

Over the years, Chattogram's Jungle Salimpur and surrounding areas have become home to migrants from different districts of the country, taking a toll on the environment, with 400 acres of hills disappearing in 15 years. Moreover, the area has also turned into a shelter for criminals as alleged by law enforcers. The government has finally taken the initiative to recover the Khas land of the areas, however, putting the residents in peril. Experts suggest that the crisis needs to be tackled by a proper integrated plan. On today's page, we discuss the manifold issues of Jungle Salimpur.

400 acres of hills GONE IN 15 YEARS



sites. They would apply for power connections in name of religious establishments, which were later shared with plot buyers, according to the deeds signed between both parties.

Any member of the 15 such Samabay Samity in Jungle Salimpur and adjacent areas was eligible to buy these plots with a non-judicial stamp worth Tk 300. They would call the Samity "Somaj" (society) and run all functions of a colony independently, including markets, local communication, Shalish (village court) and security forces, monitored by the Somaj.

According to sources, 13 barricades have been set up for security purposes in these areas, where outsiders are strictly prohibited, even if they are law enforcers. No one could enter the areas there without the permission of the "leaders" under the 15 Somaj.

Siatkunda UNO Shahadat Hossen said, "Utility lines have been installed illegally in the slums, encouraging more grabbing. During our primary assessment before eviction, we found an 11KV electricity line inside the illegal settlements."



'Where else do we go?'

FM MIZANUR RAHAMAN

Ten years ago, Rahima Akhter and her husband migrated to Chattogram from Noakhali and bought a plot in Chhinomul Bazar of Jungle Salimpur from the Mashiur gang. They paid Tk 30,000 for the land and built a semi-pucca house.

However, their good fortune did not last forever. Fifty-year-old Rahima and her family have been passing anxious days as the authorities cut off their illegal electricity line and asked the area's residents to evict the government land.

Rahima is not alone in this. Thousands of others migrated to the area and settled down after being victims of river erosion and other climate-related issues years ago. They bought lands in Jungle Salimpur and adjacent areas at a cheaper rate from land grabbers, who are not taking any responsibility now that the government is adamant to take back the Khas land.

"We have nowhere else to go. We spent our savings to buy the plots. Now the authorities are saying we live on illegal land. No one is willing to take any responsibility in the matter," a devastated Rahima told this correspondent recently.

Chhinomul inhabitants alleged that they lodged a petition with the High Court on behalf of Chattogram Mohanagar Chhinomul Bostibasi Somonny Sangram Parishad in 2017. The court directed against the eviction of the residents



before ensuring their rehabilitation. However, the administration has not considered the court orders and is now planning to evict them.

The dwellers also alleged that they are deprived the basic citizenship facilities. The union or upazila offices do not provide any citizenship rights to them. However, the authorities have claimed that though the area is under Sitakunda upazila, the dwellers of these settlements made a private road illegally from Bangla Bazar of Bayezid Link Road on the Central Gas distribution line. Their electricity lines are also illegal.

Sitakunda UNO Shahadat Hossen said, "The authorities blocked the illegal street, the main entrance to Jungle Salimpur at Bayezid Link Road as the street was built illegally on central gas distribution line of Karnaphuli."

"Members of the Rohingya community were also found here. They have no relevant documents to prove their citizenship. At times, we provide some facilities to them if they can show us verified documents proving their citizenship," said Sitakunda Upazila Chairman SM Al Mamun.

DC Mominur Rashid assured that residents will be rehabilitated gradually.



According to the official data, around 40,000 people have been residing at Ali Nagar Chhinomul slum. A DoE report stated that the administration launched several drives to evict the illegal settlers but failed.

A meeting was held regarding the issue on May 9, presided over by Additional Deputy Commissioner (Revenue) Masud Kamal, where 11 recommendations were made, including launching a full-fledged combined drive.

On July 31, a special meeting on Jungle Salimpur was held with the presence of Principal Secretary Ahmed Kaikaus at Chattogram Circuit House, where the deputy commissioner proposed several development projects on these plots. Kaikaus directed officials to take necessary steps following the proposals.

A meeting of higher-ups was held on the issue at the PMO on September 12. Five decisions taken at the meeting include eviction of the grabbers and rehabilitation of the real victims of the situation.

Deputy Commissioner Mominur Rahman said, "We have prepared a master plan, including some development projects in Jungle Salimpur, to save the existing hills and forest lands. At the same time, as per the directives of the PMO, we will rehabilitate the landless slum dwellers of the area gradually."

"Legal action is being taken against the grabbers and criminals who illegally settled down on the government land," he added.

Five persons were killed in a mudslide in ward 1 of the Salimpur union in 2017. Fire service officials said indiscriminate cutting of hills and setting up tin-shed and thatched houses on the hilly land have put the poverty-afflicted people at great risk of landslides.

According to the data, nearly one lakh people of some 24,000 families have been living in these areas established on encroached land. A series of criminal activities have also been recorded in the area for a long time. Land grabbing started in Jungle Salimpur in 2004 under the banner of "Chhinomul Samabay Samity".

FM MIZANUR RAHAMAN

Standing just beside the Fouzdarhat Bayezid Link Road, Sitakunda's Bangla Bazar area will welcome any visitor with an abundance of hilly greenery. However, the scene inside the area is not quite as it seems at the first sight.

Around 400 acres (around 2 sq km) of hills have disappeared due to mindless hill-cutting and encroachments in Jungle Salimpur area and its adjacent parts of Sitakunda in the last 15 years, according to the Chattogram District Administration and Department of Environment.

Heights ranging from seven to 60 metres, these hills were destroyed by grabbers who turned the hilly areas into real estate sites using fake documents, while the authorities turned a blind eye.

The officials, however, do not have any concrete data on the number of hills and forest land grabbed by encroachers and turned into housing plots, thanks to the negligence of bureaucrats and lack of coordination among the authorities.

However, around 15 years later, the administrations are taking stern actions to recover the government land from grabbers.

According to government officials, several development projects have been planned on these lands and a stop needs to be put to the practice of mindless hill-cutting and land grabbing.

The district administration has started a combined eviction drive against grabbers at Jungle Salimpur since August, asking the residents to vacate the areas.

However, the problem lies elsewhere.

Jungle Salimpur, an area with around 1,256 acres of land, falls under Sitakunda's Salimpur union, nearly five kilometres away from the port city. There are 3,070 acres of Khas land under five Mouzas - Jungle Latifpur, Jungle Salimpur, Jungle Bhatiyari, Jalalabad, and Uttar Pahartali, according to district administration officials.

Of the 3,070 acres, around 30 percent are hilly areas. Selling the Khas land to people, several land-grabbing syndicates have established their own "kingdom" by building colonies, installing electricity and other utility lines illegally, said officials.

These plots were mainly made available to people from lower and middle income backgrounds who came to the port city in search of a living. The entire process - starting from land grabbing to hill cutting to distribution - is done under the supervision of powerful quarters with strong political affiliations.

The sudden eviction notice has given birth to several untoward incidents already. According to the data, nearly one lakh people of some 24,000 families have been living in these areas established on encroached land. A series of criminal activities have been recorded in the area for a long time.

Land grabbing started in Jungle Salimpur in 2004 under the banner of "Chhinomul Samabay Samity". At first, people from lower income backgrounds, who were usually displaced by river erosion and other calamities, used to come and build houses in the area with the help of locals.

This came off as a business opportunity for the local influential people with political affiliation. They initiated the land business to earn some quick bucks from the people who came to the city looking for a livelihood by providing residential plots.

Before the eviction drives started in August, signboards bearing names of different individuals and housing projects in Chhinomul Bazar, Ali Nagar and Bayezid Link Road were a common scene.

They did not just stop at that. These influential quarters deployed their own security guards there and started cutting hills and excavating soil without any hindrance.

Locals and officials claimed that before any other establishment, the grabbers would start constructing a temple or a mosque at these



Integrated planning the key

FM MIZANUR RAHAMAN

Environmentalists believe that the huge environmental destruction of Jungle Salimpur poses a great threat to the ecosystem as the landscape has seen tremendous changes over the years due to mindless hill cutting.

The situation might worsen if the development projects start without a proper integrated plan after research based on data and documentation.

"Those hills in Jungle Salimpur and its adjacent areas date back to the tertiary age. The fragile soil has been further altered due to unabated hill cutting," said Prof Alak Paul of geography and environmental studies at Chittagong University.

The DoE has taken the initiative

to launch a specialised survey in this regard, titled "Contour Survey and mapping of hills", said Ferdous Anwar, DoE deputy director in Chattogram. "On July 9, a special meeting was held on hill management, where we discussed our recommendations in detail."

"In the direct method of contouring, the contours to be located will be directly traced out through our fieldwork, making a number of points on each contour. We will then survey the points to plot them on the plan and draw the contours on them," he added.

According to data from Bangladesh Environment Forum, there were 32.37 square kilometres of hills in the port city in 1976, which decreased to 14.02 square kilometres in 2008.



A haven for criminals

FM MIZANUR RAHAMAN

Criminal activities in Jungle Salimpur and adjacent areas used to make headlines more often than not.

The geographical location of the area quite easily turns it into a shelter for criminals, including drug peddlers, murderers, and firearm suppliers, as no law enforcer can enter the area without prior notice and permission from community leaders.

In early 2004, Jungle Salimpur was home to displaced migrants and criminals, who would hide in the settlements to avoid getting arrested after committing crimes in different areas.

One Lal Badsha used to hold the reins of the area and shelter several criminals at that time. He established several slums by cutting hills.

Later, Ali Abbas entered the scene and naturally, started a rivalry with Lal Badsha. In 2010, several clashes took place between the two gangs on the hills over establishing supremacy in the area.

Lal Badsha was killed in a "shootout" with Rab on May 23, 2010.

Another known godfather of the area is Mashiur, general secretary of Chattogram Mohanagar Chhinomul Songrami Bostibasi Somonny Parishad. Law enforcement agencies said Mashiur has at least 27 cases against him over rape, murder, kidnapping and land grabbing.

Though Mashiur was arrested on multiple occasions, he managed to get out of prison and returned to his gang, said Rab and police. Rab sources said Mashiur was



arrested by Rab-7 on October 23 in 2017. From his house, Rab later seized 16 firearms and 26 rounds of bullets. Later, he secured bail in the case.

Moshiur was arrested again by Rab on December 6, 2021 for possessing five firearms and 13 rounds of bullets.

In Ali-Nagar, Yasin is the chief of another gang that has established a reign of terror. He has made a huge amount of money by illegally selling the government Khas land to migrants, according to police.

Yasin was arrested in July for assaulting government officials.

No one stays in Jungle Salimpur and Ali Nagar without paying tolls to the gang members, who control the entry and exit

of every single being in the area. Locals have alleged that the gang members have often been spotted at different political programmes in Sitakunda, indicating their strong political affiliations.

Additional Superintendent of Police (Sitakunda Circle) Ashrafal Karim said, "Hooligans have made several establishments in the guise of landless slum dwellers to control the area. Whenever police or the administration attempted to enter the area, they would form a human shield and attack on duty policemen from the hills."

Rab-7 commanding officer Lt Col MA Yousuf said a Rab camp has been set up in the area to take action against the criminals after a meeting on July 31.