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ECONOMIC ZONE IN NARAYANGANJ

Farmers pay the price of development

SAURAV HOSSAIN SIAM, Narayanganj

Nurul Islam used to earn a decent living as a tenant farmer in his village in Narayanganj's Araihazar upazila. He also reared cattle and caught fish from small waterbodies to make some money on the side.

"Those were the good old days. Even in 2016, I grew various crops, had three cows that would graze on large open fields. I caught fish from nearby canals and ponds. I was self-sufficient," he reminisced.

Everything, however, changed dramatically in the span of just six years.

The construction of a special economic zone has forced hundreds of people -- all of whose livelihoods depended on farmland and waterbodies -- to switch to other professions, limiting their income sources as vast swathes of arable land, canals and other waterbodies had to be acquired for the project.

While the landowners were compensated with hefty amounts, the tenant farmers received no compensation, nor were they offered any employment opportunities, said locals.

"Now I am a rickshaw-puller from dawn to dusk," said Nurul from Maizpara village, his voice fraught with frustration.

Like him, some now pull rickshaws, some work as day labourers in different informal sectors, while others toil away at the economic zone.

Despite concerns raised by environmentalists and locals, the Bangladesh Economic Zones Authority (Beza) selected 1,000 acres of land in Araihazar upazila for the construction of the Bangladesh Special Economic Zone (BSEZ) in 2017.

In December last year, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina inaugurated the BSEZ, also known as the Japanese Economic Zone. Now, the infrastructural development work -- including filling up lands with sand, construction of boundary walls, installation of a drainage systems, and tree plantation -- is only in its first phase.

As of now, five foreign companies have signed contracts with the BSEZ authorities to set up their factories. The BSEZ is in talks with some other companies as well, said officials concerned.

Project Director (PD) Saleh Ahmed said the project was divided into two phases and around 40 percent work in the first phase had already been completed.

Around 10,000 workers are now working at the project site, said Saleh.

This correspondent found the project site had construction workers and security guards. Locals said the workers were not from the area and had been outsourced.

According to environment activists and locals, the mega project will adversely impact the environment and people's lives in the area. Beza officials, however, dismissed the concerns and said they were working in a planned way to avoid environmental degradation.

Before starting the construction work, the BSEZ authorities assigned EQMS Consulting Ltd, a private company, to conduct a survey in and around the project site in 2018.

The survey stated that some 1,714 families would be affected by the project. Around 66.45 percent of them depended on agriculture for their livelihoods.

WORD STILL NOT KEPT

At the beginning of the project, the BSEZ authorities assured that employment opportunities would be provided to the tenant farmers and their family members, whose livelihoods depended on the land and water bodies acquired for the project.

"The word given to us was not kept," said Md Zaman, another resident of Maizpara village.

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ROHINGYA REFUGEES

Indonesia sends boat carrying 250 back to the sea

AFP, Jakarta

About 250 Rohingya refugees crammed onto a wooden boat have been turned away from western Indonesia and sent back to sea, residents said yesterday.

The group from the persecuted Myanmar minority arrived off the coast of Aceh province on Thursday but locals told them not to land. Some refugees swam ashore and collapsed on the beach before being pushed back onto their overcrowded boat.

After it was prevented from landing, the decrepit boat travelled dozens of kilometres farther east to North Aceh. But locals again sent them back to sea late Thursday.

By yesterday, the vessel, which some on board said had sailed from Bangladesh about three weeks ago, was no longer visible from where it had landed in North Aceh, residents said.

Thousands from the mostly Muslim Rohingya minority risk their lives each year on long and treacherous sea journeys, often in flimsy boats, to try to reach Malaysia or Indonesia.

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"Even in 2016, I grew various crops, had three cows that would graze on large open fields. I caught fish from nearby canals and ponds. I was self-sufficient... Now I am a rickshaw-puller from dawn to dusk."

Nurul Islam of Maizpara village in Narayanganj



This picture taken from the Israeli side of the border with the Gaza Strip shows smoke billowing during Israeli bombardment on the Palestinian enclave yesterday, amid the ongoing battles between Israel and the Palestinian group Hamas.

PHOTO: AFP

Foreign countries' meddling harms nation's image

Say experts; urge political parties to stop giving foreigners the scope

PORIMOL PALMA

The increasing interest of some foreign countries in Bangladesh's upcoming general election can be seen as a reflection of their response to the country's divisive politics and the current state of democracy, say foreign policy analysts.

Frequent statements by officials from big powers, their discussions on elections, and warnings of punitive actions are tainting Bangladesh's image, they say.

If this trend continues, analysts say, it will only bring disgrace to Bangladesh and hamper the country's progress as a democratic nation. It will also give external forces the scope for using the weakness of Bangladesh's domestic affairs to their advantage.

Bangladesh's elections were discussed in the meeting between US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin and their Indian counterparts S Jaishankar and Rajnath Singh in New Delhi on November 10.

After the meeting, Indian Foreign Secretary Vinay Kwatra said the US and India shared

perspectives on Bangladesh with each other.

He said the election in Bangladesh is its internal matter as its citizens will decide their future. "We as a close friend and partner of Bangladesh respect the democratic process there and will continue to support the country's vision of a stable, peaceful and progressive nation."

The US over the last two years repeatedly spoke of free, fair and peaceful elections in Bangladesh.

Washington in May this year announced a visa policy saying that it would impose visa restrictions on individuals and their immediate family members if they are responsible for, or complicit in, undermining the democratic election process in Bangladesh.

In December 2021, the US imposed sanctions on the Rab and seven of its officials over human rights violations.

A number of other countries, the UN, and several rights groups have expressed deep concerns over the political hostilities

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UN aid to Gaza halted again

WFP warns starvation imminent; Israeli troops go door to door in Al-Shifa hospital

AGENCIES

Gaza locked in new communication blackout

24 die at Al Shifa hospital in 2 days due to power cuts

9 Palestinians killed in Israeli strike



After knocking down illegal structures, the Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority has built a walkway and done some beautification work along the Buriganga in Kamrangirchar. The photo taken recently.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

Webb spots most distant Milky Way-like galaxy

CNN ONLINE

Astronomers have spied an intriguing phenomenon in the distant universe -- a galaxy that closely resembles the Milky Way -- and it's challenging key theories on how galaxies evolve.

The faraway system, called Ceers 2112, was spotted by an international team using the James Webb

Space Telescope.

Like our home galaxy, the newly discovered Ceers 2112 is a barred spiral galaxy, and it's now the most distant of its kind ever observed. The bar at the centre of the structure is made of stars.

Ceers 2112 formed soon after the big bang created the universe (which is estimated to be 13.8 billion years old), and the galaxy's distinct structure was already in place 2.1 billion years later.

Given the distance between Earth and the objects from the early days of the universe, when telescopes like Webb observe light from the distant cosmos, it's effectively like looking into the past.