

2.57 lakh acres of forest occupied

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Forest department tells JS body that 1.6 lakh people, entities grabbed the land



Tin-roofed mud houses amid the greenery of Chunati Wildlife Sanctuary in Cox's Bazar. Jafar Alam, a local lawmaker and also a member of the parliamentary standing committee on environment and forest, has recently proposed that 600 acres of this reserve forest be turned into khas land so that it can be leased out to the locals. The photo was taken recently. Photo: Mostafa Yousuf

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Over 1.60 lakh individuals and organisations have grabbed 2.57 lakh acres of forest land across the country, the forest department reported to a Jatiya Sangsad committee yesterday.

The grabbed forest land is in 28 districts. Cox's Bazar is the worst affected with 59,471 acres of forest land grabbed, the department said.

Of the total grabbed land, 1.38 lakh acres of reserved forests were occupied by 88,215 individuals and organisations.

During a meeting, the forest department yesterday submitted the data, along with names of the grabbers, to the Parliamentary Standing Committee on the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change.

According to the department, 1.60 lakh acres of forest land was handed over to different public and private organisations, including Bangladesh Forest Industries Development Corporation.

Of the 1.60 lakh acres, 43,095 acres were given to BFIDC and 23,221 acres to different government and non-government organisations.

Besides, 93,923 acres were allocated for the Army, Air Force, Navy, Rapid Action Battalion, and Border Guard Bangladesh, according to the documents submitted to the committee.

Emerging from the meeting at the Jatiya Sangsad Bhaban, Saber Hossain Chowdhury, a ruling Awami League MP and chief of the parliamentary watchdog, told reporters that the committee has asked

the ministry to make public the names of the grabbers through its website so that people could identify the grabbers and the process of preparing the grabbers' list became transparent.

"This is for the first time in the country's history that we got a complete and detailed list of grabbers of forest land ... which is a huge document containing 5,000 pages," Saber told The Daily Star.

The parliamentary body has asked the ministry to take immediate measures to recover the grabbed forest land.

"The ministry has informed the standing committee that they have already written to the deputy commissioners for taking measures to recover the forest land from grabbers," Saber said.

The standing committee also asked the ministry to make sure that a "good amount" of forest land is recovered in the next two to three years.

The forest department said it has already recovered 534 acres in three months since October.

About the handed over of forest land to different organistaions, Saber said the committee recommended that the authorities stop the handed over of forest land to any government or private organisations in the name of development activities, unless the prime minister asked them to do so.

The standing committee also recommended realising damages from those that have been handed over forest land.

About grabbing of Sangu-Matamuhuri forest land, on which The Daily Star ran a report in late December, the committee recommended relocating around 300-400 families living on the land.

Source: <https://www.thedailystar.net/frontpage/news/257-lakh-acres-forest-occupied-2040877>