

A blatant river grab

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land office. These documents show that RS Dag (plot) No. 184 and RS Dag Nos. 301-307 are earmarked as river and riverbanks and are “owned by the Bangladesh government.”

We were unable to collect the land record for RS Dag No. 308.

Before the cement factory was set up two decades ago, the Dhaleshwari thrived as a lifeline, drawing locals who fished, bathed, and depended on its waters for livelihood.

Residents of Mollar Char, a riverside village in Munshiganj, said that when the factory was first built, it started on a small piece of land. But during the dry season every year, it kept expanding by filling the river with sand—even at night.

On March 4, 2025, the Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority (BIWTA) in a letter to the Munshiganj district administration said Shah Cement’s sand-filling activities is creating navigation problems in the Shitalakkhya and Dhaleshwari route, obstructing the natural flow of the water and causing environmental damage.

“Several companies, including Shah Cement, are raising land by dumping sand and soil on the confluence, disturbing the rivers’ flow. The navigability of the rivers has decreased, hindering vessel movement and raising concerns about environmental disasters,” reads the letter.

Despite official instructions to remove the illegally dumped sand and soil, Shah Cement has yet to comply, it said, adding, “These activities violate the Port Act 1908, Port Rules 1966, and High Court orders.”

The letter also cited a recent visit of Shipping Adviser Brig Gen (ret’d) M Sakhawat Hussain to the area when he “expressed dissatisfaction over the illegal occupation, and instructed the authorities to take action.”

Contacted, Munshiganj Deputy Commissioner Fatema Tul Zannat, who took office in September 2024, said, “I have come to know about the allegations of illegal occupation of some river land by Shah Cement. Currently, a thorough investigation into the matter is underway. Necessary legal actions will be taken after on-site investigation and verification of records.”

A TOP GRABBER
This is not the first time that government authorities are speaking publicly and exchanging letters about the encroachment.

Two years ago, on February 15, 2023, the Munshiganj district administration prepared a list and identified Shah Cement as a river grabber.

The list, signed by the then deputy commissioner and revenue deputy collector, shows that 15 companies occupied 34.96 acres of the Dhaleshwari river. Of this, Shah Cement alone had 24 acres under its occupation, making it the top grabber.

Earlier on May 6, 2019, the Munshiganj district administration prepared a list and identified Shah Cement among 50 river grabbers, saying that the company occupied river land in Mirersharai Mauza, under RS Dag No. 184.

“This list has been sent to the Upazila Nirbahi Officer concerned for necessary legal measures, including issuing notices, to evict the mentioned illegal occupants,” reads the letter, signed by the then deputy commissioner.

The letter was sent to the National River Conservation Commission (NRCC), the legal guardian of all rivers in the country.

The NRCC itself identified Shah Cement as a grabber of the two rivers in its 2018 and 2019 annual reports.

In its 2018 report, the NRCC said that Shah Cement “is gradually occupying and filling up river land and has put up signboard on river char.”

The following year, the NRCC annual report said, “Shah Cement Company has filled up around 24 acres of river land in Mirersharai Mouza, Munshiganj Sadar Upazila, under RS Khatian No. 1 and RS Dag number 184, effectively occupying the river land. The land classification has been altered by sand filling.”

The report added, “The company

has constructed a massive factory, disrupting the flow of the Dhaleshwari River on one side and the Shitalakkhya River on the other, threatening to engulf both rivers.”

The report also noted that the factory discharges liquid and solid waste into the Dhaleshwari.

“This has caused serious damage to the river’s water, environment, habitat, and biodiversity. The polluted water flows into the river through a large pipe, about four meters in diameter, directly from the Shah Cement factory.... The fly ash pollution has reduced fish, dolphins, and migratory birds,” it said.

Contacted, former NRCC chairman Muzibur Rahman Howlader said, “I

digital survey in the area is complete. Demarcation pillars will be installed soon.”

‘RIVER SHIFTED COURSE’
The Daily Star has been in touch with Shah Cement since January 26, 2025, when we first sent a set of written questions via WhatsApp. The company requested an in-person meeting instead, and we sat twice with the company representatives on February 5 and 18 at their Gulshan office and shared our findings. We also shared some land-related documents and selected portion of government reports, as requested by the company.

Upon repeated requests, the company finally responded to our



The massive industrial complex of Shah Cement in Munshiganj.

PHOTO: RASHED SUMON

“The encroached parts of the river will be recovered soon. The digital survey in the area is complete. Demarcation pillars will be installed soon.”

MOBARAK HOSSAIN,
Deputy Director, BIWTA’s Narayanganj River Port

visited the area in 2019 and identified the factory as a river grabber. How does it continue to occupy the land for so long? The factory was set up by filling up two rivers. When I was NRCC chairman, I reviewed the CS and RS records and submitted a report confirming its illegal occupation.”

Officials say the 2018 and 2019 NRCC annual reports and the 2023 list from the Munshiganj district administration were based solely on RS Dag No. 184, where Shah Cement occupies 24 acres of river land. However, surveys conducted in December 2024 and early 2025 examined additional RS Dag numbers, suggesting that the total area of river land currently occupied by the company may exceed 24 acres.

Contacted, Supreme Court lawyer Manzill Murshid said that the High Court has declared rivers as living entities, which means the local administration has the authority to clear encroachments immediately.

“I don’t understand why they haven’t acted yet, especially after August 5,” he said.

Environment Adviser Syeda Rizwana Hasan said the interim government has selected 13 rivers to free from illegal occupation within its limited tenure in office.

“If the encroachment of these rivers is on this list, you may see results during our tenure,” she told The Daily Star.

BIWTA’s Narayanganj River Port Deputy Director Mobarok Hossain said that the encroached parts of the river will be recovered soon. “The

queries on February 26. Based on its response and claim, we gathered further documents and obtained new information, which we again shared with the company and sought clarifications and comments on the new findings throughout March. But the company did not respond.

In the February 26 written response, Sheikh Shabab Ahmed, Head of Corporate Affairs and Legal, said the company upholds the highest standard in adhering to all laws of the country.

“Most of the river encroachment claims are based on CS records. After that, several other land surveys, such as RS, SA, and BS were conducted both before and after independence

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NRCC report, 2019

of Bangladesh. Due to natural movement of rivers, its courses have shifted to new areas since the CS record. This change is reflected in the recent land survey documents as well.

“Based on this, a few disputes are still in the court, and some matters remain sub-judice. However, considering the various aspects of the issue, it would not be wise for any organisation to draw a conclusion without examining the matter holistically and taking all probable factors into consideration,” the company said.

The Daily Star has collected the

relevant Cadastral Survey (CS) and Revisional Survey (RS) records, which earmark the area as river land. We have also obtained the SA records, created between the CS and RS records. These SA records also classify most of the area as river land, with a small portion designated as house properties.

But the land ministry considers SA records “inauthentic as they were created based on information from the landlords, rather than through field survey.”

Moreover, in a landmark verdict in 2009, the High Court concluded that river land-related disputes must be settled in line with the CS and RS records.



The verdict, in relation to the demarcation of the Buriganga, Turag, Balu and Shitalakkhya rivers, acknowledged that every river in Bangladesh changes its course over time.

“This is a unique characteristic of the rivers in Bangladesh. Therefore, to solve the issues raised in this writ petition, we first need to determine the boundaries of our rivers It is noteworthy that a Cadastral Survey was conducted in the early part of the 20th century before the Partition, and maps and records were prepared based on that survey.

“These CS maps and records are still the most reliable.... For this reason, we can consider the CS maps as the primary basis for determining the boundaries of the rivers. Therefore, the place where the river is shown on the CS map should be primarily recognised as river,” the verdict reads.

Even if a river changes its course from the location shown on the CS map, and as a result of such change, if a char emerges on one side of the river included in the CS map, that char area will also remain under government ownership, the HC noted.

“In accordance with the above-mentioned legal position, the next steps in the river survey must be taken in accordance with the RS records and maps prepared by Bangladesh. The survey work [to determine river area] must be completed in two ways: firstly, according to the CS map, and secondly, according to the RS map,” the verdict stated.

Manzill Murshid, who was a counsel for the writ petitioner Human Rights and Peace for Bangladesh, said, “Land surveys like SA and BS do not provide any valid basis for identifying river land. In fact, the court has already issued a directive that river land should be identified based on the CS and RS records.”

Despite repeated requests, Shah Cement did not say how much land it “owns” there or how much of the river land it rented for use with government approval.

It only said Shah Cement is one of the “highest rental paying companies of BIWTA in the country

as we use foreshore near the adjacent rivers with due approvals from the authorities.”

According to BIWTA sources, Shah Cement has been using foreshore land under a licence from the Narayanganj BIWTA Port Office since October 20, 2004, two years after the factory was set up. Currently, the company holds 11.28 acres of river foreshore land under the lease agreement, which expires in June this year.

Under the lease agreement, the company cannot fill up the river and its foreshore, cannot use additional river land, cannot change the riverbanks, cannot disrupt the navigability, cannot anchor ships haphazardly, and cannot dump waste into the river.

“Shah Cement is not complying with the terms of the agreement. They are gradually filling the river and foreshore by dumping waste, which is reducing the navigability of the river in that area. We occasionally visit the site, verbally instruct them to comply with the terms, and sometimes carry out evictions,” a senior official of Narayanganj BIWTA Port Office told The Daily Star on April 13.

Shipping Adviser Brig Gen (ret’d) Sakhawat Hussain rejected Shah Cement’s claim that it is not a river grabber.

“When I visited the Dhaleshwari and Shitalakkhya rivers [in December 2024], I saw that Shah Cement has encroached upon the river. I immediately instructed the officials concerned to take effective measures,” he told The Daily Star in March.

Contacted again yesterday for an update, he said, “I instructed the officials concerned to start a survey to determine how much land Shah Cement and other factories have occupied there. I am not sure what actions have been taken so far, but I will definitely follow up on this matter.”

Govt hires firm to remove sand, soil

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority (BIWTA) is going to hire a firm to remove the alluvial soil at the confluence of Shitalakkhya and Dhaleshwari and the sand and soil filled up in front of Shah Cement in Munshiganj.

On Thursday, the BIWTA primarily selected a contractor at its Narayanganj port office following a competitive tender process, officials said.

The firm has been selected from among three bidders to excavate about 15 lakh cubic feet of sand from the char area, said BIWTA officials, but did not disclose the name of the contractor.

“The necessary documents of the selected company are now under scrutiny, and a formal work order will be issued once the verification is done,” said Mobarok Hossain Mozumder, Deputy Director of the Ports and Transport Department at the Narayanganj River Port.

Officials expect to start the dredging after Eid upon completion of all official procedures.

According to the tender notification dated March 5, 2025, sand must be transported at the company’s own expense using boats to a designated distance under the instructions and supervision of BIWTA engineers.

The notification came a day after BIWTA wrote to the Munshiganj district administration, saying Shah Cement’s sand-filling activities is creating navigation problems in the Shitalakkhya and Dhaleshwari route, obstructing the natural flow of the water and causing environmental damage.

“Several companies, including Shah Cement, are raising land by dumping sand and soil on the confluence, disturbing the rivers’ flow. The navigability of the rivers has decreased, hindering vessel movement and raising concerns about environmental disasters,” reads the letter dated March 4.

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the attacks are shielded, as they have patrons within the government”.

He said that the forces that killed Ratan in 1988 are now attacking those who are protesting against injustice.

Prof Anu Muhammad condemned attempts to frame war crimes trials as anti-Islamic. “The vast number of pious Muslim people in Bangladesh are themselves victims of war crimes. Most of the millions who were killed were practising Muslims.”

“We must stand against all such political malpractices. We must present issues correctly and, along with protesting and resisting such oppression and attacks, we must also question the government’s role,” he added.

Yunus invites

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“There was an inauguration in the first phase, then another in the second. Now again in the third phase, you have merged things together ... you are just showing us the ‘banana of reforms,’” he said.

Referring to the latest call for talks, Salahuddin said, “We’ve told you to compile what has already been discussed and present it to the nation. But instead, you’re going through rituals with no real work being done. Why another fresh inauguration on June 2 for the third round? How many inaugurations does it take?”

He also criticised Chief Adviser Prof Muhammad Yunus for “backtracking on earlier assurances”. “You told us there would be an election by December. But then you backtracked. That is unfortunate,” he said.

“If merely speaking about reclaiming our democratic rights makes you uncomfortable, honourable chief adviser, that is truly disappointing. How much longer will you delay reforms using this excuse?”

Salahuddin said justice for crimes against humanity committed by “fascists” must remain a top priority, even above reforms. He also highlighted the sacrifices made by BNP activists, stating that they shed blood, endured torture, and were sent to secret detention centres called Aynagar. “We didn’t go through all that for nothing,” he said.

“Our goal is to establish a democratically elected government, restore voting rights, and build a society free from discrimination. Reform is a continuous process, but it should not be used to justify election delays,” he added.

BNP acting chairman Tarique Rahman’s Adviser Mahdi Amin, the party’s Executive Committee Member Tabitha Awal, and other party leaders also attended the Krishak Dal event, chaired by its General Secretary Shahidul Islam Babul.

At a separate event at the Jatiya Press Club, BNP Standing Committee Member Amir Khosru Mahmud Chowdhury responded to Yunus’s comments made during a question-answer session at the 30th Nikkei Forum in Tokyo on Thursday.

There, noting that some politicians want the election in December this year, Yunus had said, “We don’t want to leave the country with the old institutions remaining as it is. If we need a good job at the reforms, we have to wait for six months more [for the election]. There are opinions that let’s get the election done, but it is not all, just one particular party.”

In response, Khosru said, “Only the parties formed after August 5 don’t want elections. At least 52 parties want polls within December. If someone says only one party wants elections, is that a truthful statement? Is it directed at us? What does it imply?”

He added that those opposing a December election are “only four or five parties”, not even registered, and lacking public support.

“The interim government has no connection with the people. Everyone’s doing whatever they want. More will do so, causing further damage. This cannot continue,” said Khosru.

He added, “Only an elected parliament, accountable to the people, can bring stability. After Sheikh Hasina fled, major changes took place. Any party that fails to recognise this has no future in Bangladesh.”

The event was organised by the Zia Parishad and chaired by its Vice Chairman Md Shafiqul Islam. Other speakers included BNP Chairperson’s Adviser Syed Moazzem Hossain Alal and Jugantor Editor Abdul Hai Shikdar.

Mob kills two

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marijuana were seized.

“A case was filed in this regard, accusing the duo and two others. The deceased Tanvir was one of the accused in the narcotics case.”

Later, around noon, Tanvir and two other young men arrived in the Haddipatti area and started threatening the locals for tipping the police off, said the OC.

Locals said they were carrying machetes at the time.

At one point, during the heated exchange, an announcement was made over the local mosque’s loudspeakers calling residents to gather and confront criminals.

Subsequently, locals chased down the men and beat two of them to death.

The OC said police were informed only about the drug-related allegations, not about the accused carrying machetes, mugging, or harassing women.

The bodies of the deceased were sent to the Shaheed Suhrawardy Medical College mortuary for autopsy.

Haddipatti, located near a canal and somewhat isolated from the main residential area, is home to at least 250 families.

Residents, mostly from low-income groups, report a rise in mugging incidents in the area recently.

‘Signs of new fascism’ now being seen

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The event was organised by the Ganatantrik Chhatra Jote to protest the acquittal of Jamaat-e-Islami leader ATM Azharul Islam of war crime charges and attacks allegedly by Jamaat-Shibir activists on the Jote’s marches at Rajshahi University and in Chattogram.

Anu Muhammad, a former Jahangirnagar University teacher, said Islamic Chhatra Shibir must realise that the responsibility for war crimes will be imposed upon it equally if it continues to carry the politics of war criminals.

He said there were many incidents during the 1980s in various institutions and places where Shibir emerged as a terrorist force. On this

day in 1988, Rajshahi Medical College Chhatra Moitri leader Jamil Akhtar Ratan was killed by Shibir cadres, Prof Anu Muhammad said.

He questioned the war crimes trial process following the Supreme Court’s acquittal of Azharul. “How can a person identified as a war criminal be declared innocent? This question will remain with us. This question must be answered.”

While acknowledging potential procedural flaws in war crimes trials, he said that Azharul’s links to war crimes were established through law. “This is a fact that cannot be dismissed.”

“It seems the goal was to declare him innocent,” Prof Anu Muhammad said. “If such an identified war criminal is declared innocent, history

changes. This is a terrible distortion of history, and a betrayal of the millions of martyrs of 1971.”

“Therefore, it is the people’s responsibility to protest against this and build resistance.”

Prof Anu Muhammad said that Jamaat gained political legitimacy in the 1980s. “The alliances led by the Awami League and the BNP legitimised them as democratic forces during the anti-Ershad movement. Through this recognition, Jamaat-e-Islami was rehabilitated.”

Prof Anu Muhammad said that in 1995, the Awami League and Jamaat conducted movements together, and when the BNP came to power in 2001, Jamaat members accused of war crimes became ministers as part of the Four-Party Alliance.