



PHOTO: RAJIB RAIHAN

## CHATTOGRAM now a transit for wildlife trafficking

Several syndicates involved in illegal trade, say investigators

**The recent seizure of wild animals, including Hoolock gibbons, porcupines, fishing cats, leopard cats, and Kalij pheasant – from October 27 to November 8 – indicates that the smugglers are desperate and at the same time, well organised in the crime.**

FM MIZANUR RAHAMAN

Chattogram has become a transit route for wildlife trafficking by poachers and smugglers due to the indifference and lack of proper monitoring of the authorities concerned.

The organised crime came to light once again after Chattogram police successfully thwarted several consignments of endangered wild animals while being smuggled from remote hilly areas of Bandarban and Khagrachhari via Chattogram.

Investigators and the forest department said several syndicates comprising international rackets have been involved in the smuggling.

Investigator also said wildlife traffickers work in several stages – from collecting to sales – adopting different techniques to dodge the eyes of law enforcers.

The recent seizure of wild animals, including Hoolock gibbons, porcupines, fishing cats, leopard cats, and Kalij pheasant – from October 27 to November 8 – indicates that the smugglers are desperate and at the same time, well organised in the crime.

So far, police have detained five carriers in three incidents in Chattogram's Lohagara upazila. The detainees were produced before the mobile court where the court sentenced them to different jail terms, while the animals were handed over to the forest department.

It could not be known where the smugglers were taking the animals. However, the hoolock, the fishing cats and the leopard cats were headed to Riazuddin Bazar of the port city and from there to somewhere else.

Citing the primary interrogation, forest officials and police personnel said the endangered wild animals were being collected from remote parts of Bandarban's Ali Kadam, Lama and its adjacent parts with the help of locals.

Meanwhile, in November, police arrested

a man in Savar with a wild monkey and an endangered hoolock gibbon as he was smuggling the animals to Satkhira from Chattogram.

According to wildlife crime control and biodiversity conservation officials, smugglers collect the animals from the deep forests of Ali Kadam, Naikhongchhari, Rowangchhari, Chattogram's Banskhali, and Lohagara's Chunti.

The animals are later transported to the port city via Satkania and Lohagara or Chakaria upazila.

Police said before the latest arrest in Lohagara, tusks of Asian elephants were seized from Karnaphuli and Hathazari upazila of Chattogram last year.

Police submitted the chargesheet implicating two in connection with the case. However, they failed to trace the origin and destination of the animal parts.

Talking to The Daily Star, OC Atiqur Rahman of Lohagara Police Station, said, "The carriers told us that the Ulluks (hoolock gibbons), fishing cats, leopard cats and Kalij pheasants were captured by a group of locals in Bandarban and handed over to them for sale at Riazuddin Bazar."

"After the two latest recoveries, we have been able to confirm that the destinations of the items are different and an international racket is working behind it," he added.

OC Atiq also said, "During our investigation, we found that the smugglers used to send the animals in local buses or goods-laden trucks to Dhaka and other areas. We have thwarted three attempts by the smugglers of transporting the animals."

According to the wildlife management and nature conservation department, a total of 425 animals, including different kinds of birds, snakes, cats, bears, gibbons, wild pigs, Asian palm civets, and Pangolins, were smuggled to

Chattogram from different areas in the 2021-2022 fiscal year.

Md Sanaullah Patwaruy, director of Wildlife Crime Control Unit (WCCU), told The Daily Star, "Not only from Bandarban, but the endangered wild animals are also being smuggled from the deep forests in Myanmar and India. Later, they are transported to other destinations."

"As per my investigation, the animals were smuggled outside the country via Satkhira. The smugglers follow the methods of the gold and drug smugglers to dodge law enforcers. They have frequently changed the transport system, caging and packaging. As we have identified the Chattogram route, they will find another alternative route," said Sanaullah.

**CLIENTS ARE AFFLUENT**

WCCU officials said the customers of the wild animals are mostly from outside the country and are very affluent. They mostly collect the animals for their private resorts or zoos.

Smugglers contact their local agents, divided into several sections, to collect the animals for the clients.

"We have information regarding where the animals are kept in Chattogram. We have already shared the information with Interpol. However, we failed to reach the kingpin of the syndicate," he added.

This correspondent visited the Riazuddin Bazar bird market last week and talked to several sellers, who denied selling any kind of endangered wild animals.

Police and the wild crime control unit officials said several secret groups have been established on online platforms like Facebook for the trade, where sales of different animals – from leopard cats to endangered species of birds – take place in exchange for a huge amount of the money.

On June 24, WCCU personnel recovered two cubs of leopard cats from Cumilla's Courtbari area, which were advertised as "Leopard cubs" on a Facebook group.

## CTG ELEVATED EXPRESSWAY Work delaying on land acquisition hitch

SIFAYET ULLAH

The elevated expressway project in Chattogram is being delayed as Bangladesh Railway has not yet allotted the required land for the project, resulting in city dwellers suffering.

Mahfuzur Rahman, project director of the elevated expressway and executive engineer of the Chattogram Development Authority (CDA), recently sent a letter to Bangladesh Railway – seeking an explanation as to why the project's progress is being hampered by incomplete land acquisition.

Following the project director's letter, Bangladesh Railway Regional Land Allocation Committee held a meeting in Chittagong on November 20.

"We are unable to start the project from Dewanhat to Lalkhan Bazar due to the delay in the allocation of land from the BR. We are not being allocated the land by BR despite repeated requests," said Mahfuzur Rahman.

However, Sujon Chowdhury, chief estate officer of the BR (eastern), said, "We have already approved an allocation of a 0.70-acre land to CDA. We will hand it over to them after getting the railway ministry's approval.

Due to the delayed work, the suffering of the port city residents in their daily commute is to continue.

Istiaq Ahmed, a resident of Cement Crossing area, said commuting on this road is an ordeal. "We are looking forward to the completion of this project."

Enec approved the mega project in July 2017. The original cost of the project was Tk 3,250.84 crore and it was scheduled to be completed in June 2020.

The updated cost of the project is Tk 4,298.95 crore, and the deadline has been shifted to June 2024, after two extensions.

This expressway is being constructed from Lalkhan Bazar to Patenga in four phases. The work of two phases is almost complete.

CDA initiated the project to develop smooth communication between Chattogram city and the districts and upazilas in the south of the division, cut distance and cost for commuters in the city and easy movement to and from the port and airport.

Earlier, CDA constructed two flyovers connecting Bahaddarhat and Lalkhan Bazar areas in the city. After the implementation of the expressway, the two ends of the city will be connected through the flyovers and the elevated expressway.

The 16km elevated expressway will be a four-lane path with a total width of 16.5 metres. It will have 24 ramps at nine points from Lalkhan Bazar to the airport. With the ramps, the total length of the expressway will be 28.5 km.

The ramps will facilitate entry and exit at Tigerpass, Agrabad, Barik Building, Nimtala Biswa Road, customs area, CEPZ, Karnaphuli EPZ, Katghar area, the sea-beach and airport intersections.

CDA opened the 6.8km "Akhtaruzzaman Flyover" from Muradpur to Lalkhan Bazar on June 16 in 2017.



## Bijoy Mela abuzz with visitors

ARUN BIKASH DEY

The month-long "Muktijuddher Bijoy Mela", which started on December 1 at Outer Stadium in Kazir Dewri in the port city, is now abuzz with visitors.

It's the fair's 34th edition this year. Initiated in 1989, the fair's been held here every year since.

Following the initiative, now the prestigious traditional fair is held across the country, said organisers.

Bijoy Mela usually encompasses numerous stalls exhibiting a wide array of local products, eateries, entertainment shows and a Bijoy Mancha that sets the platform for conducting programmes reminiscing the Liberation War period and War Heroes.

Reminiscing about the initiative, Faruk e-Azam Bir Protik, convener of the first Bijoy Mela in 1989, said, "A bunch of youths, who were born on December 16, 1971, inaugurated the first Bijoy Mela on December 11, 1989. At that fair, Shaheed Janani Jahanara Imam was given reception."

While visiting the fair on Saturday, it was seen that different kinds of stalls were selling bags, ladies', children's wears, sandals, ceramics, plastic and aluminum products, toys, cosmetics, home appliances, jewellery, shawls, cottage products, doormats, showpieces, perfumes and what not.

People from all strata of society from both city and different upazilas come to this fair as they get almost all the household products here.

## Railway pond turns into a dumping zone

SIFAYET ULLAH

A pond near the Jan Ali Hat Railway Station in the port city's Chandgaon area has been turned into a dumping zone. Consequently, it has also become a safe breeding zone for mosquitoes.

The pond, covering around one thousand square feet of land, is owned by Bangladesh Railway, which was leased by the BR to a local named Mohammad Shawkat.

Mohammed Ismail, a businessman near the railway station, said, "Earlier we used the pond's water for our daily activities. There was also a variety of fish."

However, the pond is now devoid of any aquatic life and the water has a tar-like appearance and foul odour, he said.

"BR's Lands Department has leased the pond. We have instructed the lessee to clean the pond. Besides, we have asked the lessee to complain to the concerned authorities regarding the garbage dumping," said Abdus Salam, station master of Jan Ali Hat Railway Station.

Residents of the region expressed alarm and said the pond, which serves as a breeding ground for



mosquitoes, might be the reason for the emergence of dengue and chikungunya.

According to the Chattogram Civil Surgeon office, 2,007 people were infected with dengue in November.

Mohammad Shawkat, the lessee of the pond, told The Daily Star that he has leased the pond from BR for fish farming.

"However, people are dumping garbage in the pond. I have prohibited them from doing it but to no avail,"

he added.

According to Bangladesh Environment Conservation Act, 1995, filling in or changing the landscape of any water body recorded in the government records is a punishable offence.

However, Hillol Biswas, head of the department of environment in the Chattogram metro office, was unable to confirm any impending eviction campaign by the DoE to reclaim the canal.