Diarrhoea scourge looms in city

MIZANUR KHAN

Garment worker Afzal Hossain was fighting diarrhoea in hospital after he was rushed there from Shaheenbagh in Tejgaon, an area that was reeling under filthy floodwater.

"My house is submerged by dark water that gives a strong bad smell. It is impossible to live there. I don't know what happened. Suddenly I threw up. Everything was coming out and it did not stop," said 22-year-old Afzal from his hospital bed at the International Centre for Diarrhoeal Diseases Research, Bangladesh (ICDDR,B), better known as Mohakhali Cholera Hospital.

Afzal was on intravenous saline and his relatives standing by him told Star City that they took him to hospital two days ago when the condition turned serious.

Like Afzal, many other patients -- mostly women and children in hospital -- were fighting the waterborne disease, while doctors and nurses were trying their best to offer them a little comfort.

Hundreds of patients were lying on the beds inside the ICDDR,B building and hundreds more were given beds on passages.

"We will treat all patients who come to hospital. Our hospital in its history refused nobody who came for treatment," said Dr Pradip Bardhan, a senior scientist and in charge of the ICDDR,B.

"We are fully equipped and staffed to face the situation. If needed, we will set up tents to provide treatment," he added.

Hospital officials said the number of inpatients admitted a day has dramatically increased over the last week as floodwaters started to recede from the city by a trickle. Doctors and nurses said about 500 patients are admitted to the ICDDR,B a day, while the figure was on average 250 a month ago.

"As diarrhoea has a seasonal pattern, sometimes we receive more patients and sometimes a few in a year. The floods have doubled the number and it may increase in the coming days," Dr Bardhan said.

Experts fear the number will increase in the next two to three days when the water will go down. During water recession in 1988 and 1999 floods, more people were taken ill with diarrhoea. "The number of patients increases as the water rises, but it becomes more when water recedes," he added.

Most patients admitted to the hospital have come from low-lying areas on the eastern outskirts of the capital. People living there drank polluted water because of the acute safe drinking water crisis and contracted diarrhoea.

Children are most vulnerable, as they do not have enough immunity to protect deadly microorganisms.

"Most of them are from Demra, Badda, Mirpur and Gulshan in Dhaka and from its adjoining areas such as Rupganj, Demra and Kernaiganj," said doctor Sayma Khurshed, a clinical fellow of ICDDR,B.

Ruma, a housewife, came from Mirhajibag with her 5-month-old son Rakib five days ago. "We did not abandon our home to floodwaters and my son contracted diarrhoea," she said resting her son on her shoulder and little Rakib was crying.

Majeda rushed her 4-month-old daughter to the ICDDR,B four days ago from flood-hit Gendaria after visiting two hospitals. Her rickshawpuller husband Kader said it was just waist-deep water inside their shanty where his daughter accidentally dropped from his arms and was taken ill with diarrhoea.

Some patients have come from as far as Munshiganj, Manikganj, Narshingdi and Savar.

"It is very difficult for us to figure out the exact number of diarrhoea patients across the country but I can say about our patients with confidence. As the number of patients in hospital doubled, we can guess the situation all over the country," Dr Bardhan said.

Officials said more than 60,000 people were taken ill with diarrhoea across the country while unofficial sources put the number more than a lakh.

To face the situation, the hospital authorities have already increased the number of beds and decided to increase more if needed. More than 12,000 inpatients were treated in the past week.

"During the devastating floods in 1998, more than 900 patients came for treatment a day and we treated all. This time, if the number crosses thousand, we are ready to deal with it," Dr Bardhan said.

Hit by flood waters mostly women and children are being treated for diarrhoea at the ICDDR,B.
SYED ZAKIR HOSSAIN

Deluge brings insecurity

Not enough policemen to patrol affected areas

FAIZUL A TANIM

Residents of Dhaka's Shahajadpur, Badda and Malibagh areas are living in insecurity after the current floods forced many of them to move elsewhere leaving behind household properties under locks.

"The other family members moved away from our shack in Shahajadpur as the house went under 8 to 10 feet water. But I have stayed back. There were about eighty families living in our slum but the flood situation forced them to leave. Most people have kept their belongings tied on the partition below the tin-shed roofs and have locked the doors.

'But local miscreants are breaking into the houses and stealing things and the police is not doing anything to prevent it. They don't even patrol the area," said Amjad Ahmed, a Badda resident.

"I really do not know what has happened to my house after I left it because of the flood. I have heard stories about neighbours losing their belongings," says Shaheda Banu who also lives in Badda.

Given the security fear, a lot of people, mostly young have decided to stay and guard their homes despite the fact that the houses have gone under floodwater.

"Who is going to look after my house? Besides, young people who seek shelter, face police harassment," said one such youth Ali Hossain.

There are also reports that the flood-affected people are not getting minimum relief.

"The authorities are preparing lists of people of their choice and only those few are receiving help," complained Minara Begum of Malibagh.

"Only twice have we actually received relief and that was distributed by an influential person of the area," says Komola from a neighboring house.

"It is hard to find a police patrol. If the police force is not adequate then the army should be deployed. Quite often we hear loud screams and cursing from people staying in nearby flood shelters and eventually fights break up," said Anwar Chowdhury, who lives close to a make-shift shelter.

Volunteers however disagree with the claims. "There is no problem. The police officers are making regular rounds around the shelter. Lists are made of the total number of inhabitants living here and they are supplied with relief accordingly," said Ripon, a volunteer at shelter 113 in Gulshan.

"There are almost 300 flood shelters in the city and whenever a new one is setup we immediately send three to four personnel to the spot following the official request from the local ward commissioner," said Assistant Commissioner of Police, Mahmudur Rahman.

The ASP however acknowledged that manpower is limited.

"The number of police personnel deployed to patrol the affected areas is not sufficient. Quite often relief workers arrive in these shelters to help a maximum of 200 or 300 people but when it turns out to be 1500, chaos naturally reigns.

'Regarding security, it is not possible for us to patrol all the affected areas. We do not boats and whenever something criminal happens, we try to rush there on rented boats but that too is a difficult exercise. The boatmen also charge a lot, about Tk 30 to 40 per ride. It also boat does not stop everywhere and once we get dropped at one spot, going to another places becomes another hassle."

Flood waters have not stopped law enforcers from performing their duties to combat thefts which were on the rise.
SK ENAMUL HAQ

ILLEGAL WATER CONNECTIONS

Floods stall Wasa crackdown

STAR PHOTO

CITY CORRESPONDENT

Dhaka Water Supply and Sewerage Authority (Wasa) postponed the scheduled early August special drive against illegal connections because of the on-going floods.

Wasa covers approximately 470 square kilometres including the metropolitan city but has no statistics of illegal connections. Wasa has a current system loss of 44 percent of which 20 percent is misused because of technical reasons. Illegal connections are the main causes to the rest of the system loss.

The WASA board decided to do a consumer survey as a part of modernising the established working and circulation system, to find out the number of illegal water connections in the capital this August. But as the floods cover most areas covered by Wasa the implementation of the survey work awaits the return of the climatic conditions to normalcy.

It is said that there are 3,60,000 holdings in the city but only 2,16,000 have legal water connection lines. Twenty percent of the legal lines belong to commercial users and the rest to residents. But the Mayor Sadeque Hossain Khoka recently said that the number of householders is 2,00,000 over the city, so without a firsthand survey, the exact numbers cannot be found, said ANH Akhter Hossain, Managing Director (MD) of WASA.

Wasa had given an opportunity to those having illegal water supply connections to legalise them before February 15 this year and many subscribers made use of the opportunity.

"I legalised the water supply line making use of this opportunity," said Ahmed Munir, a resident of Shaikhertek in the Mohammedpur area.

"Wasa's cost legalisation is too high and once you confess, you are bound to either pay bills from the day the building came up or else from the inception of Wasa or better so according to the whims and fancies of the officers," said another illegal connection holder from Mirpur.

"Although I communicated with the authorities I failed to get a connection to my residence within a reasonable period of time. When the local lineman assured me of assistance to solve the problem if he was paid a certain amount of money, I decided to go along with him," he added.

"It is not possible to launch the survey to identify the real statistics on Wasa subscribers during the floods. I think most of the illegal connections in Dhaka are in Mirpur as there are many slums on encroached land," said the Wasa MD.

"Illegal connections are widespread not only in Mirpur but in most parts of the expanded city as well. We will try to bring down the numbers after a proper survey but have to wait for the floods to recede," he added.