

Dhaka wetlands must be reclaimed as per DAP

Say environmentalists

Staff Correspondent



All the conservable wetlands destroyed by earth filling to make way for illegal housing schemes must be reclaimed immediately as per the Dhaka master plan for survival of the capital city, noted environmentalists told a discussion yesterday. Residential developments in line with the Detailed Area Plan (DAP) of Dhaka can accommodate double the present population in the capital without destroying conservable wetlands, they said.

The 1,528 square kilometres Dhaka city can accommodate 2.75 crore people at 350 residents per acre without filling in flood flow zones, river plains, lakes, water retention ponds, and canals, said town planner Khondaker M Ansar Hossain.

Six environmental and professional bodies organised the discussion on wetlands, urbanisation and good governance in the capital's Cirdap auditorium.

The organisers include the Association of Buet Alumni, Institute of Engineers Bangladesh, Institute of Architects Bangladesh (IAB), Bangladesh Institute of Planners (BIP), Bangladesh Poribesh Andolon (Bapa), and Bangladesh Environmental Lawyers Association (BELA).

Conservation of floodplains, river foreshores, water bodies is vital to prevent urban flooding, help ground percolation, drainage, food production, aquatic life, fire fighting efforts, urban heat control, and surface water drinking, said Hossain, immediate past general secretary of BIP.

According to the DAP, which was prepared in mid-2010, one-third of the total master plan area is conservable wetlands and water bodies. But 77 percent of retention ponds on the eastern fringe were filled by early last year, said Hossain, who was involved in the DAP preparation.

Adequate housing is very much possible by conserving the wetlands accordingly, said Prof Jamilur Reza Choudhury, who headed the DAP technical committee and chaired the discussion.

Around 5,797 acres of wetlands are lost annually in the master plan area, while 4,224 acres are lost within a 10km radius beyond the plan area, said Dr Ishrat Islam, professor of urban and regional planning at Buet.

The private estate developers, who ruthlessly destroy wetlands and forcibly procure rural lands, displace people from their ancestral homes as well as livelihoods, doing an utter injustice, she said.

Dhaka city evolved as an island with water all around and canals criss-crossing it, but those have been ruined over the time, said Prof Abdullah Abu Sayeed, founder of Bishwo Shahitto Kendro.

Former adviser to a caretaker government Dr Hossain Zillur Rahman said wetlands were indispensable for housing, and economic growth did not go against environment.

Housing and Public Works Minister Mosharraf Hossain said Gulshan-Banani-Baridhara Lake was far wider than now, but it was narrowed to provide the ministers, MPs with residential plots.

About implementation of the DAP and conservation of wetlands, he said he had instructed Rajdhani Unnayan Kartripakkha (Rajuk) to approve housing schemes wherever earth filling was completed and some drainage facility was ensured.

Syeda Rizwana Hasan, chief executive of BELA, said it was not DAP, destruction of wetlands and lack of land ownership were what prevented illegal housing schemes.

No organisation can hold over 60 bighas of agricultural land or 100 bighas of land in other categories as per law, she said, adding that any development in the capital must be implemented in accordance with the master plan.

Environment and Forest Minister Anwar Hossain Manju, Coordinator of Nijera Kori Khushi Kabir, Chief Executive of Boishakhi TV Monjurul Ahsan Bulbul, former president of IAB Mubasshar Hossain, and Joint Secretary of Bapa Iqbal Habib also spoke.