

Fani ruins farmers days before harvest

Weak dyke gives away flooding farmland of 3,000 families

SOHRAB HOSSAIN, Patuakhali

It was only a few days to go until farmer Ruhul Amin's crops would be ready for harvest, but during Cyclone Fani, everything got ruined.

The same fate befell many other farmers living in five villages of Mirzaganj upazila in Patuakhali as water came rushing into their fields breaching a weak part of a 20km earthen embankment separating the villages from the Payra river.

"I planted mung beans on an acre. I hoped the produce would be around 10 maunds [or 370kg]," said 40-year-old Ruhul Amin of Mehendiabad village.

The storm surges flooded their fields making its way via the Payra river.

"I also grew various Rabi crops including green chilis, sweet potatoes, and ground nuts, and was planning to harvest them within a few days. Now, see, all are under water," he told this correspondent. "How would I run my family of five for the rest of the year?"

Rabi is one of the two agricultural seasons in the country. It usually lasts from November to March.

His neighbour Golam Mostafa, 50, planted Rabi crops on one and a half acres. The same happened to him.

Farmer Anis Khalifa's crops on two acres also went under water.

Only a handful of some 3,000 families of five villages -- Mehendiabad, Ranipur, Golkhali, Hazikhali, and Charkhali -- remain unaffected.

This correspondent visited the villages yesterday and found almost all farmland and houses under water.

During Sidr, a devastating cyclone

in 2007, the dyke had collapsed and flooded these villages the same way. Later, the Water Development Board (WDB) repaired the embankment, but 1km of it was under threat of erosion.

As Fani charged ahead, this 1km could not hold the pressure of the tidal surges and eventually collapsed.

Shahidul Islam, local union parishad member of ward-9 (Mehendiabad), said the 1km stretch of the dyke from Hazikhali sluice gate to Charkhali was vulnerable due to lack of repairs.

Around 90 percent of the villagers are farmers, he said. "Now they are in despair."

Khalilur Rahman, UP member of ward-4 (Ranipur), said locals had been calling for repairs of the dyke for a long time. "We also raised the issue at the union parishad meeting several times but the WDB didn't take any step to fix it."

Abdul Aziz Hawlader, UP chairman for Dewlisubidkhali, also discussed the issue at the meeting. "I had personally requested the WDB officials to repair the dyke."

In 2017, they started the work and left it incomplete, he claimed.

Abu Bakar Siddiq, Mirzaganj upazila chairman, said, "We will request the WDB authorities to repair the dyke on an emergency basis."

Contacted, Hasanuzzaman, executive engineer of WDB, Patuakhali, said, "When we started the repair, some locals refused to give their land for the dyke. So, we had to stop."

"They agreed to give land this year. We'll start the reconstruction soon."



Standing crops that would have been ready for harvest soon have fallen at Duari of Rajshahi's Paba upazila due to strong winds and excessive rain caused by cyclone Fani. Gale-force winds and rain pound Patenga Beach area, inset, of Chattogram yesterday afternoon.

PHOTO: ANWAR ALI/ RAJIB RATHAN

A sigh of relief

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inundated as storm surges breached earthen dykes and overflowed them, according to the National Disaster Response Coordination Centre (NDRCC).

A total of 32.28km of earthen dykes were damaged.

Around 13,000 houses were fully or partially damaged due to cyclonic storm in the coastal districts, including Bhola, Chandpur, Bagerhat, Khulna, Satkhira, Patuakhali and Barguna, according to the NDRCC.

Crops on 330 acres were totally

damaged while those on 52,728 acres were partially affected, it said.

"We have collected the information instantly by phone. The figures may rise slightly," GM Abdul Quader, joint secretary of relief and disaster management ministry, told The Daily Star yesterday.

He said 3,800 tonnes of rice, 41,000 packets of dry food and Tk 1.97 crore were distributed among the affected people.

Around 16 lakh people took shelter in 4,071 cyclone shelters in 19 coastal districts on Friday and

early yesterday. By yesterday noon, however, they started going back to their homes as the weather improved.

The danger signals at all river ports were lowered.

At least 13 flights were cancelled and several others delayed yesterday due to bad weather.

And as in the previous two days, water transport remained suspended. The service may resume today if the weather improves, said Alamgir Kabir, joint director of Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority.

On night of fright

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were roaming around the union parishad building where many women and children took shelter.

"It is very disappointing that there is no cyclone shelter in the locality, despite the people living here being the most vulnerable to various natural disasters," he said.

Thousands of cattle were washed away during the cyclone as there is no embankment to protect the locality from storm surges, locals said.

Around 20 shops, 60 houses, 250 large trees and 40 fish ponds were damaged badly, said Abdus Salam, chairman of Dhal Char union, adding that the whole locality was inundated following the cyclone.

"I have been demanding a cyclone shelter and a killa (highland) in every meeting of Upazila Unnayan Somonny (Upazila Development Coordination), but the authorities concerned are yet to take any action." Salam told The Daily Star.

Masud Alam Siddique, deputy commissioner of Bhola, said, "I will try my best to establish a cyclone shelter and Killa in Dhal Char. I already have contacted the higher authorities."

It is unexpected that people have to take shelter in the forest, he added.

4 dead in bus-truck collision in Rajbari

UNB, Rajbari

Four people were killed and 15 others injured in a collision between a bus and a truck here yesterday morning.

One of the deceased was identified as Asma Khatun Doli of Satkhira. The identities of the three others could not be confirmed.

Witnesses said the Dhaka-bound Green Bangla Paribahan bus collided with the truck while crossing Aladipur Jamai Pagoler Mazar area.

Rajbari Sadar OC Swapon Kumar Mazumder said police visited the spot and took the injured to Rajbari Sadar Hospital and Faridpur Medical College Hospital.

The drivers of the two vehicles went into hiding, he added.

German police shut down major 'darknet' illegal trading site

AFP, Berlin

German police have shut down one of the world's largest illegal online markets in the so-called darkweb and arrested the three men allegedly running it, prosecutors said Friday.

The "Wall Street Market" (WSM) site enabled trade in cocaine, heroin, cannabis and amphetamines as well as stolen data, fake documents and malicious software.

The encrypted platform had more than one million customer accounts, over 5,000 registered sellers and more than 60,000 sales offers, according to Frankfurt prosecutors and affidavits filed by US prosecutors in federal court in Los Angeles.

"WSM operated like a conventional e-commerce website, such as eBay and Amazon. However, its sole existence was geared to the trafficking of contraband," US prosecutors said.

Puzzle of 5 floors

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committee, wishing anonymity.

Architect Asma Hafiz, who was claimed by Rupayan Housing Estate Ltd to have approved the 23-storey building plan, has denied signing it in a testimony to the probe body.

Before the committee, Abdul Muqtadir and Khan Mahmud Amanat, two civil engineering professors at Buet, also dismissed any involvement in the tower's structural and foundation designs, sources said.

Rupayan had claimed that the FR Tower's design validation was done by the professors.

After the 2015 Nepal earthquake, the FR Tower appeared tilted and an authorised officer of Rajuk officially asked the building owners to carry out a detailed engineering assessment, which was not done, said the sources.

Another member of the probe committee on condition of anonymity said, "We immediately asked for files of six high-rise buildings on both sides of the FR Tower. Rajuk provided documents, except for one 26-storey building. All five buildings have multiple floors built beyond approved plan."

Major AKM Shakil Newaz, operations director of Fire Service and Civil Defence, said none of the high-rise commercial buildings on Kemal Ataturk Avenue in Banani had fire safety licence from the fire department.

Rajuk considers buildings 33 metres tall or taller as highrises whereas the fire department deems buildings above six-storeys as highrises.

Following one of the country's deadliest fire tragedies at a commercial high-rise on March 28, the public works ministry formed the seven-member probe committee, led by Additional Secretary Md Yakub Ali Patwary, to look into how the FR Tower was approved.

The committee is going to submit its findings this week.

Three days after the FR Tower blaze, Rajuk Chairman Md Abdur Rahman told this correspondent that Rajdhani Unnayan Karttripakkha (Rajuk) approved an 18-storey building plan on the plot where the FR Tower stands.

About the approval for 23-storey plan, he had then said, "We have no such records."

After the parliamentary body hearing, the Rajuk chairman told this paper, "Even with the revised height limit of 188 metres effective for the last one year, a building on this avenue may be 18-storeys tall at best, but there are buildings 23- to 28-storey high."

Asked how were those approved, he said, "I don't know."

Interestingly, the parliamentary standing committee on the housing and public works ministry during the hearing had asked the Rajuk chairman what the height limit was for a building on Kemal Ataturk Avenue, said a top official who was present at the hearing.

The Rajuk chairman said it was 155 feet, a 14-storey building at best, tall structure could be approved with space for machines.

When the parliamentary body asked how they approved an 18-storey building there, the official quoted the Rajuk chairman as saying, "I don't know how it was approved."

Abdur Rahman was silent when asked if any legal actions had been taken against the FR Tower builder for having the additional five floors.

He was also asked if Rajuk had taken action against any other commercial buildings in the neighbourhood for constructing beyond the permissible limit.

The Rajuk chairman said they surveyed and identified, following the FR Tower fire, other buildings that were taller than permissible and that they "would act according to the government's instructions."

Documents provided by Rupayan show that Rajuk approved a 23-storey FR Tower on February 23, 2005, under the memo R3C/1524/04/271.

According to those claimed memos, Rajuk's then authorised officer Syed Nazmul Huda signed off on the approval citing the decision of Building Construction committee's 44th meeting on February 15, 2005.

More than one probe committee members requesting anonymity said they contacted Syed Nazmul Huda, who is very ill. Huda told them that if he was given the original files, he would be able to testify if he had signed off on the approval.

The officials said the government has to go deeper with the help of criminal investigation experts if it intends to unearth whether Rajuk actually approved the 23-storey plan.

They believe the FR Tower case could be a classic example of penetrating a corrupt cartel in Rajuk that has long been accused of forging signatures of architects and authorised officers to tamper with approved building plans, and destroying original files.

Patwary Jahirullah, adviser to Rupayan Group, said, "We claimed authenticity of the 23-storey plan as per whatever documents we found. The mandate for checking the authenticity of these documents now rests on the probe committee."

According to some unverified documents, landowner SMHI Faruque in January and May 2009 wrote to the Rajuk chairman that Rupayan built four illegal floors beyond approved plan citing Rajuk memo Estate/Mohakhali/3330 dated September 22, 2007.

Public Works Minister SM Rezaul Karim at a press conference at Dhaka Reporters' Unity on April 6 said it was the unbridled greed of the building owners, developers and Rajuk officials that led to FR Tower fire tragedy.

It is shocking that even though Rajuk knew way back in 2007 that the building had illegal floors and was in deviations of the approved plan, they turned a blind eye and remained silent, he said.

All in scary conditions

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to launch an inspection on the safety status of the city's high rises.

At this, 24 teams from Rajuk examined the buildings' construction plans and fire safety measures in a total of 1,528sqm areas in the first two weeks of last month, said Abdur.

Rajuk considers a 10-storey building or higher to be a high rise. Abdur said, "I can only say that the findings [of the inspections] are frightening ... I, myself, was present during a dozen inspections."

He declined to elaborate, but said the details would be made public later by the public works minister at a press conference, with the prime

minister's consent.

Wishing anonymity, several authorised Rajuk officers echoed Abdur's view on the high-rise buildings.

They said many owners could not produce approved building plans during the inspection.

While handing out the instruction, the minister had said that if necessary, high-rises found to have been built in violation of approved plan, building code and fire safety provisions would be sealed off.

The head of an agency under the ministry, wishing not to be named, however, told The Daily Star that

shutting down such buildings would be difficult as many of the owners are powerful people having political clout and money.

"Be it commercial or residential blocs, owners of many highrises are wealthy businessmen who exercise influence on the government," he said.

Asked about the solutions, he suggested that the government should urgently retrofit high-rise buildings to ensure that no life perishes during a fire or an earthquake.

Besides, the government should impose hefty tax on the floors built beyond the approval, he added.

Legal framework inadequate

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guideline on sexual harassment was not effectively implemented in most places.

A study done by ActionAid in May 2018 found that 87 percent of university students and 64.5 percent professionals were not familiar with the HC directives.

Kashfia Feroz, manager of Women Rights and Gender Equity at ActionAid Bangladesh, said that the number of women joining the workforce is gradually growing. Between 1996-2017, the national rate of female labour force participation increased from 15.8 to 36.3 percent. But they still face sexual harassment at work as well as during their commute to and from work.

Quoting a December 2018 study, she said that 85 percent of garment workers face verbal abuse, 71 percent face mental torture, 21 percent face physical torture and 13 percent face sexual abuse.

"Gender-based violence at the workplace diminishes women's dignity, compromises their physical and mental wellbeing, and brings down productivity and profitability," she added.

Labour leader and Executive Director of Awaj Foundation Nazma Akhter said it was the employers' responsibility to ensure a safe and secured workplace for workers, especially women. "The government should enact laws and ensure proper implementation," she added.

BGMEA Director A Momen said, "We also want the elimination of harassment at the workplace."

Additional Secretary of the labour and employment ministry Mollah Jalal Uddin said that gender-based violence at workplace was not acceptable. "The government has taken a zero-tolerance policy against gender-based violence."

"If needed, we will modify the existing laws and enact new ones to

curb harassment," he added.

Nijera Kori Coordinator Khushi Kabir said, "We need laws and policies, but more importantly we need a change in the attitude towards women."

Bangladesh Nari Progati Sangha Executive Director Rokeya Kabir urged trade union leaders to take measures against sexual harassment at the workplace.

Deputy High Commissioner of Australia, Penny Morton, said that the underlining cause of gender-based violence was gender inequality. "Legislation, policy, regulation and implementation are keys to address gender-based violence," she added.

Chief Technical Advisor of ILO's Bangladesh Skills for Employment and Productivity project Kishore Kumar Singh and Chief Executive Officer of Business Initiative Leading Bangladesh Ferdous Ara Begum, among others, spoke at the programme.

Thai King crowned as Rama X

AFP, Bangkok

To the boom of cannons, pipes and chants, King Maha Vajiralongkorn was crowned Saturday in a ceremony governed by centuries-old rituals, vowing a righteous reign and calling for "national security" and "happiness" in a remarkable display of royal power.

Starting at the auspicious time of 10:09am, the public was granted a rare window into the cloistered halls of Thai royalty as the three-day coronation began.

King Vajiralongkorn is the tenth monarch of the Chakri dynasty, which has reigned over the kingdom since 1782.

He ascended the throne over two years ago following the death of his beloved father.

Yesterday's sombre ceremony opened with the white-



Maha Vajiralongkorn

gowned king receiving sacred water and dabbing it gently across his face at a shrine inside the Grand Palace complex.

A cannon salute marked the moment as pipes played and Buddhist monks chanted.

Several grey-haired Hindu Brahmins were also in attendance at a ceremony that symbolises Rama X's transformation from human to divine figure.

He later took his seat under the umbrella of state and was handed the Great Crown of Victory, a 7.3-kilogram (16-pound) tiered gold

headpiece topped by a diamond from India. Draped in bejewelled royal regalia summoning images of another era, in contrast with consumer-mad Bangkok outside palace walls, Vajiralongkorn vowed to reign "with righteousness" for the benefit of Thais.