

# Fear grips indigenous families after recurring attacks on ancestral land

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Moulvibazar

More than two weeks after the latest attack on an indigenous community and their betel leaf garden, the mainstay of their livelihood, at Nunchhara Punji in Karmadha union of Kulaura upazila, the authorities are yet to take any action against the offenders.

On February 20, four residents of the punji (village) sustained severe injuries when a group of outsiders, accompanied by members of the forest department under Noldori bit in Kulaura, attacked the villagers with local weapons in their attempt to take possession of the ancestral land belonging to the villagers, said Bobrin Tongper, the headman of the punji.

A case was filed in this connection with Kulaura Police Station, accusing Liton Mia, Renu Mia, Elaich Mia, Fazlu Mia, Junab Mia, Amir Ali, Rupali Mia, Javed Mia, Dulan Mia, Tota Mia, Dudu Mia, Farzan Mia and other unknown individuals.

Another case was filed with the police station against the same offenders after a similar attack on the village, inhabited by around one hundred indigenous families, was thwarted on November 21, 2020. That day, the attackers destroyed around 10,000 betel leaf plants while trying to forcibly occupy their ancestral land.

Urging the government to take immediate steps for protecting the community from further attacks, headman Bobrin said, "Some of the plants were 15 to 20 years old and started producing betel leaves. If such attacks continue, we will lose our only source of income and simply starve to death."

Robert Marchiang, a villager who was injured in the recent attack, said, "Betel leaf is our only source of income. The criminals shattered my hope when they destroyed my betel leaf plants. I don't know how I will now support my six-



A betel leaf plant, creeping on a tree, still looks fresh with green young leaves although its stock was completely severed from its root in an attack on the garden, at Nunchhara Punji under Karmadha union in Kulaura upazila of Moulvibazar. Right, Agnes Rabon, far right, with three other members of the indigenous community after the recent attack on their ancestral land. The photos were taken recently.

member family without the resource."

Most of the people in the indigenous community have no other occupation and it would be impossible for many of the families to survive without the betel leaf plants as well as their ancestral land, said Agnes Rabon, a teacher at the village.

Liton Mia, one of the accused, however, refuted the accusations, saying, "We are not involved in it."

"On the day of the incident, some of the beneficiaries along with Kulaura range officer of the forest department and Noldori bit officer went to visit Nunchhara where the indigenous people undermined social forestry on the hills to grow their betel leaf garden," he also claimed.

The Daily Star was unable to obtain

comments from Elaich Mia, Dulon Mia and Fazlu Mia as their cell phones were found unreachable despite several attempts.

Contacted, SM Sajjad Hossain, divisional forest officer for Sylhet, also denied the allegation. He said, "We went to the place to carry out government work, not to attack. On the contrary, a scuffle broke out when the punjee residents attacked our people and local Bangalees resisted it."

"If someone does anything to occupy the forestland, we will take action. The injured [on our side] have filed cases with the local police station for creating obstruction to government work," he also said.

Kulaura Police Station Officer-in-Charge Binoy Bhushan Roy said the



PHOTO: MINTU DESHWARA

government's goodwill." Flora Bably Talang, general secretary of KIBORAZ Inter-Punjee Development Association of Indigenous People, said,

"Indigenous people of the plain land have been living without land deeds for generations. The government should take immediate steps to find out how the land can be given [permanently] to the indigenous people. Otherwise, this problem will not be resolved."

Demanding the forming of a land commission for the indigenous communities on plain land, Bangladesh Adivasi Forum central committee General Secretary Sanjeeb Drong said the land belongs to the indigenous community as per 'ILO Convention-107'.

"The indigenous people don't have land deeds. It has been this way for a long time. Hence, it isn't possible to solve this problem without the

## Worker killed in Bogura factory fire

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Bogura

A worker was burnt to death in a fire that broke out at a mosquito coil factory in Bogura Sadar upazila yesterday.

Deceased Belal Hossain, 25, son of late Mojibur Rahman of Sirajganj's Shahazadpur upazila, was a worker at "One Mosquito Coil" factory at Sikarpur village in the upazila.

Belal had stayed back after work on Friday night and slept in the factory, Officer in Charge of Sadar Police Station Humayan Kabir said.

Locals saw the fire in the factory around 6:00am and informed them, Assistant Director at Bogura Fire Station Abdul Hamid said.

Being informed, three firefighting units went to the spot and brought the blaze under control after two hours of frantic effort, he said.

Later, Belal's charred body was recovered from the debris after the fire was doused, Hamid said, adding that the cause of the fire was yet to be ascertained but they primarily suspect that the fire might have originated from an electric short circuit.

Sub Inspector Montaj Ali said the manager of the factory failed to show any valid documents of the factory.

## Nilphamari sees jump in sunflower cultivation

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Nilphamari

Driven by higher profits, cultivation of sunflower, a relatively healthier choice of edible oil, is on the rise in Nilphamari.

Sunflower oil contains vitamin E that protects cells from age-related damage. When used in low-heat cooking, sunflower oil containing high oleic acid, a form of unsaturated fat, is thought to provide some benefits for heart health.

According to Department of Agricultural Extension (DAE) in Nilphamari, 530 tonnes of sunflower is targeted to be produced on 655 acres of land in all six upazilas of the district this year, as opposed to cultivation of the same on 30 acres of land last year.

Sanarul Islam, sub-assistant agriculture officer of DAE in Nilphamari, said they have been providing free hi-breed sunflower seeds, fertiliser and necessary advice to encourage farmers in the cultivation of sunflower.

The government spends a large sum of money on import of edible oil and hence, "we encourage farmers in cultivation of sunflower as it not only ensures higher profit, but also helps attain self-sufficiency in production of edible oil," said Obaidur Rahman Mondol, deputy director of DAE in Nilphamari.

While visiting sunflower fields in Purba Gurguri Sheikhpara village of Sadar upazila, farmer Sheikh Md Golam Rabbani said he cultivated the crop on 17 bighas of land in early December.

About 750 to 800 grams of seed is needed for each bigha of land and he received RDS-275 variety



A sunflower field in Purba Gurguri Sheikhpara village of Sadar upazila in Nilphamari.

PHOTO: EAM ASADUZZAMAN

of hi-breed sunflower seeds from the DAE free of cost. "I found interest in its cultivation as it needs less irrigation and labour, but its production cost is low and profit is high," the farmer also said.

Sayed Alam Ali, another sunflower grower from the same village, said cultivation of sunflower is more profitable than other traditional crops such as Boro rice, maize or wheat.

Each maund (1 maund=37.3242

kilograms) of sunflower seed sells for around Tk 2,700 and with a production cost of only Tk 7 thousand per bigha, about Tk 12 thousand profit can be made from a harvest of nearly six to seven maunds of sunflower seed from one bigha of land.

About Tk 8 to 9 thousand profit can be made from production of Boro on the same amount of land, Tk 8 thousand from maize and Tk 5 thousand from wheat, he added.

Many other farmers in the area said they were convinced by the profits earned by local sunflower growers and they would also consider cultivating sunflower next year.

Dr Abdul Mazid, who retired from the Directorate General of Health Services as a deputy director, said consumption of sunflower oil has health benefits as its unsaturated fat and vitamin E reduces the risk of cardiac arrest.

## Gang rape accused held

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Mymensingh

Rapid Action Battalion (Rab-14) arrested a youth on Thursday in connection with a case for gang-raping a teenage girl in Kishoreganj Sadar upazila on March 1.

The arrestee, Zakir Hossain, 32, is the prime accused in the case.

On March 2, mother of the 14-year-old victim lodged a case with Kishoreganj Sadar Police Station accusing three people including Zakir.

According to the case statement, Zakir and his two accomplices picked up the girl when she went out of her room to respond to the nature's call on March 1 and raped her.

## Villagers' clash leaves 1 killed, 18 injured

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Brahmanbaria

An elderly man was killed and at least 18 others were injured when two rival groups clashed in Kosba upazila yesterday allegedly centring a feud over a murder case filed four years back.

The deceased, Foyez Bhuiyan, 58, was a resident of Nimbari village under Mulgram union.

Quoting locals, police said a murder case was filed with Kosba Police Station against some people belonging to Kabila community for killing one Rois Miah of Pandu community in 2017.

Recently, the accused in the case came out jail after securing bail and have been threatening people of the Pandu community to withdraw the case.

As a sequel, both the groups, equipped with sharp weapons, locked in a fierce clash yesterday morning.

The clash left Foyez, who sustained severe stab injuries during the clash, died on the spot and 18 others from both sides injured, Additional Superintendent of Police (Kosba-Akaura Circle) Nahid Hasan said.

Of the injured, Foyez Miah and Rimon are undergoing treatment at Brahmanbaria General Hospital while the rest took primary treatment at Kosba Upazila Health Complex.

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