

WOEFUL LIFE OF TANNERY WORKERS

Toxic chemicals taxing health

SHAHNAZ PARVEEN
 Mohammad Babul, a 40-year-old tannery worker suffering from severe skin diseases and other complications, has lost confidence in modern medicines.
 "Medicines do not work on me anymore. I suffer from pain diseases, allergy and chest pain but my problems automatically go away when I don't work," he said.
 Born in the city's Hazaribagh

very unhygienic environment is a usual scene in the tanneries.
 Around 20,000 tannery workers are forced to continue working in this hazardous condition.
 Nearly 90 percent tanneries of the country are in Hazaribagh. According to official statistics, 198 tanneries are located on 25 hectares of land in Hazaribagh area. There are a few in Jessore, Chittagong and one in Savar. Surrounded by high walls and

explained the hazards that tannery workers face.
 "Workers at tanneries come in contact with a dangerous mix of chemicals in every step of their work, especially during the first stage of processing rawhide," he said.
 Around 30 to 40 types of heavy metal chemical compounds and acids are used to process rawhides. Among them the most dangerous are chromium, sul-

among them.
 Prof Das gives details of the illness that tannery workers suffer from.
 Generally, these chemicals can cause allergy, boils, inflammation in hands and legs, skin diseases and infection. However, if exposed for longer period they can even cause cancer.
 Prof Das explained that during work these chemicals evaporate and mix with the air.

dermatological diseases, 12 percent from hypertension and 19 percent from jaundice.
 The plight of the workers does not end here. Majority of the workers are recruited on temporary basis and are deprived of fair wages and other benefits.
 Temporary workers do not enjoy weekly holidays. With overtime, majority of the workers work around 16 hours a day. There is also night shift. Women workers are always paid less amount of wages. They do not enjoy maternity leave.
 Abul Kalam Azad, president, Hazaribagh Tannery Workers Union, said tannery owners pay very little attention to the health of the workers.



Workers at Hazaribagh tanneries still work without any protective garbs exposing themselves to serious health hazards. In the picture, top, chemical waste being collected in an open reservoir, bottom left, a worker churning chemical waste in bare hand, bottom right, working on a chemical-drenched floor without any gloves or shoes.

area, Babul has the only skill -- that is processing animal hides with deadly chemicals. His work involves soaking the skins in chemical-mixed water, liming and de-liming, scrapping off meat and fat and removing hair from rawhides, and finally tanning. And all this is done with bare hands.
 Every day he is exposed to poisonous chemicals like chromium, sulphur, manganese, copper compound, lead and many more.
 According to experts, the dangerous mixture of chemicals, acids and dyes used in the tanneries are extremely hazardous to human body.
 Babul's doctor advised him to leave the leather-tanning job if he wants to stay healthy. But he cannot even think about this. "I cannot stop working at the tannery as I have a family to feed. At this age where will I find a new job?" he said.
 Meanwhile, at Hazaribagh dirt, blood, raw skins and animal wastes lying here and there in a

with very little ventilation, the air inside the factories is suffocating with fumes, heat and odour of chemicals. While large factories have some facilities, the condition in smaller factories is deplorable.
 The dreadful stink of the Hazaribagh tannery district can be smelt from miles away, all the way to the residential areas like Rayerbazar, Jhigatola and parts of Dhanmondi.
 Hazaribagh is usually avoided by the city dwellers. No one wants to live in Hazaribagh or even go to the place for a short visit. Only those associated with the tannery industry live in this area.
 Small tanneries process hide extracted from animal waste unused by the larger factories. Re-use of chemical mixed liquid waste is a regularly practised by the small factories to process rawhide, making the situation even worse.
 Dr Ajoy Kumar Das, a professor at the Department of Applied Chemistry and Chemical Technology, Dhaka University,

phur, manganese, copper compounds and lead, Das told Star City.
 These chemicals are used for making wet blue leather from rawhides.
 Most workers are directly exposed to these chemicals every day as the entire process is done manually. They do not use hand gloves or any other protective gears.
 Around 30 export-oriented factories offer their workers protective gears while the rest pay little attention to their health and security.
 During a visit to Hazaribagh this correspondent found none of the workers using special suits, masks, gloves and special shoes to protect themselves from toxic chemicals. Most of the workers were found working with bare feet and hands while the floors of the factories were littered with dirt, blood and chemicals.
 Most workers complained of various complications such as nausea and headache. Jaundice is another common illness

Inhalation of this vapour damages lungs and causes respiratory illness such as asthma and bronchitis. It reaches the digestive system and causes diarrhoea. The vapour also damages eyes and the nerve system after touching the skin.
 After tanning comes the process of finishing leather. A huge amount of dyes, pigments and chemicals are used again. During making the finished products, leather particles mix with the air and also cause respiratory problems of workers.
 Most workers said some of the illnesses automatically disappear when they take a leave or stop working temporarily.
 According to a survey conducted by the Society for Environment and Human Development (SEHD), around 90 percent of the tannery workers are suffering from at least one of the above-mentioned illnesses.
 The SEHD report says that 58 percent of the tannery workers suffer from gastrointestinal diseases, 31 percent from

dermatological diseases, 12 percent from hypertension and 19 percent from jaundice.
 The plight of the workers does not end here. Majority of the workers are recruited on temporary basis and are deprived of fair wages and other benefits.
 Temporary workers do not enjoy weekly holidays. With overtime, majority of the workers work around 16 hours a day. There is also night shift. Women workers are always paid less amount of wages. They do not enjoy maternity leave.
 Abul Kalam Azad, president, Hazaribagh Tannery Workers Union, said tannery owners pay very little attention to the health of the workers.
 "In every two years we have formal talks with the owners. We place our demands. Contracts are also signed regularly but nothing changes," Azad said.
 "Workers keep on working in hazardous condition with regular illness as part of their life and without additional health benefits to ease their pain. Very few tanneries provide protective gears for workers. Lack of ventilation remains the same," he added.
 Azad mentioned that for lack of awareness workers also do not take these factors seriously. They are more interested in salary increase.
 "Owners fail to understand that a good working environment means healthy workers which will eventually ensure good production and revenues," he added.
 Harun-or-Rashid, managing director, Lexco Ltd, puts the blame on workers instead. "We provide protective gears to workers but they do not use them. It is not possible to supervise them all the time."
 "However, it will be possible to improve the condition once the tanneries are relocated to the proposed modern leather estate in Savar. Systems will be updated there and it will definitely change the working environment," he said.
 Tipu Sultan, president, Bangladesh Finished Leather, Leather Goods and Footwear Exporters' Association, on the other hand blamed small tannery owners.
 "Owners with small investment cannot afford modern machines so they process leather manually. They cannot afford protective gears either," he said.
 A little support from the government can change the situation, Sultan added.
 Both the workers and owners stressed quick relocation of tanneries from Hazaribagh and setting up a more modern facility.

Hazaribagh tannery district is solely responsible for serious pollution in and around the area. The untreated tannery waste is one of the most hazardous and toxic wastes. Residents in Hazaribagh area have been complaining for a long time that the tanneries spread bad odour and pollute the air beyond tolerable limits.
 According to the Department of Environment (DoE), nearly 22,000 cubic metres of untreated and highly toxic liquid waste is discharged by the tanneries every day into the water bodies including the River Buriganga, the lifeline of the capital.
 Aquatic life forms of the Buriganga are seriously threatened.
 Moreover, every day 100 tonnes of solid waste including trimmings of finished leather, shaving dusts, hair, fleshing, trimming of raw hides and skins are dumped into the Buriganga and nearby land contaminating the soil and water.
 In 2003, the then government took up a Tk 175 crore project to shift the tanneries to a 'leather estate' in Savar. The project was inaugurated in 2005.
 The deadline for relocating the tanneries to Savar is 2010. Sources said complexities in setting up the Common Effluent Treatment Plant (CETP) is hindering the process of shifting the tanneries. Tannery owners are also reluctant to shift their business until the government provides them with compensations and other facilities.



The newly built building near the century-old heritage site that houses the DMP Headquarters at Minto Road.

A heritage site in city heart overshadowed

TAWFIQUE ALI

The new building of the Dhaka Metropolitan Police (DMP) headquarters at Shaheed Captain Mansur Ali Sarani will despoil the character of the century-old exclusive residential area, Minto Road, said conservationists and experts.
 Public Works Department (PWD) is implementing the six-storey building without building approval, overshadowing the existing beautiful old structure at the site.
 The old house is one of the contemporary buildings of Curzon Hall built in the colonial era bearing testimony to the architectural style of that period. The DMP has been running its office at the old building since its inception on February 1, 1976.
 Conservationist architect Abu Sayeed M Ahmed said character of the residential enclave with open space and greenery should have been protected as a distinct feature of the city.
 "Permanent establishment of the DMP headquarters will certainly destroy the residential character of the neighbourhood," he said.
 High government officials during British period used to reside at the old building. Speaker of the then East Pakistan assembly also used to stay at the house.
 Immediately after independence, the house was allotted as residence of General MAG Osmani, the supreme commander during the Liberation War, official source said.
 During the post-independence Bangladesh, the then minister Abdur Rab Serniabat used to stay at the house until he was assassinated on August 15, 1975. The house is a two-storey building with wooden stairs, high ceiling and spacious rooms.
 Professor Muntasir Mamoon, a noted historian who has worked extensively on Dhaka, said Minto Road area was elegantly planned as an urban set-

tlement in the Ramna Green at the heart of Dhaka that became the capital of East Bengal and Assam in 1905.
 "The entire Ramna Green, which is one of the eternal heritage areas of the country, must be protected," he said. "Mutilation of it in any manner is unacceptable."
 Contacted, a high official of the public works ministry seeking anonymity said the residential set-up at Minto Road has so far been in its original state and it should remain as an exclusive residential area as originally planned.
 "DMP headquarters, which could have easily found a place at the police headquarters, is the lone office in the Minto Road residential area," he said.
 Meanwhile, the police department has started the construction of a 22-storey high-rise building on the premises of the police headquarters at Fulbaria.
 The Department of Architecture (DoA) prepared the design of the under-construction DMP building around six to seven years back. The then prime minister Khaleda Zia laid the foundation plaque of the building on June 15, 2006.
 Later, the police department was asked to retain parts of the old structure and turn it into a museum, said a source at the DoA.
 Experts said design of the new building is not architecturally consistent with the existing settlement of the old buildings in Minto Road area.
 The Minto Road at the back of the DMP headquarters is an exclusive and serene residential area with every house having sprawling green lawns and trees, where key administrative officials of Dhaka reside.
 Most of the terracotta-colour old bungalows at Minto Road and adjacent Hare Road are with distinctive architectural pattern, see-through boundary walls and iron-grills allowing viewers to enjoy the beauty of lush green lawns.

But the house at 6, Minto Road, the official residence of the inspector general of police, has been altered with different colour and boundary wall replacing the original features without consultation with or consent of the Department of Architecture.
 As a result, this particular bungalow appears out of place with loss of homogeneity with the neighbourhood.
 Asked about the alteration, ASM Ismail, chief architect of the Department of Architecture, said, "It is not in our knowledge."
 According to the Building Construction Act of 1952, Metropolitan Building Construction Rules of 2008 and Bangladesh National Building Code (BNBC) of 1993, anybody has to obtain prior approval for any building construction work from the designated authorities.
 Converting a residential plot into another without obtaining permission from Rajuk is a violation of Dhaka Metropolitan Development Plan (DMDP).
 Rajuk Chairman KAM Haroon said he could not remember whether building approval has been obtained for construction of the DMP headquarters.
 On the other hand, Sheikh Abdul Mannan, director (development) of Rajuk, said, "PWD has never sought building approval from Rajuk."
 Chief Engineer of PWD Abdullah-Al-Safi said the Department of Architecture could explain why this site has been selected for building the DMP headquarters.
 Chief architect ASM Ismail however said his predecessor had dealt with the matter.
 Contacted, the immediate past chief architect Abdus Salam said the decision for construction of the DMP headquarters was taken at the government's higher level.
 The DMP deputy commissioner, concerned with the project, declined to make any comment in this regard on record.



SPECTRUM OF COLOURS: There was a time when peacocks were abundant in Gazipur forest area when Bhawal Rajas used to go hunting in the Shaalbon. Even after the independence the magnificent birds were seen in Shalna of Gazipur. The species has become rare but experts say some of them can still be traced in the Chittagong Hill Tracts area. This photo was taken from Dhaka Zoo in Mirpur.