

Groundwater drops to alarming level

Quality and quantity of Wasa water threatened

MIZANUR KHAN

The groundwater level in much of the city dropped up to 24 metres in nine years since 1996, bringing about a crisis in water output.

Dhaka Water and Sewerage Authority (Wasa) attributed the crisis to the lack of groundwater recharge in monsoon because of unplanned and ever-expanding habitation.

"Static groundwater levels in Mirpur, Mohammadpur, Dhanmondi and Dhaka Cantonment are sharply decreasing. Groundwater doesn't get recharged, as there is no open space for rainwater to accumulate. It threatens the quantity and quality of water," Wasa Managing Director ANH Akhter Hossain said.

Last year, the water level dropped 13 metres in Mirpur, 13.5 metres in Dhaka Cantonment, 8.25 metres in Dhanmondi and 7 metres in Mohammadpur, according to Wasa statistics.

A recent study by Bangladesh Agriculture Development Corporation (Badc) also pointed to a drop in the groundwater level in the last eight years and says if the trend continues there will be a severe crisis and a risk of devastating landslide.

The water level was recorded at 26.6 metres from the surface in 1996 -- the table that slid further to 50.6 metres in January 2004, says the study carried out with the vertical automatic water level recorder, the most recent method of verifying water tables.

The groundwater level was recorded at 28.15 metres from

the surface in 1997, 30.45 in 1998, 31.86 in 1999, 34.18 in 2000, 37.78 in 2001, 41.87 in 2002 and 46.24 in 2003.

The Wasa managing director said the groundwater base in Dhaka could not sustain for long, as the water bodies are limited and real estate builders and city dwellers are building houses on open spaces. Lake and river encroachment in and around the city has worsened the situation.

Wasa generates 85 percent of its water from underground through tubewells and the rest by treating surface water. Five years ago, 95 percent of Wasa water came from underground, he said, adding: "Five years later, the groundwater level will go down further and the daily demand will rise."

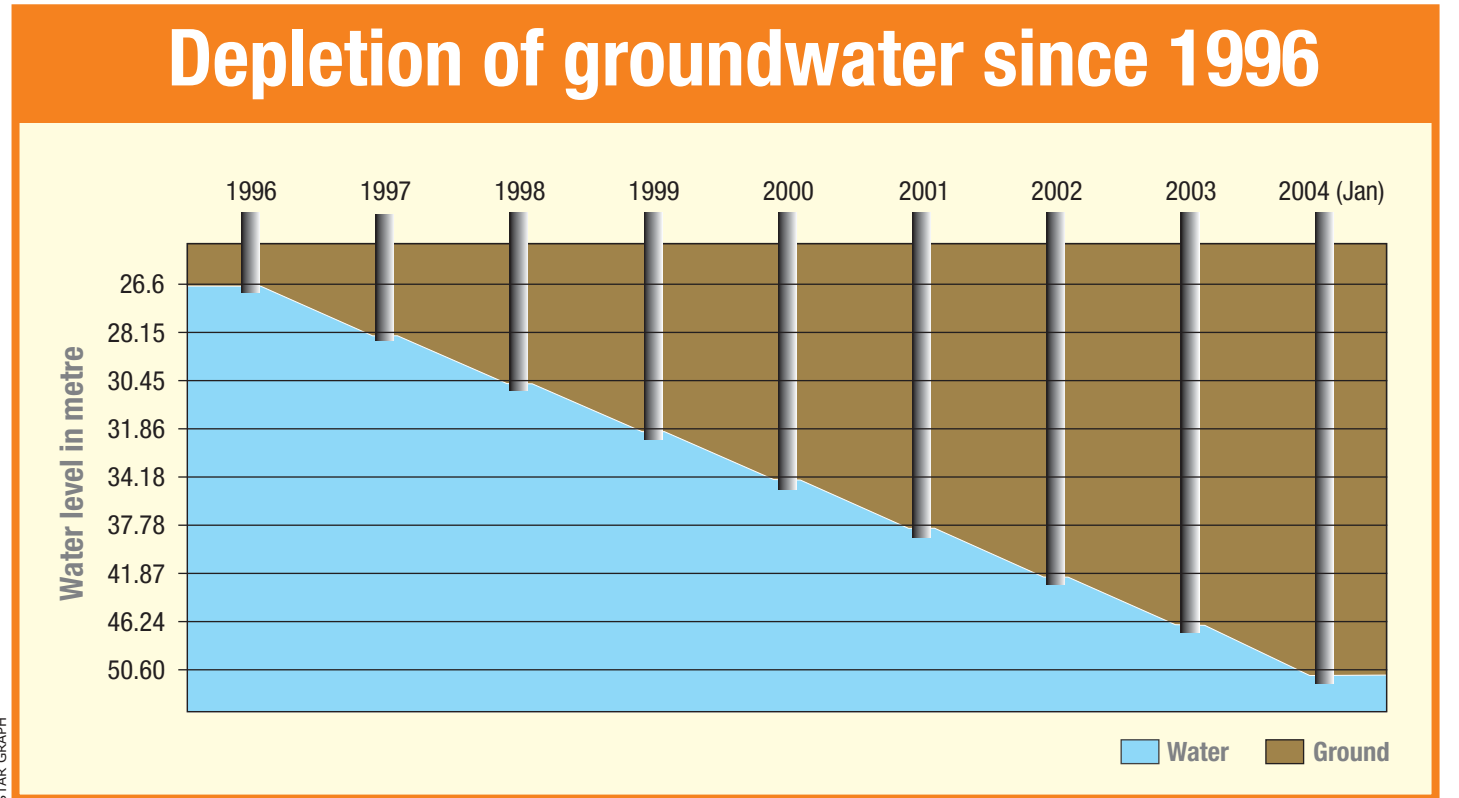
Wasa generates only 150 crore litres of water against

the daily demand for 200 crore litres, and forecast that the demand will climb to 270 crore litres a day by 2010.

Wasa workers cited the malfunctioning of tubewells as another reason for the dip in water output. Half the tubewells in Mirpur have remained inoperative for the last one year. Of 407 tubewells in the city, only 382 are operative now.

"It will not be safe to extract water from underground after two or three years," the Wasa managing director said. "We will take steps to face this depletion after we get results of a research which will start in a month."

He warned that if any work is done without substantial research, groundwater may get contaminated leading to a disaster.



Shop owners to protest law and order downslide, frequent hartal

CITY CORRESPONDENT

Shop owners will form a human chain from Dainik Bangla crossing to Shapla roundabout in Motijheel on March 22 in the

build-up to a broad movement against law and order downslide and general strikes that harm their business.

The demonstrators will carry a 1km-long banner down the streets in Dhaka that saw 13 businessmen killed and six har-

talks called by main opposition Awami League against the ruling coalition in the last two months.

"We feel insecure. Criminals kill people and hartal kills our business," said ASA Kadir Kiron, general secretary of Bangladesh Shop Owners Association, add-

ing political parties should not call a strike without national issues and the government should not do anything to prompt the opposition to go for it.

The call for demonstration came after businesspeople

talked to Home Minister Altaf Hossain Chowdhury last month, who asked for a list of extortionists from them. "It's not possible to improve the situation without help from the business community," the minister was quoted as telling the delegation.

Kiron said his organisation would ask the FBCCI (Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industry) to pressure the government to take stringent anticrime measures. "If the FBCCI doesn't do that, we will lay siege to its office."

"We come to our shop in the morning in fear and don't know whether we can get back home safe," said a businessman, who did not want to be identified for security reasons.

The demonstrators threat-

Commerce Minister Amir Khosru Mahmud Chowdhury on February 19 demanded an end to disorder.

Kamal Hossain, a leader of the Old City Shop Owners Association, accused the govern-



Shop owners pulled their shutters down at Kazi Nuzrul Islam Avenue after Mostafa Kamal (inset), owner of a travel agency was shot dead there on February 9 (left), and jewelers observe strike on February 9 to protest robbery at Karnaphuli Garden City shopping mall on February 3.



Human chain on March 22 and day-long strike on March 31. Call for steps to head off killings, extortion, robberies and death threats

ened to respond to any killing of a businessman with shutdown of two lakh shops in the city -- the figure provided by the shop owners' association.

Mohammad Helaluddin, president of Dhaka Shop Owners Association, said: "We have told the home minister that we would shut down our shops if another businessman was killed."

Business leaders in Old Dhaka are bracing for a similar movement and shop owners, who earlier went on symbolic strike and staged processions in Kotwali and Sutrapur, called a daylong strike on March 31.

The Council of Chambers, an organisation of presidents of all chambers, in a meeting with

ment of inactivity and called for efforts to head off killings, extortion, robberies and death threats.

"The situation has reached a point of no-return," he said.

"The situation has become more difficult when two businessmen were killed in four days," said AKM Masud, general secretary of the Agricultural Machinery Merchants Association.

Ashraf Huda, police commissioner of Dhaka, said all killings were not linked to extortion, adding: "The government is trying to improve law and order. Police are running special drives to arrest criminals."

Spices laced in toxic colourants

Chilli is often mixed with brick dust or a toxic colourant and turmeric with a poisonous chemical

AVIK SANWAR RAHMAN

The increasing demand of powdered spices rather than home-made spices has given rise to commercial production as well as adulteration.

A test conducted by the Institute of Public Health (IPH) found more than 50 percent samples of spices adulterated.

Turmeric and chilli are usually mixed with flour to increase the weight of the package. Chilli is at times

mixed with brick dust or a toxic colourant and turmeric with a poisonous chemical to enhance the colours faded by the white colour of flour.

Some companies mix salt and water as another method of increasing weight leaving adulterated spices damp.

Bangladesh Standard and Testing Institute (BSTI) is responsible in issuing certificates to companies applying for commercial production of consumer products.

"Companies approach us for

testing -- a pre requisite for BSTI certification in turn stamped on the package of the products. We buy these products and monitor them from time to time," said an assistant director of BSTI requesting anonymity.

But he is not sure whether or not any company has been banned for spice adulteration.

Effects of adulteration do not apply to the spices, but has adverse results on all types of food.

Vegetables and fruits are ripened by injecting chemicals

turning raw fruits ripe. These chemicals tested by BSTI are found to be toxic.

A surveillance team is jointly operated by BSTI and Consumer Association of Bangladesh (CAB) has been appointed to monitor the quality of products currently being marketed.

"We are not satisfied with the performance of BSTI. Many facts are concealed if the team goes against their interest," alleged CAB's general secretary, Quazi Farouque.

BSTI's director general

denied any allegation and assured harsh measures would be taken against BSTI official if the allegations were substantiated.

Many companies are into the powdered-spice business without registration. The products have no labels or the BSTI stamp and go unnoticed of any adulteration.

"It is not possible to locate companies that are into adulteration as the labels do not provide information of the company concerned," said another official of BSTI.

"The consumer demand is so high that unscrupulous businessmen adulterate powdered spices. Consumers should avoid spices without BSTI seals," urged the official.

But what happens to adulterated spices even with BSTI seals on the packet is a burning question.

"It is not possible to stop any company from production even if cases of adulteration are filed against them, as court issued stay orders on the case," he added.



SHED ZAKIR HOSSAIN