

MADHUPUR SAL FOREST

Of deforestation and vanishing wildlife

MIRZA SHAKIL, *Tangail*

The Madhupur Sal Forest in Tangail, once teeming with diverse wildlife such as peacocks, wild buffalo, and deer, is now facing a devastating impact from deforestation, food shortages, and poaching.

Ajay A Mre, a 70-year-old Garo leader and former president of Jayenshahi Adibashi Unnayan Parishad, said there was a time when the forest was abundant with wildlife during his childhood.

He used to venture deep into the forest with his herd of cattle every evening. There, he would see and hear a variety of wildlife. There were abundance of wild fruit trees and medicinal herbs and shrubs – including Bohera, Haritaki, Amlaki, Dumur, Anai Gota, Joina Gota, and Tithi Jam.

The wild fruits and herbal plants mentioned by Ajay are among the 36 varieties of trees that have become nonexistent.

The decline in biodiversity is evident, with the forest, which originally spanned 45,000 acres, now reduced to a mere 10,000 acres due to tree felling and encroachment, as reported by the Bangladesh Environmental Lawyers Association.

The tree felling and encroachment resulted in an acute food crisis, leaving the

remaining primates and birds struggling to survive, said locals and forest officials.

Fruits and fresh leaves from trees were the main food source for the monkeys, langurs, deer, squirrels, and different birds, including Horial (green pigeon) and parrots. Now only a few of these fruit trees remain in the forest.

The helpless animals, facing an acute food crisis, particularly in winter, venture onto highways and invade neighbouring villages, resulting in fatal accidents or falling prey to poachers.

Recently, a group of hungry monkeys resorted to raiding a banana-laden truck on the Tangail-Mymensingh highway in the Rasulpur area, highlighting the severity of the issue. Many locals said monkeys and hanumans come out of the forest and wait beside the highway seeking food and often meet a tragic end.

Gautam Chandra Chanda, BELA divisional coordinator, said apart from protecting the natural forests, laws should be enforced to protect the forest biodiversity. Besides, there is a need to create a committee of foresters, administration, and local forest dwellers.

Contacted, Sazzadur Rahman, divisional forest officer in Tangail, said

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PHOTO: STAR

A group of monkeys grabbing bananas from a delivery truck on the Tangail-Mymensingh highway in the Rasulpur area recently. Tree felling and encroachment at Madhupur Sal Forest in Tangail have resulted in an acute food crisis, leaving the remaining primates and birds struggling to survive. Many locals said monkeys often come out of the forest and wait beside the highway seeking food and often meet a tragic end.

Erosion, even in winter

At least 250 homesteads devoured by Brahmaputra

OUR CORRESPONDENT, *Jamalpur*

While most waterbodies run dry around the country this winter, residents of Jamalpur are spending their days in worries of erosion.

At least 250 families in Dewanganj and Bokshiganj upazilas have already lost their homesteads and about 200 acres of arable lands to the eroding Brahmaputra river. More than a thousand others, living along the 2-km stretch of the river banks are left exposed to this untimely natural calamity.

According to a local representative, the banks have been eroding for the last two months. They have been raising funds and making bamboo embankments to protect their lands but the makeshift structures are collapsing too.

So far, thousands of houses, multiple local mosques and schools have been engulfed by the rivers. Meanwhile, a state-owned sugar mill remains in threat, said locals, highlighting the Water Development Board's failure in curbing the problem despite efforts.



PHOTO: STAR

At least 250 families in Dewanganj and Bokshiganj upazilas in Jamalpur have already lost their homesteads and about 200 acres of arable land to the eroding Brahmaputra river. The photo was taken recently.

Mohammad Ali of Char Amkhawa union's Patadhwa village has already relocated with his family four times in the last 20 years.

"We urgently need government aid and a permanent solution to this problem," he said.

Echoing him, Md Ziaul Islam, chairman of Char Amkhawa UP, said it is necessary to excavate the rivers and build permanent embankments to protect his union.

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New bins, old habits

Habiganj residents choose littering over dumpsters



Even though the Habiganj municipality constructed concrete bins as secondary transfer stations (STS) at 14 major locations in 2021, people of the municipality continue to dump waste haphazardly. Some residents even dump waste right outside those STS.

PHOTO: STAR

MINTU DESHWARA, *from Habiganj*

The Habiganj municipality in 2021 constructed concrete bins as secondary transfer stations (STS) at 14 major locations within the municipal area, aiming to facilitate garbage disposal and enhance cleanliness.

However, the initiative failed to serve its purpose, largely due to nonbalance of the municipal residents.

Visiting different areas in the municipality recently, including the densely populated Kaligachhtola area, this correspondent saw locals have been dumping garbage on the roadside, in open drains, and ponds instead of the STS bins.

Some were even leaving their household waste around the STS bins, but not inside those.

"Many throw their waste from inside their houses into nearby drains or ponds, or roadside. While

some people do come to the STS bin, they dump the waste outside," said Muhibul Islam, a resident of Kaligachhtola area.

"The garbage often gets piled up on the main road, causing inconveniences to pedestrians, including school-goers, as they have to walk through the wastes. Also, municipal workers bringing medical and other waste from hospitals, houses, hotels, and restaurants are also leaving those outside the bins," said Mifta Mia, a resident of Noahati area.

Sujat Ali, a student of Brindaban Government College, said, "The bad odour from the waste dumped by the roadsides is often unbearable. The garbage clogs the drains, causing waterlogging during monsoon. We have to tread through the dirty water on our way to our destinations."

Contacted, Aaur Rahman Salim, mayor of Habiganj municipality,

said, "Municipality's vehicles collect household waste from at least 70 percent of residents, while the rest simply throw garbage everywhere. I took the initiative to construct the STS bins around the town so people could dump their waste there, but no one wants to use those."

"I have requested people to use the bins and play a role in keeping the neighbourhoods clean, but no one listens. We spent so much money to make the STS bins, but if people don't use those, then what can we do?" he added.

Tofazzal Sohel, general secretary of Bangladesh Paribesh Andolon (Habiganj unit), said the municipality's initiative to set up STS bins was a good move to facilitate waste management, but it is necessary to raise awareness among people to make it a success.

He also called for implementing modern waste management systems for a better outcome.

Dutch NGOs pledge to continue support

DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENT

The Dutch NGOs have pledged to continue their development support for Bangladesh, saying that the country is an "open and liberal society" and a "living lab" contributing to many sustainable solutions, social cohesion and climate resilience, even beyond Bangladesh.

The observations came at the third conclave of the Dutch NGOs or foundations working in Bangladesh in the areas like women and children, climate adaptation, health, education, water and sanitation, agriculture and mental health.

The Bangladesh embassy in The Hague arranged the event attended by around 60 representatives from over forty Dutch NGOs, according to a statement of the embassy yesterday.

Addressing the conclave, Bangladesh Ambassador to the Netherlands M Riaz Hamidullah elaborated how people of the two deltaic nations connect in respect to innovation, resilience, and entrepreneurship in spite of differences in capacity and knowledge.

Ambassador Pascalle Grotenhuis, director general (International Cooperation) of the Dutch Foreign Ministry, presented keynote speech.

Poetry festival at DU on Feb 1-2

DU CORRESPONDENT

The 12th National Poetry Festival is set to be held on February 1 and 2 at Dhaka University's Central Library.

The announcement was made yesterday by Tariq Sujat, general secretary of the Jatiya Kabita Parishad, at a press conference at TSC. Poets from many countries are expected to participate in the festival.

DU pro-VC Prof Muhammad Samad, also a poet and president of the parishad, presided over the conference.

In his speech, Prof Samad shed light on the festival's historical context, acknowledged its challenges, and expressed gratitude to journalists, writers, and publishers for their support.

With the theme "Juddho Gonohotta Shohe Na Kabita," this year's festival aligns with the ongoing global concerns of genocide and war.

The poetry festival was first held in 1987 during the days of protest against the then authoritarian regime of General HM Ershad.

Three days on, ferry yet to be salvaged

Crew member remains untraced

OUR CORRESPONDENT, *Manikganj*

Three days after the incident, neither the ferry that capsized in the Padma in Manikganj could be salvaged, nor could its missing crew member be traced.

Additionally, six goods-carrying vehicles that capsized along with the ferry were underwater until the filing of the report around 8:00pm last night.

"We fear that the crew member and the vehicles were trapped inside the ferry that now remains in an upside-down condition. We hope that we will be able to trace the person and recover the vehicles after lifting the ferry from underwater," said Md Khaled Newaz, deputy general manager (commerce) of Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Corporation (BIWTC).

"Currently, three salvage vessels – Hamza, Rustom, and Prottoy – are working to lift the ferry," he said.

"Our rescue operation teams have completed all the preparatory tasks today [Saturday]. We hope that we will be able to

lift the ferry tomorrow [Sunday]," he told The Daily Star last night.

The ferry "Rajanigandha" sank in the Padma near Paturia Ghat in Manikganj along with nine vehicles around 8:15am on January 17.

The ferry's Second Master, Humayun Kabir, 39, went missing, although 20 of the 21 people – including the driver, helper of nine vehicles, and ferry staff – were rescued.

After the accident, Hamza was engaged in the rescue operation and was able to salvage two vehicles on Wednesday.

A day later, Rustom and Hamza lifted another vehicle.

Rajanigandha weighs around 280 tonnes, but both Hamza and Rustom jointly have the capacity to lift 120 tonnes. Therefore, another rescue vessel "Prottoy" joined the operation on Friday afternoon.

Meanwhile, Humayun's brother Rafiqul Islam expressed dissatisfaction over the slow progress in the rescue operation.

"We demand that the authorities trace my brother immediately," he said.

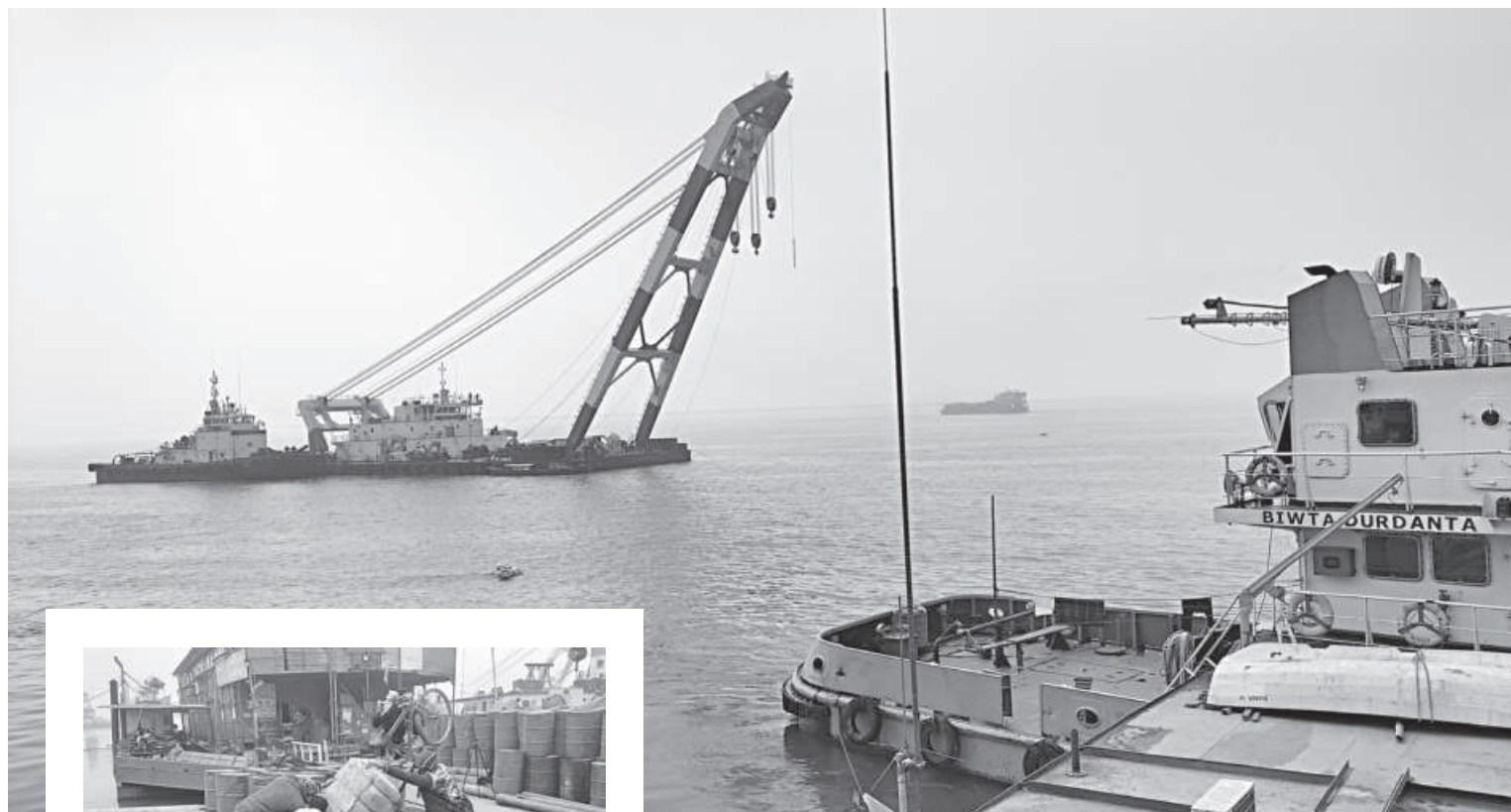


PHOTO: STAR

A salvage vessel working to rescue the ferry that capsized in the Padma in Manikganj on January 17. It has been three days but authorities are yet to salvage the ferry or rescue the missing crew member. The photo was taken yesterday.