

Safety at workplace improves, shows study

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Workplace safety level in Dhaka has improved a bit due to greater awareness and law-abiding attitude of business owners during the state of emergency, experts conducting a survey said.

Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies (Bils), a research organisation advocating labour issues, conducted the study on workplace safety level in January thru June 2007.

At least 395 workers in different sectors were killed or injured in accidents or due to violence at workplaces in Dhaka during the months of the survey as opposed to 1,017 deaths or injuries in 2006. The study, based on news items published in national dailies, found that 71 workers were killed, 315 were critically injured and 9 were raped in workplaces this year

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study also surveyed transport workers, shop workers, electric workers, cleaners and domestic workers.

Amirul Haque, general secretary of National Garment Workers' Federation told Star City that many workers die due to violence and stampede in garment factories each year. But this year, despite many pending issues, the workers refrained from violent protests since there is a state of emergency in effect.

Many factory owners on the other hand, also made infrastructural improvements like installing emergency exits or widening staircases in factory buildings to avoid accidents during the period of this interim government. These things helped reduce the number of accidents as well as deaths in workplaces, he explained.

Though the number of incidents has reduced, the study found that the level of brutality was horrible, he said. "This is a good news to make us hopeful, but we should not be celebrating yet with this small improvement."

"We should wait and see if this safety [practice] sustains. The ball just started rolling. Nothing will be achieved unless other related sides concerned also join the process."

Wajedul Islam, coordinator of Sromik Karmachari Oikya Parishad (SKOP), also said the situation has improved a bit in the garment sector, but the scenario remains the same in

other sectors.

"The level of awareness among the workers and owners has definitely improved than before. Though the safety level improved significantly in the garment sector within the first half of the year, the safety sce-

nario in other sectors like construction or domestic help did not change much," he observed.

The study, based on news items published in national dailies, found that 71 workers were killed, 315 were critically injured and 9 were raped in workplaces this year.

The annual workplace safety report for 2006 by the same organisation detected 1,017 deaths or injuries at workplaces in Dhaka. Among them, 147 were killed and 870 were seriously injured.

The study also found that the garment sector is still on top of the chart with accidents and violence while construction sector maintained the second position.

Among other sectors, the



Workplace safety has improved due to increasing awareness among business owners.



Rab personnel yesterday evicted Karwan Bazar hawkers after they returned to occupy over five seats of the thoroughfare following their eviction only two months ago.

Tales of two workers

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there are hundreds of such factories where workers dismantle different parts of dry cell batteries.

Nurunnahar, 15, works in such a small factory beside the Buriganga River. During a visit to the dismantling unit, this correspondent found the girl dismantling dry cell batteries with a hammer while another worker was sorting different parts of the used batteries.

"I am doing this work for the last five years. I can dismantle one full sack of used batteries a day. I work from 7am to 5pm along with three other workers for Tk 50 daily," said Nurunnahar with her face smeared with black ash.

Farida Begum, the employer of Nurunnahar, said she and her husband has been in this business for the last 25 years. "We buy sacks of batteries from bhangari (scrap) shops at Tk 1,200 per sack. One sack contains 2 maunds (around 75kg) of scrap batteries," she said.

"We separate every part of the batteries -- lead, plastic, tin and pencil. We sell the lead and pencil to battery factories, tin to bhangari shops and plastic to traders of Islambagh," said Farida. "The price of one maund of pencil is Tk 400, tin Tk 600 and lead Tk 3,000," he added.

"We don't have much work these days because the use of batteries have gone down due to rechargeable devices," she said.

Lead acid battery

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Every part of a scrap battery has a recycle value -- the plastic casing, plate separators and sulphuric acid. Big manufacturers buy the lead for making batteries while the other parts are traded in informal sector.

According to Lokman, around 800 tonnes of lead is imported each month to meet domestic demand. "One tonne of imported lead costs \$24,000. By recovering lead locally, we can save more than \$20 million every year."

According to the Waste Concern study, locally recovered lead could meet 60 percent of the total lead requirement of the country.

Lokman and other battery dismantling factory owners are now waiting for government approval to resume their business in an environmentally safe method. "We will start our work again after six months after getting proper licence from government. We will import a machine from India to recycle batteries that will not pollute environment. By using that machine we are expecting to recover 65 percent lead," he said.

Iftekhar Enayetullah, director, Waste Concern, put emphasis on passing laws as a first step to stop unsafe recycling of lead acid batteries and introduce a safe method of lead recovery.

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Lead poisoning causes serious environmental and health hazards, especially to children and the battery-dismantling workers. It affects human brain and may even lead to death, Enayetullah said.

During the process of dismantling lead acid batteries, a large volume of acid, lead smoke, lead dust, fuel smoke (from coal burning) and burnt coal is released, causing air, water and soil pollution, he added.

According to an estimate of World Health Organisation, 120 million people are exposed to lead and 99 percent of the severely affected are from developing countries. Batteries account for more than 75 percent cases.

"Big factories like Madina stopped unsafe dismantling after the restriction was imposed. We first need laws to save people from unsafe recycling and then start doing it safely using modern technology," said Enayetullah.

"The aim of our study on lead acid battery was to solicit the government to pass a law so that people start recycling safely. In future we have a plan to do a study on dry cell battery to stop its unsafe recycling," he said.

At present there is no study on the recycling of dry cell batteries.

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