

# Bridge lies with no approach roads for 21yrs

MINTU DESHWARA

A bridge built 21 years ago over a canal at Chilarkandi village in Moulvibazar's Kulaura upazila remains useless as it has no approach roads.

According to the LGED office in Kulaura, the 12 metre-long and six foot-wide bridge was constructed by them on the Bhukmoil-Kadipur road in 1997 to improve transportation for the people of around 30 villages. The cost of construction was estimated at Tk 3.08 lakh back then.

But the approach roads have not been constructed yet, making the bridge useless.

Syed Mahfuz Hamid, a resident of Karera village and founder of Kulaura Problem and Prospect Organisation, said thousands of people, including school and college students, from nearby villages were suffering because

of this.

During dry seasons, people walk past the canal under the bridge. During monsoon, however, they have to use inconvenient alternative roads, he added.

Azizur Rahman Monir, chairman of Bhusimoil Union Parishad, said he tried to get funds for different projects in the union but in vain.

"I raised the issue many times at the upazila administration's monthly coordination meeting, but to no avail," he added.

Ranjan Das of Chilarkandi village said around 1,000 students, mostly girls from different villages, used the road under the bridge to reach their institution in dry seasons.

But in the rainy season they have to walk two to three kilometres extra. He urged the authorities concerned to

SEE PAGE 10 COL 3



Readymade garment workers occupy Savar-Ashulia road in Ashulia yesterday morning, protesting disparity in their new wage structure. *Inset*, law enforcers swing into action to clear the road.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN



## UN calls for unimpeded

FROM PAGE 16

travelling to rural areas in five townships in the northern and central parts of the state affected by the conflict.

The International Committee of the Red Cross and UN World Food Programme were exempted from the ban, it said.

Myanmar's president urged the military to "crush" the rebels of the Arakan Army during a rare meeting with the commander-in-chief last week. The president, Win Myint, is a loyalist of the de facto government leader, Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi.

Fighting has forced about 5,000 people to flee from their homes and take shelter in monasteries and communal areas across the region since early January, according to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs.

"We are seriously concerned about new restrictions on humanitarian access which leave thousands of women, children and men in affected areas of Rakhine without access to adequate assistance and protection," said Pierre Peron, a spokesman for UN office.

"We hope the government responds positively to our call for rapid and unimpeded humanitarian access, and to ensure the protection of civilians in accordance with international humanitarian and human rights law," he said

in an email.

The Rakhine State municipal affairs minister, whose name is also Win Myint, told Reuters the restrictions on humanitarian access were put in place for "security reasons".

"We don't know how long it will last," he said, "Access will be granted again if there is no security concern."

Rakhine state has been roiled by successive rounds of violence in recent years.

In 2017, the region was the site of an extensive military crackdown, following attacks by Rohingya Muslim insurgents, that prompted about 730,000 Rohingya to flee westwards into neighbouring Bangladesh.

The Arakan Army, the group behind the recent fighting, is demanding greater autonomy from the central government for Rakhine State, where the mostly Buddhist ethnic Rakhine people form the majority of the population.

Arakan Army fighters killed 13 policemen and wounded nine in attacks on four police posts in early January, state media reported.

An Arakan Army spokesman outside Myanmar told Reuters last week the group attacked the security forces in response to a broad military offensive in the north of Rakhine State that also targeted civilians.

FROM PAGE 1

demonstrations in recent months.

Any crisis in the industry should be resolved through a joint effort from union leaders, factory management and the government and the workers are to be conveyed the message. It helps quell any unrest in a healthy garment sector.

However, the latest spell of protests against disparity in wages was not guided by the union leaders and it was evident when the demonstrating workers refused to return to work despite repeated calls from the leaders.

A couple of union leaders, who were part of the tripartite committee formed to handle the situation, admitted that the protesters were not paying any heed to them.

The workers openly said they did not trust their top leadership. Some even branded the leaders as "promoters" of the owners.

They said their "true leaders" had been on the run since December 2016 when unrest hit the sector as workers began protests demanding a new wage board with a minimum pay of Tk 16,000.

As a result, agitating workers over the last week did not follow the directives of the union leaders who engaged in negotiations with the government

and the owners for revision of the wage structure sitting in Dhaka.

Following the labour unrest at Ashulia and Savar in December 2016, many local union leaders were arrested. On their release, some of them started working either for factory management or the government, the workers alleged, adding those who wanted to work in favour of the workers had to flee as cases were filed against them.

Talking to The Daily Star, Montoo, an operator at a garment factory in Ashulia, said many of the workers did not listen to their union leaders during the recent protests. "We don't have any trust in the union leaders."

Echoing Montoo's view, many of the workers, who participated in the protest, said the union leaders did not guide them properly.

Khairul Mamun Mintoo, organising secretary of the Garment Workers Trade Union Kendra, said the government and the owners did not allow any mainstream union activities in Ashulia and Savar areas over the last two years.

As a result, the gap between the unions and the workers widened and during the peak of the latest unrest, the leaders failed to play any part in resolving the situation.

Amirul Haque Amin, president of

the National Garment Workers Federation, agreed that trade unions have weaknesses in terms of leadership as most of the unions are not organised.

He said there are many reasons for the weaknesses. For instance, the number of active union leaders in more than 4,500 garment factories stood at 750 after the Rana Plaza disaster in 2013.

But the number of such active unions is around 350 now.

Around 350 unions for more than 4,500 active garment factories are too scanty, said Amin, who led union leaders in the negotiation of wage structure. The factory managements also do not encourage formation of unions, he said.

So the cordial industrial relations which were supposed to be in place had not established in the sector even 40 years after garment trade began in the country, he added. Currently, the number of federations of unions in the garment sector is 60.

In almost every factory, the elected participation committees are present for the sake of compliance, he said. In most of the cases those participation committees are inactive and only exist on papers under pressure from buyers, he said.

"The government and International

Labour Organisation have recently been advocating for social dialogues for resolving the conflicts in the sector. But still I believe there is no alternative to trade unions in lowering the conflicts," he said, adding, "Healthy practice of trade unionism can resolve 90 percent of the conflicts."

"If workers want, they are allowed to have unions as per the labour law. Even they can apply for unionism through online applications," said Siddiqui Rahman, president of Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA).

The government relaxed the minimum participation requirement of workers in formation of union to 20 percent from the previous 30 percent to encourage it, Siddiqui added.

Meanwhile, the ILO Country Office in Bangladesh in a statement welcomed the decision to revise the wages.

"We acknowledge the genuine efforts of all parties, led by the Ministry of Labour and Employment, to work towards setting minimum wages at an appropriate level and to reach a consensus. Through this tripartite process of dialogue confidence is being built and we call upon all parties to help the industry resume its activities," says Tuomo Poutiainen, ILO country director for Bangladesh.

## Schedule likely

FROM PAGE 1

In the first four phases, the UP election would be held in different divisions. The last phase of the election would be held later in the UPs where tenures of the representatives have not ended yet, he said.

The polling dates will be fixed keeping in mind the SSC exams in February, HSC exams in April and Ramadan later this year.

Political parties will nominate candidates in the UP election for the first time in history.

According to law, UP election must be held at least six months before the tenure of the local government body expires.

In 2014, elections in 487 upazilas were held in six phases between February and May.

**RESERVED SEATS FOR WOMEN**  
The schedule for polls for women's 50 reserved seats in parliament will be announced on February 17.

The voters' list will be published by February 12 and the EC will ask political parties to report by January 30 whether they would contest as part of an alliance, the EC secretary said.

**NO FRESH POLLS**

Referring to the Jatiya Oikyafront's memorandum demanding fresh polls under "a neutral administration", Helal Uddin said the EC considered the matter and came to the conclusion that there was no scope for a fresh election.

"If someone feels aggrieved, they can lodge complaints to the tribunal," he said.

Jatiya Oikyafront submitted the memorandum to the EC on January 3.

## Hilsa habitats under threat

FROM PAGE 1

plants, each having the capacity to generate 1,320MW of electricity.

The plants are being built near the major hilsa sanctuary between the Andharmanik River and Ramnabad channel in Dhankhali union of Patuakhali's Kalapara upazila. One of them may start generating electricity this April.

The 40km stretch of the Andharmanik serves as a major corridor for hilsa migration from the sea.

Experts say a large number of vessels carrying coal, possible oil spills, fly ash, and discharge of water used by the plants could seriously harm the plankton-rich waters where hilsas breed.

A ban on fishing hilsa during spawning season and jatka or the young hilsa for eight months a year had helped increase production several times in recent years. But experts believe that the power plants in the hilsa breeding grounds would undermine the government efforts.

"The power plants will greatly disturb the breeding and nurturing of hilsa whatever the safety measures they take regarding environment," said Anisur Rahman, director of Bangladesh Fisheries Research Institute (BFRI), who has been researching on the national fish for years.

The quality of water is important as hilsa eats planktons in fresh water, he added.

"They have selected the sites and started construction of coal-fired power plants. But no one consulted us about the matter. These power plants will use a huge quantity of river water and coal-laden water transport will

pollute the rivers.

"All the efforts government made to increase the production of hilsa could be pointless because of the power plants."

North-West Power Generation Company Ltd is building a plant on 1,000 acres of land, Rural Power Company Ltd another on 915 acres and Ashuganj Power Station Company Ltd the third on 930 acres, said Mamunur Rashid, additional deputy commissioner (revenue) of Patuakhali.

Besides, 1,075 acres of land have been acquired for another plant in the same area. It will be built by Sena Kalayan Sangstha, he added.

North-West is likely to start generating 660MW by April and an additional 660MW by October, he added.

Arif Azad, former director general of Department of Fisheries, who retired last March, said considering the characteristics of hilsa, it is not difficult to say that those power plants would have a negative impact on the fish.

Those sanctuaries are the migration routes of hilsa. As per the law, all kinds of intervention are prohibited there, he said.

He added that the environment ministry did not contact the fisheries department before issuing the environment clearance certificates to the power plant companies.

Contacted, Nasrul Hamid, state minister for power, energy and mineral resources, said, "The government has made a policy about the power plants, and the companies that sought permission following the policy guidelines got the go ahead for their projects."

"Our job is to promote power gener-

ation. You better talk to the environment ministry."

Waterkeepers Bangladesh, a regional entity of Waterkeeper Alliance, and Bangladesh Paribesh Andolon (Bapa) jointly conducted a research on the effects of these infrastructures on environment, including water bodies, in April last year.

Sharif Jamil, Waterkeeper's Bangladesh representative, said this area in Patuakhali is known as the hilsa hub. The area produces hilsa worth Tk 4,000 crore a year and it is increasing.

Thousands of people involved in this trade could lose livelihood if fish production drops due to water pollution caused by the power plants, he added.

The area chosen for the projects is fragile as land formation and erosion is common in that part of the coast. The entire development plan in the southern part of the country requires a comprehensive Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA), their research report said.

According to another research jointly carried out by Bangladesh Fisheries Research Institute and UK-based International Institute of Environment and Development (IIED), the Kalapara and Kuakata areas are crucial for hilsa breeding.

"Hilsas lay eggs in these areas and hilsa fries stay there until becoming jatka. Later on, they go into the deep sea," said their report of 2014.

The areas are considered "food stock areas" for the fish and are pollution-free, added the report.

The Centre for Environmental and Geographic Information Service (CEGIS), a public trust under the Ministry of Water Resources, in 2017

conducted a study on the environmental impact of the coal-based plant of North-West Power Generation Company.

According to the study, the plant would burn at least 48 lakh tonnes of coal a year and produce 1,000 tonnes of ash.

At least 4,200 square metres of water would be pumped out of the Ramnabad channel every day and after use, the hot water would be discharged back into the channel, states the report.

The environmental impact assessment report of CEGIS said vessel movement should be limited during hilsa (September-October) and pangas (June-July) spawning and shrimp collection (February-March). That's half the year.

It suggested checking ballast water and oil spilling by the vessels.

The three coal-fired projects have been taken up centring on the Payra power plant.

AHM Rashed, assistant director of the Department of Environment in Barishal, said, "The Payra power plant authority had submitted an Environmental Feasibility Study Report for environmental clearance and we approved it."

The kind of effect a power plant could have on the fish could best be said by the fisheries department, he added.

A Department of Fisheries official on condition of anonymity said the ministry was going to conduct a study from this month to find out the impact of the power plants on hilsa.

Director General Sultan Ahmed of the environment department said the "conditional" environment clearance certificates for the plants were issued following

the environmental impact assessment. He said movements of vessels carrying coal have to be controlled during the breeding seasons of the fish.

Zargis Talukder, assistant engineer for North-West Power Company, said, "We will not discharge hot water into the river. But we will purify it with cooling machines for re-use, including drinking purposes."

The ash that would be produced will be stored in a separate yard so that it could be sold to brick kilns for making better bricks, he added.

"Fly ash would be sold to cement factories; no fly ash would make its way into the water body as we will spray water on it continuously."

Meanwhile, the government is considering setting up a nuclear power plant next to another hilsa sanctuary in Barisal.

An official from Bangladesh Atomic Energy Commission said they considered four sites for the second nuclear project after Rooppur. Primarily, they chose 2,000 acres (8.1 square kilometres) on Char Megha, between Hizla and Mehendiganj on the Meghna, in Barishal.

This is the same area the government recently declared as the country's sixth hilsa sanctuary.

Fish meets around 60 percent of the country's annual protein demand. The annual production of hilsa, the geographical indicator (GI) for Bangladesh, has increased from 1.99 lakh tonnes to 4.96 lakh tonnes in 2016-17.

Hilsa accounts for 12 percent of the total fish production in Bangladesh and has a market value of about Tk 17,000 crore a year or one percent of the GDP.

## 'Paralysis' in House looms

FROM PAGE 16

"I have concluded that I cannot, in all conscience, support the government's position when it is clear this deal would be detrimental to our nation's interests," he wrote.

Meanwhile, anti-Brexit MPs have stepped up efforts to tie the government's hands in parliament to avoid the damaging prospect of Britain leaving the EU on March 29 with no deal.

May repeated that the only way to avoid "no deal" was to support her agreement, saying that "if no deal is as bad as you believe it is, it will be the height of

recklessness to do anything else".

But with growing calls to delay Brexit or call a second referendum, she said: "It's now my judgment that a more likely outcome is a paralysis in parliament that risks there being no Brexit."

**'LEGAL VALUE'**

May signed the divorce deal with other EU leaders in December after 18 months of tough negotiations, but it has faced huge opposition in Britain.

The most contentious element is the backstop, which would keep Britain tied to some EU trade rules, with even

closer alignment for the province of Northern Ireland, if and until another way was found to avoid border checks with Ireland.

Tusk and Juncker said the EU "does not wish to see the backstop enter into force" and noted that if it was necessary, it would only be temporary.

They promised to work quickly to find alternatives to keep open the border, including using technology, a solution backed by Brexit supporters.

The pair repeated that similar assurances to this nature made at an EU sum-

mit in December "have legal value".

May conceded however that the EU had rejected her request for a time limit to the backstop should it come into effect.

Northern Ireland's Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), which props up May's government in parliament, said the EU letter was "meaningless", adding: "Nothing has changed."

**DELAYING BREXIT?**

The opposition Labour party, which favours remaining in a permanent customs union with the EU, also dismissed the EU's assurances.

"The prime minister has once again failed to deliver," Labour's Brexit spokesman Keir Starmer said.

Labour have said they will seek a no-confidence vote in the government if MPs reject May's plan.

If the government loses, parties would have 14 days to find an alternative that had the support of a majority of MPs, or an election would be called.

Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn has conceded that, if the party won power, parliament would likely need to delay Brexit so it could renegotiate the withdrawal agreement.

Speculation is growing in Brussels and London that May could also seek an extension to the Article 50 exit process if she loses the vote today.

She has denied this repeatedly, but asked about this in Stoke, gave what some viewed as an equivocal answer, saying: "I don't believe we should be extending Article 50."

May repeated her opposition to a second referendum, which a growing minority of MPs support as the only way out of the parliamentary deadlock on Brexit.