

BATTERY FACTORY'S DEADLY FUME

# Nakhalpara residents exposed to health hazards

DURDANA GHIAS

Pungent smell in the air, grumbling noise of generator, big lorries parked on narrow lanes, people struggling to move through heavy traffic congestion—this is the everyday scene during rush hour at Lucas battery roundabout in West Nakhalpara, a densely populated area in the city.

The battery factory of RahimAfrooz Bangladesh Ltd is blamed by most locals for the pandemonium.

"The traffic jam is really awful but the thing that scares me most is the poisonous lead fume from the nearby Lucas factory," said Sabina Mahmood, mother of two school-going children and a resident of the area.

The deadly lead fumes wafting from the furnaces of the factory is slowly poisoning the residents of the area.

The factory uses liquid lead and sulphuric acid to manufacture car battery. Health experts say lead fume can affect human nervous system and even cause cancer. Long-term exposure to

lead can affect a child's developing brain and cause behavioural problems.

"Many of the residents have coughing problems due to the fumes and some have died of cancer," said Nurul Afsar, an elderly resident whose wife has died of cancer. His younger sister too is suffering from cancer and has shifted from the area since she was diagnosed with the disease.

"At first we were not aware of the harmful effects of lead fume but gradually we realised how poisonous it is. Guests coming to our house used to complain about the smell," said Sabina.

Besides, the factory is located at the intersection of narrow lanes where the factory officials park their cars blocking the lanes. Big lorries carrying batteries are parked on the roads creating tremendous traffic jam.

"Lead is very dangerous for human health. We are anxious about our children's health. Why should our children be exposed to such high-risk chemicals? Which is more important—life or industry?" said Hazrat Ali, whose son is

suffering from mental illness since childhood.

"Since 1980 we had meetings after meetings with the factory management. We also had a meeting with the factory owners. They assured us of shifting the factory within six months," said Abdul Wadud, a resident of the area.

The Department of Environment (DoE) has set a deadline for shifting the factory by November this year, but locals doubt whether the factory owners complete the shifting within the deadline.

Locals submitted an application to the DoE on June 14, 1995 to shift the factory following enactment of the Environment Conservation Act in February that year, giving a full account of the environmental hazards and public sufferings due to the presence of the factory in the area.

Following the application, DoE sent an inspection team to the area on July 15, 1995, which found that the fume from the battery factory's furnace of liquid lead was directly mixing with the air.

DoE sent a letter on July 25, 1995 to the managing director of RahimAfrooz Bangladesh Ltd requesting them to use, if possible, a 'wet scrubber' for lead fumes and keep the sound pollution under 45 decibels.

The letter did not mention any specific timeframe or any step the DoE would take in case the factory did not comply with the measures.

The locals submitted three more applications in October 1997, August 1998 and in May 2007 to the DoE requesting them to shift the factory. But the DoE remained silent mysteriously.

Officials at DoE could not confirm whether the factory took the steps recommended by the DoE or whether any inspection team was sent to the factory area after 1995.

According to Iftekhar Hossain, general manager of Lucas factory, they have installed the 'wet scrubber' as prescribed by the DoE. But locals alleged that the factory authorities do not run the machine the whole day.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 22



'OPEN DAY' AT 32 POLICE STATIONS

## Taming evils by bringing police, people closer

CITY CORRESPONDENT

Petty crime, eve-teasing, toll collection and other anomalies that are visible in the neighbourhood of the city are going to be addressed with due seriousness under a new programme by

Dhaka Metropolitan Police (DMP).

This programme, named Police Open Day, has recently been introduced in 32 police stations (PS) in the city in order to bridge the gap between police and the people.

The initiative under police

reform project (PRP), a 16 million dollar project funded by UNDP, is aimed at dispelling people's mistrust towards police and building a mutual relationship of trust and cooperation.

In a recent baseline survey conducted by the PRP, around 80 percent respondents from 11 model police station areas said that they do not go to police stations unless they face a life-threatening crime, said UNDP sources.

On the Police Open Day, each of the eight crime divisions of DMP consisting four to five police stations will organise public discussions on a particular Saturday of each month encouraging locals to assist the police in maintaining law and order.

Uttara PS, Ramna PS, Sutrapur PS and Paltan PS have already observed their first open house days. Uttara PS observed their first open day on July 7 while Sutrapur PS, Paltan PS and Ramna PS observed their first open day on August 11.

Syed Nazrul Islam, officer in charge of Uttara PS, said businessmen and elites of the area attended the open day.

"Basically, we want to know what type of service people want from police, what we can do to stop unnecessary police harassment, what kind of problems they are facing in their neighbourhoods and so on," he said.

"This is a good opportunity for us to know what kind of service is needed. We are keeping a note of the proposals and suggestions made by the discussants so that no problem or suggestion is overlooked," said Nazrul.

"The introduction of open day will improve the relationship between police and the people. The main 'weapon' of police is their relationship with the people, not firearms. Good relationship with the community can be immensely helpful in crime control," he said.

"Elites and businessmen of the area came to discuss their problems with us. We did not have enough women participation this time. Next time we are hoping for a good gender balance. We are working with Naripakkha in this regard," said Nazrul.

Ameer Hossain, sub-inspector of Sutrapur PS, said the response they received on their first open day was good as around hundred people participated in the discussion. Traffic jams and eve-teasing were identified as two of the major problems in the area.

"Businessmen and local elites participated in the discussion where traffic jam and eve-teasing came up on top of discussion topics. We discussed from 11:00am to 3:30pm, but it appeared to all that many issues are yet to be discussed. Local reporters also took part in the discussion," he said.

Jahangir, sub-inspector of Paltan PS, said in their open day discussion, main problems identified were illegal shops on alleyways and cable theft. Over 50 people took part in the discussion.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 22

## Unfair bus fares still rule the city routes

RIZANUZZAMAN LASKAR

Lawlessness and defiance continue to reign over the public transport sector in the capital as majority of bus services overcharge passengers—a clear violation of the fare scheme directed by the government.

Officials at Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA), the body that is supposed to regulate the transport sector, admit that the mechanism to fight such irregularities in the sector has proved ineffective. They also blamed the people involved with the transport business for the failure of the mechanism.

"In the end, it gets down to the drivers and conductors to ensure the conformity in the service, but they readily violate all sorts of regulations by haphazardly picking up passengers from wherever they please and

charge fares for longer destinations," said a high official of BRTA requesting anonymity.

To manage a ride on the bus, the passengers have no way but to give in to the unlawful demand of paying higher fares, he added.

The government in consultation with transport owners had set the fare at Tk 0.87 per kilometre for buses with maximum 52 seats and Tk 0.90 per kilo for minibuses.

The bus services, especially the ones with ticket counters, blatantly ignore the government-set fares scheme, complained commuters.

"They [bus services with counters] are in fact worse than local bus services. They give the impression of a better service and charge higher fares, but their services are literally inferior to the local ones," said Abu Syed Sarkar from Uttara.

Even though these so-called "sitting service", "gate-lock" or "super service" bus operators do not sell tickets for destinations in between their starting points and final destinations, they pick up passengers from any point and force them to buy tickets for the entire route, Sarkar added.

For instance, Karnaphuli Paribahan, a bus service running on Motijheel-Duaripara route, charges a passenger Tk 8—the fare from Duaripara to Farmgate. Any passenger embarking or disembarking at Rupnagar, Shiyalbari, Mirpur 10, Kazipara or Shewrapara are forced to pay the same fare. Similarly, any passenger boarding the bus from the other end, in between Motijheel and Farmgate, are compelled to pay the fare from Motijheel to Farmgate, said Abu Saleh, a regular commuter on the route.

"There is no fare chart—they

charge as they please," said an aggrieved Saleh.

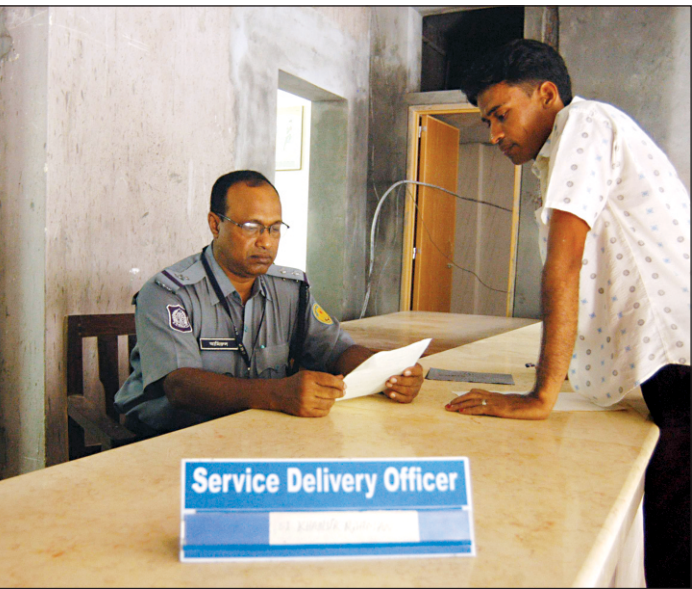
Bus conductors or operators of such bus services apparently find it more profitable to take on passengers for shorter distances, he added.

"All of these services are just collecting indiscriminate fare at their own will from the day the government declared the fare," alleged Saleh.

Similar allegations were also raised against Kalmilata Paribahan, a bus service operating on Motijheel-Abdullahpur route.

"Gate Lock" services were found to be charging Tk 7 for a distance of 6 kilometres between Mirpur 10 and Farmgate while the government-fixed fare for the same distance is supposed to be Tk 5. However, only the local services on this route seem to be complying with the government-set fare policy.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 22



A police officer is jotting down complaint at the service delivery centre at Dhanmondi Police Station (top) and an inaugural function on Police Open Day (above).



Commuters line up for tickets at Farmgate bus stoppage.