Sibtulla was the younger of the two sons of Rashidi, who has been performing the duties of the imam at Noorani Mosque for about 30 years.

Rashidi made an impassioned plea to the people gathered at the Idgah Maidan where his son was buried on Thursday.

"My son has died, but I don't want anyone else to lose his child. If you strike back, I shall leave this town," the imam told the crowd.

"I only want peace to return here. I have made the same request to the people who gathered on Thursday," he repeated his request on Friday.

Local officials and senior leaders of the ruling Trinamool Congress said Rashidi's comments will help the administration in restoring peace and normalcy in the area but questioned the circumstances surrounding his son's death.

"It is not yet clear to the administration whether the son of the imam was killed or he died due to some other reason. But we do recognise his exemplary gesture in maintaining peace in the region," Tapas Banerjee, Trinamool Congress MLA of Asansol South, said