

Indigenous village grieving for trees

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Moulvibazar

A memorial service for trees, held recently in Khadimnagar area of Sylhet city, might have aroused curiosity among a section of the city residents. But mourning for untimely deaths of trees is close to religious ritual for inhabitants of a remote indigenous village in Barlekha upazila. Bangladesh Poribesh Andolan (BAPA), Kapaeng Foundation and KUBRAJ Inter-punji Development Organisation jointly organised the programme on March 24. Green activists and members of the organisations at the programme expressed solidarity with the indigenous communities who have been in mourning after two age-old trees at Agar punji (village) in Barlekha were felled. The villagers said they consider trees to be their own children. Livelihoods of 48 indigenous families also depend on trees on which they grow vines of betel leaf -- their primary source of income. But on March 19, two such trees were chopped down along Chhotolekha-Bobarthal road, about a kilometre away from their village. The trees were part of the natural forestry in the area and each was about three to four feet in diameter and aged over 40 years. Sukmon Amse, headman of Agar punji, said around 20 to 25 people from Chhotolekha Tea Garden factory, set up on about seven kilometres away from the village, entered their betel leaf garden and started marking the larger trees with red paint. After marking 25 trees, they chopped down two of those. The tea garden men left after the villagers arrived at the scene and protested the felling of the trees. For their survival, the villagers need the trees for cultivating betel leaf. Besides,



Chopped up trunk of an age-old tree in a natural forest lie scattered as Father Joseph Gomes OMI, coordinator for JPIC in Bangladesh, inspects the site. The photo was taken near Chhotolekha-Bobarthal road, about a kilometre away from Agar punji in Moulvibazar's Barlekha upazila.

PHOTO: MINTU DESHWARA

Since he took charge as headman of the village in 2005, a total of Tk 1 crore was paid to Chhotolekha Tea Garden authorities as lease payment. His father, as previous headman, had also made lease payments to the tea garden authorities, he added.

While visiting areas around the tea garden, established on 1964.50 acres of land allotted by the government, this correspondent sensed a pall of gloom hovering over Agar punji, although the Easter Sunday -- one of the major festivals celebrated by the communities there -- was only a few days away. Asked, villager Pius Sangma, said, "We are passing days in immense tension. We will simply die [without income] if the remainder of the marked trees are felled.

"We love trees like they are our children. Would there be any festivities when a

child dies? That's why I can't even think about the Easter Sunday." When this correspondent reached Shakil Alam, manager of Chhotolekha Tea Garden, over cell phone, he admitted that the land on which Agar punji and the trees are located had been leased out many years ago to the residents of the village by the Chhotolekha Tea Garden authorities.

He, however, claimed ignorance about the amount of the lease payment they had been collecting from the indigenous communities of Agar punji and about the identities of the ones involved in the tree felling on March 19.

Sekhar Ranjan Das, forest range officer in Barlekha upazila, said they confiscated the two felled logs of Chapalish trees, 57 feet of timber in total, from the area.

Wild animals in the area, which is in close proximity to Patharia Reserve

Forest, feed on fruits fallen from naturally grown trees such as the Chapalish, he said, adding that he has heard that 25 such trees were marked by the Chhotolekha Tea Garden authorities. Sangkhudho Nagorik Andolan Coordinator Tofazzal Sohel said more than 90 percent of the vegetation in the area comprises different fruit trees -- including Chapalish, black plum or Jambolan (locally known as Kaalo Jaam), jackfruit, Awal, Cutguti, Haritaki and Bahera. Wild animals depend on the fruits of the trees for their food. Hence, wildlife in the area will be endangered if the fruit trees are destroyed.

Advocate Bimol Lyndohkiri, a law practitioner at Moulvibazar court, said land belonging to a tea garden has to be demarcated with boundary fence, which is absent in the case of the land where the trees were felled.

Furthermore, the authorities of a tea garden cannot lease out its allotted land. Therefore, the leasing of the land to the communities living in Agar punji would be illegal, he added. Contacted, Barlekha Upazila Nirbahi Officer Shamim Al Imran said prior to felling any trees at allotted land, authorities of a tea garden are required to obtain permission from Bangladesh Tea Board.

An investigation into the matter was underway, he also said. At the memorial service on March 24, Father Joseph Gomes OMI, coordinator for Justice, Peace and Integrity Creation (JPIC) in Bangladesh; Flora Bably Talang, indigenous rights leader; Abdul Karim Kim, executive member of BAPA; and Uzal Azim, land and law secretary of Bangladesh Adibashi Forum central committee; spoke among others.

The villagers said they consider trees to be their own children. Livelihoods of 48 indigenous families also depend on trees on which they grow vines of betel leaf -- their primary source of income.

they have usage rights on the land where the trees were felled because Chhotolekha Tea Garden authorities leased out the land to them in exchange for money, Sukmon said.

Tajuddin calls

FROM PAGE 12
2013, pp. 62-63]
STRATEGIC MEETING AT TELIAPARA

The first strategic meeting among the high-ranking Bangalee army officials were held today at the Bungalow of Habiganj's Teliapara tea garden. The meeting commenced from 10:00am as scheduled. Col Osmani and Brig Pandey, the then director-general of the Eastern command of the Indian Border Security Force (BSF) attended the meeting. Among others Lt Col MA Rab, Lt Col SM Reza, Maj Quazi Nuruzzaman, Maj Ziaur Rahman, Maj KM Shafiullah, Maj Khaled Mosharraf, and Maj Shafayet Jamil were present at the meeting. They emphasised on formation of a government to seek global support. They also formed Mukti Fauz comprising all resistance forces, and Col Osmani was entrusted with commandership of the Mukti Fauz. They decided to seek immediate support from the Indian government regarding the supply of arms and ammunition.

US ARMS IN DHAKA

A report published in St Louis Post-Dispatch today stated that the United States must share the guilt in the atrocity committed in Bangladesh. It further reported that the tanks were American built, furnished as part of well over two billion dollars in military aid given to Pakistan in return for its willingness to ally itself with United States objectives. Giant transport planes supplied by the United States carried the troops used in the suppression, it added.

Shamsuddoza Sajen is a journalist and researcher. He can be contacted at sajen1986@gmail.com

Accident or murder

FROM PAGE 12
Golam Kuddus, a sub-inspector of Hatirjheel Police Station, said they went to Ambagan area around 8:45am upon hearing of an accident.

A private car was seen ploughing through a road divider and a woman was seen lying in the backseat of the car. Later, the woman and her husband were taken to the hospital where the on-duty doctor declared the woman dead, he said.

The body was sent to DMCH morgue for autopsy. Citing doctors at the hospital, inspector Bachchu Mia, in-charge of DMCH Police Outpost, said the body of the woman bore no injury marks that people usually get during accidents.

"There are injury marks in her leg, head and neck but those were not from accident... We are suspecting she was strangled," he said.

Talking to reporters at DMCH, Alam however claimed that his wife was unwell and he was talking her to the hospital when a tyre burst and he lost control over the wheels.

The car hit a road divider, he claimed, adding that his wife and he got injured in the accident and later Jhilik died at the hospital.

Jhilik's younger brother Jabir Hossain Khan "We could not communicate Jhilik for last two days. Her husband called us in the morning and he was in hospital as Jhilik died."

"He killed my sister and staged the accident to divert the murder," he said.

Jabir said his sister married Alam in 2018 with a family arrangement following love affair. The couple had an eight-month old boy.

Sakib was drug addict and for this his two legs were swollen. He used to torture the victim, the family members said.

Hefajat

FROM PAGE 12
vandalised and burnt properties, must face closure, he added.

He urged Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to be tougher against Hefajat and BNP-Jamaat clique.

"We have tolerated [their activities] due to observance of the birth centenary [of Bangabandhu] and the golden jubilee of the country's independence. Nothing will be tolerated now... This evil force cannot be spared."

On the birth centenary of Bangabandhu and the golden jubilee of independence, the BNP-Jamaat and anti-independence Hefajat engaged in mayhem because they are all part of a conspiracy, he said. Protesting Selim's comments, BNP MP Harunur Rashid said the BNP was not against Modi's visit and no anti-Modi slogan was uttered by the party.

Protesting Selim's comments, BNP MP Harunur Rashid said the BNP was not against Modi's visit and no anti-Modi slogan was uttered by the party.

Man sent

FROM PAGE 12
is a student of class five of a local primary school. On Friday morning, she was playing at the school's playground.

At that time, Touhidur took the girl to a nearby abandoned building lurking her to give gift and raped her. When the girl started screaming, locals rushed to the spot and rescued her. However, Touhidur fled the scene.

Returning home, the victim's mother filed a rape case with Fulgazi Police Station against Touhidur on Friday night. Hours later, police arrested the accused, said Mohammad Kutub Uddin, officer-in-charge of the police station.

Yesterday, the accused was produced before a court that sent him to jail. The victim was sent to hospital for medical test, said the OC.

Myanmar ethnic rebel groups condemn

FROM PAGE 12
groups and their militias, who control large areas of territory mostly in border regions. At least 5 people were killed yesterday.

Yesterday, 10 of these rebel groups met virtually to discuss the situation, condemning the junta's use of live ammunition on protesters.

"The leaders of the military council must be held accountable," said General Yawd Serk, leader of rebel group the Restoration Council of Shan State.

Last week, the junta declared a month-long ceasefire with ethnic armed groups, though exceptions might be made if "security and administrative machinery of the government... are encroached on".

The announcement did not encompass stopping lethal force against anti-coup demonstrations.

But Yawd Serk said the ceasefire required security forces to halt "all

violent actions", including against protesters.

The 10 rebel groups that met online are signatories to a nationwide ceasefire agreement that was brokered by Suu Kyi's government, which attempted to negotiate an end to the ethnic militias' decades-long armed struggle for greater autonomy.

But distrust runs deep for the ethnic minorities of Myanmar, and Yawd Serk said the 10 signatories to the nationwide ceasefire would "review" the deal during their meeting.

"I would like to state that the (10 groups) firmly stand with the people who are... demanding the end of dictatorship," he said.

Last week, a UN special envoy on Myanmar warned the Security Council of the risk of civil war and an imminent "bloodbath".

Despite the global condemnation, Myanmar security forces yesterday

opened fire on pro-democracy protests killing at least five people.

Security forces in the central town of Monywa, which has seen big protests day after days for weeks, fired on a crowd killing at least four people and wounding several, two media organisations said.

One man was shot and killed in the southern town of Thaton, the Bago Weekly Journal online news portal and residents reported. Police also fired in the central town of Bago, wounding one man.

The rebel groups' meeting comes a week after one of them, the Karen National Union (KNU), seized a military base in eastern Karen state, killing 10 army officers. The junta retaliated with air strikes.

The KNU has been a vocal opponent of the military junta and said it is sheltering hundreds of anti-coup activists.

India prepares for Covid curbs

FROM PAGE 12
country considered a high-risk "red zone" during a time when families usually hold reunions.

New curbs were also coming into force yesterday in France, where authorities are scrambling to deal with a dramatic rise in cases that has overwhelmed hospitals in Paris.

Restrictions had been already intensified in other European nations such as Belgium. In Germany, the government scrapped plans for a strict Easter lockdown, but Chancellor Angela Merkel urged people to limit their social contacts ahead of the break.

Across the Atlantic, fresh curbs were also imposed ahead of Easter in Ontario and Quebec, Canada's two most populous provinces.

And in the Philippines, a lockdown affecting more than 24 million people was being extended for another week as authorities deploy tents and health workers to overwhelmed hospitals.

The pandemic has claimed more than 2.8 million lives worldwide. But the United States, the hardest-

hit nation, became the first country to administer at least one shot to more than 100 million people -- around half of its adult population.

President Joe Biden has vowed to cover the vast majority within weeks. But infections remain on the rise in parts of the US, and Biden urged Americans to keep wearing masks and taking other precautions.

The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has updated its guidance to say that fully vaccinated people can travel without observing quarantines, although they should still wear masks.

One of the worst Covid-19 outbreaks is devastating Brazil, which has reported more deaths than any country after the United States.

It is the epicentre of an unfolding crisis in Latin America, where infections have soared past 25 million, likely fuelled by a more contagious variant first detected in Brazil. The devastation in Brazil has frightened neighbours already battling their own surging caseloads.

Seeks strong punishment for polluters

FROM PAGE 12
Conservation Act, 1995.

According to a provision of the proposed law, the punishment for dodging toll, fee and other charges of the port authority will be one-year jail sentence or a fine of Tk 1 lakh or both.

If anyone violates the proposed law, he will be sentenced to six month's imprisonment or fined Tk 2 lakh or

both. Under the existing law, the punishment for the offence is six-month jail sentence and a fine of Tk 50,000.

Besides, some new terminologies like "inland water vessel", "terminal", "berth", "container freight station" and "lease" have been incorporated in the proposed Bill.

It stipulates that there will be a seven-member board to run the port. Under the existing ordinance, there are four members in the board.

The aims and objectives section of the proposed Bill says it will create momentum for the import and export of goods in the country's northern region and pave the way for generating revenue.

Drug addict kills mother in Panchagarh

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Thalergaon

A woman was stabbed to death allegedly by her drug addict son in Mithapukur area of Panchagarh municipality yesterday.

The deceased, Joytun Begum, 52, was wife of Abdul Majid of the area.

Quoting neighbours, Panchagarh Additional Superintendent of Police (ASP) SM Shafiqul Islam said Shahidul, a drug addict, often used to put pressure on his mother for money.

As a sequel, Shahidul might have stabbed his mother at their courtyard before fleeing the scene yesterday noon, the ASP quoted the neighbours as saying.

Hearing her cry for help, locals took injured Joytun to Panchagarh Sadar Hospital where the doctors declared her dead.

Slain Joytun's neighbour Maleka Begum, 47, said about two to three years ago Shahidul stabbed his father for the same reason.

Redwana's killers still at large

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Tangail

Police are yet to arrest the killer of Tangail District Cultural Officer Khandakar Redwana Islam Ilu even after a week of her sensational murder.

Earlier on March 27, Redwana, daughter of late Rafiqul Islam of Rangpur Sadar upazila, was found murdered inside a cabin at Kumudini Hospital in Mirzapur.

The following day, deceased's younger brother Arshadul Abid filed a murder case with Mirzapur Police Station against Redwana's husband Delwar Hossain Mizan, a bank officer currently serving in Bhola, who went into hiding after the incident.

Egypt

FROM PAGE 12
new National Museum of Egyptian Civilisation.

Dubbed the Pharaohs' Golden Parade, the 18 kings and four queens will travel in order, oldest first, each aboard a separate float decorated in ancient Egyptian style.

The interior ministry said both pedestrians and vehicles would be barred from Tahrir Square, site of the current museum, and other sections of the parade route, ahead of the 6:00 pm (1600 GMT) start.

"The whole world will be watching," said Egyptian archaeologist and former antiquities minister Zahi Hawass, who will commentate as the event unfolds live on state television.

"This is an important 40 minutes in the life of the city of Cairo."

Seqenenre Tao II, "the Brave", who reigned over southern Egypt some 1,600 years before Christ, will be on the first chariot, while Ramses IX, who reigned in the 12th century BC, will be at the rear.

Ramses II and Queen Hatshepsut, the most powerful female pharaoh, will also make the journey.

Emblazoned with the name of their allotted sovereign, the gold-coloured carriages will be fitted with shock absorbers for the trip, to ensure none of the precious cargos are accidentally disturbed.

Discovered near Luxor from 1881 onwards, most of the mummies have lain in the Egyptian Museum since the early 1900s.

Fascinating new details of the pharaohs' lives are still emerging.

A recent high-tech study of Seqenenre Tao II, involving CT scans and 3D images of his hands and long-studied skull fractures, indicated that he was likely killed in a post-battle execution ceremony.

For their procession through Cairo's streets, the mummies will be in special containers filled with nitrogen, under conditions similar to their regular display cases.