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PHOTO: STAR

CVASU builds dormitory in protected forest

MOSTAFA YOUSUF

Chattogram Veterinary and Animal Science University (CVASU) has built a dormitory in a protected forest -- which was leased out to them by the land ministry for building an institute for coastal biodiversity, marine fisheries and wildlife research, amid strong opposition from the forest department.

The five acres of forest land, given to CVASU, is in Doria Nagar of Cox's Bazar, an area which has already been experiencing a massive onslaught on its forest land due to Rohingya influx.

The land ministry changed the status of the protected forest in 2015 to facilitate the lease to CVASU. Once in possession of the forest, the university authorities constructed a five-storey dormitory in 2018, violating the lease conditions that prevent them from using the land for any other purpose than building the institute.

They also built a tin-shed structure, which will be used as a hatchery, which is yet to begin its work.

This land is an important habitat of the endangered Asian elephant, which has been in a dire state due to destruction of habitat, grabbing of the forestland and continuous deforestation in the region.

Besides, the forest is home to various species of deer, wild dog, monkeys and badgers.

Administrators, academics and political leaders check-in at the dormitory when they go on excursions in Cox's Bazar, the most sought-after tourist spot of the country, alleged locals.

During a recent visit, this correspondent found a foundation stone within the boundary of the dormitory, which reads: Nurul Islam Nahid, former education minister, laid the foundation stone of Institute of Coastal Biodiversity, Marine Fisheries and Wildlife Research, dated November 22, 2015.

A hundred yards to the west of the five acres of forest land was a vast field, made by levelling hills, prompting the Department of Environment (DoE) to file a lawsuit against the university authorities in 2018.

An inspection report of DoE in 2018 attributed the death of an elephant due to the steep cutting of hills by CVASU.

Kamal Hossen, professor of Forestry and Environmental Science at Chittagong University, told The Daily Star criticised the move of leasing out a forest and not utilising it for the cause it was given.

"I went to the spot where I found two tin-shed structures.

Sometimes in the name of development, we don't hesitate to sacrifice forests," he said.

Syeda Rizwana Hasan, executive director of Bangladesh Environmental Lawyers Association (Bela), said the dormitory has to be demolished and the CVASU authorities must be asked for compensatory afforestation.

"The lease must be revoked. They must afforest the area three times the forest they damaged," she said.

Contacted over phone, Dr Mohammed Nurul Absar Khan, dean, faculty of fisheries and also in-charge of the facility, told The Daily Star that the research institute was "still in review" and that the hatchery was in its final stages.

When asked why there was a dormitory in violation of the lease, he said, "I don't owe you an explanation in this regard."

Meanwhile, Cox's Bazar Forest Division (South) declined to comment on the construction of the dormitory.

About the status of the case filed against CVASU authorities, Sheikh Nazmul Huda, deputy director of DoE (Cox's Bazar), said he joined at the end of 2019 and was not aware of the issue.

"We will look into the matter," he said.

Contacted, Land Minister Saifuzzaman Chowdhury told The Daily Star that he was unaware of the issue and that he would also "look into it."

FEMALE TEA GARDEN WORKERS

Workplace sanitation still a far cry for them

MINTU DESHWARA and HASAN MEER,
Back from Sreemangal

For the last 20 years, Chinami Madraji has been working at a tea garden in Moulvibazar. Rain or shine, the 35-year-old mother of five works for eight to 10 hours a day.

However, there is no toilet facility or fresh water supply in the garden sections (working areas) for her to relieve or cleanse herself in between work.

"We are forced to relieve ourselves out in the open and cleanse ourselves with water from nearby waterbodies. Otherwise we have to go to the labour lines (residential areas of workers), which is around four miles away," she told The Daily Star recently.

Not just Chinami, hundreds of tea garden workers, mostly women, have to face this ordeal every day.

According to a survey conducted by this newspaper among 100 female tea garden workers of 10 tea gardens in three districts of Sylhet division, it was found that 80 percent of them work at least eight hours a day; 60 percent urinate at least three times during work out in the open; 80 percent relieve themselves daily during work in the open and 10 percent use soap for cleaning, even though which is crucial amid the pandemic, while 70 percent use sand.

The survey also found that the workers have no sanitary latrine facilities at work sections and almost all of them are suffering from various chronic illnesses. Fifty percent of them get treatment at dispensaries, 20 percent at home or from quacks and 20 percent at government hospitals.

The survey was conducted in the middle of this year at Kurma, Dalai, Alinagar, Rajghat, Gazipur and Patharia tea gardens in Moulvibazar; Lalchand and Deondi tea gardens in Habiganj and Khadimnagar and Khan tea gardens in Sylhet.

Sunil Biswas, a private practitioner of Deondi Tea Garden in Chunarughat upazila of Habiganj, said, "Most female tea workers who visit my chamber suffer from urinary tract infection (an infection in any part of the urinary system -- kidneys, ureters, bladder and urethra) and about 50 percent of them face uterine (relating to the uterus or womb) problems. They lack proper sanitation facilities at workplaces or even at home to some extent."

"Though they [female tea garden workers] use cloths during menstrual period, it must be changed every six hours, otherwise their reproductive organs may get infected, followed by lower abdominal pain and inability to conceive," stated Dr Chowdhury Jalal Uddin Murshed, civil surgeon of Moulvibazar.

According to the Statistical Handbook on Bangladesh Tea Industry 2020, there are 166 gardens in the country with a total of 1,40,164 tea workers.

In the three districts of Sylhet division, there are 135 tea gardens where 46,450 registered female workers and 15,153 casual female workers work.

According to experts and activists, because of the hard labour of the workers, the industry has been booming since the first commercial garden was established at Malnichhara in Sylhet district in 1854. During the sector's 166-year history, the

industry saw the highest ever production of 9.67 crore kilogrammes of tea in 2019.

However, the living standard of the workers of this thriving industry, majority of whom are women, is way below standard, with not even proper sanitary latrines in the labour lines and the garden's work sections, they said.

Besides daily wage, the workers are also provided with other benefits such as housing, ration and treatment. But that seems to have little to no impact on improving their present conditions, they added.

Philip Gain, director of Society for Environment and Human Development (SHED), who conducted a survey on tea workers in 2015-16, said, "There is no sanitary latrine in any of the workplaces at the tea gardens even though there is a clear provision to arrange lavatory and washroom services under section-51 of Labour Rules 2015."

He said section-50 of the rules also emphasises arranging fresh water for workers.

Mohammad Mahbubul Hasan, deputy inspector general of the Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishments in Sreemangal, confirmed that there are no toilets in the tea garden sections (workplaces) except a couple of exceptions. "Tea garden owners or managers have repeatedly been asked to provide the service. Even notices have been issued, but to no avail," he informed.

He also said there is no provision in the Bangladesh Labour Act to impose a fine in this regard. Hence, garden authorities

are repeatedly making excuses and getting away with it.

Even the state-owned gardens lack this facility for workers, he added.

Rambhajan Kairi, immediate-past general secretary of Bangladesh Tea Workers' Union, said, "We have discussed the issue with tea garden authorities but to no avail. They [authorities] don't seem to understand that a healthy worker will work more productively... the law must be implemented," he said.

Contacted, a top official of Bangladesh Tea Association (BTA), the representative body of the tea estates in the country, said they have toilet facilities and access to clean water for workers at factories but not at the gardens where they work in the open.

About the labour law to ensure toilet facility at workplaces, the official said the law is for the general purpose of the country's industries. "This [tea sector] is over a century-old sector, which used to have a different set of laws, and is still tradition-oriented."

However, if any organisation is interested in setting up the facilities such as mobile toilets, they can send their proposals in writing about their plans regarding implementation, support and maintenance, the official said, adding that they will look into it then.

Dr Mohammad Ali, director of Bangladesh Tea Research Institute, said, "There are no toilets in the tea gardens' work sections. However, we are providing toilets and potable water to the tea workers' residences. There are plans to do so in the workplaces as well."