



A sheer waste of public money

Port city's only escalator foot-bridge lies useless for 3 years

ARUN BIKASH DEY

On January 30, 2020, Chattogram City Corporation inaugurated the port city's first escalator footbridge, only to shut down its operations indefinitely after the next couple of months following the Covid-19 pandemic.

Built on Zakir Hossain Road at a cost of Tk 3.9 crore, the footbridge has been inoperative for the last three years.

According to CCC officials, the 65 feet long and nine-feet wide bridge was constructed by them for commoners, especially the Chattogram Diabetic General Hospital patients.

"The footbridge was installed following repeated

Once there was a forest here

5-acre of mangroves turned into shipbreaking yard

According to section 5 of the Rule, permission must be obtained from the divisional forest officer (DFO) for cutting trees from any government land.

SIFAYET ULLAH

The Tulatoli area under Chattogram's Sitakunda used to boast a lush green forest, home to numerous trees.

What was once a sanctuary of nature, now stands as a ship-breaking yard — with a multi-storey building, some artificially dug up ponds and barbed-wire fences, which now serve as barriers, keeping curious onlookers at bay.

Around 5,000 trees have been felled to convert five acres of

mangrove forest in the area into this shipbreaking yard.

The road that now leads to the yard was also carved by clearing the forest area.

Kohinoor Steel, the authorities of the newly-constructed yard, have felled the trees without obtaining permission from the Forest Department, which is illegal under Forest Products Transit Rules 2011.

According to section 5 of the Rule, permission must be obtained from the divisional forest officer (DFO) for cutting trees from any government land, said forest officials.

Following this, the Forest Department filed three cases against officials of Kohinoor Steel recently, said DFO Abdur Rahman of the Chattogram coastal forest department.

According to the coastal forest department, the place was part of the 400 acres mangrove forest created in 1983-1984 by the Coastal Forest Division to protect the locality from natural disasters.

The district administration leased out the 5-acre land to the

yard authority on February 14 last year.

But there is an ownership dispute between the district administration and the forest department over the leased land.

For this, the forest department had sent several letters to the deputy commissioner for canceling the lease.

According to data from forest department, the forest was "notified" under Section 4 of Forest Act in 1986.

DFO Abdur Rahman said, "No one can lease out the land as it is a notified forest land. But the district administration leased the land to Kohinoor Steel without informing us."

However, the district administration announced last month that they cancelled the lease agreement with Kohinoor Steel amid criticism by environmentalists.

Shahadat Hossain, upazila nirbahi officer of Sitakunda, said, "Receiving directive from higher authority, we sealed off the yard and asked the yard authority to remove their structures soon."

While Kohinoor Akhtar is the owner of Kohinoor Steel on paper, her husband Abul Kashem alias Kashem Raja is constructing the yard in reality.

Kashem Raja has been made one of the accused in the forest department's case. Contacted recently, he refused to comment citing critical health conditions.

In an earlier conversation, he told The Daily Star that the deputy commissioner has leased the place to him as per law and they are paying revenue to the government.

DAMAGE DONE
The experts have warned that despite cancellation of the lease, the damage has already been done as many trees have been felled.

Mohammad Kamal Hossain, former professor of the Institute of Forestry and Environmental Science at Chittagong University, said mangrove trees serve as a natural barrier, lowering the height of storm surges.

"Besides, due to the destruction of the forest, the ecological balance of the area will be disturbed and wild animals will be displaced from there," he added.



PHOTO: RAJIB RAIHAN

demands from locals. The road is busy, which makes it risky to cross. However, we could only use it for a few weeks, and now it stands in ruins," said Abdur Rashid, a resident of Wireless area.

Terming the escalators expensive and unfeasible, Prof Jahangir Chowdhury, president of Chattogram Diabetic General Hospital, suggested uninstalling the escalators and replacing them with stairs to keep it operational.

"A development project should be financially, technically, and environmentally feasible. However, this initiative has none of the aforementioned qualities. Such a waste of public money. This venture stands as proof of the mismanagement in city corporation," said Subhash Barua, town planner.

Its significantly high electric consumption makes it financially in viable, said Rafiqul Islam, chief engineer of CCC.

Asked why the planners did not know of the expenses beforehand and how much electricity is required daily for the bridge to run, the engineer failed to provide satisfactory answers. "I do not remember these details as the issue is over three years old."

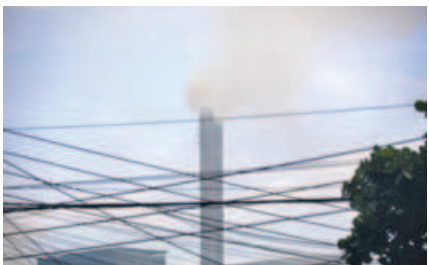
CCC Mayor Rezaul Karim Chowdhury could not be contacted for comments despite repeated attempts.

A polluter who keeps breaking rules

SIFAYET ULLAH

The doors and windows of Borhan Uddin's rented apartment, located in the port city's Ruby Gate area, have to remain closed most of the time to prevent toxic gases emitted from Saleh Steel Industries Limited from entering the place.

"The smoke emitted from the nearby steel factory is poisonous. Once inside the house, the polluted air makes



correspondent saw various nearby areas completely covered with smoke, which caused visibility problems for vehicles, commuters, students, and local business owners.

"We have to close shop when the smoke is released, as it is unbearable. Schools, mosques, and residential buildings are located near the factory, and it is extremely unhealthy for people," said Rabiul Hossen, a shopkeeper.

Air pollution exacerbates respiratory disorders and increases the risk of asthma episodes, informed Somen Das, consultant of the Medicine department at Rangamati Medical College.

Air pollution has a significant impact on patients with cancer, cardiovascular conditions, and chronic illnesses, he added.

As per the Air Pollution Control Rule-2022, polluting the air by emitting harmful substances is a punishable

offence. Violating the rules may lead to two years imprisonment, a fine of Tk 2 lakh, or both.

The accepted limit of suspended particulate matter (SPM) is 200 microgrammes per cubic metre of air.

Nevertheless, the SPM content in the air near the factory was found to be far beyond the accepted index. The company has been fined Tk 24.92 lakh in five instalments in the last four years for polluting the air, informed DoE officials.

"The APC system in the company has been damaged. We asked them to replace it with a new one," said Mia Mahmudul Hoque, deputy director of the DoE Chattogram city unit.

The APC system equipment has to be imported, and the company has already started the process, said Jakir Hossen, manager of the factory. "We have already opened a letter of credit to import the equipment," he mentioned.



it difficult for my family, especially children, to breathe," said the private job holder, who has been living in the house with his family for the past three years.

According to Department of Environment (DoE), the company's authorities have been warned several times as the toxic gases significantly harm the residents of the East Nasirabad area. Five fines have already been imposed on the company in this regard. However, the company owners seem unaffected by the situation.

Established in 1995, the capacity of the factory, which churns out a range of mild steel (MS) rods and coils, is about 84,000 tonnes per year. It is still producing rods and other products without air pollution control (APC) systems.

Upon visiting the spot, this



Choking a canal for bay terminal

SIFAYET ULLAH

For the last three years, Enamul Haque, a resident of Halishahar's Chowdhury Para in the port city, has been suffering from waterlogging.

"Now, even a drizzle results in waterlogging in our area after a part of the Chouchala canal, directly linked to the Bay, was filled by the Chattogram Port Authority to construct a bay terminal," he mentioned.

Earlier, the accumulated water used to flow to the bay through the canal.

However, since around half kilometre of the two-km canal was filled ignoring Chattogram Development Authority's directive, over 4,500 locals have suffered due to waterlogging in the area, especially during monsoons, said Kazi Hasan Bin Shams, chief engineer of the CDA.

During a recent visit to the area, this correspondent found that the canal had been filled up from the Bay of Bengal's entry point to the ring road.

The waterbody's destruction has led to heavy waterlogging. Despite repeated pleas, the CPA has not re-excavated the canal, said Mohammed

Elias, councillor of the North Halishahar ward.

The bay terminal, which has a length of 6.15 kilometres, is being constructed on around 2,500 acres of land, stretching from rear Chattogram Export Processing Zone to Rasmonighat in the Bay's Halishahar coast.

Occupying water bodies with obtaining permission from the Department of Environment is a punishable offence. The first-time offenders can be sentenced to a maximum two years imprisonment or be subjected to a fine of Tk 2 lakh, or both. Repeating the action can lead to 10 years of imprisonment or a fine of Tk 10 lakh, or both. The CPA has not taken any permission to fill the canal, informed Hillol Biswas, director of the DoE Chattogram city unit.

However, Rafiqul Alam, executive engineer of the Chattogram Port Authority, denied the allegations and assured of having necessary permissions from all the authorities concerned.

"There will be no canal through the terminal. However, an eight-km long and 80-feet wide drain will be constructed throughout the terminal to prevent waterlogging in the area," he added.