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Protecting hills from destruction

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Systematic destruction of hills in Chittagong continues unabated causing serious environmental hazards. This has been going on for creating human settlements at the foot or slopes of the hills or for other purposes. Though it takes a heavy toll of human lives, livestock and property almost every year following landslides, there is no respite from hill cutting.

The Chittagong-based correspondent of a local daily reported last week that at present politically influential people are engaged in cutting hills and hillocks at Sitakunda upazila in more than 25 spots under seven unions. The cutting of hills is going on round the clock under the full knowledge of the local administration and the Department of Environment (DoE). The press report says some hill cutters have obtained permission for cutting hills on the ground of supplying earth to the under-construction Dhaka-Chittagong Four-Lane Highway. But they are not actually supplying earth extracted from the hills and reportedly selling it to different organizations for filling up low-lying lands and housing projects. Moreover, as many as 27 illegal brick fields have been built at the foot of the hills in the upazila. The owners of the illegal brick fields are also cutting hills to get earth for producing bricks without the approval of DoE. The destruction of environment does not end here. Some brick fields are consuming trees of the hill areas for burning bricks. Local people say they have nothing to do to stop this dangerous practice.

Green activists have been demanding formulation of a national hill management policy for quite a long time. They also urged the authorities concerned to take drastic action against those engaged in cutting hills and trees illegally resulting in deaths and serious environmental hazards. The leaders blamed a politically influential quarter for chopping trees, developing lands for housing projects and constructing roads in an unplanned manner in the hilly areas. They alleged that the government appears to be indifferent to such illegal activities of a handful of powerful groups which have already caused enough damage to environment. Besides, a large number of people perished following landslides in the recent past across the Chittagong hill areas. Green activists say that reckless felling of trees results in developing cracks on the hills in summer due to excessive heat. Afterwards when the rain water enters the cracks, the soft hill soil becomes too vulnerable to slides. In the wake of a landslide, the local administration asks the people living in hill slopes to evacuate. But they are not permanently rehabilitated. After the rainy season is over, people return to their previous settlements and start living until fresh slides subsequently claim lives and destroy properties. Therefore, it is essential to formulate national hill management policy to protect the hills from gross human interference and to avert further environmental degradation.

On June 26 last year, rain-induced landslides left 114 people dead in Bandarban, Cox's Bazar and Chittagong which got wide media coverage. According to an unofficial estimate, the death toll would be much higher as many people remained buried under tonnes of mud. Following the tragedy, the authorities moved a large number of settlers from the hill slopes to safer places in relief camps. But many dwellers refused to comply with the directives of the local administration and preferred to live under constant threat of landslides.

Under the prevailing circumstances, it is essential to take stringent measures against illegal hill cutting under a comprehensive national policy. Bangladesh is one of the most vulnerable countries of the world due to global climate change. We are not yet fully prepared to face the challenge. At this crucial moment if we fail to protect our environment from reckless human interference, we shall only hasten the process of impending natural disaster.

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