

CTG-COX'S BAZAR RAIL ROUTE

Security challenges still unaddressed

FM MIZANUR RAHAMAN

The rail service connecting Cox's Bazar is facing some major security challenges regarding the newly-laid rail track on Chattogram-Cox's Bazar route.

According to the police sources, a year ago the Government Railway Police sent a proposal to install a circle office, two police stations, and six police outposts with extra manpower to provide security for the 102-km rail track from Dohajari to Cox's Bazar.

Sources at the Police Headquarters said they sent the proposal for 1,413 manpower to this end, including two deputy inspector generals (DIGs), three additional DIGs, two superintendents of police, four additional SPs, 13 assistant superintendents of police and 28 inspectors to the home ministry at the end of last year.

However, the proposal is still pending with the home ministry.

The newly built railway track will not only bring dramatic changes to Cox's Bazar and Chattogram region, but will also possibly benefit smugglers and traffickers operating on the route if the security issues are not addressed immediately, said officials.

Cox's Bazar and Teknaf are the two main entry points for contraband drugs



like yaba before those are distributed across the country through different modes of transport.

However, three CMP officials, seeking anonymity, said the seizure of yaba in Bakalia and Karnaphuli areas, the road entry point to the city from Cox's Bazar, dropped significantly after the rail track was opened.

Besides, another matter of concern is that every day Rohingyas are reportedly fleeing the refugee camps using different ways, and the rail link might ease their escape, they said.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina inaugurated the first ever rail track to Cox's Bazar on November 11 last year, marking a new era of trade, connectivity and tourism to the country's southeast coastal region.

The maiden train journey between Dhaka and Cox's Bazar began on December 1.

Bangladesh Railway authorities have set its schedule to operate two trains on the route daily.

Admitting the security challenges, SP Mohammad Hasan Chowdhury of Government Railway Police, Chattogram said, "GRP Chattogram would provide security from Chattogram as the proposal for extra manpower is still awaiting green signal."

He said three to four policemen alongside Railway Nirapatta Bahini personnel would be deployed in the Cox's Bazar bound trains to provide security.

Cox's Bazar district police said during an inter-department coordination meeting in October involving the narcotics department, BGB, Rab, police, district administration and other departments, it was agreed that a baggage scanner, like those in airports, would be installed at Cox's Bazar rail station to prevent drug trafficking.

Also, train passengers would have to carry their NID cards and other identification documents before entering the station, which will enable the law enforcers to identify illegal Rohingyas if they try to board the trains, said a police official who attended the meeting.

Contacted, Cox's Bazar SP Md Mahfuzul Islam said, "The train station is situated within three kilometres of Cox's Bazar Bus Terminal. Earlier, road communication was the single mode of transport for drug trafficking. Now the criminals will try to dodge the law enforcement agencies using different ways."

He also said the limited workforce would pose a big challenge for police to prevent criminal activities.

"Installing the scanner is not the only solution. We have also sought a dog squad considering all aspects," Mahfuzul added.



The Chattogram-Cox's bazar rail route opened last year amid much enthusiasm. According to officials, this long-awaited route marks a new era of trade, connectivity and tourism to the country's southeast coastal region. However, concerns over security remains as a proposal to ensure adequate manpower to provide security for the 102-km rail track is stuck in red tape. PHOTO: RAJIB RAIHAN



Sumedh Chakma in his mushroom farm in Shapchhari union under Rangamati Sadar upazila.

Sumedh shines in mushroom farming

LALTANLIAN PANGHUA

Oyster mushrooms can be seen blooming out of cylindrical containers in a small straw hut with a thatched roof. A family is invested in plucking the ones that are ready for harvest, while a young man checks for the ones that are yet to bloom.

This is the sight this correspondent was welcomed to during his recent visit to Borogang Mushroom Agro Farm in Shapchhari union under Rangamati Sadar upazila.

Initiated in January 2021, Sumedh Chakma, the farm's proprietor, has seen a promising commercial success in mushroom cultivation.

However, his journey to success was a rather bumpy ride.

Deeply interested in mushroom cultivation, Sumedh wanted to pursue training in it. However, his plans did not bear fruit due to a lack of resources and training facilities.

Unable to find a scope, he turned to YouTube for insights on mushroom farming.

"The videos demonstrated various techniques which I decided to try when I first began growing oyster mushrooms. However, accessing the spores [seeds] was the most challenging part," he mentioned.

Making ends meet with whatever resources and insights he could find online, Sumedh was finally able to take advanced training on mushroom farming from the horticulture centre near his locality.

The training revealed a new world of mushroom varieties and techniques to Sumedh.

"This year, I tried growing milky mushrooms, the first indigenous variety to be grown commercially in the country, and saw success. I plan to produce three varieties in total from now on," mentioned Sumedh, who has so far earned Tk 14 lakh against an investment of Tk 7 lakh.

Planting spores nurtured in his farm, Sumedh produces about four tonnes of mushrooms annually.

With a daily yield of 10-15 kilos, the mushrooms are sold to wholesalers for Tk 200-300 and for Tk 280-300 in retail.

Sumedh's success has paved the way for many others who now wish to pursue mushroom farming commercially.

"I really liked Sumedh's farm and want to get involved in mushroom farming," said Niketan Chakma, a local.

The horticulture centre in Rangamati's Assam Bosti area provides week-long training on mushroom farming, informed Md Moniruzzaman, deputy director of Department of Agricultural Extension in Rangamati.

"We also provide spores to those interested," he added.

A new hope for avian fauna

60 hectares of land being used for forestation in Ctg

SIFAYET ULLAH

At a time when the country's bird population is shrinking amid habitat loss due to rapid urbanisation, the forest department in Chattogram has taken an initiative to create a haven for avian fauna.

The state agency has planted 1.5 lakh trees of different species, including dhaki-jaam, bhat, haritaki, bahera, amlaki, dumur, and kadam, as part of a reforestation effort on 60 hectares of land on the bank of Mahamaya lake in Mirsarai upazila.

Besides being home to numerous local bird species, Mahamaya also shelters many species of migratory birds from mid-December till March-April.

Visiting the area recently, this correspondent observed that the planted trees of native species are now over four feet tall and spreading their branches, while being nurtured by three forest department staffers.

"We hope the area will be transformed with a rich avian diversity within five years," said Shahansha Naushad, in charge of Mahamaya lake and ranger of Mirsarai forest range.

Jahangir Kabir Tutul, an environmental activist, said, "The areas surrounding the lake were once home to many wildlife, including birds, which were forced to leave due to deforestation. To attract birds again, the authorities concerned need to plant and nurture trees of native species till they grow."

The initiative, being implemented at a cost of Tk 60 lakh, will usher in a positive change for the region's biodiversity by providing a natural habitat with food sources for birds, said avian experts.

Md Farid Ahsan, an eminent birdlife researcher and professor of zoology department at Chittagong University, said without a healthy environment, birds cannot live properly and face disruptions to their reproductive capacity.

"The initiative for birds is a very good decision by the forest department. However, they need to ensure safety of the birds visiting the area to make the initiative a success," he added.

SM Khaizer, divisional forest officer of Chattogram North Forest Division, said after the trees become mature, the area will be fenced off to protect the birds from predators and poachers.



The forest department in Chattogram has planted 1.5 lakh trees of different species on 60 hectares of land on the bank of Mahamaya lake in Mirsarai upazila.

UTTARAN AT CU

Helping friends, one meal at a time

FM MIZANUR RAHAMAN

The Covid-19 pandemic was a life changing event for people from all walks of life.

Students of Chittagong University were no different.

During the two-year closure of the university amid the pandemic, many CU students experienced financial hardship and uncertainty due to inconsistent and meagre earnings from tuitions.

Even after CU reopened, the situation did not improve overnight. Facing financial strains, students who come from poor backgrounds had to often spend days starving while living on the campus to continue their studies. While many chose to remain silent and bear their agonies, some opted to seek support on different Facebook pages.

Nur Uddin Robin, a student of communication and journalism department at CU, noticed the humanitarian appeals in social media and started thinking about how to solve the crisis.

His friends Hasan and Mahmudul Hasan Maruf also joined him in the effort.

Together, the three reached out to Reazul Karim, an assistant professor of the department, who joined them as chief patron to launch "Uttaran", a platform to provide free meals to students on CU campus, in 2022.

The journey began with their modest



Uttaran members at CU. The platform has been providing free meals to students on CU campus since in 2022.



contributions to the Suhrawardy Hall dining. Little did they know, the initiative would end up benefiting nearly 1,500 male and female CU students over the next two years.

"We began by sharing the campaign on various CU Facebook pages. Identities of those in need were kept private, and all they needed to do was sign a logbook after having a meal. The feedback we received was incredibly positive and exceeded our expectations," said Robin, who recently completed his post-graduation.

At present, with the combined effort of 20 CU teachers and students from different departments, the platform is not only providing free meals but also offering tuition fees, IT training, stipends, and mental health support to CU students.

Uttaran has introduced the "Ayesha Siddiq Education Merit Scholarship", sponsored by CU alumnus Tarek

Mahmud, an official at the International Organization for Migration (IOM). Over the past two years, nine students have benefited from this scholarship, and in the future, Uttaran aims to expand its initiatives both domestically and internationally, with plans to extend the concept to other public universities.

"For transparency, we keep all activities monitored and documented, while each year's balance sheet is presented to all patrons, donors and beneficiaries at yearly meetings," said Robin.

Rezaul Karim, currently pursuing his PhD at Arizona State University in the US and overseeing Uttaran remotely, said, "Upon learning about the initiative, I actively participated and advised my students to initiate teamwork to collect funds."

"The journey would have been challenging without the backing of my colleagues, students, and well-wishers," he said.