

Khulna's coastal area in crisis

Md Hasanur Rahman Tanzir – “If we are not careful now, the burden of our mistakes will be borne by future generations,” expressed a senior environmental activist from Khulna. Khulna, a coastal region in the southwestern part of Bangladesh, has become one of the epicenters of the forest crisis today. In particular, the Sundarbans, one of the largest mangrove forests in the world, and its surrounding areas are constantly under pressure from humans. In the last 22 years, 43,689 acres of forest land have been lost in Khulna district alone, which is the highest rate in the country. Mangrove forests act as an essential natural shield for conserving biodiversity, maintaining environmental balance, and preventing natural disasters. However, this important ecological protection zone is under the greatest threat today. Environmental experts believe that natural disasters will spread across the country if the coastal region is not protected now.

According to the 2023 data of the Khulna Divisional Forest Office, 16,500 acres of forest land in Dakop is being used for shrimp farming and settlements. In Koira, about 8,200 acres of forest land has been encroached on the border of the Sundarbans. In addition, at least 5,000 acres of forest land are under threat in Batiyaghata due to illegal plantations, honey extraction and logging. In addition, 43,689 acres of forest land have been lost in Khulna district alone between 2001 and 2023. Of these, Dakop, Koira and Batiyaghata upazilas have the highest rate of forest loss. According to the 2020 statistics of the FAO, the annual rate of deforestation in Bangladesh is 2.6%, which is double the global average. The Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) statistics for 2021 say that only 14.1% of the country's total land is forest land. 25% is needed for ecological balance. The 2023 annual report

of the Forest Department says that 287,453 acres of forest land were lost across the country between 2001-2023. More than 15% in the Khulna region.

Experts say that the expansion of human settlements, fish pens, factories and power projects on the northern and western borders of the Sundarbans is destroying the habitat of wildlife.

Dr. Farhana Yasmin, a professor of the Environmental Science discipline at Khulna University, said that the buffer zones of the Sundarbans are under serious threat due to the pressure of human settlements in the coastal areas. This is affecting many species including crabs, turtles and water birds.

Increasing salinity due to the impact of climate change is also a threat to the forests of Khulna. A 2022 study by the Bangladesh Climate Change Trust (BCCT) says that salinity may double in Khulna, Satkhira and Bagerhat by 2030. Currently, the highest salinity of 14,500 $\mu\text{S}/\text{cm}$ has been recorded in the Shibsa River in Koyra upazila of Khulna district, which is much higher than normal. In Asashuni and Shyamnagar upazilas of Satkhira district, water salinity was found to be between 1,427 and 2,406 $\mu\text{g}/\text{kg}$, which has crossed the safe limit (1,000 mg/L) for drinking water. In addition, in Bagerhat, salinity was recorded at medium to high levels (5,001-10,000 $\mu\text{S}/\text{cm}$), which is having a negative impact on agricultural production. This will severely damage mangroves and agro-forestry.

Shahinur Rahman, Assistant Conservator of Forests (ACF), Khulna Forest Conservation Division, said that despite regular drives by the Forest Department, sustainable success does not come in the face of obstacles from influential shrimp owners and local encroachers. Lack of legal support and political goodwill is evident.

Md. Mizanur Rahman, Deputy Director, Khulna Division, Department of Environment, said, we do not approve any project without an environmental clearance. Yet, due to weak monitoring at the field level, illegal structures are being built within 10 km of the Sundarbans in many cases. Recently, we have closed 11 illegal factories in Khulna.

On the other hand, thousands of families involved in beekeeping, forest plants, fish breeding grounds, handicrafts, wood and tree-based industries are losing their income due to forest loss.

Environmental scientist Dr. Nahida Sultana said, Community Forest Management must be developed now with the participation of local governments, forest departments, environment departments, educational institutions and communities. Only then will natural forests be able to restore their structural structure and biodiversity.

Adv. Babul Howlader, coordinator of Bangladesh Environmental Lawyers Association (BELA) and BAPA Khulna branch, said, Sundarbans is not just a forest, it is a safety net for the survival of coastal people. Without forests, the risk of loss of life and property in cyclones will increase manifold. He said, if Sundarbans is lost, not only trees will be lost, but also the natural shield for climate mitigation. This forest is one of the mainstays for reducing the speed of cyclones and tidal waves. If Khulna's coast is not protected now, natural disasters, food security, livelihood threats, and climate change will spread across the country.