

Pitch melting pollutes Dimla air

Labourers burn old footwear, tyres, plastic to melt pitch

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Nilphamari

Air quality of Dimla upazila under the district hit a hazardous level due to melting of pitch in front of Dimla Islamia Degree College for construction of a road, causing health hazards of the students as well as locals.

A diesel-run machine to prepare pitch by melting waste materials was set up on the college campus around one month ago by a construction firm.

The machine pollutes the environment by emitting dense smoke, dust and dirt. As a result, attendance of students has decreased and many of them, along with locals living in surrounding area, have fallen sick.

Local Government and Engineering Department (LGED) Upazila Engineer Abu Jafar Saleh said they had called tender for major maintenance work of around 4.5 kilometre section, stretching from Boro Jumma to Shaheed Minar of Dimla-Shutibari road a year ago at an estimated cost of Tk 1.50 crore. Messers Rehan Traders got the work order, he added.

On a visit to the college campus on Tuesday, this correspondent found that the entire area was covered with smoke as labourers melted pitch with fire made from thrown-away footwear, old tyres and plastic items only a few metres from the academic building. "Due to the dense black smoke and floating

dust particles, the college authorities were compelled to stop academic activities in the old building," said Md Akhtaruazzaman, a teacher of the college.

"We can't stay in the classroom due to severe air pollution and the loud sound of tractors carrying construction materials. Now around 60% students remain absent from classes," said Jyotish Chandra, a student of Class XII.

"At least one member of every family in the area suffers from respiratory problems, headache, aching eyes, loss of appetite and so on," said Nayan Islam of College Para area.

"We're implementing the government's development programmes for convenience of the local people and we have set up the machine with consent of the college authorities," said Md Mizan, manager of the construction firm.

He also said they will leave the college campus with all the machinery within four or five days.

Principal Hashim Hyder Apu refuted Mizan's claim that he was given permission. "The contractor set up the machine with blessings from influential quarters. If he fails to leave the campus with the machinery, I will be compelled to take legal action," he said.

"As per our rule, the construction firm must set up machines far from an inhabited locality. If necessary, they should rent the land," said district LGED Executive Engineer Md Belal Hossain.



Dense smoke emitted from a pitch-melting machine set up on the campus of Dimla Islamia Degree College is polluting the atmosphere and causing health problems for people.

PHOTO: EAM ASADUZZAMAN

Betel leaf bonanza

Bountiful harvest and export demand bring solvency to many Bagerhat families

PARITHA CHAKRABORTY with ANDREW EAGLE

In Bagerhat, prosperity grows in leafy bursts of resplendent green. Betel vines have performed to their utmost this year; enough to please even the most hardened farmer.

"Last year we suffered a lot from excessive rain and water logging," says Rahaman Seikh, a betel grower from Karapara in Sadar upazila. "This year is quite the opposite. Harvests are very good since the weather has been favourable. I hope we will overcome last year's losses."

"Most people in our village grow betel leaf," says Sujit Shome from Khalishakhali village in Kachua upazila. "Thanks to this year's harvest, our family will eat well through the whole year. I have already sold at least Tk 1 lakh of leaves from my farm."

Village after village, across Fakirhat, Mollahat, Sadar and parts of Kachua upazila the situation is repeated: the abundant harvest has brought rejuvenated solvency to many households.

For many farming families it represents the fulfilment of a long-awaited promise. Betel was specifically chosen for its potential profitability when traditional crops like paddy and jute were proving less profitable than once they had been. The burgeoning betel leaf industry has generated numerous employment opportunities for farmhands too.

At Mollahat and Jatrapur, two distribution sites have been established. As a measure of the 'good times in green', up to seven truckloads of betel leaf are being shipped daily towards Dhaka and beyond.

"Betel leaf production is increasing day by day," says Bagerhat Sadar upazila's agriculture officer Sanjay Kumar Das. "This year a total of 485 hectares has been devoted to betel leaf crops in this upazila."

"Betel leaf has become one of the most economical crops in Bagerhat," says the district's agriculture department deputy director Aftab Uddin. "Not only has the harvest been good but demand is also strong. Betel leaf is used in ceremonies and at festivals. It is also exported from here to markets in the Middle East."

"Betel leaf farming is playing a significant role in Bagerhat's economic development," he adds.



PHOTO: PARITHA CHAKRABORTY

A betel leaf sales centre at Mollahat Bazar in Bagerhat's Mollahat upazila. Up to seven truckloads of betel leaf are being transported daily towards Dhaka and other districts.

Tk 12.5 lakh spent

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The charge sheet said that for the attack, Rash and Hadisur Rahman Sagor, another top operative of "Neo JMB", collected four 9mm pistols, eight magazines and 35 bullets from Chapainawabganj in May 2016.

Abdus Sabur Khan alias Soheli Mahfuz, who was inducted as a member of Majlish-e-Sura (highest policy-making body) after being interviewed by Tamim in May 2016, collected the arms and established communication with some mainstream JMB members staying in India.

"Neo JMB" -- as law enforcers call it -- is an IS-inspired faction of the banned militant outfit Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB).

Afterwards, two top operatives of "Neo JMB", Abu Raihan Tarik and Jahidul Islam, a retired major, provided arms training to the five café attackers in Saghata of Gaibandha in the first week of May, mentioned the charge sheet.

They taught the five café attackers -- Nibras Islam, Mir Sabeh Mubashir, Rohan Intiaz, Khairul Islam Payel and Shafiqul Islam Uzzal -- how to assemble and operate arms, and make improvised explosive device.

They were also trained to use AK-22s but the charge sheet did not mention how those were acquired.

At the same time, Rohan and Nibras also received training in explosives, especially grenades, from Rash, with the training taking place in the Buriganga river.

The planners later established a control room in West Shewrapara of Mirpur, where Tamim and another coordinator named Nurul Islam Marzan, took up position. The attackers were kept in a house in Bashundhara, which Chocolate had rented till the end of May of that year for Tk 22,000.

Chocolate had paid Tk 40,000 as security deposit for the

house.

FIVE OTHER PLACES RECCED According to the charge sheet, the Holy Artisan Bakery was not the first target of the attackers.

As their motive was to kill a large number of foreign nationals, Rash had first recced two places -- Gulshan Park and Holy Artisan Bakery -- in June that year.

During the time, the security guard of the café had asked for Rash's identification, upon which he provided a fake ID card and claimed he was a student of Dhaka University.

Two operatives of the "Neo JMB" media cell, under the organisational alias of "Botam" and "Huzur", used to prepare different fake ID cards for the outfit's members. The charge sheet, however, did not give any details about them.

The five café attackers had also recced Ladies Club, Jamuna Future Park, Bashundhara Park and Banani Cash, along with Marzan, who was killed in a "gunfight" with police.

On June 30, 2016, Tamim and Sarwar came to the attacker's Bashundhara house and held a meeting with them around 11:00pm.

Later, Sarwar Jahan asked them to target the Holy Artisan Bakery on July 1, as most foreigners gathered there on Fridays.

According to the charge sheet, Sarwar also told them, "Do not show mercy... even if the person is a journalist."

The five attackers entered the café around 8:42pm on July 1 and killed 19 people, including 16 foreigners, within 30 minutes. One Japanese citizen, who hid in the freezer, was killed around 1:00am, the next day.

After the killing, the attackers asked the hostages for a phone with internet connection. Hasnat Reza Karim, a hostage, said he had one. They then took it and installed the Wicker application on his phone to commu-

nicate with Tamim and Marzan, the charge sheet read.

Forensic tests showed that the application had been installed in Hasnat's phone after the attack.

'VICTIM OF CIRCUMSTANCES' In the charge sheet, investigators mentioned that Hasnat was a "victim of circumstances" and that the attackers had used him as a shield while going to the rooftop to check on the law enforcer's activity in the morning.

The other survivors of the attack also said Hasnat was forced at gunpoint to go to the roof.

The investigators did not find Hasnat's involvement in the attack and said he had gone there to celebrate his daughter's birthday with his family.

The investigation officer appealed to the court to relieve him from the case.

The anti-terrorism special tribunal in Dhaka fixed August 8 to decide whether to accept the charge sheet against eight militants in the case filed over the attack in Holy Artisan Bakery.

The investigators found the involvement of 21 suspects with 13 of them already killed in different operations.

Of the 21 suspects, five were killed on the spot while eight others -- Tamim; Sarwar; Marzan, a Chittagong University student; Jahidul; Chocolate; Tarik; Kaderi and Mizanur Rahman alias Boro Mizan; Hadisur Rahman Sagor and Rakibul Islam, a so-called religious trainer.

The other two -- Shahriful Islam Khaled and Mamunur Rashid Ripon -- are fugitives and have fled the country.

Bloody day

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Provincial health director Najibullah Kamawal said some of the dead were "burned beyond recognition".

As the raid began with a suicide attacker blowing up a bomb-laden car at the entrance, local representatives of foreign donors and agencies were meeting department employees inside the building.

"All the partner agency representatives attending the meeting were Afghans and those who were stuck inside, including the director of the refugees and repatriations department, were rescued," Khogyani said.

Several people were taken hostage by the attackers, said Zabiullah Zmarary, a provincial council member.

"I saw a black Corolla car drop three armed men at the gate of the refugees and repatriations department," a witness told AFP.

Khogyani said the two attackers who stormed the compound were killed.

Security forces swarmed into the area, and a plume of thick black smoke rose into the sky above the compound.

The Taliban denied involvement in the incident in a WhatsApp message sent to journalists.

There was no immediate claim of responsibility for the attack, which comes three days after militants raided a midwife training centre in Jalalabad.

CIVILIANS UNDER ATTACK

In the western province of Farah yesterday, the bomb which hit the bus killed at least 11 people and wounded 31.

"It was a bomb planted by the Taliban to hit security forces but... it got a passenger bus," Farah provincial police spokesman Muhibullah Muhib told AFP.

There was no immediate confirmation from the Taliban that they were responsible.

In a separate incident, 22 passengers travelling on a Kabul-bound bus in the eastern province of Paktia were kidnapped by gunmen on Monday night.

Officials blamed the Taliban for both incidents.

Most of the attacks in Jalalabad have been claimed by IS, which has a relatively small but potent presence in Afghanistan, mainly in the east and north.

It is not clear why the militants targeted the refugees and repatriations department, but government buildings are frequently hit.

Road collapses into canal for rain

Locals blame unplanned excavation of Modonkhali canal for the incident

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Faridpur

Some sections of a concrete road collapsed into Modonkhali canal in Faridpur municipality on Friday due to excessive rain and unplanned excavation of the canal.

Thousands of people, including the students, in the area are suffering due to the road collapse.

Locals said a total of 2.25 kilometres of the road from Aliabad Union Parishad to Saken House was built by Local Government Engineering Department (LGED) three years ago.

Some 800 metres of one kilometre road from Mollah Dangi to Saken House collapsed due to incessant rain from Wednesday and unplanned excavation of the canal, they added.

Thousands of people of 15 villages use the road to go to their destinations, they said, adding that students of several educational institutions are the worst sufferers.

Abdul Haque, a resident of Beel Mohammadpur village, said incessant rain and unplanned excavation of Modonkhali canal by Water Development Board (WDB) a few months ago are the rea-

sons for the washing away of the road.

Hiru Matabbor of Izeuddin Matabbor Dangi village said local people are suffering a lot. If the authorities do not take necessary steps the whole road will be washed away anytime, he added.

Faridpur Municipality Mayor Sheikh Mahatab Ali Mathu said they would take necessary steps so that people can use the road.

WDB Executive Engineer Sultan Mahmud said excavation of the canal did not cause the collapse of the road. It may have happened due to incessant rain, he said.

Central bank detects

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Allah Malik Kazemi, change management adviser to the BB, said the central bank has micro-level regulations to monitor whether money is being laundered out of the country through fake imports.

BB Chief Economist Faisal Ahmed said that in the new monetary policy, the credit growth target in the private sector has been kept unchanged at 16.8 percent as part of efforts to ensure quality lending in the election year.

In recent times, the BB has

found some gross violations in foreign exchange transactions that have raised concern about money laundering.

In many cases, importers didn't submit to the banks concerned bills of entry -- the document to prove that imported goods actually entered the country -- against the letters of credit (LCs).

This indicates that the goods didn't enter the country but the money was transferred abroad to the designated importers' accounts.

The BB recently fined Janata bank Tk 10 lakh for

having huge overdue bills of entry against imports.

According to BB estimates, about 7 percent of the LCs remains mysteriously unsettled with no bill of entry submitted.

Janata Bank alone shares 3 percent of the LCs or about half of the cases of non-submission involving around \$1 billion.

This major violation in foreign exchange transactions has made the BB worried. It served five warning notices on Janata Bank from January last year to April this year.