

Health Problems of Bangladesh Rooted in the Environment

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A large number of diseases commonly found in Bangladesh are caused by microbes in water, food and air. Gastro-intestinal disorders, respiratory tract infections, infections of the eye, ear and nose are examples of these diseases.

Infectious diseases due to polluted air, water and soil such as diphtheria, tetanus, polio, measles and tuberculosis are common among children. Infant and child mortality rates are high, 110-125 and 25 respectively, per 1000 live births.

Unplanned urbanization and industrialization contributing to increasing urban pollution and injudicious uses of chemical fertilizers and pesticides in the rural areas have all contributed to the problems of health and sanitation.

The hazards of biological and chemical pollution of the sources of water are well-known and commonly seen here. Eighty per cent of the diseases prevalent in the country are water related. Some of the most communicable diseases are present throughout the year. These are: various forms of diarrhoea and dysentery, typhoid, warm infestation and viral hepatitis.

Diarrhoeal diseases, which have been virtually eliminated from the developed countries through improved water supply and sanitation, still top the list in this country.

Water available to an average Bangladeshi is inadequate in quantity as well as poor in quality. Rivers and ponds are the major sources of water for all domestic purposes. Only a fraction of the village population uses tubewell water.

Piped water is available to only about 35 per cent of the people of Dhaka and 32 per cent of the people of other towns. Contamination of piped water is not uncommon and the slum-dwellers have no access to safe water.

Deep tubewells used for irrigation of fields has led to lowering of the ground water level leading in turn to difficulties in obtaining water from hand tubewells for domestic purposes.

In the coastal areas high salinity of the ground water makes provision of water supply expensive and difficult. Iron content of 70 per cent of the tubewells is in excess of the maximum tolerable level. Because of iron and salinity problems people are forced to use surface water from ponds which is less saline and low in iron content but polluted.

The state of sanitation all over the country is far from satisfactory. Disposal of disease-spreading human excreta and garbage is done in a manner very harmful to health. Only 33 per cent of the rural population uses a fixed place for defecation and only two to four per cent of the rural

households have sanitary latrines.

In urban areas the situation is slightly better but not satisfactory. Only 35 per cent of the households in Dhaka have access to sewerage lines and only 38 per cent households of Chittagong have septic tanks.

The garbage collected in Dhaka is carried in trucks mostly uncovered and inadequate in number. The careless and untimely movement of trucks spreading litter and the way is a serious health hazard.

Bangladesh is one of the least industrialized countries, yet industrial pollution causing health hazards is a reality. Wastes and effluents released by the industries either pollute the air causing respiratory problems or pollute the water making it unsafe for human beings and aquatic life.

The major polluting industries in Bangladesh are tanneries, fertilizer factories, textile mills, sugar mills, paper mills, vegetable oil mills and pesticide factories which pollute the air with dust and fumes and oxides of carbon, nitrogen and sulphur.

Many of the industrial units

are located in or near residential areas. The air and noise pollution caused by them is undoubtedly a health hazard for both the residents of the areas and the workers.

Injudicious use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides by uneducated farmers is another cause of concern in this country. Besides producing toxic projects as the water here cannot flow out.

There is another reason why these closed water systems become a reservoir of diseases. The human excreta accumulated in the closed water systems can cause epidemics. A study in the Chalan Beel area has shown that people there now suffer from diseases that were not there.

An unpublished study by the University of Engineering and Technology has confirmed rising incidence of diarrhoeal diseases (and also instances of mosquito breeding) in flood control and irrigation projects.

The air people breathe is no longer clean and smoke-free. There is serious pollution of air in major cities including Dhaka arising from rapid growth of population, increasing numbers of automobiles and industrial units and increased use of chemicals for

various purposes. The air people inhale in the cities contain rising proportions of such harmful chemicals as carbon monoxide and nitrous oxide. The consequent illnesses range from simple allergies, eye irritation and sneezing to respiratory troubles including asthma.

The Department of Environment (DOE) monitors surface, ground and piped water in urban areas and monitors industrial wastes. But it works on a much too narrow scale.

The DOE monitors the quality of water at 24 sites of only small section of the rivers Padma, Meghna, Buriganga, Sitalakhya, Karotoa, Karnaphuli, Rupsha/Bhairab, Balu and Surma.

Ground water is tested at only 16 sites spread out in the country with water samples collected from deep and shallow tubewells. Bacteriological tests are done only periodically and not at all sites.

The air quality of Dhaka was monitored last year when the DOE had the necessary equipment with it for 10 months.

The DOE has been entrusted with the responsibility of ensuring environmental protection through continuous vigilance and action

programmes. But shortage of skilled staff, poor physical facilities, limited material resources and lack of funds have kept its activities at a minimum level.

Because of weaknesses in the relevant laws or ineffectiveness of the punitive measures provided in them, the different bodies and agencies, though theoretically authorized to take action, find themselves helpless in dealing with pollution-related problems. Unless these lacunae are removed and the DOE is strengthened enough environmental protection will remain more a pious wish than a reality.

Of late initiatives have been taken to assess the environmental problems affecting health and sanitation. The National Conservation Strategy (NCS), a project of the Ministry of Environment and the International Union for effects in human body, these chemicals disturb the total agricultural ecosystem by killing beneficial species of bacteria, insects, parasites and worms.

Pesticides can build up a dangerous level in closed water systems like the river Dakatia, the Chandpur and the Meghna-Dhonagoda Irrigation



Garbage littered everywhere

Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN), is researching a strategy for sustainable development. The objective is to help find appropriate remedial measures.

Tourist Ships Drain Mombasa of Fresh Water

Mombasa on the Kenyan coast is developing as a major tourist destination. But tourism can bring as many problems as it solves, and a looming problem for Mombasa is being able to supply the quantities of fresh water demanded by the tourist industry. Gemini News Service reports that demands made by passenger liners in particular, are leaving some residents waterless. by Patrick Isaack and William Onyango.



Battle to Save Jewel of the Kalahari

The Okavango area of Botswana is the world's largest island delta, a unique and beautiful wildlife and water ecosystem. Now there are plans to dam, divert and drain the Boro River within the delta to provide water for the Orapa diamond mine — and increase grazing land for Botswana's powerful cattle barons. Gemini News Service reports on the scheme which is causing unaccustomed protest within Botswana and threatens an international campaign to stop it. by Damien Lewis

The purpose of SOIWD is threefold: to irrigate 10,000 sq km of land, provide a water supply for the town of Maun, and increase the water supply to the Orapa diamond mine. The first two objectives involve raising the outflow of the delta by dredging 42 kilometers of the Boro River and building a series of dams along the delta's southern fringe.

The Orapa diamond mine — one of the world's richest — currently uses about five million cubic metres of water a year. This demand will have doubled by 2000 and may be as high as 12mcm a year by 2004.

The most enthusiastic exponent of SOIWD is the Botswana government, followed by the Australian project consultants. Snowy Mountain Engineering Corporation. The Corporation has admitted that it has limited understanding of the Okavango and is not able fully to predict the effects of draining the delta.

Greenpeace's report calls for the project to be abandoned and recommends that the delta be nominated a protected site under the World Heritage and Ramsar Conventions.

Orapa, a joint venture between De Beers of South Africa and the Botswana government, has said it does not need water from Okavango since it has access to adequate underground supplies. The rub is that tapping the underground water and treating it for use, is expensive.

Local people have repeatedly expressed opposition to the scheme. They feel it is wrong to interfere with a complex living system that no one understands, and they have seen previous drainage projects fail, at the expense of wildlife and their livelihood.

At a recent meeting in Maun they asked: "What will happen to us if the water dries? If the work goes ahead there will be a war here."

At a protest meeting in Makalameadi in early May they confronted the President, Dr Quett Masire, who told them

already suffered a setback last year because of the political tension that culminated in three days of riots in several cities and towns last July. A particular blow was transfer of the International Bar Association conference in September from Nairobi to New York.

Main aid donors such as the United States and Norway quarrelled with Kenya. Kenya and Norway broke diplomatic relations, over their disagreements, and American citizens were advised not to travel to Kenya because of the unsettled conditions.

In December foreign exchanges shortages forced the Kenyan government for the first time to impose a six-month restriction on foreign travel by public sector employees.

When the Gulf crisis broke, the UN embargo meant the loss of considerable tea exports to Iraq. Tea is Kenya's third biggest foreign exchange earner after tourism and coffee.

The country's burgeoning population — at about 25 million and growing at 3.4 per cent a year — now has an unemployment rate of 16.2 per cent.

Most of the last year's 7,000 university graduates still have not found any work.

For the sixth most indebted country in Africa, with an external debt of \$5.69 billion for 1989, oil price rises caused by the Gulf crisis also took their toll, and the national carrier, Kenya Airways, had to cut its services and reduce staff.

All African airlines are in difficulties. The major world carriers are gradually elbowing the less established ones out of business. Aircraft operated by many African airlines have outlived their usefulness. They are inefficient in fuel use and affected by bans clamped on noisy aircraft in Europe.

They lack the money to buy sophisticated new planes, do not have the facilities to maintain them or the personnel to fly them. To forestall disaster Tanzania, Zambia and Uganda have formed a new airline, African Air services, independent of national carriers and with equal partnership shares.

Back in 1988 an African airline convention held in Cote d'Ivoire floated the possibility of all African airlines merging over eight years and finally producing a single airline for all Africa.

Kenya Airways is developing opportunities in the Scandinavian market. A new route links Nairobi, Mombasa, Copenhagen, Stockholm and Nairobi. Flights out of Copenhagen are usually full.

Kenyan are confident that their tourist business is now picking up and travel operators believe they are recovering from the bad start to the year.

Joshua Mwendwa, national chairman of the Kenya Association of Hotelkeepers and Caterers, is optimistic. He says that since the Gulf war ended the phones have hardly stopped ringing.

— GEMINI NEWS

Landless Peasantry Threatens Forests

by Jan Sharma

A government task force looking at forest destruction and landlessness has expressed concern over the rate of forest destruction in the wake of political changes in Nepal. It has also recommended strong measures.

Forest security committees — composed of representatives from political parties, community leaders and local officials in 18 of 25 districts — have been formed to stop immediately the massive destruction of forests.

The task force, constituted by the new government last September, has recommended 150 steps including those related to landless settlers estimated at two million. The task force is headed by Drone Prasad Acharya, a former member of Nepal's version of parliament who has leftist sympathies.

Nepal's forests cover 37 per cent of the country. But 2.7 per cent of it is degraded. A hefty 2.7 per cent annual increase in population has exerted tremendous pressure to convert forest land for agriculture.

Although the rate of deforestation is disputed, the problem of landless settlers encroaching on forest land is a recurrent and sensitive political issue. Successive governments have been unable to tackle the problem.

Mr. Acharya submitted his report to Prime Minister Krishna Prasad Bhattarai on February 8. Two days later, police opened fire on demon-

strating forest settlers in the southwestern township of Sunwal, killing three and injuring 24 others.

Government officials said the police resorted to firing after settlers obstructing the region's main road started brickbating the police. Some officials and 15 policemen were also injured in the scuffle.

The Nepal Sukumbashi Sewa Sangh, an organisation of landless settlers has launched movements nationwide since January 30 to press its 16-point demand asking authorities for their settlement.

The organisation held demonstrations in Kathmandu and elsewhere to protest the firing. A delegation of peasants met Prime Minister Bhattarai to brief him on the problem.

"It is unfortunate that neither the government, nor the Nepali Congress, nor the communists are taking any interest in our problems," said Lok Bahadur Basnet, a peasant activist who had also met the prime minister.

He demanded an independent inquiry into the incident, legal action against those involved, financial assistance to the bereaved families, and free medical treatment to those injured.

"We may start fresh agitation if our problems continue to be ignored," threatened the organisation in a press note.

The firing is an embarrassment for the communists who share the government with the centrist Nepali Congress Party.

The leader of the Marxist-Leninist faction of communists, Jhal Nath Khanal, is also the minister in charge of forest and soil conservation.

Mr. Khanal had warned the demonstrators landless peasants last February 4 that the government would take "strict action" against those felling trees without any authorisation and those smuggling timbers and encroaching upon forests.

He also authorised the security personnel to use the "ultimate force" in view of the situation on hand, against those who try to forcibly free the convicts arrested by the personnel and seize timber or other forest products from them.

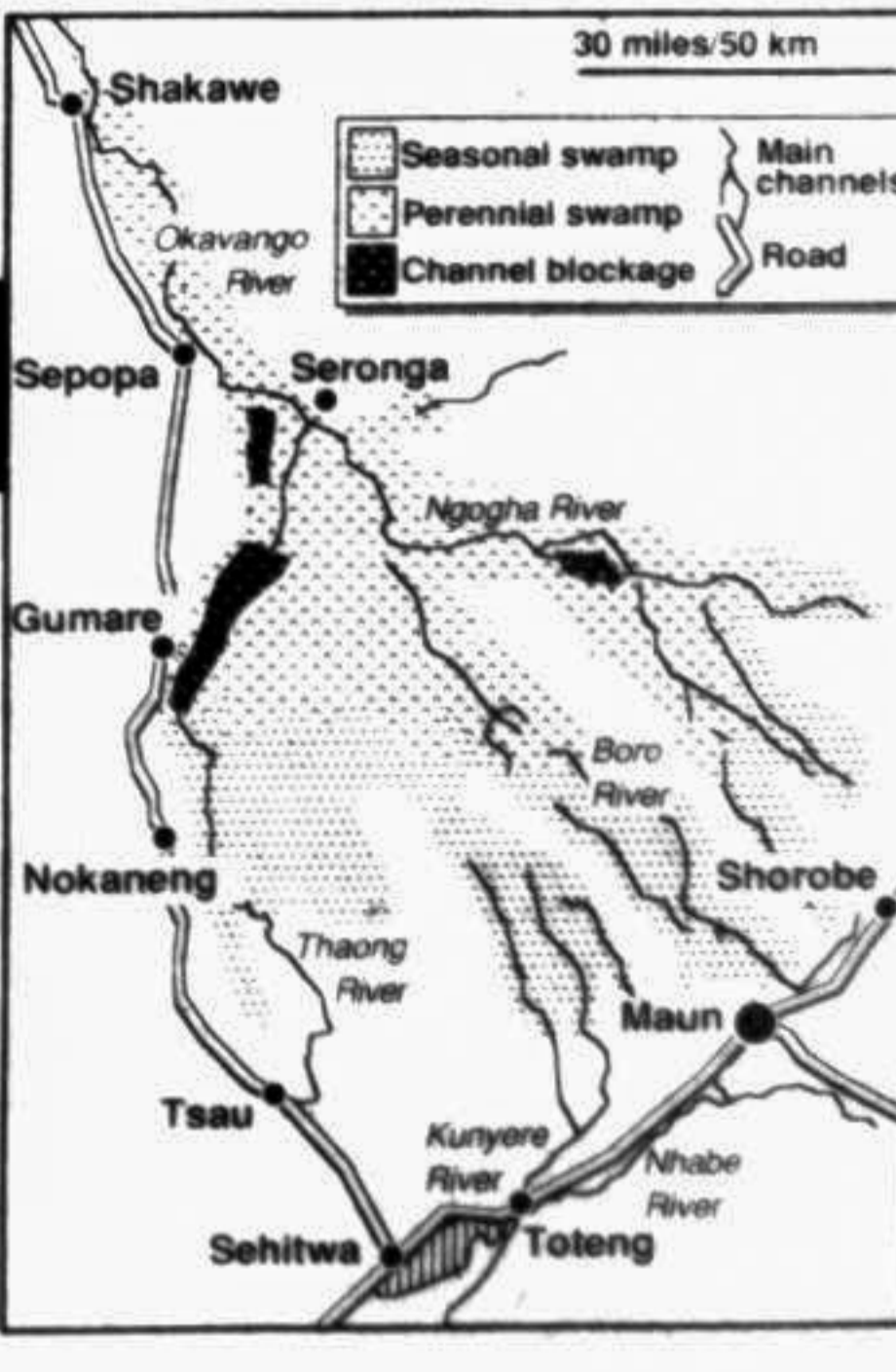
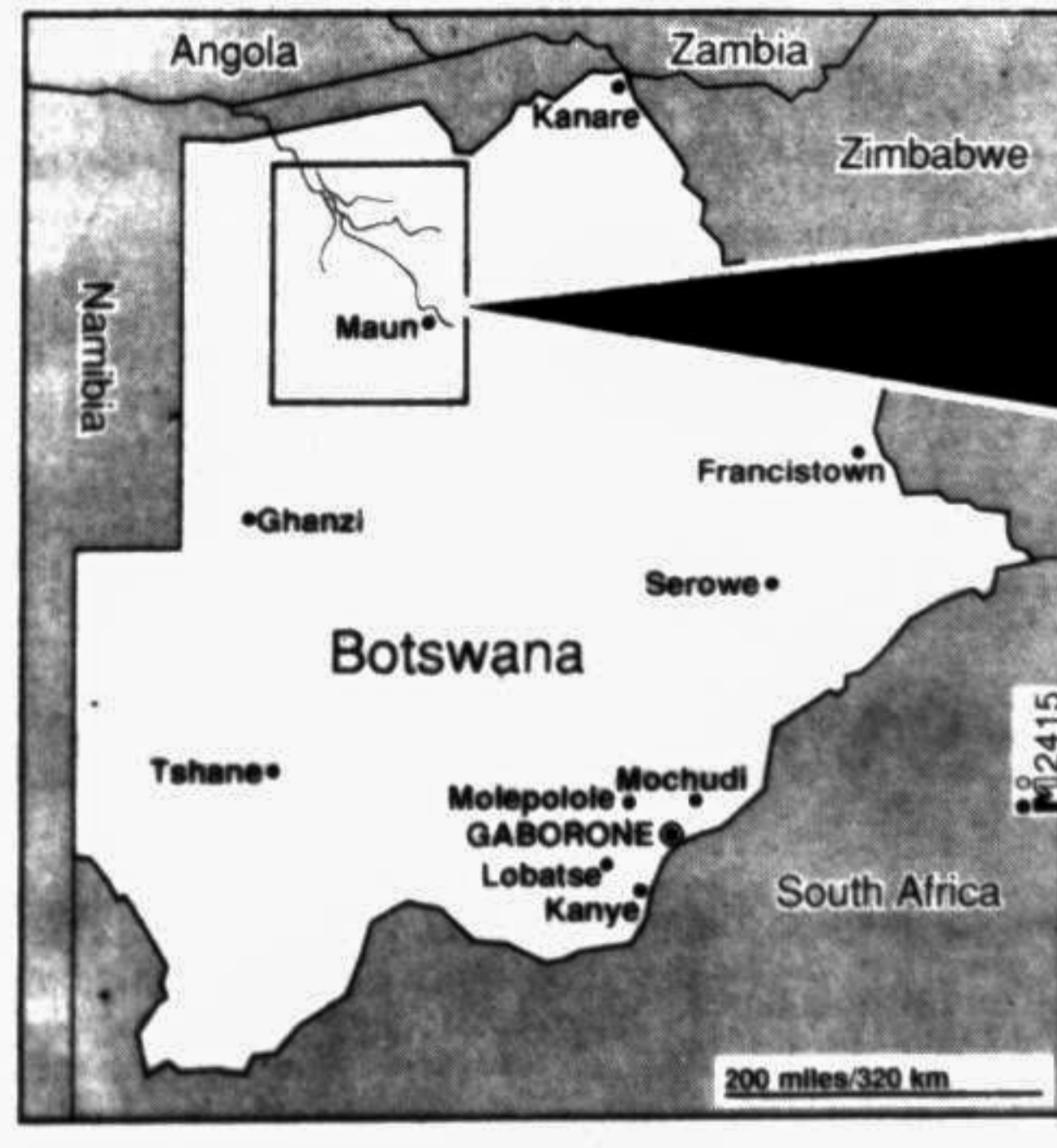
That is nowhere near to solving the problem of landless settlers in forest land. Mr. Acharya — the head of the forestry task force — said in an interview that he visited 23 districts where deforestation had decreased after the advent of democracy and this was due to the commitment of major political parties to nature conservation.

However, the size of landless settlers has multiplied by leaps and bounds in just the previous year. For example, 2,500 settlers have cleared the forest and settled there in the northwest district of Surkhet.

In the Manjhudi and Kandra forest areas in Bardiya district near Surkhet, 66,000 people have encroached upon the forest.

— Dephnews Asia

Okavango Delta: a paradise threatened



of environment-friendly options. However, there is another lobby pushing for the scheme to continue — that of Botswana's powerful cattle barons.

Heef is the second-biggest export earner for Botswana (although it is small compared with earnings from diamonds). Six per cent of the people own 70 per cent of the national herd.

Cattle interests have long been identified with the erection of 3,000 km of fences

across Botswana — ostensibly to guard against foot-and-mouth disease carried by wild animals, though that is hotly disputed by some experts.

The fences have caused the deaths of tens of thousands of plains animals trekking to water in times of drought, and finding their way blocked by the fences. In some areas the great plains herds, of zebra and wildebeest for example, once the second greatest concentrations in Africa, have all but disappeared.

Draining Okavango would

release large amounts of land for ranching and boost beef exports to the European Community.

Local Okavango residents believe the water development scheme will devastate their small-scale agriculture and threaten the livelihood that comes from the 30,000 tourists who visit the delta each year.

Greenpeace is seeking World Heritage nomination for the area so that it can remain the "Jewel of the Kalahari" for everyone. — GEMINI NEWS