



The Water Development Board and district administrations concerned conduct drives to demolish illegal structures on the Karotoa river in Fateh Ali bridge area of Bogra town, Old Brahmaputra river at Thanar Ghat in Mymensingh city, and below, the Ichamati river in Pabna town yesterday.

PHOTO: STAR

# Massive drive to free rivers kicks off in districts

Scores of illegal concrete structures knocked down in Pabna, Cumilla, Pirojpur, Patuakhali, Moulvibazar; the operation to continue

STAR COUNTRY DESK

The authorities yesterday launched a massive eviction drive against illegal occupiers of river lands in different districts across the country.

Pabna district administration in cooperation with the Water Development Board (WDB) has started the long awaited eviction drive in 'Puraton Bridge' area of the district town, reports our correspondent.

"All the illegal structures beside the Ichamati river in Pabna town has already been marked with the red signs and the drive is meant for freeing river from illegal occupiers," said Md Shahidul Islam, superintending engineer of the WDB.

According to Water Development Board's feasibility study based on the CS record map of the river, several thousand illegal structures including over 400 concrete buildings have been identified on the river land areas in Pabna town, he said, adding that the drive will continue to free all the illegal structures.

Originated in the Padma in Pabna's Shibrampur, the Ichamati runs an 84 kilometre course across the district before meeting the Jamuna in Bera upazila.

According to the government's Cadastral Survey (CS) records, published in 1922, the nine-km section of the river that flows through Pabna municipality had 88.58 acres of riverbed. But the area dropped to only 54.53 acres as shown in the most recent Bangladesh Survey (BS) record map in 2013 according to the district settlement office.

During yesterday's drive, several occupiers of the



river land claimed that they have legal documents of the lands.

"The government has taken a mega project to save the Ichamati river and the eviction drive is a part of the project. There is no scope to consider the claim of the illegal occupiers," said Pabna Deputy Commissioner Kabir Mahamud.

People are delighted that at last the government has taken initiative to free the Ichamati river, said SM Mahabub Alam, convener of 'Save Ichamati' movement. "Ichamati is the life of Pabna. Saving the river is to save Pabna town," he added.

Our Cumilla Correspondent reports: The authorities demolished 139 illegal structures on

both sides of the Gumti river yesterday.

Officials of the district administration and WDB with the cooperation of the police conducted the drive in Poschim Majhigacha, Poschim Bisnoper, Ariora, Dakkhin Rasulpur and Utter Sreepur mouzas of Cumilla Sadar upazila.

Earlier notices were served to the owners of illegal structures to remove those, following a list prepared by WDB authorities.

Water Development Board yesterday demolished 109 illegal structures in a 8.5-kilometre canal area of Panachpara Bharani Khal in Sikder Mollik and Kadamtala unions under Pirojpur Sadar upazila, reports our correspondent.

Dipak Ranjan Das, executive engineer of WDB in Pirojpur, and Pijush Kuman Chowdhury, assistant commissioner and executive magistrate in Pirojpur, led the drive.

"The drive will continue to free all the government lands under WDB in Pirojpur," said Dipak Ranjan Das.

WDB with the help of district administration and law enforcers demolished 28 illegal structures at Hetalia Badghat Bazar on Patuakhali-Kuakata road in Patuakhali Sadar upazila yesterday, reports our correspondent.

The drive will continue to remove illegal establishments in the area, said Md Hasanuzzaman, executive engineer of WDB.

"We are preparing list of all illegal occupiers who built structures after grabbing government lands and those will be demolished by turns," said Md Shahjahan, sub assistant land officer of Patuakhali Sadar upazila.

Our Moulvibazar Correspondent adds: The authorities yesterday removed nine illegal establishments at Barapara in Sadar upazila of Sunamganj, as part of a drive to remove illegal establishments along the rivers, canals, streams, haors and other waterbodies in the district.

As many as 248 illegal establishments near rivers and canals, including 26 in Sunamganj Sadar upazila, 40 in Dakkhin Sunamganj, 13 in Chhatak, 25 in Jamalganj, 30 in Dharmapasha, 60 in Jagannathpur and 64 in Tahirpur upazila will be removed, said officials of Sunamganj district administration.

## Food officer 'takes away' TV journo's camera

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Lalmonirhat

A food officer in the town yesterday allegedly misbehaved with a TV journalist and took away his video camera when the latter went to his office with queries about procurement of paddy from rice mill owners.

Jahedul Islam Sompto, district correspondent of Maaranga Television, is a resident of Thana Para in the town.

Jahedul said Office in-Charge of Lalmonirhat Sadar Local Supplied Depot (LSD) godown Shahinur Rahman and his staffers were procuring paddy from rice mill owners in the godown yesterday noon. At the time, no farmers were present there.

"On information, I rushed to the spot and asked the food officer why he is procuring paddy from the rice mill owners instead of the farmers that angered the latter," said the journalist, adding that the officer even declined to give any information about the farmers.

At one stage, the officer hurled abusive words at him and took away his camera, said the journalist.

On information, local journalists, police and additional district commissioner (ADC) rushed to the spot. The ADC found the food officer guilty after primary investigation.

He will file a case in this regard, said the journalist.

Contacted, the food officer said he was procuring paddy from the farmers. He is not the authority to give information about paddy procurement to journalists.

"I will give information to my higher authorities about paddy procurement if necessary," said the food officer.

But he remained silent when he was asked about why he took away the journalist's camera.

ADC Rafiqul Islam said he will submit the investigation report to the deputy commissioner and the food authorities soon.

## UP chairman 'embezzles' VGF rice

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Bogura

A union parishad (UP) chairman in Bogura's Sariakandi upazila has allegedly embezzled rice allocated for Vulnerable Group Feeding (VGF) programme.

Muzahidul Islam, secretary of Kamalpur union parishad (UP) said after distributing 438 sacks out of 530 sacks of VGD rice among the poor people of the union on December 18, they stored the rest 96 sacks at a temporary warehouse.

Meanwhile, Hedaidul Islam, chairman of the UP, accompanied by his men went to the warehouse early Saturday and took away 50 sacks (each containing 30 kg), by forcibly breaking open the lock of the godown ignoring the on duty security guards call, Muzahidul said.

## UP member murdered

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Mymensingh

A union parishad (UP) member, who sustained critical stab injuries in an attack by some unidentified criminals in Kishoreganj's Pakundia upazila on Saturday night, died on his way to Mymensingh Medical College Hospital (MMCH) on Sunday.

The deceased, Yusuf Ali Masud, 38, son of late Idris Ali of Hosendi Doripara village in the upazila, was member of Ward No 3 under Hosendi UP.

Officer in Charge (Investigation) of Pakundia Police Station SM Shafiqul Islam said, some unidentified criminals stabbed Masud with sharp weapons while he was returning home from Bhuiyan Bazar around 11:00pm on Saturday night and fled the scene, leaving him critically injured. He later died on way to MMCH.

## RIVER EXCAVATION

# Irrigation pumps instead of dredger pose threat

The unusual arrangement causes a big hole in the river, say activists of Nodi Bachao Desh Bachao

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Gaibandha

The contractor concerned has placed engine-driven irrigation pumps for excavation of the Chaghot river instead of using dredger, posing erosion threat to the nearby bridge, road and homesteads in Sundarganj upazila of the district.

Rangpur Water Development Board (WDB) undertook plans to excavate Chaghot for keeping navigability of the river between the boundary line of Rangpur's Mithapukur and Gaibandha's Sundarganj round the year.

The plans include 2,000 cubic metre excavation using dredger, construction of 15-metre wide bank and 30-metre height slope.

The authority has allocated a fund of Tk 2.17 crore for implementation of the plans. A Chattogram based construction firm named M/s Yunus and Brothers got the work order. According to the condition of contract, the contractor must have to use

dredger for excavation of the riverbed.

But the contractor has placed six engine-driven irrigation pumps instead of using dredger in the river, which is lifting sand from underground level.

Due to continuous underground sand lifting, a big hole is being created there, which will divert the river water in the rainy season, posing erosion threat, said activists of voluntary organisation "Nodi Bachao Desh Bachao", adding that but if the dredger is used for the river excavation, it does not happen.

Sadequul Islam Dulal, convener of the organisation, said the river should be excavated as per direction of competent authority, otherwise the riverbed will be badly affected.

Rangpur WDB Sub-divisional Engineer Tabibur Rahman said the main object of the work is to excavate the riverbed using dredger but there is not enough space to place the dredger.

## Number of patients goes

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Yesterday, the lowest temperature was recorded at 10.2 degrees Celsius in Sitakunda of Chattogram and highest 27.8 degrees Celsius in Teknaf of Cox's Bazar.

Although the severity of cold is reducing gradually, the spread of various cold-related diseases is still persisting and affecting people, mainly children and the elderly, in at least six districts.

Our correspondents from different districts reported that several hundred people were being admitted to hospitals with various cold-borne diseases -- including pneumonia, bronchitis and asthma -- over the last few days.

In Thakurgaon, about 284 people were admitted to the district's Sadar Hospital so far in the last three days.

"Our hospital has 100 beds, but the number of patients has increased. It has become difficult for us to maintain everything in this situation," Abul Kasem, acting civil surgeon of Thakurgaon, told our correspondent.

During a visit at the hospital yesterday, the correspondent found the hospital's children ward was packed with patients. The children were found sharing beds, while their guardians were lying on the

floor of the ward or the veranda.

In Narayanganj, paediatric specialists have been busy as the flow of patients has increased significantly over the last few days due to the cold wave.

Aminul Islam, a medical officer of Narayanganj 300-Bed Hospital, told our correspondent that a total of 106 child patients visited him till 12:00 noon yesterday. "The number is likely to cross 150 in two hours," he added.

In Chattogram, Bogura, Kurigram and Chapainawabganj, several more patients were admitted to the districts' sadar and general hospitals, reports our correspondents.

## TRAIN SERVICES DELAYED

Meanwhile, most of the trains going towards the northern and north-western regions of the country were facing delays due to fog as the drivers have to run the trains within a restricted speed.

Mia Jahan, an additional director of Bangladesh Railway, told The Daily Star that at least eight trains on those routes were running one to seven hours behind schedule yesterday, like they have been since the last three to four days.



Workers pluck potato at a field in Putimari village of Nilphamari's Kishoreganj upazila. The photo was taken last week.

PHOTO: EAM ASADUZZAMAN

# High demand drives potato farmers harvest early

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Nilphamari

Attracted by more than double the price of matured crop, potato farmers in the district are harvesting immature potato 30 to 40 days before its harvest time.

Belal Hossain, president of Nilphamari kitchen market traders' association, said the trend might have a negative impact on the final yield of mature potato that is preserved in cold storages for consumption throughout the year.

The Department of Agricultural Extension (DAE) however ruled out the apprehension that the early harvest will cause a reduction in the year-round supply of the produce in the country.

DAE Deputy Director in Nilphamari Nikhil Chandra Biswas said, "Harvest of immature potato will not affect the targeted production as farmers can cultivate the same crop two times on the same land."

In the aftermath of Cyclone

Bulbul, nationwide devastation of croplands left vegetable prices soaring at kitchen markets. The farmers who lost their crops to the cyclone are now trying to make up for the loss by selling their produce when the prices are high.

According to the DAE in Nilphamari, out of their target of potato cultivation on 21 thousand hectares of land between October and December, the peak cultivation period, the crop has so far been cultivated on a total of 18 thousand hectares of land.

The yield of immature potato, so far harvested from around 2,100 hectares, amounts to only 15 tonnes per hectare, said a DAE official.

If harvested mature, after at least 90 days, between January and March, the per hectare yield of potato would be 24 tonnes, the official added.

While visiting a potato field in Putimari village of Kishoreganj

upazila, this correspondent saw potato traders buying and sending out immature potato straight from the field to Dhaka in 50-kg sacks.

Farmer Motilal Roy said after crops on a vast tract of land were damaged by the cyclone recently, shortage in supply of vegetables resulted in the rise of their prices and they were harvesting potato early to take that advantage.

"I sowed the potato on October 25 and after 50 days, I reaped a harvest of 30 tonnes that I sold for Tk 7.8 lakh at Tk 26 per kg."

"If I harvested after 90 days, in the last week of January, I would probably get at best 48 tonnes, from which I most likely would earn only Tk 4.8 lakh, at Tk 10 for each kg. That was the price I got last year," Motilal explained.

Just 15 days back, the price was even higher -- Tk 35 a kg, said Khiron Barman, a farmer in Tengenmari village of Jaldhaka upazila.