

# Grabbers feast on railway hills

» 5,500 people residing on 9 hills

» Landslide killed over 400 in 17 years

» Port city lost over 120 hills in 40 years

SIFAYET ULLAH

Over 3,000 illegal structures have been constructed on nine hills owned by Bangladesh Railway in various parts of the port city, violating the law and endangering the hills.

According to data from BR estate department, over 5,500 people currently reside on these state-owned hills, which are being subjected to indiscriminate hill razing and tree felling.

"We've removed more than 1,700 illegal structures from these hills in the past two years, but no action has been able to deter grabbers, as people returned to the hills after the evacuation," said Sujon Chowdhury, estate officer (east) of BR.

BR made a list in 2022 and found that most of the illegal



Over 5,000 people in the port city are currently residing in makeshift structures on state-owned hills, built illegally by local influential people and a section of government officials. These are mostly rented to low-income families who live in the landslide prone slopes, risking lives. The photos were taken recently.

PHOTO: RAJIB RATHAN

due to our inability to afford the rent for high-rise buildings," she said.

According to both locals and BR officials, a number of syndicates led by local influential people and BR staff members constructed these buildings and leased them to low-income people.

Recently, BR suspended one of its employees, Abdul Khalek, for his involvement in constructing illegal structures on Soloshohor hill.

Moreover, over 100 structures, predominantly erected by a politically influential figure named Mohammed Tareq, who was identified by BR as a key hill grabber, were removed.

However, Tareq denied all allegations of land grabbing against him. "My opposition group is spreading propaganda by calling me an encroacher," he added.

A study conducted by geography and environmental department of Chittagong University showed, landslides claimed the lives of more than 400 people, primarily in informal settlements in the port city between 2000 and 2017.

structures are built on its hills at Foy's Lake area in Chattogram's Akbarshah area.

The Daily Star obtained a copy of that list. During a recent visit to a Soloshohor hill, it was noticed that people are residing in homes constructed on the hill's slope, even though a landslide on August 27 claimed the lives of two individuals, including a child, at this very place.

Sharifa, who lost her husband in that landslide, said, "Where else will I go? Anywhere else is too costly. Poverty forced us to live here."

Nur Jahan, a 60-year-old, is still crying for her two sons, Mohammad Liton and Mohammad Ripon, who died in a landslide in Akbarshah area last year.

"We had no choice but to reside on a hillock

Recently, BR suspended one of its employees, Abdul Khalek, for his involvement in constructing illegal structures on Soloshohor hill.

## Building at the cost of a pond

SIFAYET ULLAH

A pond in Chattogram city's Mohora area is counting its breaths as builders continue to fill it up for the construction of a five-storey building.

The permission for this construction was given by the Chattogram Development Authority, violating the Environment Conservation Act.

To legalise their action, the authorised division of CDA has shown the pond as an open land during paperwork. However, the place is still mentioned as a pond on a BS survey.

The Daily Star has obtained copies of the aforementioned documents.

In November last year, CDA permitted Sadia Kamal, owner of the pond, to construct the building by filling up the 0.12-acre pond, according to the documents. The construction works started in January.

"We used to collect water from this pond for domestic use. But the builders have filled it up under the nose of the administration as they are influential in the area," said a local woman, seeking anonymity.

During a recent visit, this correspondent saw several pillars had already been constructed by filling up a vast portion of the waterbody.

Owner Sadia Kamal said, "CDA issued the plan following our application. If they had not given the permission, we would not have started the construction work."

Mohammad Hasan, authorised officer and member secretary of CDA's Building Construction Committee, approved the construction permit.

Asked, Hasan said, "I am not aware of the situation and did not have field data. I only issued the permit as an authority."

Kazi Hasan Bin Shams, chief engineer of CDA, said, "There is no opportunity to approve plans for construction of buildings by filling up ponds. We will look into the matter and cancel the permit if irregularities are found. Besides, action will be taken against those involved in the irregularities."

Filling up water bodies is a punishable offence under the Environment Conservation Act. An accused can be sentenced to five years imprisonment or subjected to a Tk 50,000 fine, or both if found guilty of grabbing any water body.

Mia Mahmudul Hoq, deputy director of DoE (port city), said "We already sent a letter to CDA, requesting them to cancel the construction permit."

According to DoE, the port city was home to around 25,000 waterbodies in 1981. However, a 2017 Chittagong university study found the existence of 1,249 of them.

"Water bodies play an important role. It can serve as a source of water for domestic use and to douse fire. It also helps control waterlogging, support biodiversity, and restore depleted groundwater. This city will become unliveable if we continue to kill these natural water sources," said Md Delwar Hossain Mazumdar, executive member of Forum for Planned Chattogram and former chairman of Institution of Engineers, Bangladesh.



CU MUSEUM

## Where history comes alive

FM MIZANUR RAHAMAN

Walking down the aisles at Chittagong University Museum, a treasure trove of priceless antiquities and archaeological knowledge, it would seem as if history has come alive there.

Anyone would feel a thrill, as if she or he is travelling to the past, by simply looking at the displayed artifacts.

There is an ancient Surya idol at the sculpture section that is more than 2,400 years old, dating back to the Gupta Empire (320 and 550 CE). Numerous century-old specimens from different historical periods of this region are also on display.

This is the only university museum in Bangladesh. It started its journey with an initial collection of 30 pieces of art and artifacts that included robes and pillows, weapons and armours, stone inscriptions, sculptures, and brass plates, according to CU sources.

It was inaugurated on June 14, 1973, temporarily on the first floor of CU's arts faculty building. After a while, it was shifted to the Chattogram District Shilpakala Academy, before being relocated again to AR Mallick Bhaban on the CU campus in 1988. The museum found its own place in the three-storied Library and Museum Building of CU on August 10, 1992.

The items were collected by CU's Department of History before being handed over to the museum.

Over the years, the museum's collection became more enriched, with most of the



items being donated to it.

The sculpture section has 52 ancient idols of different sizes, sculpted from rare black stones. A sandstone statue of Vishnu, collected from Mirsarai of Chattogram, is among the oldest specimens, dating back to the 9th century.

Besides, there are 28 bronze and some other metal sculptures, which are close to 2,800 years old, dating back to the Pala Empire (750-1161 CE).

The museum houses five permanent

exhibition galleries on the first floor: Pre-History and Archaeological Gallery, Sculpture Gallery, Islamic Art Gallery, Folk Art Gallery, and Contemporary Art Gallery.

The ground floor comprises of Abdul Karim Reference Library, a conservation laboratory, a space for special exhibitions and workshops, a documentation and research service centre, and the museum's stores and offices.

The second floor houses a conference hall.

An open stage, thematic gardens and the yard complete the CU Museum's premises.

Professor AR Mallick, the first vice-chancellor of CU, and Professor Abdul Karim, the first head of the history department, took initiative to build up the museum's collection. Dr Shamsul Hossain, a former student of the history department, was its first academic staff, who later served as its deputy curator.

The CU authority allocates a fund for the museum's maintenance. However, it fails to draw enough attention from researchers and visitors due to lack of planning and exposure, according to sources.

It remains open for visitors from 9:00am till 1:30pm.

"The museum has been playing a vital role in historical research and academic knowledge for both teachers and students," said Professor Mahbulul Haque, dean of CU arts faculty and former curator.

## Work starts for specialised burn unit at CMCH

ARUN BIKASH DEY

A modern and specialised burn and plastic surgery unit is being set up at Chattogram Medical College Hospital following a bilateral agreement between China and the health ministry.

The project work has begun with surveying and soil testing of the construction site, and is expected to be completed in 2025, said CMCH Director Brig Gen Shamim Ahsan.

China is funding 119 million yuan for the project, he said.

The agreement to construct the 150-bed burn and plastic surgery unit was signed in Dhaka on March 30. On March 11, a preliminary Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was signed between the CMCH authorities and the Chinese government at CMCH.

Chinese Embassy Secretary Shi Chen said,

**Establishment of a modern burn unit in Chattogram is a crying need and a long cherished dream. This project will make that dream come true.**

Dr Samanta Lal Sen Coordinator of National Institute of Burn and Plastic Surgery

"If everything goes properly, the unit would be constructed within 22 months after signing of the agreement. We want to start the construction works soon."

Although CMCH has a burn and plastic surgery unit, it is not adequately equipped with modern instruments and also has a crisis of beds.

The new specialised unit will have modern equipment for treating burn patients, alongside two modern operation theatres, 10 intensive care unit beds and 25 high dependency unit beds, the CMCH director said.

The Chinese government will build the infrastructure of the new unit and provide all modern equipment for treating burn patients, while the unit will be managed by CMCH authorities, he said.

"Establishment of a modern burn unit in Chattogram is a crying need and a long cherished dream. This project will make that dream come true," said Dr Samanta Lal Sen, coordinator of Sheikh Hasina National Institute of Burn and Plastic Surgery in Dhaka.

Dr Mujibul Haque Khan, president of Bangladesh Medical Association's Chattogram chapter, said around 30 million people in this region will be benefitted once the modern burn and plastic surgery unit at CMCH is established.