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Sugarcane is put on sale on the ground of Durgapur Government Primary School in Bogra's Kahaloo upazila. Local influential people have set up the market there, leaving school children to suffer. The photo was taken early this month.

PHOTO: STAR

# School becomes marketplace

*Bogra primary school seeks respite from land grabbing*

MAMUN-UR-RASHID with ANDREW EAGLE

What's the name for a place where people sell paddy and rice, livestock, trees and sugarcane? For a resident of Durgapur union in Bogra's Kahaloo upazila an obvious if unfortunate answer to the question would be: Durgapur Government Primary School.

"We can't play on the field anymore," says class-V student Chandan Kumar Srijaya, 11. "And it's difficult to pay attention to our classes due to the disruption of vehicles honking their horns outside."

School authorities are calling for an end to the land grabbing of the school's grounds by local businessmen who have even constructed a shoddy and smelly latrine in the middle of the school's field to serve their makeshift marketplace.

"We are always scared of being kicked or butted by cows in the market," says Chandan's classmate

Zakiya. "There is too much dust from the market and we really suffer," complains Maloti Rani Paul, a student of class-IV.

Parents share their children's concerns. "The unhygienic and risky environment at the school is really a worry," says one guardian, Mohsin Ali.

According to teachers, the school, established in the farming community in 1940, has performed well in every Primary School Certificate exams in recent years, with many students having secured scholarships under both talent-pool and general quotas in the upazila.

Good results are in one sense not surprising since the school is blessed with motivated staff, evidence of which can be found by a visit to any of the eight classrooms, equipped with white-boards, toys for pre-primary children and other educational materials; and painstakingly decorated with picture galleries.

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However, with much of the school's land grabbed by influential people from Durgapur Bazar Committee, it's unclear if the 350 primary school students will be able to achieve such praiseworthy results in future, no matter how hard the teachers try.

"The noise of people and vehicles is a disturbance to teaching activities," says Assistant Teacher Farzana Khatun.

"At the least we need a boundary wall constructed at the school as soon as possible."

Accommodation constraints, particularly during the morning shift, are an added obstacle to learning.

The school's eight teachers including the headmaster have repeatedly urged local influential people to take necessary steps to protect the school's learning environment and recreation facilities, but entreaties have

been met by threats to school staff from the land grabbers.

"We have informed our higher authorities about the situation," says Headmaster Faruk Hossain.

"But we are yet to see any belief in a congenial learning environment is vital in order that our students' potential and flourish."

President of the school's committee Akram Hossain has also apprised the higher authorities of the problems, and has been trying to persuade local people to support the school's needs, but, he adds, his efforts to date have been in vain.

Kahaloo upazila's primary education officer Sarwar Hossain says he has repeatedly written about the problems to the higher officials at the primary education department, but pleas have gone unanswered as yet.