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not even in the compound; Momtaz put up corrugated tin sheets to make a tiny shower area.

The buyer of the plot allegedly came and pulled down the bathroom, so Momtaz put it back up again. "We can shower at the common water tap, but I have four growing daughters who need some privacy," he says simply, when asked why he encroached upon land to build the shower. To be fair, the land he encroached upon has just enough foot-space for a bucket and the person using it.

Yet the case filed against him by the buyer states, "Momtaz erected a structure in the middle of the night on 5/11/2014 and 6/11/2014 by illegally occupying land, and is now extorting money from me, in exchange for breaking it down." Hence, Momtaz is being charged with extortion. The case statement further goes on to describe him as "a rioter, a fraud, greedy, terrorist occupier with no respect for the law." Apparently, his job is to squat on others' land, build makeshift settlements and extort money from the original owners of the land, says the case statement. Momtaz was surprised when he heard the charges. "It was the buyer who called my sister up day before yesterday and offered to pay Tk 2.5 lakh to me for my house! He also offered to buy me a rickshaw!" he claims. Momtaz is also

*A decade into possessing the land, the seller Amir Bhuiyan, and more importantly, the buyer Abdul Momin, must have known that the plot is inside the Shahid-e-Millat camp.*

being charged with threatening to kill the real estate lawyer who filed the case against him, and assaulting his representative.

His neighbour Mostafa is also in the same situation—his room was sold off by the government, and now he, too, is facing a case of extortion. "I have lived in this room all my life. See, it is written here on my father's ration card," says Mostafa, pulling out the red slip of paper that all Bihari refugees were given by the International Committee of the Red Cross. Mostafa is a security guard by profession.

Yet another neighbour of Momtaz's,



**A signboard advertising a multi-story building erected outside a plot Biharis claim is camp land**

Meherun, has already had her home pulled down and is now living with her niece. "My niece is newly married and has only one child, so my husband and I sleep on the floor of her house," says Meherun, whose husband is a *katan* sari weaver, and right now charged with an extortion case. "That used to be Jamil's house over there but he also left after being charged with a case," adds Meherun, pointing at the skeleton of a structure.

Having a police case means these men can be harassed by the police for as long as their case is not settled.

"Two months ago, the police of Pallabi police station came around 2 am, banged on my door and told me that I will be arrested unless I vacate the plot. Later an anonymous person called my sister's cell phone and told her that I will be charged with heroin possession," says Momtaz.

It is a classic case of land-grabbing. In 1995, the plot Momtaz's home stood on was leased by the government for 99 years to a man called Mohammed Amir Bhuiyan. 10 years of monthly payments down the line, Bhuiyan handed over the plot to a real estate lawyer named Abdul Momin. The government allocated these plots to buyers using a lottery—meaning only chance would decide which buyer would get what plot. Since that process was blind, we are unable to determine whether Amir Bhuiyan was aware of the fact that he was in fact buying Bihari camp land—but we can be sure that Momin knew it for certain. A decade into possessing the land, the seller Amir Bhuiyan, and more importantly, the buyer Abdul Momin, must have known that the plot is inside the Shahid-e-Millat camp. The case filed against Momtaz is a very strategic scare-tactic.

Monim however denies it.

"This plot was never a camp. When the land was sold off, these

Bihari criminals squatted on the land," claims Momin over the phone. When asked to clarify how it happened, the lawyer cut the line insisting he was busy, and then was unreachable over the phone from that point on.

But there were others like housewife Shahnaz Begum who had no idea that her plot fell inside the Bihari camps.

"My sister simply entered the lottery in 1995 hoping to land a plot and she did. Ever since, she has been waiting for the plot to be handed over. She has been paying her monthly instalments every year, but stopped only very recently over the last year or two because the plot is not being handed over," says Shahnaz's cousin Osman Ghani, speaking on behalf her.

The government however are insisting that the Biharis claiming the land as their own are squatters. "When the land was



**Mirpur Bihari homes beside narrow alleys**

first distributed as plots it was covered in slum dwellings. There were no camps. It was only later that they hung up signboards claiming this area was a Bihari camp," says the current project director of DUEP, Mohammed Abdur Rouf.

I ask Momtaz's sister Sharbari if this was true. She vehemently denies it. "My father was given a thatched hut on the spot where Momtaz lives now, but it was definitely camp land. We have been Shahid-e-Millat camp since then," says Sharbari. The refugees were settled in 1972 by the International Committee of the Red Cross following the liberation of Bangladesh, because Pakistan refused to repatriate them.

She goes on to explain how the one-roomed house came to be built with bricks. "We took two micro-loans, which we are still paying back." When Sharbari was asked about her childhood in the area, she reminisces having to walk all the way to the place where the Mirpur stadium is located, for water. "That place was a large pond back then. When they filled that up to build the stadium, we asked for community tubewells and taps. Our camp has those too," she states.

How could the government hand over plots before ensuring no Bihari camps existed there? The community claims it is because they are constantly being evicted from one place and moved to another by different government authorities and there is no coordination among them.

Bihari leaders claim that the camp boundaries are constantly changing because local government agencies keep evicting them and rehabilitating them elsewhere. This apparently, however, is not reflected in the government lists of where the camps are.

"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 Shahid Ali Bablu, the general secretary of Urdu Speaking Peoples Youth Rehabilitation Movement (USPYRM).

The camps of Bihari communities have amorphous borders, a situation not made better by the fact that the population has swollen over the years. Mayor Annisul Huq had initiated relocating the community to Beguntila, in the outskirts of the city, but no initiative has been taken to realise that plan. A letter sent in 2016 by the Director General of the Department of Disaster Management, Mohammed Riaz Ahmed, to the ministry's Secretary General requested 726 acres of land to house the community—but there is no progress on that front. While moving them out of Dhaka comes with its own set of problems, at least they will be moved to safety away from the jaws of the rapid urbanisation and real estate development that Mirpur is going through.

PHOTOS: KAZI TAHASIN AGAZ APURBO