

Forest conservation, reforestation must be policy priority

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A COUNTRY should have at least 20 per cent of its land to be forested while in the case of Bangladesh, it is 10 per cent. Bangladesh is said to have lost more than 4.58 lakh acres of forests since independence, keeping to the account of the cadastral survey, to land development, even by government agencies, or encroachment by more than 100,000 individuals and business entities. The forest department allotted more than 1.60 lakh acres to government agencies such as the Roads and Highways Department, the railway authorities, the Armed Forces Division, the Rapid Action Battalion and Border Guard Bangladesh and for other development projects. Big business entities and politically powerful quarters are reported to have encroached on a large share of 11,000 acres of forest land in Gazipur and Dhaka. The forest department neither has the record of how much land it has lost or how many cases involving forest land have been pending in courts. There are even allegations that forest officials have forged documents to allot forest land to individuals for commercial use.

An Anti-Corruption Commission investigation in 2018 found that district officials of Gazipur had been involved in the illegal use of forest land for the development of at least eight resorts and private parks. This is, therefore, no surprise that the greenery disappears when government agencies arbitrarily acquire forest land for development projects and forest officials help in land grab. For a sustainable economic growth, the government should attend to ecological concerns, which include deforestation. It is feared that a rapid deforestation is gravely impacting biodiversity, air quality and the general climate condition. At least 31 wildlife species are reported to have already been extinct and 391 more species are declared endangered and they may be extinct unless their habitat in forests is protected. There are High Court orders and government directives to protect and conserve forests, yet nothing tangible has happened. In January, the High Court observed that any notified forest area, no matter whether declared reserved forest or not, could not be allotted or leased out for any purpose that could damage the forest. The government should keep off its ecologically insensitive development plans and corrupt management in government offices to stem the continued degradation of forests.

Bangladesh as a signatory to the Sustainable Development Goals is obliged to stop deforestation by 2020 and have 20 per cent of the landmass as forests by 2030. In order to attain this goal, the government must immediately find out the people who grabbed forest land and take legal action against them for the reclamation of the forested land. The government must have forest conservation and reforestation as a priority on its agenda.

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