

Bangladesh: People's movement against sand-grabbing

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One group of formerly nomadic people in Bangladesh's ancient capital Sonargaon, settled on the small island of Mayadip, which is surrounded by the Meghna river, a 40-minute boat ride from the mainland of Sonargaon. They have survived since the 1980s without electricity, basic services, or access to schools, since massive flooding in the south displaced them. They rely on the river's catch of fish for their livelihood.¹

The residents of the islands of Mayadip and Nunertek in the Narayanganj district have been suffering great pressure and political powerlessness due to the threat of illegal sand extraction in their area. Those responsible for this illegal extraction are part of the powerful sector of society and are associated with the ruling political party of Bangladesh, the Awami League.

On 17 October 2010, the District Commissioner of Narayanganj visited the island of Mayadip and saw the plight of the poor islanders himself. He then set up a 21-member committee to save the two islands from illegal sand extraction. The District Commissioner asked the islanders to prevent illegal sand grabbing by any means and assured them that the administration would always be with them.

On December 9, however, the constant sand extraction from the Meghna River near Mayadip resulted in the bank of the island sliding into the river. In fact, due to previous sand extraction, a portion of Mayadip and Nunertek had already been absorbed by the river. Despite their resistance, the islanders were not able to stop the illegal sand grabbing. Both islands are now at great risk. The situation was such that when people went to bed at night they could see their land, but when they awoke the next morning, they could only see the river.

The dire situation of the island's bank led to hundreds of panicked islanders, including women and children, coming out on the morning of December 10 to resist the sand grabbers. They damaged their boats and dredgers and captured four of the sand grabbers, who were later freed by their thugs. On the same day, the sand grabbers filed two false cases against the islanders.

A staff member of the sand-extracting firm Micro International, by the name of Mr Sharif, filed a false case at Sonargaon police station, Narayanganj District accusing 12 individuals and some 20-25 unknown islanders (persons unrecognized by Mr Sharif). According to the complaint, the islanders illegally attacked the sand grabbers, who have legal authority to dredge the river through a government lease, and took money from them. In actual fact, the sand grabbers were not given any such lease, which was confirmed by the District Commissioner when forming the committee to save the island. One of the illegal sand grabbers, Mr Milon from Tulatoli village of Meghna thana, Comilla District filed another false case against 14 individuals and some 20-25 unknown islanders.

The innocent islanders were caught up in fabricated cases and being attacked as they tried to save their land from the illegal sand-grabbers. The illegal sand-grabbers became more arrogant over

¹ To visualize their living conditions, see: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KEaHseV-C_s.

time, and began threatening the islanders. Meanwhile, the law enforcement agency meant to protect them, the police, instead filed false cases against the islanders in order to harass them.

To stop the threat of the sand extractors and to negate the false cases against them, the islanders started an Agitation and Protest campaign. On December 12, environmentalist and chairman of Save the Environment Movement (POBA) Mr Abu Naser Khan and myself handed over a memorandum to the District Commissioner along with the signatures of 5000 islanders. A copy of the memorandum was also sent to the Prime Minister, the Home Minister and the Inspector general of Police. [pics1-2]

The memorandum states ironically that those who resist the illegal sand extractors under the District Commissioner's order have become criminals, while the sand extractors have become the good people. The police—in other words, the Bangladeshi government—have made a case against the islanders, while taking no action against the sand grabbers who have forcibly confined the islanders to the island by threatening to attack them if they are seen in mainland Sonargaon. For their daily needs, like buying vegetables, rice and other items, as well as to sell their fish, the islanders must go to the mainland. Too scared to leave the island, they were hence unable to meet these needs.

The memorandum also notes that the sand grabbers filed two false cases in two different police stations—due to which the islanders are passing their days in panic, afraid of being arrested at any time—and attacked the islanders.

While the Bangladeshi government is doing its best to save the Buriganga River, upon whose banks rest Dhaka, the capital city, it is less concerned with the plight of the Meghna river and the inhabitants of Mayadip. Islands like Nalchar and Ram Prasader char, close to Mayadip, have already lost a maximum part of their land.

Finally, the memorandum appealed to the government to take all necessary steps to stop this illegal sand extraction from the Meghna River near Mayadip and Nunertek.

After December 10, the sand-grabbers warily removed their dredgers (40 dredgers) from near the islands. At present they extract sand from far away, mid-river (extraction from this location will not harm the islands). Sometimes at midnight however, they come near the islands to extract sand.

Due to political pressure from the Awami League, on 20 April 2011 the District Commissioner was compelled to advertise the leasing of the Nunertek sand extraction point (balu mahal) in the Meghna river. Previously, even though the sand-grabbers were extracting sand from the river close to Mayadip and Nunertek, they were doing so without any permission. If they obtained the lease, they would destroy both islands. The 12,000 inhabitants would become homeless, and the destruction of the river base would mean that fish cannot be bred for many years.

Therefore, a writ petition was immediately filed in the High Court against the government's proposed lease, and the court issued a stay order stating that there should be no lease due to the threat to the islanders. This legal victory has meant that the islanders are no longer threatened to go to the mainland, where they have also been able to gain public and media support. Although their fight continues, the situation today is better than before.

The only problems facing them now are the two fabricated cases against them, which require them to go to court every month. For the poor islanders this causes considerable difficulty; on the days they must attend court, they cannot fish and earn their daily livelihood, which is problematic for the entire family. For some of them, their transportation and other money is arranged by activists. The lawyers fighting their cases are also doing so without any fees.