

228 CHT pry schools in limbo as donor funding ends

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THE academic life of about 16,000 primary school students of the Chittagong Hill Tracts area hangs in the balance as 228 schools are on the verge of closing down.

The students, guardians and teachers of the schools are living out their days in a state of anxiety as donor agencies have stopped funding the schools since June and the government is yet to take any full decision on nationalisation of the schools.

The nationalisation has become uncertain because of problems in land registration, said primary and mass education ministry officials.

If these schools are forced to shut down, children will have to travel for up to three days to attend the nearest government primary schools, or most likely, not attend schools at all. This would be a serious setback to the progress in education among communities living in remote areas, said field-level education officials and academics demanding the nationalisation of the schools, treating them as special cases, as land registration in hill areas is difficult.

At present, many teachers and students are not going to school or have become irregular.

Satyabi Tanchanga, a

teacher of Noapara Non-Government Primary School in Rangamati admitted that many teachers were absent from duty. 'They are worried about their jobs,' Satyabi said. There are about 1,000 teachers at the 228 schools - 86 are at Rangamati, 83 in Bandarban and 59 in Khagrachhari.

There are a total 1,561 primary schools in the three hill districts: Rangamati in 600, 621 in Khagrachari and 340 at Bandarban, confirmed officials.

'There is huge difference between the plain-lands and hill areas as the latter still has a high rate of illiteracy and dropout. If these schools are closed many of the students will drop out,' said an official of Rangamati district primary education office.

These non-government schools, in some of the remotest parts of CHT region, were set up by locals at different times and international development partners started funding the schools through the UNDP's Support to Basic Education in CHT project, under its Chittagong Hill Tracts Development Facility project.

These schools are managed by the Hill District Councils and funds are channeled through the CHTDF. The project was

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scheduled to end on June 2013 and after extension, it was closed in June this year,' said a top official of CHTDF-UNDP.

When asked about the future of the academic life of the students, the official said 'nationalisation of schools has been our main exit strategy. Until the schools are nationalized, bridging support is required. UNDP is supporting HDCs to find budget to finance schools in this bridging period.'

The primary and mass education ministry has some criteria for schools to be nationalised. For the third phase of na-

tionalisation, schools need to have 30 decimals of land either registered or leased before May 24, 2012.

Because of a long and complicated land registration process in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, the 228 schools could not complete land registration by the deadline.

'Land registration in the CHT is not as what it is in the plain land. The registration of land in the CHT requires a long process to be followed,' Sanjeeb Drong, general secretary of the Bangladesh Indigenous Peoples' Forum, said.

The European Union

ambassador William Hanna sent a letter to the Prime Minister in February 2014, for 'a waiver necessary to relax land registration condition which is holding back the process of nationalisation.'

Dhaka University professor emeritus Serajul Islam Choudhury said that as the CHT is still underdeveloped, special consideration is required to nationalise the primary schools.

Santosh Kumar Adhikari, additional secretary of the primary and mass education ministry, also overseeing nationalisation of schools, said that these schools were not included in the list of

nationalisation of 26,290 schools in three phases.

'A committee of the ministry is reviewing whether all these schools are necessary in the area as we have heard that many of these schools were located near government primary schools,' he said.

Member secretary of the review committee Nuzhat Yasmin said they had sat for their first meeting last week and 'it will take some time'.

'We will sort a way out for the future of the students within a short time and nationalisation is not the only solution to the problem,' Nuzhat said.