

DHAKA-COX'S BAZAR
RAIL ROUTE

Project to buy
tourist coaches
stuck in row over
feasibility study

SIFAYET ULLAH

The much-awaited project to buy tourist coaches taken up four years ago for under construction Dhaka Cox's Bazar rail route is still in limbo, as the project is stuck in a row over a feasibility study.

The project was taken up by Bangladesh Railway (BR) in 2019 to attract tourists, increase revenue earning both in BR and the tourism sector, and brighten the image of the railways at large, according to a Preliminary Development Project Proposal (PDDP) of BR.

Tabassum Binte Islam, joint director general (mechanical) of BR, said after completing their feasibility study, they had prepared a PDDP based on it and sent it to the Planning Commission in September 2021.

However, the Planning Commission did not accept their prepared PDDP and has directed them to resubmit a new one after conducting a feasibility study by a third party, she said.

SM Selim Bahar, chief planning officer of the BR, said as the estimated cost of the project is more than Tk 25 crore, the railways have to formulate a new PDDP through a feasibility study by a third-party as per the Planning Commission's directive.

"We have already appointed a consultancy firm for conducting a feasibility study. The firm already started their work," Tabassum added.

Under the previous PDDP, an estimated cost of USD 57.28 million, 54 deluxe tourist coaches, including six meter-gauge tourist coaches (city), 13 air-conditioned sleeping cars, 22 air-conditioned chair cars, seven power cars along with air-conditioned dining cars and guard breaks are listed for procurement. The government will provide USD 14.84 million for the project, while the rest of USD 42.44 million will come as foreign assistance.

According to the BR, the Infrastructure Investment Facilitation Company (IIFC), an organisation under the Economic Relations Department (ERD) under the Ministry of Finance, is conducting the study.

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Meanwhile, Railways Minister Nurul Islam Sujan announced last month that the under-construction 100 km rail line, Dohazari to Cox's Bazar, would be opened by this year.

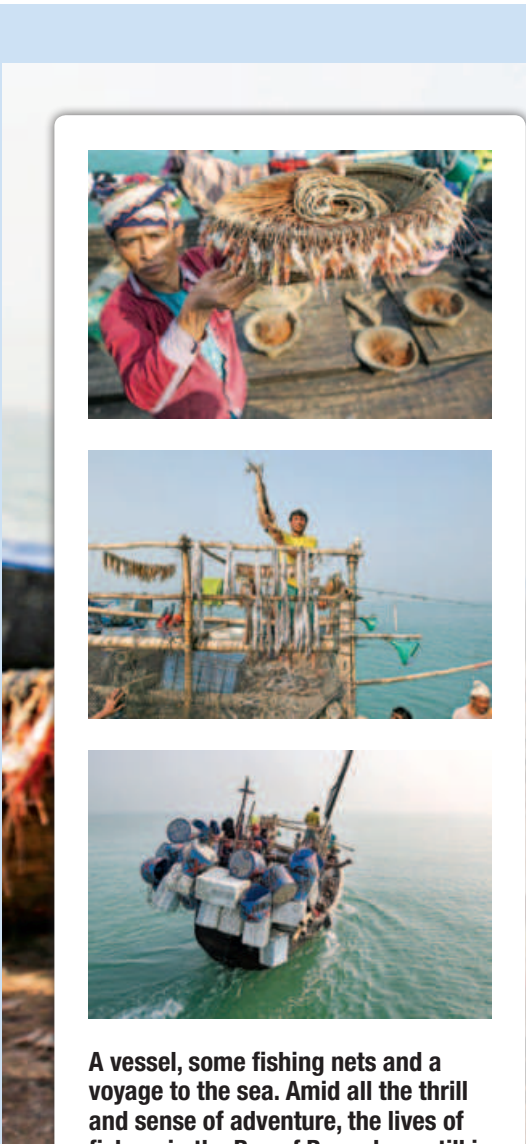
Mofizur Rahman, director of the project, said the progress of the project is 80 percent.

After the inauguration of the line, four trains, including a tourist train, will run every day to and from Dhaka to Cox's Bazar via Chattogram initially along with the regular service with a minimum number of stoppages, according to BR sources.

The rail line project, at a cost of Tk 18,034 crore, is being installed in two phases.

On April 3, 2011, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina laid the foundation stone for the construction of the rail line between Dohazari-Cox's Bazar.

The project's new deadline is June 2024.



A vessel, some fishing nets and a voyage to the sea. Amid all the thrill and sense of adventure, the lives of fishers in the Bay of Bengal are still in no way fulfilling, as they make only a bare minimum of earning by catching fish, bringing them to the dock and selling them to the local market. The photos were taken recently.

PHOTO: RAJIB RAIHAN



HILLS RAZED FOR INDUSTRY

The concrete-mixing factory of the company, whose chairperson is Shirin Ahmed, wife of late Awami League politician and lawmaker Moslem Uddin Ahmed, is being constructed on an acre of hilly land near Bayezid Link Road in Sitakunda upazila's Fouzdarhat area.

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The authorities of Build-Aid Readymix Concrete Limited have ravaged several hills in Chattogram to build a factory, that too without getting permission from the environment ministry. Suffice to say, this may lead to serious environmental harm.

The concrete-mixing factory of the company, whose chairperson is Shirin Ahmed, wife of late Awami League politician and lawmaker Moslem Uddin Ahmed, is being constructed on an acre of hilly land near Bayezid Link Road in Sitakunda upazila's Fouzdarhat area.

Officials of the Department of Environment (DoE) confirmed that they visited the area and found evidence of hill cutting.

Ashraf Uddin, assistant director of DoE's Chattogram office, submitted a report on the hill cutting to the department's higher authority last year. This correspondent obtained a copy of the report.

According to the report, during the factory's construction, 9 lakh cubic feet of hill area has been cut, in violation of Bangladesh Environment Preservation Act-1995.

The punishment for breaking the relevant law is up to two years' imprisonment or Tk 2 lakh fine, or



both for the first time. For the second time, it is up to 10 years' imprisonment or Tk 10 lakh fine or both.

During a visit to the area, this correspondent found that hills are surrounded by a fence. The company authorities have cut a large part of the hills. Some locals, requesting

anonymity, said the company authorities have built the structure by cutting the hills.

Mofidul Alam, director of DoE's Chattogram region, told The Daily Star, "We have fined the company Tk 5 lakh for violating the environment preservation act."

Chairperson Shirin Ahmad

declined to comment on the matter.

Earlier, a mobile court headed by Ashrafal Alam, assistant commissioner (land) of Sitakunda upazila, fined the authorities of the factory Tk 2 lakh for the same reason.

Ashrafal told this newspaper, "Acting on a tip-off, we found evidence of hill cutting there and

seized various equipment, including excavators, and fined the landowner."

Meanwhile, experts fear that if hill cutting carries on like this, the environment of the area would be in danger.

Mohammad Kamal Hossain, former professor of Institute of Forestry and Environmental Science at Chittagong University, said the ecological balance of the area will be disturbed, and wildlife living in those hills will be displaced.

According to data from Bangladesh Environment Forum, 120 hills disappeared from Chattogram city in four decades. In 1976, there were 32.37 square kilometres of hills in the city, and that decreased to 14.02 square km in 2008.

The data showed that there were 200 hills in the city 40 years ago, and 60 percent of those have disappeared now.

