



Drug traffickers prowl Naf in the guise of fishermen

According to a Rohingya man who once worked on such a boat, the smugglers would pay Tk 30,000 to Tk 40,000 everyone for each successful trip.

MOHAMMAD JAMIL KHAN
back from Teknaf

Drug traffickers posing as fishermen are smuggling in stashes of yaba pills from Myanmar through the Naf river in Teknaf, Cox's Bazar, amid lax enforcement of a ban on fishing in the river, according to several intelligence officials and men involved in the trade.

The government ban imposed in August 2017 to curb drug trafficking is still in force. But local drug cartels, backed by a section of fishing department officials and leaders of a boat owners' association, are operating the boats in the name of fishing.

The traffickers keep the stashes in the hull of the boats hidden under previously caught fish supplied by their Myanmar counterparts, said the sources.

The smugglers spend about Tk 6 to Tk 8 lakh to build the boats that are a little smaller

information," he told this newspaper on September 28.

"Besides," he added, "we discuss the issue with BGB commanders during meetings because they are the ones taking care of the border."

Contacted on October 5, Delwar Hossen, senior fisheries officer in Teknaf, said the boats that are going for fishing in the river are small in size.



each fisherman every month to "manage" the authorities.

Abdul Jalil, president of the association, said applications for registration of 73 of the boats have been submitted to the authorities.

"We will apply for registration of other fishing boats soon," he said.

About the allegation that the association was collecting money from fishermen, he said the association only collected Tk 12,000 to Tk 14,000 from the fishermen, depending on the size of the boat, for approval from the shipping ministry.

"We are not involved in any illegal activities," he said.

Abdus Salam, president of Bangladesh Khudro Matsyajibi Samity's Teknaf unit, said, "We have been asking the fishing department in the upazila for four years not to allow any new boats without checking its owner's background. But no one listens to us."

That's why traffickers are being able to pose as fishermen, he said.

Regarding the use of fishing boats in drug trafficking, fisheries officer Delwar Hossen said it was the law enforcers' job to look into the matter.

According to sources, the illegal boats collect tokens from some fisheries department officials in exchange for Tk 1,000 to Tk 2,000 for approval to go fishing. Asked about it, Delwar refused to speak on this.

Contacted, Lt Col Sheikh Khalid Mohammad Iftekhar, commanding officer of BGB-2, said he had not heard about fishing in the Naf.

"Fishing trawlers go out to the sea through the river," he told The Daily Star.

About the allegations that fishing boats were used for drug trafficking, he said, "Ask the people who gave this information to tell us, so we can take action."

Lieutenant Kazi Al-Ameen of the Bangladesh Coast Guard in Cox's Bazar also said he had not heard of trafficking through the river. "We have strict surveillance to prevent illegal activities in the river and sea," he said.

Yaba flowing in despite conflicts in Myanmar

Rohingyas playing noticeable roles in smuggling

MOHAMMAD JAMIL KHAN

There have been conflicts on the Myanmar side over the last two months with sounds of heavy gunfire and mortal shelling sending a wave of panic across the border into Bangladesh. But it has hardly created any impact on the yaba smuggling.

Anxieties have gripped people in the bordering areas of Cox's Bazar and Bandarban quite often as mortar shells even fell inside Bangladesh, but nothing could deter drug dealers in the coastal area from smuggling the pink pills from the neighbouring country.

Law enforcers claim Rohingyas are getting increasingly involved in the smuggling. They cross the border and bring in the crazy pills, which are then kept hidden in the refugee camps of Cox's Bazar, according to members of the police and intelligence agencies.

On Monday, the Armed Police Battalion (APBn-8) claimed to have arrested five Rohingyas with around 11,000 pieces of yaba from the Ukhiya camp area.

"We have recovered around 65,000 pieces of yaba in August and around 40,000 in September and the majority of smugglers were Rohingyas."

From January 1 to October 9, APBn-8 recovered around 15 lakh yaba pills and arrested around 400 people, mostly Rohingyas, for their involvement in the smuggling, Faruk Ahamed, assistant superintendent (operations and media) of the battalion, told The Daily Star.

According to Sayed Harun Or Rashid, commanding officer of APBn-14, the unrest on the Myanmar side has hardly affected the yaba smuggling.

"We have recovered around 65,000 pieces of yaba in August and around 40,000 in September and the majority of smugglers were Rohingyas," he said.

"Rohingyas smuggle the pills from Myanmar and preserve those in the camps."

In the latest strategy, the wholesale dealers sell yaba to retailers on credit but hold one or two of the retailers hostage. If payment is not made on time, they start torturing the hostages, he told this newspaper.

The Rapid Action Battalion on August 27 arrested around five members of a Rohingya criminal gang led by one Nobi Hossain, and recovered around 4.10 lakh yaba from them.

Interrogating the arrestees, Rab officials came to know that Nobi's gang was selling yaba on credit after holding people hostage as security.

Official data show Rab has recovered around 89.74 lakh yaba pills and arrested around 2,098 drug traders in the first eight months of this year. Around 11.69 lakh yaba were recovered by the elite force in August alone. In September, the Border Guard



Bangladesh (BGB) recovered around 2.73 lakh yaba in five big drives in Cox's Bazar and Bandarban, according to sources.

From August 1 to October 15, Bangladesh Coast Guard recovered around 4.73 lakh yaba and arrested around 16 people.

Lieutenant Kazi Al-Amin of Cox's Bazar Coast Guard said smugglers are adopting new techniques like moving on customised boats. "But we are on alert and taking action whenever we get any information," he added.

According to the yearly report of the Department of Narcotics Control, yaba is entering Bangladesh from Myanmar through 15 routes of Cox's Bazar and Bandarban. It is difficult to control smuggling through these remote border areas.

It added that yaba is produced in factories in Shan and Cochin provinces of Myanmar.

Lt Col Foyezur Rahman, director (operation) of BGB headquarters, said, "We always remain alert to any untoward situations in the border."

Actual fishermen suffer

Sources say the 10,683 registered fishermen in Teknaf have suffered because of the fishing ban.

The real fishermen do not have the means to "work the system" and fish in the river during the ban, said Imam Hossain, a fisherman in Teknaf. "Our livelihood depended on fishing on the Naf river but we are not allowed to do it."

Many fishermen took loans to buy boats and fishing nets spending Tk 8-10 lakh. Since the ban was imposed, the fishermen only received 30 kilograms of rice as the government aid but this is far from being adequate, he said.

Abdus Salam, president of Teknaf Upazila Unit Bangladesh Khudro Matsyajibi Samity, said at least 8,000 of the registered fishermen left their profession and became labourers and rickshaw pullers.

"The ban should be lifted soon," he added.

Asked about lifting the ban, fisheries officer Delwar Hossen said, "We are ready to lift the ban but the law enforcers, especially the BGB must give the green signal for that. BGB stills want the ban to be imposed to curb yaba smuggling."

However, Lt Col Sheikh Khalid Mohammad Iftekhar, CO of BGB-2, said it depends on the government's decision. "We are not responsible for continuing the ban," he added.

than the usual fishing boats that one sees in Teknaf, they added.

Asked about the frequent violation of the fishing ban, Mahfuzul Islam, superintendent of police in Cox's Bazar, admitted that some fishing boats are going to the river.

"But we take action whenever we get

"We often have to ignore those boats because we do not have enough manpower and resources to frequently conduct mobile court drives."

WHO ARE THEY?

Shah Alam, a fisherman in the Danguarpara area of Teknaf, was enlisted by police as a narcotics carrier. But recently, he has started working as a dealer who brings yaba from Myanmar directly, according to the sources.

This correspondent could not contact him because his number was found unreachable.

These smugglers mainly employ Rohingya men in their boats because they know the ways to enter Myanmar to pick up the stashes of yaba.

According to a Rohingya man who once worked on such a boat, the smugglers would pay Tk 30,000 to Tk 40,000 everyone for each successful trip.

The Daily Star managed to talk to a man who said he used to be a yaba carrier in Teknaf but left the path of crime recently.

He said the carriers took the risks at the border, but the dealers took the profit. "Why shouldn't the carrier become a dealer?"

Sources said boat owners and fishermen in Kayak Khali Khal, Jaliapara, and Sluice Gate areas in Teknaf are mainly involved in the illicit trade.

In the Kayak Khali Khal area, the traffickers recently built at least 80 boats that are being used without registration, they said.

A fisherman, requesting not to be named, said the Kayak Khali Khal boat owner's association has been collecting Tk 5,000 from



PHOTO: STAR