



Balashi Ghat terminal on the Jamuna in Gaibandha lies idle during the ongoing dry season as the adjoining channel has lost navigability due to massive siltation in the riverbed.

PHOTO: STAR

BALASHI, BAHADURABAD TERMINALS

Ferry services disrupted as navigability lost to siltation in Jamuna

K M REZAUL HOQUE, Gaibandha

Due to freshly deposited silt in the Jamuna river, ferry services along the Balashi Ghat terminal in Gaibandha and Bahadurabad Ghat terminal in Jamalpur are almost at a halt.

Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority (BIWTA) carried out dredging in the river last year to increase navigability.

But during monsoon this year sediments again found their ways into the river bringing down the water level at many points.

As a result, a plan of BIWTA to create road link between northern districts and Dhaka by placing barges (large, flat-bottomed boat for carrying heavy freight on rivers, canals) is now in limbo.

The pontoon at Balashi Ghat is currently lying inactive. The terminal is mostly used to carry passengers and goods to the capital from northern districts.

Communication via different routes of the Jamuna river gets largely disrupted every winter as water level goes down drastically.

At some points, it becomes knee-deep making it impossible for vessels to move. Vessels run into shoals and get stuck, according to local boatmen.

Everyday hundreds of people travel to different destinations by engine boats from Balashi Ghat.

The terminal connects Gaibandha town to Sundarganj, Fulchhari and Sagata upazilas of the district. It also connects the town with Chilmari, Raumari and

Rajibpur upazilas of Kurigram, Sariakandi and Sonatola of Bogura, and Dewanganj and Islampur of Jamalpur, according to Gaibandha District Council.

Navigability on the routes are almost lost as water flow from the upstream has gone thinner over time, said locals.

"In rainy season, it takes only one-and-a-half hour to reach Bahadurabad Ghat but in dry season it takes three to four hours," said Abdul Hye, a boatman of Kalasona Char in Fulchhari.

"We thought that navigability would be restored by excavation, but flood again brought silt from upstream and the situation went back to square one," said boatman Jamaluddin of Balashi Ghat.

"Passengers cannot reach their

destinations on time in winter, as a number of shoals develop in the riverbed impeding movement of country boats," Asaduzzaman Hashu, leaseholder of the terminal, told this paper.

Moklesur Rahman, executive engineer of Bangladesh Water Development Board, Gaibandha, said, "We need a master plan to do dredging in such a way that ferry channels remain navigable throughout the year."

During British rule, railway authorities had launched train ferry services in the Jamuna.

Following the construction of Bangabandhu Bridge, the railway ferry services between Balashi Ghat and Bahadurabad Ghat was withdrawn in 2005.



PHOTO: STAR

Visitors from 22 countries, including writers, literary and media personalities, pose for photograph with Bangladesh officials in front of historic Shat Gombuj Masjid (Sixty Dome Mosque) in Bagerhat yesterday noon. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs invited the foreign delegates to Bangladesh ahead of the 'Mujib Year-2020' marking the birth centenary of Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

Illegal brick kilns all over Maheshpur

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Jhenidah

Flouting environmental laws, at least 13 illegal brick kilns in Maheshpur upazila are likely to burn an estimated 11.8 lakh maunds of firewood this year.

Out of those, 10 kilns use barrel or drum chimneys while the other 3 use fixed chimneys.

A barrel-chimney kiln usually consumes about 60 thousand maunds of firewood a year while a fixed-chimney kiln consumes about one lakh maunds, said several brick kiln owners in the upazila.

According to them, the 10 barrel-chimney kilns in Maheshpur would consume about 6 lakh maunds of firewood while the three fixed-chimney kilns would consume about 3 lakh maunds of firewood this year.

While visiting several of the brick kilns, this correspondent found huge amounts of lumber stockpiled at the yard of each of those while the area remained covered with thick black smoke spewed out from the chimneys.

Requesting anonymity, a brick kiln owner said the authorities consider issuing operation permits to only zigzag type of brick kilns, which use coal to bake bricks.

But none of the kilns -- including Shohag, Masum, Bhai, Shakil, SBM, Ripon, MAR, Rafi, Jewel, Rado and Bahar bricks -- are zigzag types and those do not have any authorisation to operate in the area, he added.

Another brick kiln owner said lumber or firewood is readily available locally at lower



PHOTO: STAR

A huge amount of lumber, stockpiled to be used as firewood, at this illegal brick kiln with a barrel or drum chimney in Jhenidah's Maheshpur upazila. The photo was taken recently.

prices than coal and they profit more when they burn firewood at the kilns.

Abdul Latif, owner of Raja brick kiln that uses coal in its zigzag type of kilns, said it costs them about Tk 6,500 to produce one thousand bricks, whereas the production cost for the same quantity comes down to Tk 5,000 when firewood is used.

As a result, more buyers are enticed in buying

bricks from the illegal kilns due to the significant price difference, he also said.

A local firewood trader, Golam Sarwar, said they make more profit this time of the year when local brick kilns go in full operation.

Contacted, Maheshpur Upazila Nirbahi Officer (Acting) Sujon Kumar Sarkar said they would take necessary action against the illegal kilns soon.

Telenor serves legal notice

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Reporters' Network Bangladesh (TRNB) at his office.

"We have already discussed it with senior lawyers of the country and found nothing to be worried about," he added.

BTRC sources said Allen & Overy LLP, a Singapore-based international law firm, sent the legal notice to the president on October 30, referring to the business protection treaty signed by Bangladesh and Singapore.

Talking to this newspaper, Khandaker Reza-E-Raquiab, legal counsel for the BTRC, said, "We discussed the notice at a court hearing on November 18. We later replied to the Allen & Overy LLP, saying there is no scope for accepting any such notice as the matter is lying with the Supreme Court."

He said the firm might have thought that serving such a notice on the president would create pressure on the government. It, however, did not make the BTRC or the telecom ministry respondent to the notice.

Contacted, Attorney General Mahbubey Alam said Telenor could have served the notice on the telecom ministry or at best on the prime minister.

He, however, mentioned that there

is no legal bar on any firm in sending notices to the president.

Jabbar said Grameenphone could go for international arbitration anytime, but at the same time they needed to consider that they would have to follow the laws of Bangladesh to run their business here.

Earlier, both Grameenphone and Robi hinted that they may take up the audit issue with the International Centre for Settlement of Investment Disputes -- one of the five agencies of the World Bank Group -- which settles international investment disputes.

"Our door is still open for discussion but to start a dialogue, you will have to meet at a certain point; you never want to pay anything, but want arbitration which is not possible," said Jabbar.

The minister also said they had tried to settle the matter on several occasions with the help of the finance minister and the prime minister's ICT affairs adviser, but the operators were not "serious" in doing so.

"The government proposed that they pay only Tk 250 crore -- Tk 200 crore from Grameenphone and Tk 50 crore from Robi -- to start the arbitration, but the irony is the court ordered the Grameenphone to pay Tk 2,000 crore

within three months."

On November 24, the Supreme Court directed Grameenphone to pay the telecom regulator Tk 2,000 crore, which is around 10 times what the carrier was willing to pay as adjustable deposit.

The telecom minister also said they had formed two arbitration committees, but the operators didn't take part in those.

"To avoid the payment, they [Grameenphone] even try to portray the process as extortion, which made headlines in newspapers," Jabbar said.

The Daily Star could not obtain a copy of the legal notice sent by Telenor. This newspaper also tried to contact Cathrine Stang Lund, communications director of Telenor Group in Asia, but could not reach her.

Meanwhile, Grameenphone yesterday issued a statement which said it was not a party to this notice.

"For Telenor Group, it is important to protect its assets in Bangladesh. Telenor has sent a notice to seek resolution of a dispute and invited the Government of Bangladesh to meet to discuss the matter and work towards a constructive solution," read the statement.

The BIT (Bilateral Investment Treaty)

process itself encourages dialogue, and Telenor still believes the best way forward is that the authorities and the operators agree on an amicable and transparent solution to the disputed audit, it said.

About Robi, Jabbar said the telecom company did not respond to the government's request for an out-of-court settlement. But now it is proposing an amicable settlement, which the government might accept.

"We were ready to accept any of their proposals. They could seek deduction of the late fees and we would consider that. Their attitude was uncooperative from the beginning," said Jabbar.

Of the BTRC's total audit claims, more than half are for late fees.

Asked yesterday about the minister's remarks, Robi declined to say anything.

Jabbar said that following the audit claims, the telecom regulator halted all kinds of service approvals for both the market operators and stopped imports of equipment, which impacted the operators' service quality.

"As a user [of the services], I am also a sufferer. But we have nothing to do... As soon as they clear the dues, we will remove all the bars," he said.

Moulvibazar to recall mine blast tragedy today

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Moulvibazar

Today, December 20, is reminder of Moulvibazar mine blast tragedy.

On this day in 1971, at least 25 freedom fighters (FFs) were killed in a series of explosions that followed an accidental mine blast at the FFs' transit camp at century-old Moulvibazar Government High School in the district town.

After the nation's final victory against the Pakistani army on December 16, local freedom fighters started joining the transit camp and arms, ammunition, mines and other explosives carried by the freedom fighters were kept there.

Azizur Rahman, chairman of Moulvibazar district council, said on the morning of December 20, a mine from the hand of a freedom fighter accidentally fell on the floor of the school building and exploded with a big bang. It caused blasting of several other mines.

Azizur, also an eyewitness to the incident, said "Hearing the sound of explosions, locals rushed to the spot. They later recovered the bodies of over 25 freedom fighters."

They were buried with due honour in the south-eastern corner of the school ground, he said, adding that a martyrs' memorial built in front of the burial place, came to be known as the Central Shaheed Minar of the district.

Another monument was later built with inscriptions of a list of 25 freedom fighters that died in the tragic incident.

The accidental mine blast killed freedom fighters on the spot, said Md Jamal Uddin, district commander of Bangladesh Muktiyudha Sangshad, Moulvibazar unit.

The number of the victims would be much higher, said Fazlur Rahman, mayor of Moulvibazar municipality.

Manpower shortage grips Faridpur General Hospital

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Faridpur

Health services at Faridpur General Hospital are being affected due to shortage of doctors and other staffers.

Established in 1917 with a capacity of 20 beds, the hospital was upgraded to a 50-bed one in 1985. In 2002, it was further upgraded to a 100-bed capacity.

However, the authorities did not allocate necessary manpower for the upgraded facility, alleged locals.

Currently, there are only 17 doctors against an allocated 37 posts and most other posts in the hospital remain vacant, they also said.

At present, there is no senior consultant at departments of surgery, skin and orthopaedics while junior consultant positions at eye, radiology and pathology departments lie vacant.

Besides, the posts of anaesthetist, pathologist, radiologist, two sub-registrars of gynae, two sub-registrars of surgery, sub-registrars of ENT, two sub-registrars of medicine, two posts of EMO, two medical officers, one blood bank officer and one medical officer (herbal) post are also vacant.

Moreover, the available doctors and staff members are not serving the patients in their best capacity. Many of the service seekers further complained of poor service and unprofessional conduct of many of the hospital employees and doctors.

Services at the hospital's emergency are not available from the afternoon till the next morning, they also alleged.

During a recent visit to the hospital, this correspondent found a large crowd of patients waiting for a long time at the outpatient service counter.

Some of the service seekers alleged that the doctors often



allow more time to medical representatives from different pharmaceutical companies than the patients.

Ismail Kazi, 65, from Chartapakhola village, said, "I came here at 9:00am and could not see a doctor after waiting till 12:00 noon."

Ozufa Begum, 55, from Ashapur village in Boalmari upazila, said, "I came from Boalmari to see a doctor around 9:00am. I've been waiting for about two hours now."

Ganesh Agarwala, a resident medical officer of the hospital, said at least 150 to 200 patients get treatment from the hospital's outpatient section every day. "But we don't have sufficient doctors to treat them."

Faridpur Civil Surgeon Enamul Haque said, "We are suffering terribly from the shortage of doctors and other staffers."

They wrote to the higher authorities seeking additional manpower, but they were yet to see any response, he added.