

TANGAIL'S MADHUPUR Foresters, Garo people at odds over land

MIRZA SHAKIL

Tensions have been brewing between members of the Garo community and foresters over pieces of land in the Amtali forest of Tangail's Madhupur upazila.

While Garos have been cultivating crops on the land for generations, the forest department has recently adopted a plan to dig an artificial lake there for tourists.

A few days ago, the authorities put up a sign forbidding people from entering the land, saying it was "reserved forestland".

Locals have been opposing the lake from the very beginning, fearing endangerment of their livelihood and culture.

Witnesses said some foresters, led by Dokhala Range Officer Ismail Hossain, went to the area on Wednesday after learning that Garos, including Kaushala Nokrek, a well-known farmer in the area, were ploughing the land with some other workers.

The rangers retreated following an altercation between the two sides. They, however, took policemen to the spot later to stop the farmers.

Garo farmers alleged that the rangers threatened to shoot them.

Contacted, Kaushala said they have been cultivating the land for generations. The foresters, on Wednesday, went there and threatened to shoot.

"I asked them if the weapons were provided to them by the government to shoot us," she told The Daily Star.

Her question was met with a threat.

She asked this correspondent, "What will we eat if we can't cultivate?"

Range Officer Ismail said they went to the spot to forbid the Garos from ploughing land with tractors.

"But they continued their work."

He denied the allegation of threatening to open fire. "We didn't say we would shoot them. When we asked them to stop ploughing, they chanted 'shoot us'. We then left the area."

Local Garo leader Eugene Nokrek, also the president of Joyenshahi Adivasi Unnayan Parishad, told The Daily Star that several indigenous families had been cultivating crops for a long time on the lands where the forest department plans to dig the lake.

The department is constructing a new rest house close to the area.

Local lawmakers, following the agriculture ministry's directives, have spoken to locals in this regard. The locals, however, did not agree to the lake or the rest house.

Eugene further said, "We think it is important to resolve the issue quickly through discussions."

Sajjadur Rahman, divisional forest officer in Tangail, said though the locals

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The journey of joy has turned into pain for holidaymakers, who are heading for their home districts to celebrate Eid-ul-Azha. This picture taken around 11:30am yesterday shows passengers bound for northern districts are stuck in a long tailback on Dhaka-Tangail highway near Tangail town. The snarl-up of vehicles stretched about 25 kilometres at the east end of Bangabandhu Bridge.

PHOTO: MIRZA SHAKIL

G20 SUMMIT IN BALI

West seeks to unblock Ukraine's grain ports

Russian FM walks out of the talks amid criticism; artillery barrages pepper Donbas

AGENCIES

Western officials yesterday tried to coax Russia into allowing Ukraine to ship its grain out to the world as the four-month-old war threatened to bring hunger to countries far away from the battlefields.

Moscow, however, accused the West of waging economic warfare on Russia by attempting to isolate it with sanctions imposed over the February 24 invasion.

On the frontlines in Ukraine's eastern Donbas region, officials reported continued Russian shelling of towns and villages ahead of an anticipated new push to grasp more territory.

At a meeting of G20 foreign ministers in Bali, Indonesia, some of the staunchest critics of the Russian invasion confronted the Kremlin's top diplomat Sergei Lavrov.

High on their concerns was getting grain shipments from Ukraine out of blockaded Black Sea ports.

At a plenary session, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken urged Moscow to let Ukrainian grain out to the world, a Western official said.

"He addressed Russia directly, saying: 'To our Russian colleagues: Ukraine is not your country. Its grain is not your grain. Why are you blocking the ports? You should let the grain out,'" the official said.

Earlier, Lavrov had berated the West, saying that instead of focusing on how to tackle global economic problems at the meeting, ministers had embarked on "frenzied criticism" of Russia over the Ukraine conflict, reports Reuters.

He walked out of a morning session as German counterpart Annalena Baerbock criticised Moscow over its

invasion, diplomats said.

Indonesian Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi called on the G20 to "find a way forward" to address global challenges and said the repercussions of the war, including rising energy and food prices, would hit poor countries the hardest.

The biggest conflict in Europe since World War Two has killed thousands, displaced millions and flattened Ukrainian cities.

On Sunday, Moscow declared it had "liberated" Luhansk and now plans to capture parts of neighbouring Donetsk it does not control.

Luhansk governor Serhiy Gaidai said yesterday Russian forces were indiscriminately shelling villages, towns and cities.

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Bangladesh observes state mourning today

UNB, Dhaka

Bangladesh is observing a one-day state mourning today for former Japanese prime minister and the country's true friend Shinzo Abe.

The Cabinet Division issued a notification in this regard yesterday evening.

As a mark of Bangladesh's deepest respect for Abe, the national flag will fly half-mast on all government, semi-government and autonomous institutions' offices, and missions abroad.

Special prayers will be offered today for the eternal peace of the departed soul.

Abe, 67, died yesterday after being shot while delivering a campaign speech in southern Japan.

Policeman, 3 others held with yaba

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, Ctg

Members of Rab-7 arrested four men, including a police constable, with 5,280 pieces of yaba pills in Chattogram.

Upal Chakma, 45, a constable of CMP City Special Branch, Nantu Das, 42, Kamrul Islam, 30, and Ghiyasuddin, 42, were arrested near Chattogram Medical College Hospital around 11:15pm on Thursday.

A case has been filed against them under the Narcotics Control Act with Panchlaish Police Station, said Sadequr Rahman, inspector (investigation) of the police station.

Seven die from Covid

STAR REPORT

Seven people died from Covid-19 in 24 hours till 8:00am yesterday, read a press release of the Directorate General of Health Services.

With this, the death toll in the country now stands at 29,195 and the death rate at 1.47 percent.

At least 1,611 fresh cases were recorded during this period.

The current positivity rate stands at 16.82 percent and the total positivity rate at 13.77 percent.

A total of 9,580 samples were tested across the country during this period.

Meanwhile, at least 890 patients have recovered from Covid-19 within this time.

SUNNY MURDER

Rab arrests three more

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Rajshahi

Rab arrested three more persons for their alleged involvement in Rajshahi's Sunny murder.

Mohammad Moyeen, the prime accused in the case, his mother Bithi, and Habibi Kumkum Saba were arrested from Kurigram, said Rab.

The trio was trying to flee the country, claimed Lt Col Riaz Shahriar, commanding officer of Rab-5, at a press briefing in Rajshahi Rab office yesterday.

Meanwhile, two teams of Rab-5 arrested two other accused -- Raheem, 20, and Shahi, 21 -- from Dhaka and Narayanganj on Thursday.

On July 3, a group of miscreants abducted Sunny, son of Rafiqul Islam Pakhi, vice-president of the motor workers' union, from Rajshahi Medical College Hospital premises.

Later, he was stabbed to death in Hetemkhan Sahajipara area of Rajshahi city.

Homegoers get stuck in tailbacks

FROM PAGE 1

Meanwhile, cattle traders have been in fear of losing money as trucks going to Dhaka from the northern districts remained stuck in traffic.

In Tangail, Traffic Inspector Delwar Hossain said the tailbacks happened as the number of vehicles multiplied for the holidays. Some trucks going out of order in the middle of the road also created bottlenecks.

Construction work

on Dhaka-Mymensingh highway has occupied two lanes of the road at multiple places between Tongi Bridge and Chandana intersection, creating bottlenecks that resulted in a 26km tailback.

Motorists said it took them over two hours to travel just about two kilometres. Congestion was most severe in Konabari and Safipur Palli Bidyut areas, they added.

Those going to the southern towns spent

much less time on the roads despite the tailbacks near the Padma Bridge toll plazas. But finding a vehicle was a major challenge for them.

Pick-up and truck drivers took Tk 500 from each individual they carried from the capital's Jatrabari to Bhanga in Faridpur. Some trucks carried people with cattle.

"My mother and I had to board a pick-up ... She fell sick on the way as the vehicle got stuck at a toll

plaza on the expressway for 15 minutes," said Mahmud Hossain, who is a student.

In Gabtoli terminal in the capital yesterday evening, several thousand people were seen waiting for their buses that could not enter Dhaka because of congestion on the highways. Around 5:30pm, Parveen Begum, who was with her elderly mother and three children, said she had been waiting since 1:00pm.

"My mother and children

have lost all energy. The transport company employees say they do not know when the bus will reach Dhaka," Parveen said.

Those travelling shorter distances paid the drivers of trucks and three-wheelers to carry them for a lot more than the usual fare. People were seen travelling on the roofs of buses.

However, river traffic was smooth yesterday: 14 launches left for Barishal with a good number of passengers. The

anticipation that there would be a scarcity of launch passengers because of the Padma Bridge was proven wrong.

At Kamalapur Railway Station, as trains arrived behind schedule, hundreds of people struggled to get on board through the doors and windows. Many were seen happy to be able to climb to the rooftop.

[Our correspondents in Tangail, Gazipur, Munshiganj and Manikganj contributed to this report.]

Hope against hope

FROM PAGE 1

The first unit of the 1,320-megawatt Payra plant and the 525MW Barapukuria plant are now generating 763MW -- less than half their combined capacity.

Of a total of 152 power plants across the country, only 59 were operational on Thursday, according to the Power Grid Company of Bangladesh (PGCB).

The rest were out of operation either because of the fuel crisis or due to maintenance issues.

On Thursday, 28 power plants were out of operation due to fuel shortage, and that number was 19 on June 30, when the government started power rationing, showed the PGCB data.

The government is trying to cut dependency on imported fuel and gas-based power plants and rely more on domestic gas production, coal-fired power plants and imported electricity.

To save electricity,

the government has already instructed restrictions on lighting in social programmes, shopping malls, shops and households and it is contemplating shortening office hours, introducing "home office" for its officials and rescheduling school timing.

An official of PGCB told The Daily Star that the government only said "September" hoping that the winter will reduce demand for electricity, and that the timeline is not based on any study.

Prominent energy expert M Tamim said the difference of peak-hour demand in winter and summer is more than 4,000MW.

"Currently, our national AC [air-conditioner] consumption load is more than 2,500MW at peak hours. The government recommends setting the thermostats at 25 degrees Celsius. Even if everybody adjusts their thermostats to 24 degrees, it would save 700-800MW more in

total," he said.

He also said that as per his knowledge, no new coal-based power plant will be in operation by September.

"The second unit of Payra is ready but not operating due to lack of a transmission line, which is likely to be ready in December. We are paying Tk 103 crore every month in capacity payment for this power plant running at half-capacity [the first unit is running at 660MW]. And through the same transmission line, Rampal will also supply electricity. Adani will also come next year."

The Daily Star reported earlier that the transmission line to import electricity from India's Adani power plant will not be ready by this year.

M Tamim, however, welcomed the power-saving recommendations made by the government, saying it was the only solution to reduce the electricity demand.

Only one out of three units of the Barapukuria coal power plant are operating, using coal produced in Barapukuria. These units cannot go into full production because the coal mine is not producing enough coal.

Asked about Barapukuria power plant, Tamim said, "Since we are not able to operate the Barapukuria plant because of a lack of coal, firing up three new coal-based power plants would not solve the crisis unless coal supply is ensured."

Replying to a question, Tawfiq-e-Elahi Chowdhury said during Thursday's briefing that the full capacity of the Barapukuria power plant cannot be utilised as coal production at the nearby coal mine has remained suspended for development of the next phase of the mine.

"The next phase will be ready for production after a month," he said.

"The Payra power plant's capacity also has

remained underutilised as a substation required for power evacuation is being repaired for back-feeding electricity to the Rampal power plant."

Even if the government adopts austerity measures and keeps fuel-based power plants out of operation, the capacity charges to be paid to the power plants will continue to be a huge burden.

Experts suggested renegotiating contracts with power plant owners and suspending capacity charges for the time being.

According to data of Institute for Energy Economics and Financial Analysis (IEEFA), the government has paid a total of Tk 33,970 crore in "capacity payments" to the independent power producers, rental and quick rental power plants between 2017-18 and 2020-21.

In 2017-18, it was Tk 5,600 crore, in 2018-19 it was Tk 6,241 crore, in 2019-20 Tk 8,929 crore and in 2020-21 Tk 13,200 crore.

Flood death toll now 113

Says the DGHS

UNB, Dhaka

Although flood situation continues to improve in most places, another death was reported in Habiganj in 24 hours till yesterday morning, taking the total flood-related fatalities to 113.

The latest victim drowned in floodwater, according to the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS).

The total deaths were recorded between May 17 and July 8, it said.

Among the total deceased, 85 people died by drowning in floodwater, 15 from lightning strikes, two from snake bites, one from diarrhoea, and nine due to other reasons.

Of the deceased, 60 people died in Sylhet, 40 in Mymensingh, 12 in Rangpur and one in Dhaka division, it said.

Pilgrims pack Mt Arafat

FROM PAGE 12

before performing the symbolic "stoning of the devil" ceremony today.

"I am so happy to be here... This is the biggest hajj in the coronavirus era, but it isn't big enough yet," Egyptian pilgrim Saad Farhat Khalil, 49, told AFP. "There are one million here today, but if the Saudis allowed more, 10 million would have come," he added.

Entry roads were packed with worshippers as helicopters buzzed overhead and volunteers handed out bottles of water and collected rubbish in green plastic bags.

The hajj, usually one of the world's largest annual religious gatherings, is among the five pillars of Islam and must be undertaken by all Muslims with the means at least once in their lives.

In 2019, as in previous years, some 2.5 million Muslims from around the world took part, a figure that dropped to a few

thousand in 2020 and 60,000 in 2021.

A number of world leaders have participated this year, including Mauritania's president and Indonesia's vice president. State media yesterday reported that Chechen strongman Ramzan Kadyrov had arrived in the kingdom to perform the hajj.

At noon, thousands of pilgrims prayed in Namirah mosque, where the Prophet Mohammed (PBUH) gave sermons.

The hajj is taking place against the backdrop of a resurgence in the region, with some Gulf countries tightening restrictions to keep Covid outbreaks in check.

All participants were required to submit proof of vaccination and negative PCR tests. On reaching their white tent encampment at Mina on Thursday, they were handed bags containing masks and sanitiser.