

Promises on paper, pollution in reality

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ministry has initiated three projects to save three rivers -- Sutang in Habiganj, Haridhao in Narsingdi and Labandaha in Gazipur -- under the Bangladesh Climate Change Trust Fund. The water resources ministry has approved a large volume of emergency work to protect riverbanks in just two months.

The ministry also drew up a list of 1,294 rivers in Bangladesh.

The long awaited Teesta River project has finally taken off with a Chinese company about to complete its fieldwork, which will help determine what needs to be done under the project. According to the initial plans, it will curb bank erosion, reclaim land and store floodwater for use during the dry season.

In August last year, soon after taking office, Rizwana told The Daily Star that she would select one river in each division to rid them of pollution and encroachment. In subsequent public speeches, she had vowed to go after businesses that pollute rivers. She had been especially vocal against the factories that release untreated industrial waste into the river systems.

But nothing of substance has been visible till now.

All the rivers around Dhaka city, including the Buriganga, Turag, Shitalakkhya, Dhaleshwari and Balu, are still as polluted as before. In the last one year, her ministry could only prepare a plan to revive 63 rivers in 63 districts.

Although Rizwana wishes to ensure a fair share, negotiations about 54 transboundary rivers remain uncertain.

Forest land recovery from forcible occupation also remains a major challenge. Over 1.60 lakh individuals and organisations occupy

2.57 lakh acres (more than three times the area of undivided Dhaka city) of forest land across 28 districts, according to a forest department report of 2021. Of that, 31,615 acres were recovered between October 2020 and July 2024. The interim government has recovered over 5,000 acres in the last year.

A release from the environment and forest ministry said that besides cancelling numerous projects with allotment of forest land, which in turn saved 11,000 forest land from encroachment, the forest department had taken an initiative to revive three forests -- Modhupur Sal Forest, Chunati Forest and Sherpur Forest.

Smaller initiatives include banning the invasive acacia and eucalyptus trees, reintroduction of the extinct native peafowl, and conservation of other species like sambars, capped langurs and hoolock gibbons.

Also, the plan for a safari park in Lathitala of Moulvibazar has been scrapped as the ministry didn't find it feasible. Meanwhile, plans are underway to establish a sanctuary for captive elephants in Chunati, Cox's Bazar.

The forest department, however, could not improve its record on protecting wild elephants. At least 11 elephants were killed by poachers and villagers in Chattogram over the past year. In the last 10 years, more than 100 elephants were killed by villagers, according to forest department data.

While there has been some progress in monitoring pollution, the ministry has yet to enforce concrete, long-term measures to combat Dhaka's air pollution, which remains among the worst in the world.

Ministry officials say

they have developed plans for national air quality management. They say 830 illegal brick kilns were demolished in the last one year. They have also shut down 18 unauthorised lead factories.

Brick kilns, however, continue to operate on Dhaka's outskirts, contributing to the city's air pollution.

When pointed out that the 80,000 diesel-run buses and trucks still ply the streets further worsening pollution in Dhaka, Rizwana said vehicles are regulated by the transport ministry and that environment ministry is trying to coordinate with the transport ministry to limit old vehicles.

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On the other hand, the move to make the airport area a silent zone seems to have fallen flat, even though mobile courts collected fines worth Tk 15.5 lakh and

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