

# Water crisis hits Lawachhara wildlife hard

MINTU DESHWARA, Moulvibazar

Winter is a difficult time for animals that reside in Moulvibazar's Lawachhara rain forest. As its streams run dry, quite rapidly, at the onset of the cold season, its diverse range of inhabitants don't have an option but to look for water elsewhere.

But this is not just related to winter. According to a forest department official, the forest never faced a water crisis even three decades ago, but rampant deforestation over the years has led to soil erosion in the forest, which ends up in the streams and reduces their capacity for water retention drastically.

Besides thirst, this creates another problem for the wild animals. Starved of water, they often make forays into nearby villages under Kamalganj upazila. But far from being welcomed, they're regularly treated with hostility.

Saju Marchiang, a tourist guide of Lawachhara forest, told this correspondent that around 15-16 streams serve as the main source of water for the wild animals, zig-zagging along the forest through areas such as Jankichhara, Depalchhara, Jagchhara and Bagmarachhara.

According to the Wildlife Management and Nature Conservation Department in Sylhet, the 1,250 hectares of forest land is home to rare, endangered and even nearly-extinct animals,



The animals don't just need water for drinking, but they also have a need to bathe and play in it.

PHOTO: STAR

including gibbons, various species of snakes, junglefowl, pangolins, barking deer, fishing cats, wild boar leopards, squirrels, king cobras, pythons and more.

Talking to The Daily Star, Swapan Deb Sajal, director of Bangladesh Banya Prani Sheba Foundation (Bangladesh Wild Animal Care Foundation), said, "We rescue around 100 injured animals from the areas surrounding Lawachhara every year, especially during the dry season."

"The animals don't just need water for drinking, but they also have a need to bathe and play in it," he informed.

On the other hand, residents of the villages adjacent to Lawachhara

say their hands are tied too. "Wild animals, including panthers, start coming near our villages in search of water during this season. We only act in self-defence," said Sadek Mia, one such resident of a nearby village.

Md Nurul Mohmain Milton, general secretary of Environmentalist Journalist Forum, thinks there's a role for the government to play here. "Deforestation is the main cause for the forest's food and water woes," he said.

"As the eroded soil ends up in the streams, they go almost completely dry between October and April. The government should have this in consideration and make arrangements accordingly to

ensure neither the animals nor the villagers suffer," he added.

Convener of Lawachhara Forest and Biodiversity Protection Movement Joly Paul told this correspondent, "This forest is very important for the environment, ecology and biodiversity of this region. The shortage of water is leading some of the animals to go extinct! Authorities concerned should dig ponds in the forest to retain water and protect the wildlife."

She suggested putting up temporary embankments in the streams, for five to six months a year, in order to help retain water for the animals.

Contacted, Rezaul Karim Chowdhury, divisional forest officer of the Wildlife Management and Nature Conservation Department in Sylhet, said, "We have already set up two water reservoirs in the forest area and have sent proposals to build more."

However, ecology and biodiversity conservation researcher Pavel Partha said he doesn't think much of the department's initiatives. "The two ponds by the forest department is nothing for such a huge forest," he said.

He said the government needs to study the forest's water geography and address the reasons behind the drought, namely unplanned excavation, rubber plantation, development, sand extraction and more.

## Constables can't seem

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The study, conducted on 364 traffic police officers, was published in the Indian Journal of Medical Science and Clinical Research.

Meanwhile, another study on air pollution found that over 40 percent of traffic police officers suffer from some form of sleep problems. Over 56 percent said they heard a constant ringing sound, even during sleep.

Around 28 percent of them suffered from mental health issues, stated the research.

Shakila Yeasmin, a physician of Institute of Epidemiology Disease Control and Research, who conducted the research, said it was conducted from October to December in 2018.

Dr Md Emdadul Hoque, superintendent of police (SP) of Central Police Hospital, told The Daily Star that traffic police who come for treatment suffer from asthma, bronchitis, allergy, low haemoglobin, hearing loss, severe headaches, abdominal pain, inflammation of the eyes, liver damage, joint pain and heart problems.

"We provide them with available medicines from the outdoor for free. We try our best to provide the best treatment from the hospital," he said.

Various studies have shown that the air in Dhaka contains lead, sulfur dioxide, nitrogen oxides, hydrocarbons, ozone gas, carbon monoxide and other harmful

chemicals and various types of particles.

Dr Rezaul Haque, assistant professor of National Institute of Chest Disease and Hospital, told The Daily Star that in a research they found that the air quality of Dhaka is worse than any other city in the country.

"If any person works in this environment for a long period of time, it is only natural for them to develop asthma, bronchitis and severe lung infections," he said.

Asked about remedy, Dr Haque suggested using masks round the clock.

He also said traffic police should consult with doctors immediately if they develop any symptom, adding they should get check-ups every six months.

Shaiful Islam, commissioner of DMP, said traffic police do suffer from different diseases as a result of their exposure to noise and air pollution. However, this is part of their regular work.

"We are now briefing police officials to take precautionary measures, like wearing masks, putting some cotton in their ears, etc.," added the DMP chief.

"Some people honk and some emit carbon dioxide without any reason. We are also trying to reduce these problems. Besides, we are in discussions with the city corporations so that they spray water regularly on the streets to reduce dust," he said.



A lot of their woe stems from the stressful demands of the profession, often leading to engaging in arguments and shouting.

PHOTO: PALASH KHAN

## Brahmaputra dying

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of Jamalpur as the culprit that has changed the shape of the mighty river over the last three decades.

While visiting Kalibari and Kachari Ferry Chat areas recently, it was found that the river is now riddled with household garbage, which is another contributor to its slow descent.

What's more, Ibnul Sayeed Rana, member of Brahmaputra Waterkeepers Bangladesh, told this correspondent that when they visited different points of the river on various occasions, they found that it has even changed its course over the years, shrinking at different points.

As a result, floods have damaged

community life over the past few years, seriously affecting crop fields, houses, livestock, and displaced thousands of people in Mymensingh region, Rana added.

Once upon a time, huge boats carrying hundreds of maunds of agricultural products used to be transported from Mymensingh to diverse destinations, including Narayanganj, Manikganj and Gazipur, year-round.

Back then, the ghats of the region buzzed with traders coming in from other regions, said 75-year old boatman Chand Mia at Kachari Ferry Ghat. But as the river's fate has changed, the people who live off it are also becoming prone to more and more uncertainty.

At an open discussion jointly organised by Brahmaputra Surakhha Andolon and Bangladesh Environmental Lawyers Association recently, speakers said rivers are the veins of a country and as such, they should be nurtured properly.

Advocate Nazrul Islam Chhunu, convener of Jono Uddyog Mymensingh, a social initiative said, Brahmaputra, the lifeline of Mymensingh region, requires proper dredging and monitoring by the concerned department, as well as eviction of the grabbers to ensure its protection.

For permanent protection of the river, the government must follow the Classification Survey (CS) Khatyan, added Chhunu.

Speakers at the session also said over two crore people of this region could be benefited if the river is properly dredged.

Contacted, Arafat Ahmed, sub-divisional engineer of BWDB, Mymensingh, admitted to the complaints, saying they have prepared a list of grabbers and will start eviction drives soon. They will also launch drives against polluters and sand lifters, he said.

Meanwhile, a 227-kilometre dredging project in Brahmaputra river from its offtake in Dewanganj upazila of Jamalpur to Toak in Mymensingh's Gafargaon upazila that was started in 2019, at a cost of around Tk 2,763 crore, is slated to finish in June 2024, he added.

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## Causing waterlogging

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water from flowing through."

The place that went underwater poses risks of serious accidents at nighttime, said residents.

"Two people, including a university student, died after falling into roadside drains in the city recently, and we are in fear of such accidents," said resident Saleh Ahmed. "There are no signs to mark the drains."

Contacted, Prof Aniruddha Ghosh, head of medicine at Chattogram Medical College Hospital, said if people pass through the filthy water, they may suffer from different skin conditions, like itching, eczema and scabies.

Contacted, CCC Deputy Conservancy Officer Morshedul Alam Chowdhury said he was unaware of the situation.

"CCC is not working on Chakhtal canal; it's CDA that is working there, as part of the mega project to address the city's waterlogging issue," he said.

Contacted, CDA Chief Engineer Hasan Bin Shams said the engineering core of Bangladesh Army is implementing the project under CDA, and so, the project director would be able to explain it best.

Contacted, Lt Col Shah Ali, director of the mega project, acknowledged the situation and said they are working on resolving the issue.

"We have to build temporary embankments on canals when we build retaining walls on both sides," he said. "We have to continue development work and not inconvenience residents at the same time."

"I will talk to an official of the sub-contractor working in the area regarding this issue," he added.

## 3 sisters who fled

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After the three left the house, one of their aunts filed a general diary with Adabor Police Station on Thursday.

Earlier on Friday, the Rapid Action Battalion informed the media that they had identified their location in Jashore. Later, police said they rescued the girls.

## Debate over

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Saddam Hussain, assistant general secretary of that Ducus committee and incumbent general secretary of Chhatra League DU unit, said, "We urge the administration to hold the next election immediately."

Amanullah Aman, member secretary of Jatiyata-badi Chhatra Dal DU unit, said such remarks by the VC reflect the administration's unwillingness to hold the polls. His sentiments were echoed by Faiz Ullah, president of Bangladesh Students' Union.

If the administration sincerely wanted it, they could arrange a fair election, Faiz said, urging the authorities to ensure co-existence of all groups at the campus.



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Date: 21/11/2021

Memo No. CEDP/GBC/2021-22/G14

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