

Luring teenagers to nicotine addiction Why it's still 'cool' to smoke

ZAIN ALI

"I just can't stop. I go through about seven or eight a day. My day just wouldn't be complete without them."

The words of 15-year-old Saiful, expressing worry over his growing addiction to cigarettes. Saiful is not a unique case. It wouldn't be too difficult to find 50 teenagers who are serious smokers. Children, as young as 12 and 13, smoking openly aren't too rare a sight in Dhaka. Take a short walk down any major road and you will probably see groups of teenagers, huddled around cigarette stands, lighting up. It is not illegal for them to buy cigarettes, it is not illegal for shopkeepers to sell them cigarettes and it is not illegal for them to smoke.

Smoking at any age can lead to serious diseases such as bronchitis and lung cancer. However, studies have shown that smoking at a young age leads to the creation of more heavily addicted smokers who are more likely to suffer from diseases related to smoking.

The heaviest smokers are usually those who start in their teens. These early addicts will also have the most difficulty giving up. To quote one teenage smoker, "If you want to see just how dangerous cigarettes are, light a cigarette and wrap a tissue paper around the filter. Take a drag. The tissue paper becomes completely black even through the filter. That sight scared me but it only stopped me smoking for a month."

Nicotine is one of the most carcinogenic substances known to man and a prolonged intake of the substance usually leads to a strong level of emotional dependence. Numerous campaigns have tried to increase awareness about the dangers of smoking in order to make it less socially acceptable. It was hoped that with increasing awareness of the risks associated with smoking, the entire trend would slowly be phased out in successive generations.

This has turned out to be a false hope. There hasn't been a visible decrease in smoking, especially not among minors. Instead it seems that the number of teenage smokers has steadily risen. The sheer scale of the problem seems to suggest that teenagers smoke for a variety of reasons, some more obvious than others.

"The cigarette ads are probably some of the best ads in Dhaka," says Saiful. They probably are the huge, slick "Be gold" billboards "are pretty cool" and hold a lot of appeal for Dhaka's youth.

One billboard, placed on a busy main road that most school children in Dhaka would pass by, shows a man and a woman facing a wall with their backs turned to us. We see long, hazy shadows cast over the bright gold background, synonymous with Benson & Hedges, creating a mood of what would best be described as illicitness. The man's hand is held up to his lips, holding what might be a cigarette. This kind of imagery is very youth-friendly and ties in well with modern popular culture.

"[The ad] shows how much people love smoking. The guy leaves his girlfriend, someone he loves, just to have a smoke. That ad is probably one of my favourite ads. I just love it," says a 15-year-old smoker called Jaina.

The media in Bangladesh are rife with cigarette advertisements, from tacky television ads (Top Ten anyone?) to slick 555 and Benson & Hedges billboards. Benson & Hedges seems to be the most widespread and, more importantly, youth-oriented brand among the crowd. Benson & Hedges has always shown a strange interest in pop music events and concerts. What weekend newspaper supplement would be complete without a Benson & Hedges Star Search brochure?

Although Benson & Hedges' active interest in cultural activities is commendable, it is strange, if not questionable, that all the cultural activities they have a vested interest in seem to hold such a wide appeal to teenagers. It would, hypothetically, be very profitable for cigarette companies to profit from the 'irresponsibility' and impressionability of minors by marketing their product to them. A lot of evidence seems to suggest that this is exactly what they are doing.

According to Jaina, "The ads definitely hold a lot more appeal to teenagers than they do to adults." The anti-tobacco lobby in the west has succeeded in restricting cigarette ads and thus reduced the extent of their influence on minors. Cigarette advertisements cannot be placed within a certain radius of schools and cigarette companies are no longer allowed to sponsor major sports and music events. Joe Camel, Camel cigarettes' popular cartoon mascot and possibly the most blatant example of marketing cigarettes to children, has been completely banned. But Bangladesh has few laws and regulations restricting the activities of large, multina-

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STAR PHOTO: ZAHID I KHAN

starts first and the habit spreads to other children in the school. The practice of smoking has integrated itself so deeply among teenagers that it has almost become a rite of passage. Peer pressure has played a very important role in all of this. Being popular and not feeling 'left out' is something that is quite important to a lot of teenagers. They often start smoking simply to conform.

The problem seems to be generally worse among boys. "If I heard a girl was smoking my first reaction would be surprise. But if I heard a boy was smoking I wouldn't be at all surprised, I'd find it completely normal," says 14-year-old female smoker. Why then did she start smoking? "To impress my friends," she says, flatly.

Many teenagers don't start smoking for the narcotic effect but purely to build up an image. "Most people think it's cool. A lot of people just like how they feel when they're holding a cigarette," says Jaina.

Teenagers deal with their self-consciousness by deriving confidence from a superficial 'image'. What remains a mystery is where the idea of smoking as an image is derived from, what part of popular culture is responsible for this?

Teenagers seem to be fascinated and drawn to the idea of smoking partly because it is 'wrong' for them to smoke, (the illicitness makes it more exciting and appealing) and because often they have no one to talk except other friends who might be smokers. This adds the element of the unknown, further increasing its appeal. This all culminates at a point where teenagers satisfy their curiosity by smoking.

Understanding on the part of schools and parents could help the problem of peer pressure greatly and ease the pressure to be popular and to conform. Open communication could reduce the entire factor of illicitness built up around smoking.

But the exact opposite has happened. Schools adopt a strict "Just say no!" policy and never talk about it, almost treating the issue with denial. Many schools suspend or even expel students they find smoking on school grounds without a second word. This does nothing to help the problem in anyway. In fact, this is what makes smoking into something illicit and 'bad' and

greatly increases its appeal to teenagers.

Most parents are usually very strict about smoking and a wall of miscommunication develops as a result. Saiful says, rather emotionally, "I think people should understand that [teenagers] have to go through a lot and should sometimes be more understanding." The strict, harsh attitudes of schools and parents alienates teenagers, forcing many to seek some superficial comfort in conformity, in being popular and being one of the crowd.

You could have laws that stopped teenagers from buying cigarettes or make it illegal for them to smoke (some states in America have started to fine teenagers they find smoking). Such a law could backfire quite dramatically. The illegality of smoking would increase the appeal (the illicitness factor) without reducing the availability (since no one would really stop selling cigarettes to teenagers). Teenagers would start smoking in greater numbers and simply stop smoking in public. This would only make the problem less visible and would reduce the extent to which we can control it.

Placing restrictions on cigarette ads and on marketing strategies adopted by cigarette companies would be a more realistic first step. However, most of these restrictions would be targeted at large, powerful and, most importantly, rich cigarette companies. Given the level of corruption and inefficiency in the government it would be impossible for such a plan to succeed without some major setbacks.

A realistic step would be for parents and schools to adopt a more liberal attitude, in order to build up some kind of respect with teenagers and to help ease some of their frustrations.

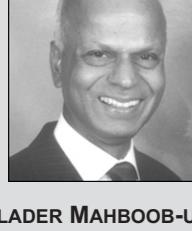
The problem is that a lot of questions haven't been asked, a lot of statistical data is lacking and almost no research has been done about what is fast becoming a serious problem. Before a solution can even be considered we should seek answers to many important questions.

Why do teenagers smoke? Are cigarette companies targeting teenagers? How big is the effect of peer pressure? How big is the effect of popular media and cigarette advertisements?

We lack answers to a lot of undeniably important questions. These answers are something we will eventually have to find.

Names of interviewees have been changed in this article

The vision that drives Israeli politics in Palestine

CHAKLADER MAHBOOB-UL ALAM
writes from Madrid

portion, confiscation of more Palestinian land and building of more Jewish settlements.)

As far as the second question is concerned, it is the firm belief of many political analysts that the Israelis are in no hurry to resume negotiations with a view to signing a peace deal unless, of course, the Palestinians are prepared to ratify the current status with only minor modifications. The longer they can maintain the status quo is better for them. Why?

DURING these last eight months (September, 2000 to May, 2001) of the Intifada, the Israeli government has gone on escalating its repressive measures against the Palestinians. It is no longer content with using live ammunition against rock-throwing adolescents; flattening Palestinian homes, factories and farmland with the help of tanks, bulldozers, helicopter gun ships; burning orchards; destroying their economy; assassinating their leaders and placing the entire population under military siege. Now it has unleashed its most deadly weaponry (American-supplied F-16 fighter jets) against civilian targets. All this time, Israel's official stand (with American backing) has been that it is prepared to get back to the negotiating table as soon as the Palestinians cease violence. At this stage two questions come to my mind: First, what do the Israelis understand by the term violence? Second, is the Israeli government in any hurry to resume peace negotiations?

The kindest adjective that I can find to describe Israel's understanding of the term violence is hypocritical. While actions such as throwing stones at the occupation army (tanks and fully armed soldiers) enforcing a humiliating closure policy, firing home-made mortars at Israeli settlements within occupied territories and suicide bombings in Israel are given wide publicity as violent acts, most Israelis do not seem to understand that the military occupation of Palestinian territories and the building of hundreds of Jewish settlements in those territories are acts of extreme violence by any civilised standards. (The United States government does not seem to understand that after more than four hundred Palestinian deaths, an unconditional end of the Intifada would mean an acceptance of the status quo and a surrender to Israel's violence, i.e. military occu-

million of innocent Palestinian civilians from their homes and land, the West had participated in the creation of the Palestinian problem.) Most Europeans, who still had a guilty conscience about the way the Jews were treated all across Europe (the holocaust was the latest one) readily bought into the propaganda (tell a lie a million times and it will be perceived as the truth) that the "defenceless Israelis" were a part of "us". After all, the Europeans already thought of the Arabs as

Bank and the Gaza strip into a colony. To achieve these ends a detailed plan was worked out, which was rarely discussed in public by the Likud or the Labour party politicians.

Mr Sharon, who in my opinion, is a simpleminded soldier, has just described in detail the long-term Israeli strategy in the occupied Palestinian territories. In a couple of recent interviews to the Hebrew-language *Ha'aretz* and the French daily *Le Figaro* (which were not

UN agency, the Palestinians have become some of the poorest people in the world), destroying their homes and orchards, assassinating their leaders and using Israel's overwhelming military might against the Palestinians is to wear them out, wait out the Intifada, divide the people and convince the masses that they have no other alternative but to make peace with Israel under the terms and conditions set by Israel. As long as the Palestinians refuse to surrender, Mr. Sharon's

his repeated acts of excessive violence (the use of helicopter gunships and F-16 fighter jets) against innocent civilians and finally his refusal to stop all settlement activities as recommended by the Mitchell Commission and endorsed by the EU and the UN are alienating world opinion from the Israeli cause. He does not understand that in a terrible way the Palestinians are winning and he is unwittingly helping them. He has yet to realise that in the twenty-first century, despite unconditional American government support for Israel, the Palestinians (both Christians and Muslims), the Arabs, the Muslims all across the world and the Europeans will never allow the colonisation of an entire nation, the introduction of an apartheid system in the heart of the Arab world and at the same time let Israel live in peace. (In the nineteenth century he could perhaps get away with it).

Recently there have been demonstrations in many European capitals in favour of the Palestinians. Newspapers are full of editorial and opinion columns expressing support for the Palestinian cause. Television and radio are giving wide coverage (almost always portraying the Palestinians as victims) to what is happening in the occupied territories. The Europeans, of course, could do more. The EU could take economic measures against Israel by revising its favourable trading conditions. Even in the United States the tide is slowly turning in favour of the Palestinians. For example, only recently several hundred Jewish religious scholars placed an advertisement in the *New York Times* supporting the Palestinian rights. Now there is definitely a much better understanding of the Palestinian cause both in Europe and the United States. The sooner Sharon realises that his people's security is closely tied to the establishment of an independent, economically viable state with clear defensible boundaries for the Palestinians where they can live with dignity, the better for everybody concerned. Meanwhile the Palestinians should be considered as war crimes.)

I have never heard any Israeli politician spelling out in such clear terms the Israeli intentions as far as the occupied territories are concerned, although one always suspected that these were the underlying principles which had so far guided all Israeli governments (the conservatives and the socialists alike) since the 1967 war and particularly after the Israeli invasion of Lebanon.

Ariel Sharon

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LETTER FROM EUROPE

The sooner Sharon realises that his people's security is closely tied to the establishment of an independent, economically viable state with clear defensible boundaries for the Palestinians where they can live with dignity, the better for everybody concerned. Meanwhile the Palestinians have no other option but to resist.

Ever since the war of 1967 and the subsequent occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza strip, Israeli government policy of both the conservatives and the socialists has been guided by one unequivocal principle, i.e. never to give up the conquered Palestinian land. However, the Israelis realised that they wanted to implement a policy of straightforward annexation of the land. First problem was the world opinion. After all, they, who proclaim themselves as the champions of western democracy and defenders of human rights could not openly resort to naked colonialism in late twentieth century to fulfil their dream of restoring Israel to its Biblical space and grandeur. Then there

either fanatic fundamentalists or degenerate playboys. Direct and indirect propaganda portrayed the Arabs as "primitives and inferior beings" to make it easy for the Europeans and, of course, the Americans to consider the Palestinians as "the other". Thus to the ordinary western mind Israel came to be considered not as the oppressor but as the oppressed desperately trying to survive in a hostile part of the world where the "uncivilised barbarians" were irrationally bent on destroying the only country there which was "civilised, western and democratic".

The second problem was however, more difficult to handle: What to do with several million Palestinians, who despite all the punishment inflicted on them would not oblige the Israelis by fleeing to other countries or accept the Israelis as their masters? Israel could not absorb several million Christian and Muslim Palestinians as its citizens without losing its jealously defended status of being the only exclusively Jewish fundamentalist state in the world. Since in late twentieth century the world opinion would not endorse the physical extermination of such a great number of human beings, the Israelis worked out a long-term strategy with a view to maintaining the status quo (the military occupation) and quietly and surreptitiously (very few people in the West knew about the extent of Israeli settlement activities until Mr. Sharon's visit to the Al Aqsa mosque on September 28, 2000 and the subsequent start of the Intifada) converting the West

gives wide publicity by the Jewish controlled media in the western world because of fear of tarnishing the carefully constructed image of Israel as being a modern democratic country. Mr. Sharon said:

1. "People today are not much excited by the idea of gaining a hectare and then another hectare for Israel but for me that's still exciting." 2. "Jerusalem is the heart of the Jewish people" and "no Israeli has the right to share Jerusalem." 3. A Palestinian state consisting of more or less the area currently under the control of the Palestinian Authority can be established if the Palestinians cease "violence". It means the Palestinians will be allowed to live in their "Bantustans" under an apartheid system or leave the country. The detractors will be physically eliminated. (By the way, the United States government recently criticised the International Red Cross for a remark made by the head of its delegation in Israel that Jewish settlements in the West Bank and Gaza should be considered as war crimes.)

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***** HAVE A NICE DAY *****



Dr. Rubaiul Murshed

All health information to keep you up to date

Beware

What's in a cigarette?

Tobacco smoke contains some 4,000 chemicals including these poisons:

TAR: Contains cancer-causing substances. It coats your lungs. A 20-stick-a-day smoker inhales up to a full cup of tar every year.

BUTANE: Lighter fuel.

CARBON MONOXIDE: This is the gas that kills you when you breathe in car exhaust fumes. It replaces oxygen in your blood and robs muscles, brain and body tissue of oxygen. It also makes the lungs less able to clear themselves and over time, airways swell and lets in less air into the lungs.

ARSENIC: Found in ant poison.

NICOTINE: This is the addictive drug in tobacco. It raises your blood pressure and heart rate each time you smoke. This strains your heart and increases your chance of heart attack.

AMMONIA: Found in floor cleaners.

CADMIUM: Found in batteries.

NAPHTHALENE: Mothballs.

Bet you know all the hard facts about smoking already. We'll tell it to you anyhow. And, we challenge you to do something good for yourself QUIT!

PHYSEMA: A disease that slowly destroys the lungs; lungs rot and lung tissue harden.

LUNG CANCER: Caused by tar and nicotine in tobacco smoke. Most lung cancers cannot be removed with surgery.

CARDIOVASCULAR DISEASE: Nicotine and carbon monoxide causes blood vessels to narrow and clot. The heart will be overworked because it has less oxygen and has to work harder to pump blood through narrowed vessels.



Soap and your health

Buying soap isn't simple as it used to be. Formulations are targeted to moisturise dry skin, curb acne, kill bacteria, banish body odour, and more. How to know what you really need? Here are some suggestions.

If you have:

Dry skin: Use soaps made with added oil or moisturizing ingredients that leave a thin film after rinsing. Or try liquid cleansers with glycerin such as glycerin, acetyl alcohol, or propylene glycol.

Oily, Acne-Prone skin: Opt for detergent based cleansers (also called beauty bars) to clean away residue and oil. Look for the active ingredients like sulfur, salicylic acid, or benzoyl peroxide. Note: An oily complexion doesn't necessarily indicate oily skin elsewhere. You may not need a drying soap all over.

Sensitive skin: Superfatted soaps are gentlest because they contain glycerin to help your skin retain moisture. Avoid soaps with anti-bacterial ingredients such as triclocarban or trichlosan—potential skin irritants. Opt for fragrance-free rather than unscented, which may contain chemical fragrances to mask its natural smell.

If your skin is extra sensitive, use soap sparingly. If you still experience irritation, it may not be the soap, but hard water, which leaves a residue. In that case, have you water tested and consider installing a water softener.