



A train narrowly avoids colliding with a bus stuck in the sand along the lines in the capital's Khilgaon yesterday afternoon. The bus driver drove the vehicle close to the rail lines to turn the vehicle around. Seeing the approaching train, locals frantically signalled to the train driver to stop. The train driver was able to stop as the train was slow in its approach to Kamalapur Railway Station.

PHOTO: PALASH KHAN

Of illegal sand lifting and Dipu Moni’s 15 letters

FROM PAGE 1
In the 2.5km stretch from Chandpur Sadar upazila’s Harinaghat to Bahariya, we spotted seven dredgers on the night of October 5. Around the dredgers were two speedboats, patrolling in a close formation to prevent any other vessels or fishing boats from going near.

The night was too dark to take photos or videos, and we turned the boat around for our safety.

“All these dredgers are owned by Selim Khan and his family members. Selim Khan’s henchmen do not allow even fishing boats in this area at night to keep their sand mining hidden from the public,” said the boatman whom we are not naming for his safety.

Sand lifting in the Meghna is banned since the middle of last year. Still, Selim Khan has been extracting sand from Bahariya, Harina, and Alur Bazar at night, usually from 10:00pm-6:00am, almost regularly, locals and district administration officials say.

The extracted sand is then taken to Harinaghat, Munshiganj, Sonargaon, Narayanganj, Dhaka and other places.

Selim Khan declined to comment for this story, first saying he was unwell. When pressed, he hung up the call, and did not respond to our calls and text messages afterwards.

THE RISE OF SELIM KHAN

Locals say Selim Khan has at least 50 dredgers that can lift an estimated 3 crore cubic feet of sand per month, which is worth at least Tk 6 crore at wholesale level.

From a rickshaw-puller in the 1980s, Selim Khan’s rise has been astronomical since he found an earnest enabler in Dipu Moni, now the education minister.

District Awami League leaders say Selim Khan developed close ties with Dipu Moni after the AL came to power in 2009, and has since been extracting sand from the Meghna.

His aggressive and illegal sand lifting over the years has earned him the nickname Balukheko, the Bangla word for someone who eats sand, figuratively.

Documents obtained by The Daily Star show that between 2018 and 2022 alone, he lifted more than 668.33 crore cubic feet of sand from 21Mauzas of Chandpur Sadar upazila, from where Dipu Moni is elected.

Currently, white sand is sold at Tk 2 per CFT at wholesale level. At this rate, the sand he lifted in the last four years is worth at least about Tk 1,337 crore.

Although he made hundreds of crores out of the sand business, he did not pay a single taka to the government exchequer.

On September 9, the Chandpur district administration ordered him to pay Tk 267.33 crore in 15 days in overdue royalty against his sand lifting from 2018-2022, or face legal action.

As of yesterday, Selim Khan did not pay the royalty, the Chandpur DC said.

An investigation by The Daily Star indicates that Selim Khan could not have run his sand business without the backing of Dipu Moni, who went as far as writing to the Prime Minister’s Office on at least three occasions to promote Selim Khan’s cause.

The connections between Dipu Moni and Selim Khan have been previously reported by different media, including this newspaper.

It resurfaced on the World Rivers Day on September 24, when the now-fired National River Conservation Commission Chairman Manjur Ahmed Chowdhury made a bold assertion.

“River grabbers have political

backing. Those who are illegally lifting sand from the Meghna have ties with a female minister from Chandpur,” he told a seminar in Dhaka, without naming anyone.

Other than Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, there is only one female minister in the current cabinet of 25 ministers. This minister is Dipu Moni, elected from Chandpur-3 constituency. Chandpur, which has five parliamentary seats, does not have any other minister, male or female.

Last week, the government cancelled Manjur Ahmed’s appointment “in public interest” less than a month after his comment on the river grabbers, sand miners and their patrons.

The gazette notification that cancelled his appointment did not say what that “public interest” was, but environmentalists and citizen groups criticised the government decision saying it was against the government’s stated policy to save rivers.

DIPU MONI: SELIM KHAN’S ENABLER

The Daily Star is in possession of documents that show Dipu Moni promoted Selim Khan’s sand business with a dogged determination.

Between 2015 and 2021, she wrote at least 15 Demi Official letters, known

Of her six letters in 2019, two were written to the principal secretary at the PMO, two to the secretary of the shipping ministry, one to the secretary of the land ministry and one to the Chandpur DC.

On one occasion that year, she wrote three letters on the same day – two to two ministries and one to the Chandpur DC – asking them to take measures that would facilitate Selim Khan’s sand business.

Paper trails also suggest that she sought the intervention of the principal secretary at the PMO three times to expedite the approval process when things were not moving as fast as expected.

Most recently on August 3, 2021, Dipu Moni wrote to the land secretary, detailing her own letter chain since 2019 and reminding the secretary of a High Court order of 2020 in favour of Shanto Enterprise, the firm owned by Selim Khan’s son.

Dipu Moni then asks the secretary to “instruct” the Chandpur DC and the deputy director of Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority, Chandpur, to hand over a sand quarry in Bashgari area to Shanto Enterprise for lifting 8.60 crore CFT of sand.

Md Nojibur Rahman, the now-

Citing official records, Chandpur DC Kamrul Hasan said the district administration has never officially leased out any sand quarry to Selim Khan.

“He lifted sand using a court order, which he secured by presenting false information before the court [High Court]. The Supreme Court later cancelled the [High Court] verdict and directed us to collect the royalty,” the DC added.

Dipu Moni claimed she was not aware if Selim Khan’s sand business was illegal, even as she wrote 15 DO letters in the span of six years.

Last year, the Chandpur district administration abolished 10 sand quarries in the Meghna, citing serious risks of riverbank erosion.

But since January this year, Selim Khan has been lobbying to extract sand from these quarries using the influence of Dipu Moni, multiple government officials having direct knowledge of the matter said.

“Selim Khan regularly comes to the DC office to ask why there is a delay in granting the lease. We are under pressure,” a top official at the DC office said on condition of anonymity as he is not authorised to speak to the media.

“Since many DO letters came to the DC office in the past, we can very well understand whose influence he is using to lift more sand,” the official told The Daily Star by phone.

On September 17, the Chandpur district administration declared around 415 acres of the Meghna riverbed in Sadar upazila as sand quarry. Leasing it out will allow extraction of around 30 crore cubic feet of sand.

This quarry is in Bahariya area, where Selim Khan is a union parishad chairman.

Officials at the DC office and local Awami League leaders say Selim Khan is lobbying hard to get the permits to lift sand from there.

“He has been doing this with support from an influential person. Selim Khan cannot do this all by himself,” said Chandpur district AL President Nasir Uddin Ahmed.

Other than sand lifting, Selim Khan’s name had surfaced during a nationwide crackdown on illegal casinos in 2019, when he reportedly went into hiding briefly.

Currently, he faces a corruption case filed by the Anti Corruption Commission over illegal wealth worth Tk 34.53 crore, and has an embargo on leaving the country.

His name also came up, along with Dipu Moni’s brother Wadud Tipu, in March 2022 in the alleged corruption in land purchase for Chandpur Science and Technology University.

Subsequently in June 2022, Selim Khan was expelled from the Awami League for “violating party discipline and damaging the party image by mining sand from the Meghna through dishonest and illegal means”.

A month after the expulsion, he still joined a local Awami League meeting as a “special guest” and Dipu Moni, joining the meeting virtually, still addressed him as the “president of the union Awami League,” according to the video clip of the event.

Dipu Moni’s support for Selim Khan has been a popular subject of discussion and debate within the local Awami League circle for the last one decade.

“Dipu Moni has never looked after the political or business interest of any other local Awami League leaders the way she does in case of Selim Khan,” Chandpur district AL President Nasir Uddin said.

Note: Given Dipu Moni’s elaborate response to our questions, we are running her replies separately.

Dipu Moni’s response to our nine questions

Question - 1: The National River Conservation Commission chairman [removed from the post on October 18] said a female minister from Chandpur is involved in illegally extracting sand from the Meghna. What is your comment on that?
Dipu Moni: The NRCC chairman’s remark is false and baseless.

There is only one female minister from Chandpur. That’s me. I do not have any involvement with illegal sand extraction or encroachment on rivers, and I do not patronise any individual or group engaged in such activities.

The statement by the NRCC chairman is uncalled for. There was certainly a dishonest motive behind the statement, which was made just before the national election.

Question - 2: Why have you sent at least 15 demi official (DO) letters to various government offices between 2015 to 2021 [to help Selim Khan get permission for sand extraction]?
Dipu Moni: My DO letters are self-explanatory. In each letter, I clearly mentioned why I was writing it.

Those who regularly commute through the main waterways and go to the shoals of the Padma and the Meghna in that region know about the navigability problems. Dredging is essential for navigability. Due to underwater shoals, vast areas along the banks get eroded by the water sometimes.

The extracted sand is also used in development works. Sand extraction always takes place in the Meghna. Dredging is done mainly to trim shoals or char lands to protect navigability and prevent erosion. The government also earns revenue from those who extract the sand. It is a business for the extractors too.

As an elected member of parliament from the area, it is my responsibility to assist the local government representatives or anyone from my area when they want to do something that is not illegal.

When a union-level party leader, also a chairman, of my area sought my cooperation in legal sand extraction, I gave the aforesaid self-explanatory DO letters on different occasions to assist him in sand extraction from the Meghna to protect navigability and prevent erosion in some areas.

I have always known that sand extraction takes place there following the government rules and that his sand extraction is legal.
Question - 3: You have sent three DO letters to the prime minister’s principal secretary, recommending that Selim Khan and his son be allowed to extract sand. Why was this necessary? What role does the principal secretary have in this matter?
Dipu Moni: The principal secretary often plays a role in coordinating

‘No lack of coordination among us’

Says EC commissioner about other commissioners

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Election Commissioner Brig Gen (retd) Ahsan Habib Khan has said that there is no lack of coordination among the commissioners.

“Of course, there is coordination among us,” he told reporters at the Election Commission yesterday.

Ahsan was responding to a question from a journalist about a difference of opinion in the EC regarding the “conducive situation” ahead of the upcoming general election.

The EC in a concept note of a workshop said that the expected environment for holding a free, fair, participatory, and festive election is yet to be created.

Speaking to The Daily Star on Monday, Election Commissioner Anisur Rahman said that he “disagrees” with the concept note’s assertion.

“I don’t know based on what it was written. I don’t see any such situation. The situation is conducive to the election.”

Yesterday, Ahsan said respected commissioner Anisur made his statement.

The EC concept note mentioned that the

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On October 3, river police arrested nine people for illegal sand mining and seized a bulk carrier owned by Selim Khan.

PHOTO : COLLECTED

as DO letters, to various government offices so that Selim Khan and his family members can continue and expand their sand business.

In letter after letter, she “specially requests” the government offices to allow Ms Selim Enterprise, Ms Shanto Enterprise and Ms Brishti Enterprise to lift sand from the Meghna and carry out hydrographic survey to determine the volume of sand in the riverbed that needs lifting “to improve the navigability”.

Selim Enterprise is owned by Selim Khan himself, while Shanto and Brishti enterprises are owned by his son and daughter, respectively.

In the eight months between April and November 2015, she wrote seven letters – three to the Chandpur deputy commissioner, two to then shipping minister Shajahan Khan, one to the senior secretary of the land ministry and one to the principal secretary at the Prime Minister’s Office.

The two letters to the shipping minister were sent on the same day, June 16, 2015. One letter “specially requests” the shipping minister to write to the land ministry to allow Selim Khan to lift sand from the Meghna for three years. In the other letter, Dipu Moni asks Shajahan Khan to write to the land ministry and the Chandpur deputy commissioner to allow Ms Brishti Enterprise, Selim Khan’s daughter’s firm, to carry out a hydrographic survey in the Meghna to determine the volume of sand that needs extraction.

retired principal secretary at the PMO who received two letters from Dipu Moni in 2019, declined to comment. “I do not want to talk about this,” he said.

“Dipu Moni cannot do this. She has done this in violation of protocol,” former cabinet secretary Ali Imam Majumder said, when asked about her letters to principal secretaries.

Dipu Moni, also a joint general secretary of Awami League, denied having any business ties with Selim Khan and his illegal sand mining. In her response via WhatsApp, she also refuted that she financially benefitted from it.

Asked why she wrote so many letters for a single person, she said, “When a union-level party leader, also a chairman, of my area sought my cooperation in legal sand extraction, I gave the aforesaid self-explanatory DO letters on different occasions to assist him in sand extraction from the Meghna to protect navigability and prevent erosion in some areas.

“As an elected member of parliament from the area, it is my responsibility to assist the local government representatives or anyone from my area when they want to do something that is not illegal.”

However, local AL leaders said they do not know any other party leaders or businesspersons in Chandpur who enjoy such support from Dipu Moni. **‘WE ARE UNDER PRESSURE’**
But Selim Khan’s sand mining is illegal.

FROM PAGE 1

Palestinian conflict in decades.

Gaza’s health ministry said at least 5,791 Palestinians have been killed in the strikes on the Hamas-ruled enclave since October 7, including 2,360 children. A total of 704 were killed in the previous 24 hours alone, it said.

Ministry spokesman Ashraf Al-Qidra said it was the biggest number of deaths in a 24-hour period in the two weeks of Israeli strikes.

After his daughter was killed in an air strike in southern Gaza, Abdallah Tabash refused to let her go, holding her body in his arms. Blood stained her

face and hair as people begged him to hand her over so they could bury her.

“This is my girl, I want to see her as much as I can,” the shocked father said in the city of Khan Younis.

The bombardments were unleashed in response to a Hamas attack on southern Israel on October 7 in which the members of the group killed more than 1,400 people – mostly civilians – in a single day.

Hamas on Monday freed two Israeli women who were among the more than 200 hostages taken during the assault. They were the third and fourth hostages to be released.