

GOVT, UNDP PROJECT Victims of river erosion get land

THOMSON REUTERS FOUNDATION, Hatiya

Ferdousi Akter's family struggled to survive after a crumbling riverbank forced them to abandon their home and move to a new part of the island where they live, off the Bangladesh coast.

Her husband worked as a day laborer on fishing boats but earned too little to cover their expenses.

Just over a year ago, however, the five-member Akter family was one of 45 households offered land on Hatiya Island under a decade-long free lease by the Bangladesh Forest Department.

"I got a pond and a piece of land for 10 years," said Akter. "Now I am farming fish in the pond and cultivating vegetables on my land - and getting benefits."

She has already sold fish for 10,000 taka, and hopes to increase her earnings to 100,000 taka in the next few months.

Riverbank erosion made worse by heavy monsoon rains upstream had displaced the family repeatedly from their home on Hatiya, a 371-sq km (143-sq mile) island located in an estuary where the Meghna River flows into the northern Bay of Bengal.

A few years ago, the Akters moved to a coastal embankment in another part of the island, where they built a makeshift house.

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RMG workers

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made accused in a case and would be arrested.

So far, eight separate cases have been filed with Ashulia and Savar police stations against 215 named and more than 1,000 unnamed garment workers for their alleged involvement in vandalism and looting, police officers said.

Of the cases, six were filed with Ashulia Police Station and two with Savar Police Station, law enforcers said.

"We have nabbed at least 10 workers for their alleged involvement in vandalising vehicles and factories," Rezaul Haque, officer-in-charge of Ashulia Police Station, told The Daily Star yesterday.

The week-long protest left one garment worker dead while 50 vehicles and some factories were vandalised.

Meanwhile, State Minister for the labour ministry Monnojan Sufian yesterday at a core committee meeting on crisis management for the garment sector in her Dhaka office said the ministry would launch a hotline soon where one could lodge any complaints relating to garment factories round the clock.

At the meeting, factory owners assured that no "innocent" workers would be harassed.

Nazma Akter, president of Sammilito Garment Sramik Federation, said she hoped the normalcy which had been restored would continue. "Hope the normalcy will continue as the government revised the wage structures as per the workers' demand," Akter said after emerging from the meeting.

"Many workers have already gone back to work. There will be no problem if they go back to work; we talked to the factory owners," said Superintendent of Police (SP) in Dhaka Sha Mizan Shafiqur Rahman while talking to journalists at a press briefing in Jamgora of Dhaka around 10:30am.

Replying to reporters' query, the SP also said some of those who had "instigated the unrest" had been identified and detained. Police would take action against them, he added.

Additional police forces were seen outside most of the factories in Savar and Ashulia areas in order to avoid any untoward situation. Security was also beefed up inside the factories.

Police were seen using loudspeakers to urge workers to go back to work. "If you do not join work, you will not be paid," a police official was heard saying.

Sana Shamir Rahman, superintendent of Dhaka Industrial Police, told The Daily Star yesterday that the factories had opened and workers had returned to work peacefully.

At least three factories were shut down for an indefinite period, but those would also reopen as normalcy has been restored, said Siddiquur Rahman, president of Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA).

"It is difficult to specify the amount of loss due to the unrest as many factories were affected and some of them were vandalised severely. I can only say the amount is huge," said the BGMEA president.

The biggest loss to the sector has been of its image as the sector was working quickly for remediation following recommendations by the Accord and Alliance.

Many factory owners will lose work orders and may also have to bear costs of expensive air shipment of goods, he said. In case of air shipments, the factory owners could not make any profit, he added.



Mohammad Raihan, founder and CEO of Ecospear, at his bag factory in Ashulia of Savar. Made of roots of cassava starch, the bio-degradable packaging bags look exactly like polythene bags but do not harm the environment. The photo was taken recently.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

A bag full of potential

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"Our bags are totally non-toxic and don't cause the environment any harm. No matter how long they take or how irresponsibly they are disposed of, one thing is absolutely certain: they will biodegrade," said Raihan, 36.

Depending on their size and thickness, the bags will cost between Tk 5 and 25 each and can be used for about a month, he added.

The cost will drastically fall if the government slashed the import duty on cassava starch, which is 31 percent now.

Currently, production is going on in full swing in Ecospear's first plant at Halishahar in Chattogram. Its second plant, opened recently in Ashulia in Dhaka, is expected to start production soon.

Together, the two units can make some 34 lakh bags per month.

"Already, we have received orders for 62 lakh bags from home and abroad," said Raihan, adding that most orders come from local fashion houses.

Raihan, who graduated from the North South University, launched the

project in 2017, a year after he returned from the UAE where he worked in the HR department of a telecom company for about six years.

His current market includes the UK and France. Buyers from Sweden and Spain have also shown interest to buy the bags in bulk.

The bags come in two varieties: 30-micron, which takes less than 90 days to completely degrade after being discarded, and 55-micron, which is a little heavier and takes 147 days to degrade, Raihan said.

Ecospear also makes disposable cups and straws as well as food containers and surgical aprons. The cups and straws are made from paper and the coating is made from corn starch instead of polyethylene or wax, which are injurious to health.

The food containers are made of sugarcane instead of the non-biodegradable Styrofoam, another hazardous element for health.

In comparison, all Ecospear products use food-grade colour and have passed the biodegradability test of the Bangladesh Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (BCSIR) in July last

year and the stringent oral toxicity tests from Netherlands, said Raihan.

The bags also have an Organic Waste Systems (OWS) certification from Belgium.

Quazi Sarwar Imtiaz Hashmi, additional director general of the Department of Environment, said, "The quality of the bags is good and natural. We have already asked the BSTI to promote the bags in the local market. We have also talked with chain shops about the use of these bags."

Environmentalists say these bags can be a perfect alternative for polythene bags, which was banned in Bangladesh in 2002 but is still widely used.

Every day, about 2 crore polybags are used in Dhaka city alone, according to Poribesh Bachao Andolon (POBA).

Despite various efforts by the government to encourage use of organic, biodegradable packaging such as jute bags, the use of polythene bags keeps on rising.

Superstores and kitchen-market grocers do not like jute bags because they are expensive. They are way

thicker and heavier than artificial packaging and are hard to store.

Most polythene packaging, which are of course made entirely of artificial materials, are cheap and light.

But in Bangladesh, most consumers throw them away after use. The polythene bags eventually end up in the garbage disposal grounds, polluting the earth and rivers.

The nonbiodegradable bags could take a few hundred years to degrade, according to experts. They remain in nature like a hostile alien, clog sewers, prevent air from entering into and minerals to pass through soil and water.

Asked about the initiative, prominent environmentalist Shahriar Hossain said, "After they are degraded, the materials will turn into micro plastic. The main concern is what happens to those micro plastics."

This is why more tests are needed to be done before marketing them, said Shahriar, also secretary general of Environment and Social Development Organisation, which led the campaign to ban polythene in Bangladesh.

maximum cases was unable to play a proper role during the election process. It did not take effective steps for ensuring all parties' participation in the election.

No role was played to create equal scope for electioneering for all parties. The EC also failed to create an example by taking steps against electoral code violation by ruling party men.

"While in one hand the EC has failed to create a level playing field for all parties and candidates, on the other hand difference of opinions of commissioners regarding it became public," the report said.

The EC also made "transparency of election" questionable by controlling the flow of information, slowing down internet speed and putting restriction on the election observers, it said.

The TIB recommended the authorities concerned appoint honest, skilled, neutral and courageous persons as election commissioners and enact law fixing process and qualification for the appointment.

It also said the Election Commission, administration, law enforcing agencies and all others will have to be natural and free from influence of any party for the sake of free, fair and acceptable election under a partisan government.

METHODOLOGY
The study was conducted to review how far the election was fair, neutral and legal and how the EC, political parties and candidates followed electoral laws and code of conduct. It also analysed the claims of the candidates about spending and reviewed the role of stakeholders of election.

The study followed a qualitative method including content analysis, interviews of information providers and observations. Information providers are candidates, party activists, law enforcers, returning officers and other election officials, including Electoral Tribunal officials, local journalists and voters.

The study also used secondary sources of information like laws and regulation, published and unpublished research reports as well as newspaper reports.

218 BNP men sent to jail over Jubo League leader murder

OUR CORRESPONDENT, NOAKHALI

A Noakhali court yesterday sent 218 leaders and activists of the BNP and its associate bodies to jail after rejecting their bail petitions in a case filed over the murder of Jubo League leader Mohammad Hanif.

Senior Judicial Magistrate Soheb Uddin Khan passed the order after all the 222 accused in the case appeared before the Cognisance Court-1 in the district and appealed for bail.

The remaining four got bail, he said.

Noakhali BNP General Secretary Abdul Rahman said the accused who were not given bail included the party's Organising Secretary Shahidul Islam Kiron, Subarnachar BNP General Secretary Enayetullah Babul, district Sweekhaseb Dal General Secretary Mizanur Rahman, Noakhali municipality former councilor Delwar Hossain, district Chhata Dal General Secretary Abdullah Al Noman and Noakhali town BNP General Secretary Omar Faruk Topy.

Sudharam Model Thana OC Anwar Hossain said Hanif was shot dead during a BNP procession on December 11 last year.

Ejbalia Union Jubo League Joint Convenor Ariful Islam Suman filed a case against 361 leaders and activists of the BNP and the Jamaat over the incident.

NILPHAMARI BORDER Bangladeshi shot dead by BSF

UNB, NILPHAMARI

A Bangladeshi was shot dead by members of Indian Border Security Force (BSF) along the Bhujaripara border in Dimla upazila early yesterday.

The deceased was identified as Khalilur Rahman, 23, son of Moksed Ali of Paschim Chatnai village in the upazila.

Subedar Mobarak Ali, company commander of Dimla camp of BGB battalion-51, said the BSF members opened fire on Khalilur when he went to the no-man's land, leaving him dead.

A letter was sent to the BSF seeking return of the body, he said.

Will work

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passed in parliament in September last year.

After the passage of the act, editors of the country's leading newspapers formed a human chain in front of the Jatiya Press Club in the capital to press for amending nine sections of the much-debated act to protect independent journalism and freedom of expression.

Yesterday, the information minister said he would look into whether the newspaper owners implement the wage board for journalists at their offices.

"We will look into whether anyone [newspaper owner] does not implement the wage board even after announcing that it would be implemented."

Mahmud said television journalists should also be brought under a wage board. The information ministry would start working in this regard immediately, he added.

About the expansion of the online media, the minister said it would not be right to stop the expansion as it has become a global trend now. "But we will work so that those media houses can be run under proper rules and regulations.

"Regulations for online media are being formulated...they will have to get registered.... The operations of the online media which have sprouted up will be stopped following the implementation of the regulations."

Speaking at the programme, Moslem Uddin Ahmed, president of Chattogram (south) district AL, said the party leaders and activists were ready to obey the instructions of cabinet members, but they would not accept if a minister's relatives and people surrounding him threw their weight behind any matters.

He urged the minister to remain aware of it.

Chattogram Mayor AJM Nasir Uddin, also the general secretary of Chattogram city AL, said the party would accord a reception to all the cabinet members from greater Chattogram in the city's Laldighi Maidan on January 29.

Salman

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Joy was appointed under the same provision of the same law, it said. He would carry out his duties on PM's instructions and suggestions, it added.

With the two, the PM now has seven advisers.

Polis anomalies in 47 of 50 seats

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The TIB boss also said not all the candidates were allowed to conduct electioneering freely while voters faced obstacles to cast their votes. So this election was partially participatory, he added.

Contacted, Election Commissioner Rafiqul Islam trashed the TIB study and called it "pre-determined" and "imaginary".

TIB did not provide the names of 50 constituencies.

The report says the "50 seats covered under the survey are in 45 districts of nine divisions. Of those, the highest -- 11 seats -- are in Dhaka division, followed by Chattogram with nine. The lowest -- four seats each -- are in Sylhet and Barishal."

MAJOR IRREGULARITIES

Presenting the report, TIB Senior Programme Manager (research and policy) Shahjada M Akram said irregularities were witnessed in at least one or more voting centres of 47 out of 50 constituencies.

Ballot papers stamping took place the night before the elections in 33 constituencies, stamping ballots openly after occupying booths in 30 seats on the election day and non-availability of ballot papers in 22 constituencies.

The TIB study found ballot boxes filled-up prior to the beginning of polling in 20 constituencies; voters forced to cast vote for a particular symbol in 26 constituencies, people barred from going to centres in 26 seats, voters driven away from polling centres in 21 seats and beating up supporters of opponents in 11 constituencies.

The survey found casting of fake votes in 41 seats, silence of the administration and law enforcing agencies in 42 seats and obstructing and driving out polling agents in 29 seats.

In each of the 50 constituencies, not all the polling centres necessarily saw the anomalies. Irregularities took place in one or more centres of a seat, the watchdog said.

The study found 41 AL candidates spent Tk 1.34 crore each on average, followed by its alliance partner Jatiya Party as eight of its candidates spent Tk 63 lakh each.

When asked who were behind or carried out the irregularities, Iftekharuzzaman and Shahjada told the press that they "cannot" say this.

EXPENSES 3 TIMES HIGHER

Since the election schedule announcement till the voting, the TIB study found, election-related expenditure of a candidate was Tk 77,65,085 in those seats, three times the amount fixed by the Election Commission.

A candidate can spend maximum Tk 25 lakh in electioneering, according

PICTURE OF IRREGULARITIES (IN ONE AND MORE CENTRES)	SEATS