

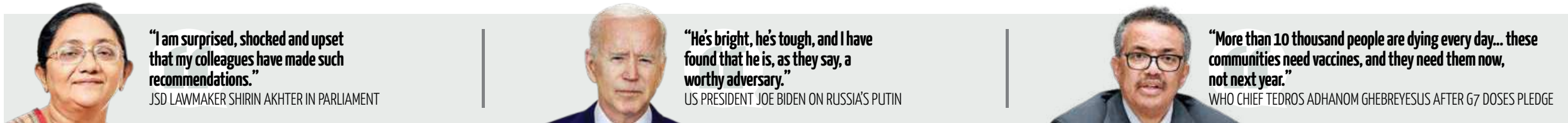


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TANGAIL SAL FOREST

Two-thirds gone as greed at play

Its areas declining fast amid continuous tree felling, grabbing

MIRZA SHAKIL, Tangail

The Sal Forest in Tangail is shrinking fast as mindless grabbing and tree felling continue, threatening the existence of this natural treasure and pushing its flora and fauna towards extinction.

While foresters and locals keep playing the blame game for the destruction of a major forest, almost two-thirds or around 80,000 acres of it has been wiped out, according to Forest Department data.

Once a large, dense jungle and home to a variety of wildlife including tigers, peacocks and langurs, the forest was spread across more than 1,22,876 acres of land in 1925.

Officials say its area is decreasing fast due to years of tree felling and indiscriminate grabbing by both locals as well as influential outsiders who also constructed different structures, including concrete ones, on the forestland.

They get phone calls from powerful people, including top government officials, whenever they take initiatives to reclaim the grabbed land.

Now, natural forest remains on less than

40,000 acres of land while around 38,000 acres of land remains grabbed, said Dr Jahurul Haque, divisional forest officer in Tangail.

The forest now also sees plantations of various fruits and vegetables like pineapple, banana, jujube, guava, mango, lemon, papaya, arum, turmeric and ginger on grabbed land. The growers use excessive insecticides and other chemicals, destroying the ecological balance as well as biodiversity.

WHAT FORESTERS SAY

On May 6, foresters recovered 45 logs of Sal (Gajari) trees felled in Harindhara area under Dokhala Range of Madhupur upazila. Earlier, on April 26, some 200 logs were seized in Gargavindapur under Boheratoil Range in Sakhipur upazila.

Abdul Ahad, ranger of Dokhala Range, said both locals and outsiders have destroyed the forest and occupied vast tracts of it. People from ethnic minority communities leased out most of the grabbed forestland to local Muslims or outsiders.

"A local man alone has kept around 250 acres of forest in Madhupur occupied and

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Logs of illegally felled trees are loaded on a three-wheeler in Modhupur Sal Forest. They were seized and taken to the forest department office in Tangail's Modhupur upazila. The forest area is depleting fast due to illegal logging and grabbing of forest land. The photo was taken recently.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

GUARD OF HONOUR TO FFs When will their mindset change?

Chumki, Shirin blast JS body's recommendation for excluding female UNOs

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Awami League lawmaker Meher Afroz yesterday in parliament joined the ongoing protest against a parliamentary body's recommendation to exclude female UNOs in giving the guard of honour to freedom fighters after their death.

In the discussion on the proposed budget for 2021-22, Meher Afroz, chief of the parliamentary standing committee on the women and child affairs ministry, said she couldn't even imagine how a parliamentary watchdog, in this case, the Liberation War Affairs ministry, could come up with such a recommendation.

Besides, Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal MP Shirin Akhter yesterday in parliament also raised the issue and demanded intervention of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to prevent the implementation of the recommendation.

Meher Afroz said those who are making

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LOW COVID TESTING RATE Fees, fear, lack of awareness to blame

MOHAMMAD AL-MASUM MOLLA

Panchagarh, a bordering district, is home to 11 lakh people. But the number of daily Covid tests in the country's northernmost district hardly gives any indication of its population.

The data provided by the health directorate says it all: only nine people turned up for Covid test in the district in 24 hours till 8:00am yesterday, and two of them were found to be carrying the virus.

This means the virus positivity rate there is 22 percent, much higher than the national positivity rate.

The number of tests conducted the day before was 10, and three of those were positive. On Sunday, the same number of people got their tests done and one was positive.

This is the picture of Covid testing in the rural hinterlands though many of the districts outside the capital are witnessing a spike in both infections and deaths.

Health officials at the grassroots level said they have the capacity of testing as many as 300 samples a day in each district, and there is no shortage of testing kits.

But people with symptoms are not coming forward to get their tests done mainly due to ignorance and fear of isolation if detected positive for the virus, they said.

The Tk-100 fee is another reason for the low number of tests in the rural areas as many poor people feel discouraged to get tested because of it, they said suggesting waiver of the fee for the poor.

Md Fazlur Rahman, civil surgeon of Panchagarh, said they have been trying to motivate people to go for tests as the deadly virus is spreading in the bordering district. But people don't seem to care.

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Curbs in more bordering areas

Positivity rate rises to 14.27 percent

STAR REPORT

As the Covid-19 positivity rate rose to 14.27 percent yesterday, restrictions, including lockdown, were imposed in more areas of the country's border districts to slow down transmission.

Fifty more people died of Covid-19 in 24 hours preceding 8:00am yesterday, taking the official death toll to 13,222.

The death rate stood at 1.59 percent, said the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS).

Another 3,319 infections were recorded in the same period. With this, the caseload reached 8,33,291 in the country. The overall positive rate is now 13.4 percent, said the DGHS.

The Covid-19 situation in the border districts has been worse than that of

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New poor is temporary

Finance minister says no measures needed for them

REJAUL KARIM BYRON

It is universally acknowledged that the global coronavirus pandemic has widened inequalities in nations all over -- including Bangladesh.

But if one looks at the proposed budget for the 2021-22 fiscal year due to begin on July 1, one gets the impression that "new poor" does not exist in the country.

It turns out that the architect of the fiscal plan, Finance Minister AHM Mustafa Kamal, does not actually believe that many slipped into poverty after their livelihoods were upended by draconian measures enforced to slow the spread of the coronavirus.

"Look outside, everything is operating as normal. No store is closed now. Salons, sweetmeat shops, corner shops, none are closed. So why would there be new poor?" he told The Daily Star in an interview earlier this week.

About 20.5 percent of the population was already living in poverty and the pandemic raised the ratio to 30 percent, according to the World Bank.

Some 1.60 crore of new poor was created by the pandemic, according to an estimate of the Centre for

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BUSINESS Bad loans rise after payment holiday ends partially

As feared, default loans went up substantially in the first quarter of 2021 after the central bank partially withdrew the moratorium facility. Non-performing loans stood at Tk 95,085 crore in March, up 7.1 per cent from three months earlier and 2.8 per cent year-on-year, data from the Bangladesh Bank showed. The loan moratorium facility had barred banks from downgrading the credit status of their borrowers throughout 2020 even if they failed to pay instalments regularly.

STORY ON B1

Ask them to file wealth statements

JP MP says govt should ask all bureaucrats, business persons to do so

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Jatiya Party senior lawmaker Mujibul Haque Chunnu yesterday demanded the government issue an order asking civil-military bureaucrats and business persons to file wealth statements in two to three months.

Taking part in the discussion on the proposed national budget for 2021-22 fiscal year in parliament, the JP co-chairman said he, along with all other MPs, had submitted his wealth statement on an affidavit to the Election Commission before the 2018 national polls.

The lawmaker said he was ready to submit his up-to-date wealth statement in seven days if the government asked for it. "And if a single taka is found beyond my declared wealth statement, the government can confiscate it."

"Through the Speaker [Shirin Sharmin Chaudhury], I urge that

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An excavator knocks down illegal structures along the Buriganga during an eviction drive by Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority (BIWTA) in Kamrangirchar's Battery Ghat area yesterday. The BIWTA carries out such drives periodically to free the river from encroachers.

PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

'ATTEMPT TO RAPE, MURDER' No matter how powerful, none will be spared

DB officials assure Pori Moni; Nasir, Omi on 7-day remand

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Officials of Detective Branch of police yesterday assured actor Pori Moni that those who attempted to rape and kill her would be brought to book, regardless of how influential they might be.

Speaking to The Daily Star after coming out of the DB office in the capital in the afternoon, she said the officials assured her that she would get justice.

Speaking to reporters later, Harun Or Rashid, joint commissioner of DB (North), said those involved in the incident would not be spared.

The popular actor filed a case on Monday against six people, including former president of Uttara Club Limited Nasir U Mahmud and businessman Tuhin Siddique Omi, over attempted rape and murder.

The previous day, she alleged that Nasir and Omi tried to rape and kill her around midnight of June 9 when the latter had taken her to Dhaka Boat Club in Birulia, Savar.

She raised the allegations in a post on her verified Facebook page and then again later the same day during a press conference at her home, where she named the two perpetrators.

In the case statement, Pori Moni said Nasir and others ganged up on her at the club and forced her to drink alcohol by putting the neck of a bottle into her mouth, physically assaulted her and tried to rape her.

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