

Tk 12.16-cr canal running dry most of the year

Private irrigation pump operators cashing in on water scarcity in the dry season; further depleting groundwater level in Barind region

ANWAR ALI, Rajshahi

The much-hyped surface water irrigation project of Sormongla canal in Rajshahi's Godagari upazila, implemented by Barind Multipurpose Development Authority (BMDA) at a cost of Tk 12.16 crore, has been fumbling without water for the past ten years.

Funded by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the re-excavation and modernisation project of the 29-kilometre-long canal was designed for all-year round irrigation of around 2,000 hectares of cropland on both sides of the canal, with water channelled in from the Padma river.

The BMDA claims the Sormongla project to be their 'most successful work' towards utilising surface water. But contrary to the claim, the canal -- stretching from Nityanandapur to Bilpatikula -- fails to deliver the much-needed irrigation water throughout most parts of the year, except for a few months during the monsoon, to vast swathes of cropland in the Barind region.

Farmers as well as officials at the Department of Agricultural Extension (DAE) in Godagari said the canal has remained dry for the last ten years, except for the months in monsoon.

According to DAE data, the current



A section of the dried up Sormongla canal in Rajshahi's Godagari upazila. The photo was taken recently.

PHOTO: ANWAR ALI

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Shafikul Islam, the DAE official in the upazila, quoting field officers said that only 10 kilometres of the canal, from Nityanandapur, hold water. The remaining 19 kilometres of the canal, from Gogram, can never hold any water in the dry season.

As a result, farmers in the area are either leaving their croplands fallow or desperately turning to groundwater extracted by private operators, which ultimately defeats the core purpose of the Sormongla project -- to save the environment by lowering dependency on groundwater for irrigation of croplands, the DAE officials and farmers said.

Local farmers alleged that many private operators with political clout have been making brisk business by supplying groundwater to the farmers with deep tube wells in the area.

These operators have been 'managing' the BMDA officials to shut off water flow into the canal so the farmers are compelled to procure water for irrigation from the private operators, they also alleged.

BMDA Superintending Engineer Md

Shamsul Huda said, "The allegations are not true... The canal should always have water. But the farmers sometimes extract all water from it. We fill it up whenever necessary."

In 2003, the UNDP under its 'Sustainable Environment Management Programme' provided funding for re-excavating the canal, constructing weirs to maintain water its water level, and setting up of pontoons, water pumps in the Padma river and installing 3.5 kilometres of pipelines to pump water in the canal from the Padma.

BMDA completed the project by 2006-07. It installed 33 low-lift pumps and six solar panels along the canal for the distribution of irrigation water.

Initially, the pumps had the capacity to withdraw 30 cusecs of water from the Padma every day, but the capacity fell to 15 cusecs daily, BMDA official Rafiqul

said, adding that the capacity is still sufficient to fill up the canal.

He, however, could not explain as to why the canal was mostly dry when this correspondent visited the project area recently.

While visiting Jogpur village under the project area, this correspondent found no water in the canal, with the exception of a puddle of water near a set of solar panel installed by BMDA.

Farmers said the canal had also been dried up in Mohorapur, Sapaipur, Tulsipur, Muralipur, Gogram Dhatma, Boshipara, Belora, Biroil and Bilpatikula areas.

Farmer Tajirul Islam, from Jogpur, said he had to buy water from a private irrigation pump to cultivate Boro rice on 0.56 hectares of land. "Groundwater is more expensive. But I had to buy it, finding no water in the canal."

Pakistan accuses

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miscreants". The government denied Indian press reports that its warplanes had used bombs or napalm, and it said there had been "no attack of any description" against any city or populated area.

FAMILIES FLEE TOWN
Scores of terror-stricken families tonight fled Sathkhira amid reports that a Pakistani army column was moving on the area. A Pakistani column of hundreds of men with artillery was reported to have left Jessore yesterday and to be moving towards Khulna.

Naik Subedar Ayub, commander of the local Rifles company, said the army convoy was destroying everything in its path as it moved toward the district. [New York Times, April 9, 1971]

PAK ALLEGATIONS AGAINST INDIA
Pakistan charged today that India was interfering directly in East Pakistan, using "armed infiltrators in plain clothes" by sending in truckloads of army and by massing six divisions on the border.

These moves have been checked by Pakistan, it said, in spite of hostile propaganda.

The charges were in a note with a covering letter from Ambassador Agha Shahi of Pakistan asking UN Secretary General U Thant to circulate the note to the 127 member governments.

India, the note said, "while professing allegiance to the United Nations Charter, is attempting to demolish one of its cornerstones by flouting the principle of noninterference in the internal affairs of member states".

TRANSFERRING POWER TO A PROVINCIAL GOVERNMENT
Joseph S Farland, the US ambassador in Pakistan, sent a telegram today to the US State Department reporting on a conversation on April 7, 1971 between US Assistant Secretary Sisco and Pakistan Ambassador Hilaly.

Hilaly offered a hopeful prognosis for political developments in East Pakistan. He anticipated that the Martial Law Administration would be willing to concede on the Awami League's six-point agenda, with minor adjustments. He also noted that President Yahya Khan had reiterated his intention to transfer power to a provincial government in East Pakistan, and he speculated that the change would take place within the next few months. Hilaly did not feel that the arrest of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman or the outlawing of the Awami League would significantly affect the political outcome in East Pakistan.

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End of a life devoted to singing

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also singers.

Deepthi has been ill and is currently under treatment. Dipankar resides in Australia and Indra Mohan's daughter Shangita Rajbongshi lives in Japan.

Indra Mohan served as the head of the folk music department at Dhaka Music College for several years. He was a valiant voice artiste of Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendra in 1971.

During the Liberation War, on his way to join the MuktiBahini, he was caught by the Pakistani military and forced to work as a bilinguist under a different name. Later, he joined the Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendra.

Mainly known for his expertise in folk music, he proved himself to be a talented singer from the early days of his career. He was adept in Bhatiali, Jari, Shari, Bhaowaiya and Murshidi, among other genres.

He was also a researcher and a teacher and worked tirelessly to preserve and collect folk songs of our country.

He was the founder of Bangladesh Loko Sanskriti Parishad. He was a playback singer for several films as well, starting with the 1967 film "Chena Ochena". He was also renowned as a Rabindra Sangeet singer.

The esteemed artiste received the Ekushey Padak in 2018 for his contribution to folk music. He had

earlier received many other awards and accolades.

"Indra Mohan Rajbongshi was a researcher, composer and above all, an artiste. He was a voice warrior. He was considered as our second Abdul Alim," said noted singer Fakir Alamgir. "On December 16, 1971, Indra Mohan and I performed in an event at India's Medinipur, when we heard of Bangladesh's victory. We could not control our emotions and embraced each other in joy."

Fakir added, "Indra Mohan shared his disappointment over the lack of participation of Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendra artistes during the 10-day celebrations for the golden jubilee of Bangladesh's independence. He used to share everything with me, we have so many memories together."

"He was a talented artiste and a meritorious person," said Shaheen Samad. "He devoted his life to singing. May he rest in peace."

"One by one, all our friends from Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendra are leaving us," said Rafiqul Alam. "We lost yet another good artiste. His demise has left a void in our industry."

Indra Mohan Rajbongshi was presented with a Guard of Honour before being cremated at the Kali Mandir in Dhaka's Rajarbagh area yesterday afternoon.

Case filed against unnamed

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"We are trying to arrest the criminals involved in the incident," he told this paper.

The launch named Sabit Al Hasan left Narayanganj Launch Terminal for Munshiganj with nearly 50 passengers around 5:56pm on Sunday. Around 15 minutes later, it sank near the third Shitalakkhya Bridge in Koylaghat of Syedpur area when it was hit and dragged by the other vessel.

Multiple witnesses and survivors claimed that the vessel was named SKL-3. After three days of the accident, the government authorities concerned could neither trace the vessel nor its captain.

Seeking anonymity, sources claimed that SKL-3 is owned by a ruling party lawmaker and that it was the reason for the authorities taking a slow approach in identifying the vessel.

However, The Daily Star could not reach the lawmaker concerned for comments.

This paper asked an official of the Department of Shipping to identify the owner of SKL-3, but the official refused to divulge the information and suggested filing a request under the right to information act.

Meanwhile, Safe Water Way Movement,

a non-government organisation working for ensuring safe waterways, in a statement yesterday claimed that footage captured by a witness clearly shows that the vessel was SKL-3.

So, legal action must be taken against the operators and owner of the cargo, the organisation said.

PUBLIC HEARING
Hours after the accident, the district administration and the BIWTA separately formed two bodies to investigate the incident.

The bodies are going to jointly hold a public hearing today to collect information from people, witnesses, and survivors.

The hearing will be held from 10:00am to 4:00pm, said Abdullah Arefin, deputy assistant director of Fire Service and Civil Defence in Narayanganj, who is a member of both the committees.

In another development, Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan yesterday claimed that accidents on waterways are declining in the country because of changes in vessel design, implementation of necessary measures, and stronger monitoring, reports UNB.

He came up with statement while addressing the inauguration of the River Security Week-2021.

Bikers stage

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than a hundred such service providers blocked the Shaheed Captain Mansur Ali Sharani in front of the Dhaka Metropolitan Police headquarters in Ramna.

A video clip of the incident that has gone viral on social media shows that the service providers park their motorcycles on the road, blocking it.

Several hundred service providers also staged a demonstration at Moghbazar intersection around the same time to press home their demands.

Contacted, Monirul Islam, officer-in-charge of Ramna Police Station, said motorcyclists staged a demonstration near Moghbazar for a few minutes and then left.

Also, over a hundred ride-sharing service providers staged a demonstration in front of the Jatiya Press Club around 10:30am, protesting fines that were imposed on them by traffic police for operating their services amid the restriction.

The demonstrators said they wanted to run their services maintaining health guidelines.

Many of them said they lost their full-time jobs due to Covid-19 induced fallout and later started operating their vehicles under the ride-sharing services.

"We have no job. If the police keep slapping fines this way, from where will we manage the money [to pay the fine]?" said one such service provider Mohammad Abdullah.

He said traffic police already imposed fine twice on him.

"Where will we go? What will we do?" he asked.

"The government is allowing bus services inside the cities, then why not allowing bikes?" asked another demonstrator.

Talking with this newspaper in front of the Jatiya Press Club, service-provider Mohammad Yasin alleged that although the authorities allowed public transport plying on the city roads, rideshare service was still restricted.

"This put many providers like me in dire situation economically," he said.

Yasin said following the government-imposed ban he did not take to the street in the first couple of days, but due to economic hardship, he had to start picking up passengers from Tuesday.

He alleged on-duty traffic police imposed a fine on him at Jigatola on Tuesday for carrying a passenger on his motorbike.

He added later, he had to give the fine to get the permission.

Asked, Inspector Bashir of DMP's traffic division, who was on duty in front of the Jatiya Press Club, said police were trying to convince the demonstrators and calm them down.

OC of Shalla

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The Daily Star yesterday morning.

OC Nazmul has been attached to Barishal Police Range while OC Ashraful to Moulvibazar District Police.

The violence was carried out after Jhumon Das Apon, a youth from Noagaon village, allegedly uploaded a post on his Facebook profile criticising Hefajat leader Mamunul Haque on March 15.

On March 16 night, Apon was detained by police after Hefajat supporters gathered near his village and demanded his detention. The mob declared that it would gather near the village again the next day.

The next morning, several hundred supporters of the Islamist group attacked, vandalised and looted at least 75 Hindu houses of the village.

So far, two cases -- one by a victim from the village and another by police -- have been filed with Shalla Police Station over the mayhem.

Scientists

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in the first observation and a flare of X-rays in those taken 15 years later, Nasa said.

The paper said that Uranus and Neptune were, until these findings, the only planets in the solar system where X-rays had not been detected.

Security

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of "handmade 'sound bombs', or fireworks meant to create noise and cause minimal damage".

A fire broke out in the Chinese-owned JOC Garment Factory in Yangon yesterday, the Fire Department said. There were no reports of casualties and no details on the extent of damage.

In another Yangon neighbourhood, activists set fire to the Chinese flag, according to pictures posted on Facebook.

China is viewed as being supportive of the military junta and last month arson attacks were made on 32 Chinese-invested factories in Yangon.

Police file case

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government offices, the MuktiJoddha complex and set fire to two government vehicles and two motorbikes.

Police used rubber bullets, tear gas and sound grenades to bring the situation under control around 12:00am. The violence left one dead and at least 10 people, including seven cops, injured. The dead, Jobayr Ali, 22, was from Ramkantapur village in Saltha.

Confirming the incident, Md Ashiquzzaman, officer in-

charge of Saltha Police Station, said, "The case was filed by the police on charges of assault and obstruction of government work and property. We have already arrested 12 people in connection with the incident. The arrestees were produced before a court, which sent them to jail."

The overall situation in Saltha is calm for the time being and members of the BGB, Rab and police have been patrolling areas to maintain law and order.

PM to attend D-8 Summit

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level, and improve standards of living.

Now, with the fourth industrial revolution and the coronavirus pandemic that is rattling the global economy, the leaders are putting emphasis on more connectivity, trade, technology, education, and employment that have been reflected in this year's theme "Partnership for a Transformative World: Harnessing the Power of Youth and Technology".

Bangladesh may also seek support from the D-8 countries on climate change and solving the Rohingya crisis during the summit to be held virtually, officials said.

The theme of the summit has been decided, keeping in mind that the youth of D-8 member states would be fully prepared to reap benefit from the Fourth Industrial Revolution and shall be equipped sufficiently to cope with the ever-changing world of ICT, said Foreign Minister AK Abdul Momen at the D-8 Council of Ministers ahead of the summit yesterday.

He said D-8 countries have a combined population of 1.1 billion people; of which 207 million, are aged between 15-24 years.

"We only need to tap the unbound potential of this youth turning the D8 into a vibrant, dynamic, and lively one."

Youth education and suitable employment are essential to harnessing the opportunities for economic growth associated with the demographic dividend, but they need the skills needed for a future that is digital and innovation-driven, he said.

"D-8 requires to take leadership in this particular area to ensure

job creation while equipping them with the right skills. A D-8 incubation initiative might be a good option to consider. In this regard, Bangladesh strongly believes in enhancing knowledge-sharing and connectivity amongst the D-8 Member States," Momen said.

He said the D-8 members need to stand together more than ever as the whole world is experiencing an unprecedented global public health and economic crisis.

"Since the overall objective of this global organisation is to improve Member States' life and livelihood situation through multiple approaches, I earnestly hope to create a D-8 digital marketplace, and create a suitable-for-all resilient post-pandemic cooperation model to ensure the common interests of all member states."

He said to minimise the worsening effects of Covid-19 on the world economy, Bangladesh would like to explore all avenues for economic recovery through collaboration among the D-8 member states.

Bangladesh believes in free and equitable access to markets for not only products but also services. It would facilitate D-8 governments and private sectors to come together to highlight how D-8 member states can deepen connectivity, networking, and collaboration in light of experiences of the Covid-19 era.

Foreign ministers from the other D-8 member states also virtually attended the meeting.

Earlier, on April 5-6, the 43rd session of the D-8 Commission was held. On April 5, D-8 Business Forum and the first D-8 Youth summit were held.