



A scene of mushroom cloud that formed after a massive explosion at Magurchhara gas field on June 14, 1997. PHOTO: COLLECTED

MAGURCHHARA GAS BLOWOUT

22 years pass by without proper compensation

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Moulvibazar

Today marks the 22nd anniversary of a devastating gas well explosion at Magurchhara gas field in Moulvibazar's Kamalganj upazila.

On June 14 of 1997, a massive explosion at the gas field obliterated natural forests and property worth crores of taka during drilling of a gas well by US energy company Occidental.

After more than two decades of the incident, compensation for the affected however is yet to be realised.

During a recent visit to Magurchhara area the affected people expressed their dissatisfaction to this correspondent over the failure of national political leaders as well as the government in realising appropriate compensation after such a long time.

According to forest department, Lawachhara Reserve Forest, adjacent to the gas well, was greatly damaged in the explosion.

A sejun timber garden, established in years between 1944 and 1950; a bamboo garden, established between 1993 and 1995; and a strip of plantation, established in 1994; also sustained extensive damage due fire caused by the blowout.

Trees on about 96 acres in Lawachhara forest were completely burned. Besides, a variety of organisms and animals, for which the forest is a safe habitat, were affected extensively.

Abul Hasan, joint convener of Lawachhara Jib Boichitro Rokkha Andolon, said the loss is irreparable. After losing their habitat to the fire, wild animals have been roaming around in human habitats in search of food.

Quoting different investigation committees formed by the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Ministry of Power, Energy and Mineral Resources, he said the damage done to the forest resources amounted to Tk 9,858 crore and such damage to the ecology will be impossible to recover in the next 50 years.

Saju Marchiang, publication secretary of Khasi Social Council, told this correspondent that the Khasi people received only 10 percent compensation from Chevron.

Abu Musa Shamsul Muhith Chowdhury, divisional forest officer of Wildlife Management and Nature Conservation Division in Sylhet, said he was not aware of the assessed loss in Lawachhara Reserve Forest due to the gas well blowout and the status of realisation of compensation from Occidental or Chevron.

New concern for consumers

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annual turnovers above Tk 50 lakh will have to pay turnover tax of 4 percent from the next fiscal year.

Snehasish described the move as a "big relief".

However, it will be a challenge for the National Board of Revenue to determine firms with turnover of Tk 50 lakh each as their owners will try to keep the turnover below the threshold to evade VAT, he said.

Under the 1991 VAT law, VAT was imposed on 84 products, including spices, powdered milk, paper, newspaper, exercise books and rod. And VAT on those items were determined on the basis of tariff value of the items to reduce pressure on consumers.

From the next fiscal year, most of these items will come under the VAT rate of 5 percent. This could result in an increase in prices of a number of those items.

Besides, edible oil such as soybean was exempted from VAT since 2015-16.

But the government seeks to impose VAT on edible oil from the next fiscal year.

Biswajit Saha, director of legal and regulatory affairs

at the City Group, a major commodity importer and processor, said prices of edible oil would rise due to withdrawal of exemption.

Manwar Hossain, chairman of Bangladesh Steel Manufacturers' Association, said prices of rod would go up by Tk 1,100-Tk 2,500 per tonne as VAT on the key construction material has been increased.

"It will affect consumers and the sector. Costs of apartments and buildings will rise," he said.

The NBR said the new VAT system will be implemented through automation, and it will be mandatory for shop owners and business entities to keep records of VAT invoice through Electronic Fiscal Device (EFD) and Sales Data Controller (SDC).

About the implementation of the new VAT law, Choudhury Atiur Rasul, director of accounts at Pran-RFL Group, said, "It appears that there is no major change. But there is no good news for consumers as well."

AF Nesaruddin, president of the Institute of Chartered Accountants of Bangladesh (ICAB), said, "Introduction

of multilevel rates of VAT is in fact a continuation of the existing system.

"Since VAT automation is key to this new VAT act, steps should be taken immediately for its smooth implementation."

A number of NBR officials, however, said progress in automating the VAT system has been sluggish.

At present, businesses can register online for Business Identification Number and the revenue authority plans to start online filing of VAT return from July 1.

Nesaruddin said the authorities should assess the impact of not giving VAT credit to businesses that pay VAT of less than 15 percent.

Talking to this correspondent, a senior NBR official admitted that prices of some products and services may increase due to revision of VAT rates.

"But we have tried as much as possible so that prices do not rise for revision of the VAT rates. At the same time, we also had to find ways to increase revenue collection," the official said, seeking anonymity.

VAT measures have been drawn up, keeping in mind that businesses do not oppose implementation of the new VAT law as they did in the past, the official pointed out.

On the prescription of the International Monetary Fund, the government had framed the VAT law with a uniform 15-percent rate to increase revenue collection by automating the VAT system.

But opposition from businesses against a uniform VAT rate forced the government to delay implementation of the VAT law thrice.

"We just wanted to start implementing the law," said the NBR official.

The government has assigned the NBR to collect a total of Tk 325,660 crore in the next fiscal year. Of the amount, it will have to collect Tk 123,067 crore in VAT, which is 17 percent higher than the revised target.

The official expects that the NBR would be able to collect a substantial amount of revenue from increased VAT rates and supplementary duties on cigarettes, mobile phone usages and products such as edible oil.

Mobile phone calls may get costlier

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VAT is 7.5 percent.

For calls and messages, a subscriber would be able to use about Tk 78.27 for every Tk 100 refill under the new tax structure. The rest would go to the government exchequer.

Taxes on new SIM and SIM replacement are also increased to Tk 200 from Tk 100.

However, the cost of broadband internet would remain unchanged.

The government has been increasing the taxes on cellular services for the last few years.

Experts and industry

insiders have been saying that the move doesn't reflect the government's commitment to digitalisation.

TIM Nurul Kabir, independent telecommunication expert, said the cellular phone services were becoming too expensive for the common people.

"We urge the government to sit with the investors and try to understand the situation. The services are going to be unaffordable," said the former secretary general of Association of Mobile Telecom Operators of Bangladesh.

Taimur Rahman, chief corporate and regulatory affairs officer at the Banglalink, said, "In order to accelerate the digital movement in the country, it is necessary to make sure that people are provided with cost-effective digital services."

The finance minister also proposed raising the minimum tax for mobile carriers to 2 percent of their turnover from 0.75 percent.

Taimur said such a move would discourage shareholders of the companies, which are not profitable, from making further investments.

"We strongly urge the government to reconsider this and ensure the fulfilment of the dream of a true digital Bangladesh."

In 2015-16, the government introduced 3 percent supplementary duty on mobile services.

The next year, 1 percent surcharge and 5 percent supplementary duty were introduced.

In 2017-18, the government revised the taxes on mobile device import and increased it to 10 percent. It was increased again by 5 percent in the outgoing fiscal year.

Smoking gets Costlier

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Of the retail price of the top three segments, the government will get 65 percent supplementary duty (SD), 15 percent VAT and 1 percent surcharge.

Price of 10 sticks of low segment cigarettes was increased from Tk 35 to Tk 37, of which 55 percent would be SD.

Compared to expensive ones, prices of cheaper cigarettes will not change

much.

For bidi, the price of 25 non-filter sticks is proposed at Tk 14 with 35 percent in SD and 20 filtered ones at Tk 17 with 40 percent in SD.

To curb the consumption of zarda and gul, the finance minister proposed setting the prices of 10gm of zarda at Tk 30 and gul at Tk 15, with 50 percent in SD.

Anti-tobacco campaigners said the tobacco companies would

benefit as tax rates remained unchanged.

Prices of a stick of low-segment cigarette have been increased by 20 paise or 5.7 percent. However, the per capita income increased by 11.32 in the last one year, anti-tobacco campaigner Progga said in a statement.

An industry insider, seeking anonymity, said the government move would increase tax evasion by some companies.

AL hails budget

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would help the country continue its ongoing development.

The Awami League's Dhaka city unit and its like-minded organisations brought out a procession hailing the budget proposals in front of the party headquarters on Bangabandhu Avenue in the capital.

On the contrary, BNP said the proposed budget would not meet the expectations of the mass people.

Amir Khasru Mahmud Chowdhury, standing committee member of BNP, said the government kept

Tk 145,380 crore deficit in the proposed budget which would be "forcefully taken out of people's pockets".

"We, the people, will suffer to meet the budget deficit. The government will fill up the deficiency by hiking gas or electricity price," Khasru said while talking to journalists at his Banani office.

Terming the budget "big", the BNP leader, also a former commerce minister, said it would affect the everyday life of people adversely.

"The government has confined the country's entire economy," he said.

Meanwhile, the CPB has rejected the budget proposal, terming it "pro-imperialist" and "anti-people".

In a statement signed by CPB President Mujahidul Islam Selim and General Secretary Md Shah Alam, the party said the scope of whitening black money would strengthen the "ongoing looting in the economic sector of Bangladesh".

The rich will be richer and the poor will be poorer because of the budget. It will widen disparity and class differences, the statement added.

Most shoddy food items

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Protection to immediately remove the 52 substandard food items from the market and to submit a report to the court on May 23 after complying with its order.

During a hearing on the petition on May 23, the HC bench of Justice Sheikh Hassan Arif and Justice Razik-Al-Jalil came down heavily on the BFSA for not abiding by its May 12 order to get 52 substandard food items off the shelves.

The court also rebuked the BFSA chairman, summoned him, and issued a contempt of court rule against him for not complying with its order.

It asked the chairman to appear before it on June 16 to explain as to why his office had not abided by its May 12 order. The chairman cannot go unpunished, the bench said.

Meanwhile, the BSTI handed over a report to its lawyer Sarkar MR Hassan

on June 10, saying that samples of most of the 52 food items, which were previously found to be substandard, passed a retest by the quality regulator.

The lawyer yesterday told this correspondent that he would submit the BSTI's latest report to the HC on June 16.

In May, a BSTI report, signed by engineer SM Ishaq Ali, director (CM), had said samples of the 52 products failed BSTI tests.

Gloom of growers not going away

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However, Prof Atiur Rahman, former governor of Bangladesh Bank, said although the initiative was good, small farmers, who are already struggling to make ends meet, would not be able to buy the agricultural tools.

The proposed budget added that the government will continue providing all sorts of incentives to farmers. The support includes agricultural subsidies for those with farmer's cards and subsidies for fertilisers and seeds, as well as rebate on electricity bills for using irrigation pumps.

Currently, the number of such cardholders is nearly 2.08 crore, it said.

Talking about the issue, Prof Atiur said the budget has some visions for farmers. But implementation of those initiatives would be a problem as indicated by "past records".

"We have seen misuse of such government incentives in the past. It would be good for farmers if the incentives are not abused," he said.

He said many of the incentives do not even reach the marginal farmers, including the landless ones. "Also, they don't get any loan from banks," he said.

The professor said the government could have announced incentives for those who use and produce organic fertilisers, as those are environment friendly.

The proposed budget says there will be a 20 percent incentive on exporting rice.

The move had already been announced a few days ago. It came amid an outcry over falling prices of paddy and rice in the domestic market, resulting from good harvest of the Boro crop and higher public and private stock of imported rice.

Dr M Asaduzzaman said the government's initiative of providing 20 percent incentives on rice export would benefit mill owners, not the farmers. "So it has become a business-friendly budget, not farmer-friendly," he said.

"And we will have the impact of the present crisis in the next Aman and Boro seasons. Many farmers, who did not get fair prices, might not feel encouraged to produce paddy anymore," he said.

He also expressed doubt whether the policymakers knew the ground reality.

In the budget proposal, the government has allocated Tk 66,234 crore for the agriculture and rural development sector, which is 21.5 percent of the total size of the budget.

Nearly, 40.62 percent of total labour force is employed in the agricultural sector, the budget proposal said.

Beijing defiant

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repeat of the running battles of the day before.

The government attempted to lower the temperature by indefinitely postponing a parliamentary debate on the bill which had been scheduled for Wednesday and triggered the scenes at parliament.

But demonstrators have vowed to let up in their campaign, calling for a rally on Sunday and a city-wide strike on Monday.

"(We) will fight until the end with Hong Kong people," said Jimmy Sham from the Civil Human Rights Front, the main protest group, adding that they had applied for permission to hold the weekend rally.

"When facing ignorance, contempt and suppression, we will only be stronger, there will only be more Hong Kong people," he told reporters.

INT'L CONCERN

The international community has voiced concern over Wednesday's violence.

The European Union called for the "fundamental right" of Hong Kongers to assemble and express themselves to be respected as it became the latest grouping to add its voice to a growing chorus of criticism of the bill.

The EU "shares many of the concerns raised by citizens of Hong Kong", it said, drawing an angry response from China which dismissed the comments as "irresponsible

and erroneous".

British Prime Minister Theresa May said it was vital the proposed law did not breach the deal China agreed to allowing Hong Kong to retain its freedoms for at least 50 years.

US President Donald Trump told reporters in Washington he could "understand the reason for the demonstration" and that he hoped "it all works out for China and for Hong Kong".

'EXCESSIVE FORCE'

The police response has drawn criticism from a range of influential bodies including lawmakers, journalists and legal groups, with calls for an independent inquiry into "excessive force" from a top legal body that helps elect the city's leader.

The Hong Kong Bar Association also weighed in, saying the police force "may well have overstepped its lawful powers" with "wholly unnecessary force against largely unarmed protesters who did not appear to pose any immediate threat to the police or the public".

But Beijing said it fully supported the city authorities' handling of the protests.

Police chief Stephen Lo defended his officers yesterday, saying they "had no choice but to escalate the use of force".

He said 11 arrests had been made so far and that 22 officers had been injured. At least 150 rounds

of tear gas had been fired while 19 complaints of police violence had been reported and would be investigated.

Throughout the day police and officials worked to open roads and remove barricades thrown up in the city's commercial heart, a district that boasts many international companies.

At a park next to parliament, much of the clean-up operation was done by young protesters who gathered piles of garbage, discarded protective gear and broken umbrellas -- a symbol of the rallies.

India-NZ

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He added: "We have a break now, which is interesting at this point in the tournament but it's a good chance for guys to freshen up and look forward to our next challenge."

Meanwhile India captain Virat Kohli said: "The outfield was not suitable for play, especially as it's so early in the tournament you don't want an injury at this stage."

"It's unfortunate, you cannot control the weather but a point isn't bad at this stage given we already have two wins," the star batsman insisted.

The International Cricket Council has faced criticism over the lack of reserve days in the group stage but said having them for every match would be "extremely complex".

21 SP-ranked

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Feni, SP of Noakhali Elias Sharif as the DC of DMP, SP of Anti-Terrorism Unit (ATU) Mohammad Kaiser as the SP of Bhola, and SP of Bhola Moktar Hossain was transferred as the DC of Barishal Metropolitan Police.

Besides, SP of Kurigram Md Mehedul Karim was transferred as the SP of ATU, Joypurhat SP Md Rashidul Hasan as the DC of RMP, SP of Police Headquarters Mohammad Salam Kabir as the SP of Joypurhat, DC of DMP Mohammad Yusuf Ali as the SP of Panchagarh, SP of Jhalakathi Md Zobayedur Rahman as the DC of DMP, DC of Chattogram Metropolitan Police Fatiha Yesmin as the SP of Jhalakathi, SP of Panchagarh Md Giasuddin Ahmed as the special SP of Special Branch, SP of Sylhet Md Moniruzzaman as the special SP of SB, Commandant of 8 Armed Police Battalion Syed Moshfequr Rahman as the special SP of SB, Mohammad Shihab Kaiser Khan of SP (PTC) Noakhali as the commandant of 8 APBn, SP of Rangpur Md Mizanur Rahman as the SP of Rajbari and Rajbari SP Asma Siddika Mili was transferred as the DC of DMP.

Insiders say almost all the officials have been transferred after serving three years or more in their respective posts. However, transfer of a few was considered as upset as those officials have close connection with the high-ups but got apparently less lucrative posts, they observe.

10-yr-old girl

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their marriage. The house was owned by Sajenur's father. Recently, the duo got divorced. Sakhina was the daughter of Sajenur and her first husband Hasan.

Belal used to threaten Sajenur with death whenever they had family feuds, the sources added.

Hearing Sajenur scream, locals rushed to the spot and found the house on fire around 2:00am, said her neighbours.

Md Ziauddin, residential medical officer of Patharghata Upazila Health Complex, said Sajenur was admitted to the health complex first. Later, she was sent to Barishal Sher-E-Bangla Medical College Hospital as her condition was deteriorating.

Md Humayun Kabir, upazila nirbahi officer of Patharghata, said he immediately provided the victim's family with Tk 10,000 and asked police to identify the culprits and bring them to book.

Meanwhile, Belal reportedly died by suicide after the incident. Locals found his body hanging with a mango tree around 10:00am in the same upazila.

Police sent the bodies of Sakhina and Belal to Barguna General Hospital morgue for autopsies.

No case was filed till 8:00pm in this connection.

Tigers

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Nottingham, Bangladesh still need to win four of their next five matches against West Indies, Afghanistan, Australia, India and Pakistan.

With his family in tow, and with Mehedi Hasan Miraz tagging along, Mashrafe then went out for lunch. The inspirational skipper would be looking to keep the spirits of the team high when they start getting back to cricket with an optional practice session today.

Shakib Al Hasan, Tamim Iqbal, Mohammad Mithun, Sabbir Rahman and Mosaddek Hossain have taken the break in action to spend some time away and are expected to return today. Tamim is expected to join the optional training session.

Macron

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"The poor thing did not survive," Macron said Tuesday, when he also asked reporters not to look for meaning where there is none.

"I will send another."

The two leaders recently marked the 75th anniversary of D-Day together, with Macron -- who has been an outspoken critic of Trump's nationalism and isolationist tendencies -- using the occasion to send a message to his American visitor.

"America is never as big as when it is fighting for the freedom of others," he said.