

THE ROAD EXPANSION PROJECT THAT WILL DEMOLISH BIHARI HOUSES

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population, a physical manifestation of heritage. According to project documents, the road is to be widened to a little more than 30 feet, while currently it is less than 20 feet wide.

The bulldozers had already come once on July 23, to break down housepainter Nasim's home on Lane 22 of Block C Mirpur 11. The locals claim to have stood in the way of the bulldozer and saved hid home. But city corporation workers still managed to tear down the walls on one side. They also tore down the drains on his street, leaving tepid drainwater and floating sewage all around. As Nasim talked about his home, a child slipped and fell into the open sewer.

"We intervened and did not let them do anything to Nasim's house or to the others on the block," says Shahid Ali Bablu, the general secretary of Urdu Speaking Peoples Youth Rehabilitation Movement (USPYRM). "We could do that because the demolition was in direct violation of a 'status quo' ordered by the High Court on the eviction of the Bihari camps in 2017. The High Court ordered that no eviction can take place without doing a survey of the camp boundaries."

The fact that the government holds no

information on where the camp boundaries lie is the crux of the problem. As observed by *Star Weekend*, most of the structures that have to be demolished, if the roads are to be widened, are Bihari homes. Yet, when asked if the government has to acquire any land from homeowners, the engineers of DNCC said that no homes will be demolished.

"The camp boundaries have changed since we were first settled here. For example, camps were demolished to build the Journalists' Residential Area, and the Biharis were relocated elsewhere in Mirpur 11. Camps also had to be demolished to build the road that leads from Kalshi to Mirpur DOHS. These are only two examples, but the community is constantly evicted and rehabilitated so nobody knows the exact

boundaries of these camps," says Bablu.

When we visited the councilor's office of ward number 3 last week, we found local political parties deep in discussion about the impending drive scheduled for the next day. Local Biharis, as well as the local Awami League unit, were present.

"We will try to rehabilitate those who are

extremely poor and are being evicted," said Abdul Halim Majumdar, the president of ward number 3 Awami League. When pressed for details of when this rehabilitation would happen, he stammered a little, so his sidekick Jahir Ahmed, the former Vice President of the Dhaka North wing of Bangladesh Chhatra League,

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spoke up.

"When our late mayor Annisul Huq was in office, he met with the Bihari community and discussed relocating them to Beguntilla," said Jahir, "but after he died, nothing moved forward..."

Such an initiative, in fact, does exist. *Star Weekend* examined a letter sent in 2016 by the Director General of the Department of Disaster Management, Mohammed Riaz Ahmed, to the ministry's Secretary General, asking for 726 acres of land on the outskirts of Dhaka for the rehabilitation of the community.

But their rehabilitation is a project separate from their eviction. According to DNCC, the Tk 600 crore project that is tackling the road crisis has not allocated a single paisa for the rehabilitation of this community.

"Either way, these roads have always been as wide as we propose to make it. Over the years, different encroachers have illegally occupied the roadsides, eating into it. We only want to reclaim that land," added Jahir.

Jahir is not entirely wrong. When the camps were built, they were

designed as rows of one-roomed houses for each family. Toilet facilities were shared. When the residents of Shahid e Millat camp living on the side of Road 5 of Mirpur 10 Block A needed more toilets as population boomed, they just built makeshift ones out of corrugated tin sheets. These toilets are on the demolition list.

"It will be so difficult for us to function if they break down the toilets," said Jamil, a resident of the camp on that lane.

Bihari camps are definitely not the only ones to be affected—Bengalis are on the list too. The problem is that each Bihari family is technically a small homeowner of a one-roomed house, while the Bengalis being affected are owners of larger structures. For example, Ferdousi alias "Shumir Ma" used to live in a rented room by the side of the road in Block C of Mirpur 11, when the bulldozers came to claim a few feet of her room. Her landlord asked her to clear out the room, and she moved to another one in the back in the same block. "I did not

incur any losses. The landlord lost a few feet of his property," she said. The property block was large enough to house ten one-roomed houses, each room being of a sizeable area. Walking through the roads, it could be noticed that most non-Bihari properties lost only their yards or storefronts in the road-widening project.

USPYRM's Bablu explained, "The local ruling party women's members asked me why I am being so stingy about letting go of a few feet for the roads. I said that a few feet taken away from her large flat won't matter but Bihari homes are barely 8 feet in width. How do we spare even an inch from there?" The Biharis were given ownership of these one-roomed homes in 1972 by the International Committee of the Red Cross.

The assistant organiser of the USPYRM Mohammed Johnny also pointed out: "Not a single Bihari living in the camps owns a car. Why would we need such wide roads?"

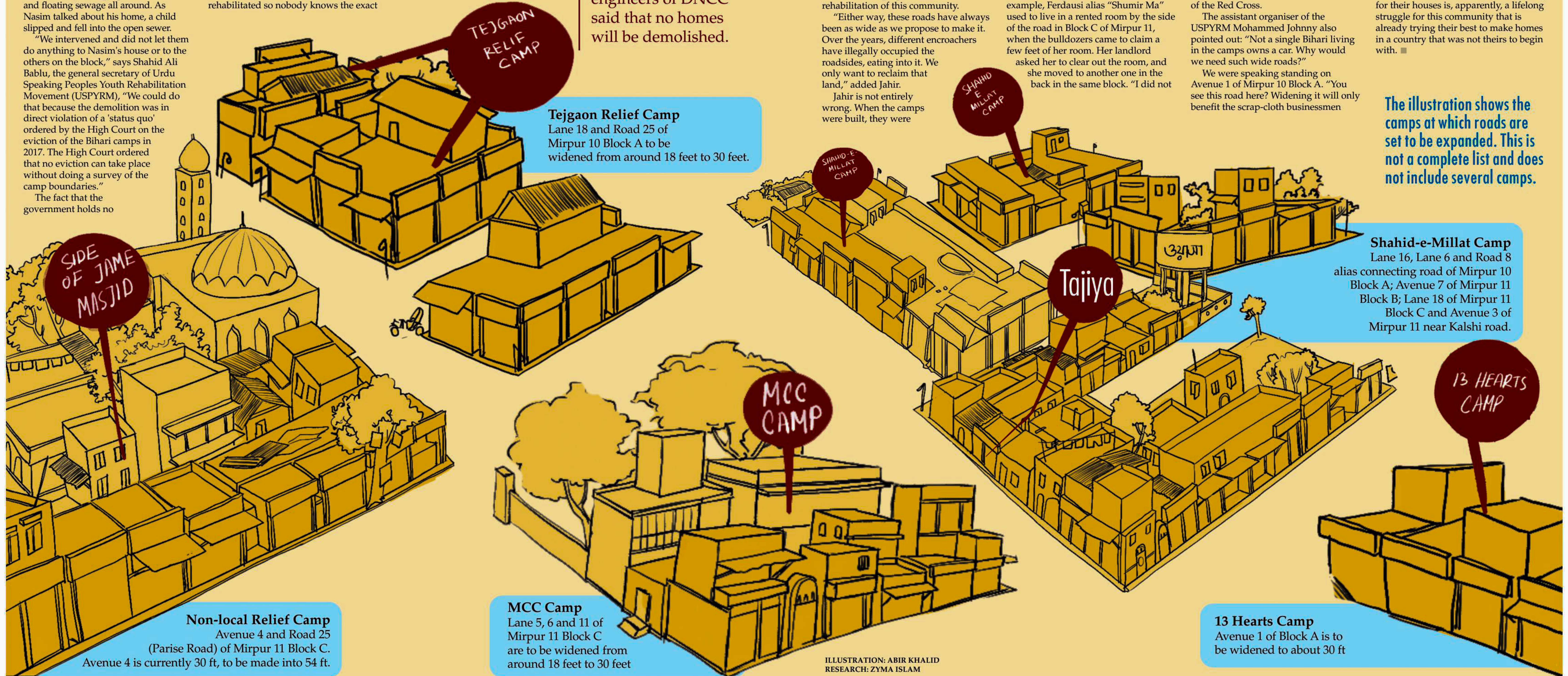
We were speaking standing on Avenue 1 of Mirpur 10 Block A. "You see this road here? Widening it will only benefit the scrap-cloth businessmen

whose trucks have to ply this road." The scrap-cloth businesses began at the end of the lane.

The bulldozers came on July 26 but were not allowed to tear down the homes because the night before the Biharis met with the police to convince them not to give police protection to the government. "I showed the officer-in-charge of Pallabi station the court documents declaring the status quo, and upon conferring with higher officials, they decided to not support the drive on this day," said Bablu.

The bulldozers have been stopped until next time, but such poorly thought schemes to evict the Biharis are hardly new. For example, last year, on May 18, Kashmiri camp was demolished and 26 families were put to the streets. Fighting for their houses is, apparently, a lifelong struggle for this community that is already trying their best to make homes in a country that was not theirs to begin with. ■

The illustration shows the camps at which roads are set to be expanded. This is not a complete list and does not include several camps.



Non-local Relief Camp

Avenue 4 and Road 25 (Parise Road) of Mirpur 11 Block C. Avenue 4 is currently 30 ft, to be made into 54 ft.

MCC Camp

Lane 5, 6 and 11 of Mirpur 11 Block C are to be widened from around 18 feet to 30 feet

13 Hearts Camp

Avenue 1 of Block A is to be widened to about 30 ft

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