



PHOTO: STAR

Hill cutting puts local residents at risk

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An immigrant family is currently engaged in hill-cutting activities to flatten the land for their house in South Baradohar area of Juri upazila in Moulvibazar.

This activity poses a significant threat to three families residing atop the hill and around fifty other families in the surrounding area. In response to this imminent danger, Ira Mia, representing the affected families, has recently lodged a formal written complaint with the Juri Upazila Nirbahi Officer (UNO).

According to the complaint filed on December 12, two sons of Rukia Begum, a resident of South Baradohar, live in Qatar.

They have been cutting hills for several days to level the house. There is a fear of the collapse of two other families' houses

along with Ira Mia's on top of the hill.

Recently this correspondent visited the area and found a large hill of 30 to 35 feet in height.

Rukia Begum's house under the hill. Above are the residences of Ira Mia, Shahin Mia and Habib Ali.

The hills are being cut in Rukia's area and piling of cut soil.

However, no member of Rukia's family or any laborer engaged in hill cutting was found there. Three people's residences on top of the ridge are under threat.

The soil of the hills is being filled in the lowlands of Rukia. Rukia's brother and neighbor Sayed Mia rushed there after hearing the news.

Sayed said, there are 10 decimals of land bought by Rukia. His two sons live in Qatar. They will build a new house. So, the

hill is being cut to level the house.

Akhlish Mia, a UP member of Sagarnal Union Parishad (UP) said that after receiving a complaint from the victims, I asked Rukia Begum's family members to stop the hill cutting. But they did not accept it. Nurul Mohaimin Milton, general secretary of Bangladesh Poribesh Sanbadik Samitee Moulvibazar said there is no provision to cut any government or privately owned hill.

In the interest of the public, the Environment Ministry, and Forest and Climate Change hold the authority to approve hill cutting.

Razing hills is a punishable offense under Section B of the Environmental Protection Act 1995 (Amended 2010). There is a provision for both jail time and a fine as punishment in this regard.

He said the biodiversity and ecological balance are being disturbed and the topography is changing because of the hill cutting. Immediate action should be taken to save the environment and wildlife.

Juri Upazila Assistant Commissioner (Land) Sanjida Akhter told this correspondent that after receiving the complaint, the concerned union land assistant officer has been given the responsibility to investigate the matter.

Necessary action will be taken against the persons involved in this matter after receiving the complaint.

Assistant Land Officer Mujibur Rahman, who is in charge of the Sagarnal Union Land Office said he will conduct an on-site investigation and send a report to the Assistant Commissioner.

BNP urges UN

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action to foster the restoration of democracy in Bangladesh," the letter read.

Senior Joint Secretary General Ruhul Kabir Rizvi addressing a virtual press briefing yesterday, confirmed that the party had sent a letter to the UN.

The letter dated December 28 was addressed to United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, where the party presented its views on the country's overall political and electoral situation.

"...Much like its predecessors, the lead up to this so-called dummy election is marred by state-

sponsored violence against pro-democracy activists, as well as targeted assaults on public and private establishments, causing the loss of lives and damage to assets," the letter read.

Regarding the violence surrounding the elections and arson attacks, the party presented some incidents and it blamed the ruling party for those.

"We believe that the ongoing anarchy, jointly implemented by the AL and the police in a series of sabotage acts, should never serve as a strategy to undermine democracy and reinforce fascism," the letter also read.

Attacks on opposition

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In these attacks, three people were killed and 17 gravely injured, while one was abducted.

"The attackers either hacked the victims on the chest and back, or bludgeoned them and broke their limbs," said the report, adding that the victims could not recognise their attackers in a single instance.

Human Rights Support Society (HRSS), in their annual report released yesterday, said four people were killed in such attacks.

It said at least 130 homes of opposition leaders and activists were attacked, vandalised or torched.

Regarding the convictions in old cases, it put the figure at 1,641 people convicted between August and December 2023.

The report further said that as many as 1,400 people were convicted in 82 cases just between December 7 and December 24.

It added that five people were killed in electoral violence, and as many 902 were injured in December 2023.

MSF said that over the year, at least 10 people were killed, and eight suffered bullet-wounds in electoral violence.

It said there were 59 allegations of law enforcers arbitrarily picking up people and reports of 53 individuals

who were picked up, showed up as arrested in different police stations and courts.

HRSS said there were more allegations of enforced disappearance in 2023 compared to 2022.

It tracked 31 people who were forcibly disappeared for up to three days, of whom 19 were later shown arrested, and six were released.

No information could be obtained about the six others, it said.

150 Palestinians

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As battles raged through the rubble of towns and refugee camps, the UN said more than 85 percent of Gaza's 2.4 million people have fled their homes.

"We were hoping that 2024 would arrive under better auspices and that we would be able to celebrate the new year at home with our families," said Mahmoud Abou Shahma in a camp for displaced people in Rafah, on the Egyptian border.

The ministry reported numerous deaths in overnight strikes on central Gaza's Zawayda and the nearby Al Mughazi refugee camp. A former Palestinian Authority minister was also killed in an Israeli strike on his home in the enclave.

No coming home

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arrested Sumona and four others.

According to the case documents, Sumona was discovered in a room with a customer.

Despite her status as a victim of human trafficking for commercial sexual exploitation, the First Information Report (FIR) was filed against her and the others under the Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act, 1956, as well as under the Indian Penal Code, 1860, with Sikandra Police Station in Agra, Uttar Pradesh.

Police brought charges against Sumona that she did an obscene act in a public place.

The Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act refers to punishment for keeping a brothel or allowing premises to be used as a brothel, living on the earnings of prostitution, procuring, inducing, or taking a person for the sake of prostitution, and detaining a person in premises where prostitution is carried on.

The legislation aims to prevent trafficking, but its provisions have been used to conduct raids and search operations, detain women and place them in shelter homes.

Tragically, Sumona, treated as an accused, was presented before the Magistrate of the Agra Court and was remanded to Agra District Jail. Although she was granted bail on June 5, 2017, she remained incarcerated.

In response to this injustice, a Writ Petition was filed before the High Court of Allahabad, Uttar Pradesh, on December 10, 2018, challenging her unlawful detention by the State.

However, on March 17, 2021, the case was disposed of without issuing any favourable orders.

On June 10, 2017, Sumona was transferred to a Protective Home operated by the government of Uttar Pradesh in Agra.

It is worth noting that due to the severe trauma resulting from continuous sexual violence, she was unable to reveal her true identity and provided an unverified address from West Bengal, India.

Subsequently, on July 10, 2018, while undergoing counselling at the Protective Home, Sumona confided in Superintendent Urmila Gupta, disclosing her actual status as a Bangladeshi national. She shared her complete address and the harrowing story of her trafficking from Bangladesh, as well as her ordeal of enduring forced sexual exploitation at multiple locations.

The superintendent of the Protective Home failed to report these critical facts and the atrocities committed against Sumona to the Court and Investigating Officer at Sikandra Police Station, and failed to initiate her repatriation process in accordance with the Memorandum of Understanding signed by the

Governments of India and Bangladesh.

The superintendent also disregarded all pertinent legal procedures and proceeded to file a second FIR with Etmadaula Police Station in Agra, Uttar Pradesh, on August 4, 2019, against Sumona under the Foreigners Act, 1946, for illegal entry and stay in India.

As a result, Sumona once again appeared before the Magistrate of Agra Court and was remanded to Agra District Jail, where she has remained detained since.

Sumona appealed for bail before the Sessions Court of Agra, but her plea was denied on December 4, 2019. Charge sheets have been submitted by investigative officers before the Chief Judicial Magistrate, Agra, in both cases.

On April 5, 2023, an application for bail was submitted before the High Court of Allahabad.

The Court acknowledged that Sumona had presented a valid case for bail, and her application was granted on May 9, 2023.

The High Court of Allahabad did not impose any restrictions on Sumona that would prevent her from returning home through the established formal repatriation process.

The Agra Court released her on September 26 in the custody of a man who is originally her trafficker but posed as her relative living in India.

After the repatriation process failed, she entered Bangladesh illegally with the help of her trafficker on November 8, Mohammed Tariqul Islam, Country Director of Justice and Care, an NGO that supports trafficking victims, told The Daily Star yesterday.

Between March 2017 and October 2023, the NGO rescued around 800 women and children aged 14 to 35 in India and brought them back to Bangladesh, he said.

"So far, we have provided legal assistance in about 350 trafficking cases in different courts in Bangladesh. Out of these, 100 have been disposed of, and in seven cases, convictions were secured. Notably, all the convicted individuals were recruiters," he told The Daily Star yesterday.

CRIMINALISING THE VICTIMS
Meanwhile, sex workers' collectives in India condemn these raids and rescue operations, saying that instead of combating trafficking, it creates scopes for arresting sex workers without due process and detaining them in shelter homes where they face more abuse and violence.

A 2018 report by organisations and collectives associated with the National Network of Sex Workers, which tracked down 243 women who were picked up and detained in parts of Maharashtra between 2005 and 2017, found that almost 80 percent had not wanted to be "rescued".

Sex workers collectives have criticised

the Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act ITPA stating that it criminalises their work, their families and their right to have children. Another criticism is that the act invalidates adult consent and has created provisions for unfair and forced evictions.

In the administrative office of a shelter home in Mumbai, a staff member rushed in with a paper and said, "Look at the new order!" to another staff member.

The paper was a copy of a magistrate's order saying that seven women who were detained in a raid under the ITPA be detained for a year in a shelter home. What was surprising for the shelter home staff was that this order was passed without a report from the probation officer.

"Of the seven women who were detained, only one was a case of kidnapping and trafficking," the staff member told The Daily Star.

"The family members of the other six were present in the court yet they were not released. Now they will have to stay in a shelter home for a year, with no income. A lot of these women have children and throughout the stay they will be worried about them and will not participate in the activities in the shelter home."

"To be able to leave earlier, the women will have to file an appeal which would take months and at least Rs 60,000. They will end up taking debts and then having to work more to pay it back," said the staff member.

When it comes to Bangladeshi women, the situation gets more complicated. As many women enter India illegally, they are also vulnerable to being charged under the Foreigners Act. Many trafficking survivors who are now working as sex workers and are settled in India have got Aadhaar cards or other Indian identification documents, some real, some fake.

"Trafficking is a serious concern," said Tejaswi Sevekari, facilitator of Saheli, the only sex workers collective in Pune.

"But the sad part is that no one is addressing the issues of the safety of women and girls during the transit, be it in Bangladesh or in India. And once she has landed in the red light area or a brothel, rescuing her after a few years makes no sense. The border safety needs to be addressed properly. A woman's current status needs to be considered during the rescue operation. Most of the time, it happens without her consent."

Even those who want to be willingly repatriated face long delays. "Khushi," who came to the shelter home when she was 19, has been there for almost three years now.

"When we have to send a Nepali girl back, the process is very easy and quick," said Triveni Acharya, co-founder of Rescue Foundation, an NGO that runs shelter homes and aids police in rescue operations.

"But for Bangladeshi girls, the process is long drawn and complicated," Triveni noted.

This delays repatriation and forces survivors to stay in shelter homes for long durations.

INDIAN IDS WITH FAKE DOCUMENTS
The Pune police declined to make any official comments.

But a senior officer with the Anti-Human Trafficking Cell of the Pune police said, "There are 110 brothels in the red light area of Budhwar Peth, which is located in the heart of the city. There are around 800 to 900 women commercial sex workers (CSWs) in these brothels."

Requesting anonymity, the officer added, "The CSWs belonged to Nepal, Karnataka, and Bangladesh. The majority of them have Aadhaar Cards and PAN [Permanent Account Number] cards."

Explaining how women are trafficked in India, the officer said, "All the women from Bangladesh have crossed the Indo-Bangla border illegally with the help of pimps. The border is very porous. The women are then kept in different lodges or hotels in Kolkata by the agents for a few days. During these days, their PAN cards and Aadhaar cards are prepared by submission of fake and fabricated documents."

"The agents generally lure the women from poor families based in Dhaka, Khulna, and other places with good and respected jobs in Delhi and Mumbai. These women are uneducated or school dropouts," he said.

"After their brief stay in Kolkata, the women are then handed over to other agents who take these women to Pune or Mumbai in the express trains. The agents generally use fake identities while communicating with the women on the express trains. The women, during their journey, are not allowed to speak with anyone else," he said.

"Once the trains reach Pune railway station, the agents hand over these women to the brothel keepers. These women are bought by the brothel keepers for a very trivial amount ranging between Rs 8000 to Rs 20,000," the officer said.

For official comments, an RTI was also filed with Pune, Mumbai, and Maharashtra police, but none of them responded to our questions about the trafficking rackets. Mumbai police only said they rescued one Bangladeshi survivor in 2022 and 2023, but no one in previous years.

Triveni Acharya, one of the founders of the rescue foundation, said they rescue around 500 girls yearly, and 20 percent of them are Bangladeshi. Even there are so many Bangladeshi "guru-ma" (brothel managers) in the brothels in Mumbai, she said.

"These girls were actually taught by the traffickers to give identity as Indian to avoid legal complications of illegal entry," Triveni added.

One in 5 households food

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'went without eating for a whole day', they 'skipped a meal', their 'household ran out of food', they ate less than they should, ate healthy and nutritious food, and were worried about not having enough food to eat.

Those who responded positively to all eight questions fall under the severely food insecure category, said Shahnaz Arefin, secretary to the Statistics and Informatics Division.

Rangpur division has the highest number of households suffering from moderate or severe food insecurity: 29.98 percent. This was followed by Sylhet (26.48 percent) and Mymensingh (26 percent).

Dhaka division has the lowest number of households experiencing food insecurity: 16.40 percent.

Rural areas saw higher food insecurity than urban areas: 24.12 percent and 20.77 percent respectively. Around 11.45 percent of households in the city corporation area suffered from moderate or severe food insecurity, according to the survey.

About 24 percent of Bangladesh's population was food insecure, according to a survey report of the World Food Programme that was released in August last year.

"It's alarming that a government survey comes up with such a percentage of food insecure people," said Selim

Raihan, executive director of the South Asian Network on Economic Modelling. The country is still facing a food price shock.

Moreover, the economy is going through a crisis and that is hindering job opportunities, he said.

"People need jobs to ensure food security."

He, however, contested the household figure of Rangpur division.

The BBS Household and Expenditure survey said that poverty has declined in Rangpur, but this food security survey showed that this division has the highest number of households facing food insecurity.

"It's inconsistent," said Raihan, also a professor at the University of Dhaka's department of economics.

The rise in food insecurity in the rural areas has reasons, he said.

"Before, most of the producers in the rural areas were the consumers as well. Now, many of them have become consumers only -- they are no longer producers," Raihan added.

The wastage of food from the production level to the consumption level varies from 31 percent to 50 percent, said Md Shahidul Alam, director general of the Food Planning and Monitoring Unit at the food ministry, at the event.

"If such wastage could be minimised, food insecurity could be addressed to a large extent."

Mob torches cars, attacks cops

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Several witnesses told The Daily Star that the locals started demonstrating demanding arrest of the employers and residents of the house, alleging that the woman was murdered and her body was thrown from the building.

As police went to recover the body, the agitators barred them and asked them to make the arrest first.

The law enforcers tried to pacify them but they continued their protest until 10:00am.

At one stage, police chased them to disperse and the demonstrators started throwing brick chunks at the law enforcers, injuring at least six police personnel, including Officer-in-Charge Mashiur Rahman of Rampura Police Station, said Sub-inspector Habib Uddin of the police station.

The demonstrators later broke opened the gate of the building and torched vehicles in the car park.

In fear, the residents of the six-storey building took cover on the rooftop.

Two fire engines later doused the blaze.

Police from other stations rushed there and brought the situation under control.

Several people were detained from the spot, said Golam Maula, inspector (investigation) of Rampura Police Station.

Talking to The Daily Star, Delwar claimed that they neither tortured nor killed Asma. She might have killed herself.

Mainuddin said Asma was dealing with a family issue after her husband died.

This newspaper, however, could not contact her family for comments.

Minara Begum, who works as a house help in Meradia area, said she along with others rushed to the spot after hearing that "a fellow worker was killed by her employers".

"We see many house helps lose their lives due to torture by their employers. So, we joined the protest seeking justice."