

Eviction of slum dwellers from Bhashantek

Association for Realisation of Basic Needs (ARBAN)

Introduction

The ties that bind humans to land are primordial. An Australian indigenous leader living in the Northern Territory comprehends the nature of this relationship in a more complete manner: “Land is the centre point of the indigenous peoples’ existence. Land is our address, our life. Since the land is there, the sky, the clouds, the rivers and trees, the air, the sea, the sands and the grains are so beautiful. Because land is there, life has so much pace in it. Land is the symbol of life. The land is ours and we are of the land. We take rest in the lap of the land. We issue from the land and we return to the land.”



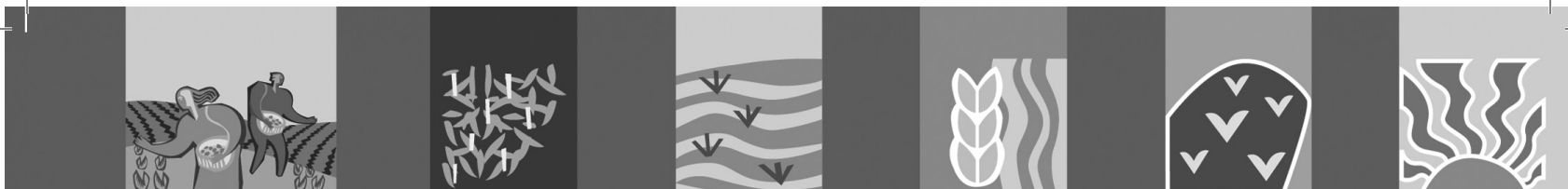
What the indigenous leader said is true for all human beings. Land is one of the basic elements required to ensure man’s fundamental needs are met. Nevertheless, the poor and powerless people of Bangladesh do not have secure rights to their own land. They cannot use the land to fulfill their fundamental needs. On the other hand, a coterie with vested interests is perpetually engaged in

grabbing land. They have evicted and dispossessed the farmers, share croppers, landless laborers and workers, small peasants, fisherfolk communities, indigenous peoples and minorities from their lands, homestead, hills, mountains, forests and even water bodies. The land that had once provided shelter, food, and means of livelihood for these people no longer remains the same. Not a single grain of food is produced there now. The enormous metropolis of Dhaka is a stark example of this process of eviction and dispossession.

During the British and Pakistani occupations, rice, vegetables and other crops were produced in most of Dhaka’s residential districts. In order to produce rice and vegetables year-round, enough to feed the people of Dhaka city, a dam – the Dhaka-Narayanganj-Demra (DND) embankment – had even been built in the late 1950s.

Bhashantek, in the north of Dhaka, used to produce vegetables for the city’s dwellers. But the farmers who lived in the area were forced to leave their lands.

Today, marginal and poor farmers, low-income working people, indigenous peoples and even middle-income farmers are victimized by the oppression, exploitation, attacks and false court cases perpetrated by the powerful coterie. Most of these marginalized peoples eventually ended up in the slums of urban areas. One of the most recent evidence of such incidents is Bhashantek, where marginalized inhabitants are being stripped of their land.



Geography and geology of Bhashantek

Bhashantek is within the Dhaka Metropolitan area. It is bounded on the north by Matikata, on the south by Mirpur-14, Dhaka cantonment on the east and Baishteki on the west. It covers an area of around three square kilometers.

Until the end of the British rule, Bhashantek was full of swamps and bogs abundant with wild vegetation. Many people were already living in the area at that time. Gradually, people began to pour in from outside, cleared the jungle and started agriculture. During the monsoon season, the entire area is submerged, bringing in silt that makes the soil fertile enough to produce a large amount of vegetables, most of which was supplied to Dhaka.

From Agricultural Area to Slums

Bhashantek has undergone rapid transformation since the country's independence in 1971. The war of national independence devastated rural areas, so rural people, having lost all their resources and means of production, rushed to the cities in search of livelihood. They took shelter in shacks and shanties built on both sides of railroad tracks, highways, embankments, bus stations and other empty or less populated areas. From 1973-74, the government introduced initiatives to relocate these people and selected the Bhashantek area as relocation site. Bhashantek was never the same from then on.

Rehabilitation and Relocation

As more and more people came to Bhashantek for shelter, and families already relocated there grew in number, the area became unbearably crowded by the end of the 1980s. The government then initiated a relocation of a number of Bhashantek's inhabitants to Bauniabandh under Ward-5 of Pallabi thana within Dhaka metropolitan area. Low-lying land

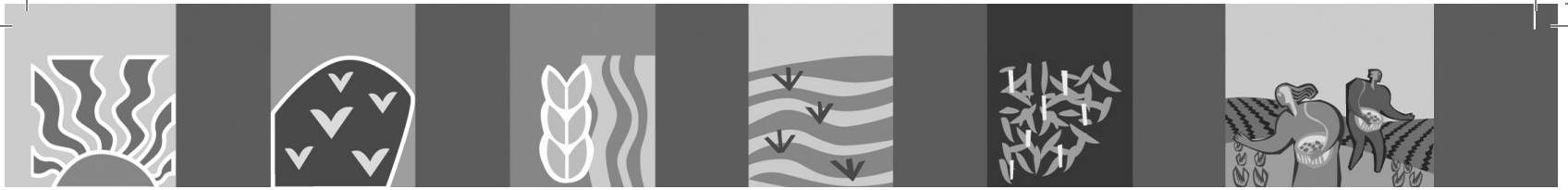
“Bhashantek, in the north of Dhaka, used to produce vegetables for the city's dwellers. But the farmers who lived in the area were forced to leave their lands.”

was filled up and settled with 2,640 families. But over time, Bauniabandh also became overcrowded like Bhashantek.

Initiatives for permanent relocation of Bhashantek slum dwellers

Sometime after liberation, various political and social organizations, civil society groups, non-government organizations and professional groups began demanding the permanent rehabilitation of Bhashantek inhabitants. From 2003-04, the government declared the construction of multi-storey buildings. The announcement gave a shred of hope to the area's inhabitants living in squalor. The land ministry was tasked to carry out the program. The ministry then issued a notice to the slum dwellers to evacuate a part of the area. The people, in good faith and with hopes of receiving improved shelter, vacated around 50 acres (20 ha) of land in the area.

The land ministry appointed North-South Properties Limited, a private developer, to construct the multi-storey buildings. Initially, it began work on six-storey buildings. Meanwhile, the government announced that 4,400 flats would be built during the program's first phase, of which 2,000 flats would be given to the Bhashantek slum dwellers and the remaining 2,400 flats allotted to third-class government employees. Bhashantek slum dwellers were utterly disappointed at this decision as they had, justifiably, expected the entire allotment of flats to them. However,



they followed the government's instructions. They prepared a list of those interested to take a flat and submitted it to the proper authorities.

However, new rules were implemented to deprive the slum dwellers of their allotted flats. One of these rules was for the future owners of these flats to make a one-time deposit of Tk. 50,000 (USD 595.97) per flat. The government was fully aware that such a rule would be impossible for the impoverished slum dwellers to follow. The result of this farce was exactly what it was meant to produce. Many slum dwellers were unable to book their flats, hence they lost their rights and a vested-interest group was able to take advantage of the situation.

From the beginning, North-South Properties Limited engaged in corrupt practices. Using forged documents, the company sold the same flats to multiple buyers. Eventually, the company's corrupt practices were revealed. The Government began to take action against them. Victims also started to demand reparation. Facing these charges, the company aborted developments and escaped. All the problems created by North-South Properties have yet to be resolved.



Damage Faced by the Evicted Slum Dwellers

Slum areas serve as shelter for destitute village migrants. After getting some modicum of shelter, they embark on finding wage earning work. With almost no education and limited skills, most of them find work as domestic helpers, vendors, street cleaners, day laborers, rickshaw drivers and construction workers. When these people were suddenly forced to leave the slum areas, their means of livelihood were severely affected. They faced financial, social and political damage from eviction.

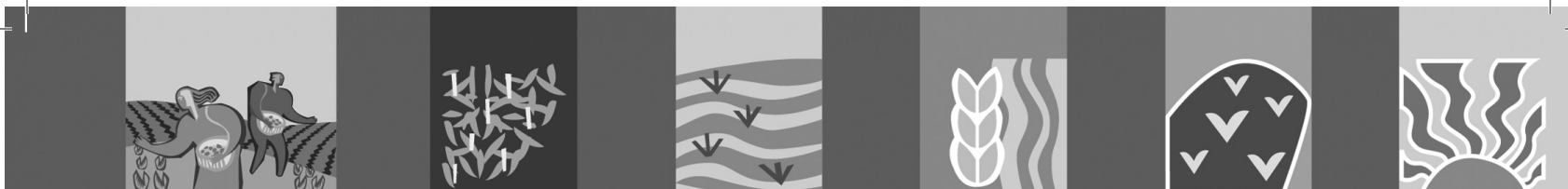
Economic Damage

Bhashantek's slum inhabitants faced serious economic setbacks when they had to leave the slum areas. Many of them lost their means of livelihood as they had put up small businesses there, setting up tiny structures in the area that were demolished after their evacuation. They pulled down their shanties and incurred new costs of building shelter elsewhere. Many took out small loans to rebuild their businesses. They went back to the same level of destitution as when they first migrated to Dhaka.

Social Damage

But the social damage is greater. They were deprived of social services, such as education and health care that were provided by the government and non-government organisations.

NGOs play a major role in providing social services to the slums. These NGOs devote a great amount of work in networking and lobbying to make these services possible. In a permanent and large settlement like Bhashantek, these social service organizations become more interested in developing their services. When such a large settlement is demolished, it also means



the end of these organizations' efforts to establish a successful social service system.

Political Damage

Living so close to each other for years brought the Bhashantek dwellers together. They stood by each other in bad times and shared their happiness in good. Through this natural social process, leadership developed and the community's political consciousness grew. They learned to network and lobbied at different levels of society, which strengthened their existence as a community. This unity and sense of togetherness virtually disappeared when they had to leave the place.

Conclusion

Absence of pro-people and pro-poor policies and laws relating to the use of land, forests and water bodies, the unbridled greed of housing developers, corruption in the bureaucracy, the military and major political parties, mindless and thoughtless expansions of urban areas and industrialization, aggressive expansions of military bases, constructions of roads and highways, mining and exploration activities for gas and oil by the transnational and multinational companies, all in unholy alliance with the Bangladesh government were responsible for land grabbing in the country.

Government must stop acquiring land in the name of "public interests" in a land-hungry country like Bangladesh. Bangladesh is one of the least developed and densely populated countries in the world, with a population of about 160 million living in a geographical area of 56 square miles (145 square kilometers). Under these conditions, housing projects by the government and private land developers, and housing companies must also be stopped as they use state power to grab land, most of which are agricultural land.

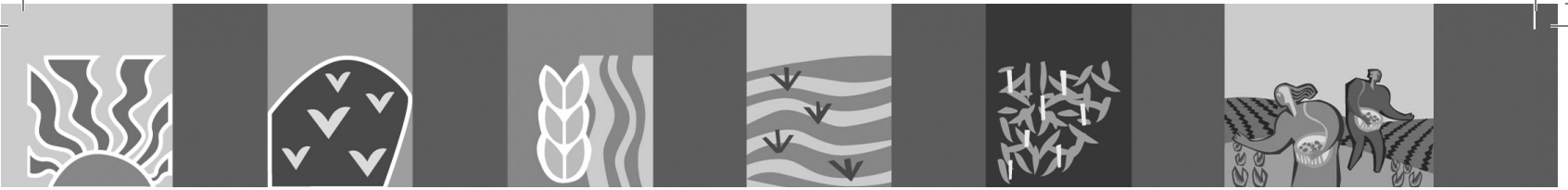
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Bangladesh is situated in one of the biggest deltas in the world. Every inch of its land area produces all types of crops for the consumption of its citizens as well as for export. Therefore, its precious lands have to be protected from land grabbers to ensure land rights and food security of its people. Cooperative and collective action of community-based organizations, with support from all levels – local and international – have to be organized.

Furthermore, the only way to save the country's slum dwellers is to save the land and introduce land-centered initiatives for their livelihood and shelter. The unbridled movement of people, who have become more destitute through a continuous process of land grabbing, can only be thwarted or reduced this way. It is high time the government, with the assistance of concerned groups, led the process. The following recommendations would help slum dwellers find a life of peace and dignity:

Government should:

1. Formulate and implement laws forbidding the eviction of existing slum dwellers without proper rehabilitation and relocation.
2. Relocate all slum inhabitants of Bhashantek to decent flats.
3. Impose a ceiling on land ownership in all cities and district headquarters, which should include limiting capital for acquiring more remaining land.
4. Recover all land in the cities illegally possessed by the land grabbers.



5. Construct low-cost flats in *khas* (State-owned) land and lease these to slum dwellers and homeless urban families.
6. Furnish the flats built for the poor with all the essential utilities such as water, electricity and gas.
7. Ensure that social services such as education and health care are provided to slum dwellers for free.
8. Monitor the implementation of anti-eviction laws, relocation activities and quality of social services for slum dwellers.
9. Initiate effective policies and steps so that the poor do not need to migrate to the cities, and to this end implement programs to provide them with shelter and means of livelihood at the regional level.
10. Recognize poor people as the main driving force of the country's economy, rather than as a burden.
11. Eliminate the income disparity between the rich and the poor, as well as between rural and urban areas.
12. Adopt and implement pro-poor urban land reform for the benefit of the slum dwellers and the impoverished.

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ARBAN has been operating in Bangladesh since 1984. Its broad objective is to raise awareness of poor and powerless people and to work with them in helping themselves.