

Polybags bounce back

Creep into all kitchen markets because of lax monitoring, absence of mobile court drives

SHAHNAZ PARVEEN

Production and use of hazardous polythene bags have increased alarmingly in the city due to lax government monitoring and absence of mobile court operation.

Shopping bag traders said the use of polythene bags has increased even further with the arrival of Ramadan, posing threat to public health.

One of the wholesalers of shopping bags at Karwan Bazar said the demand for polythene bags increases during Ramadan as iftar sellers wrap food items in small polythene bags. Customers also accept this and find it easy to carry iftar items in polybags.

"No one came to raid the market for a long time to check the sale of polythene bags. We just provide what people want," he said.

Most of this polythene bags are recycled from discarded polybags, which is extremely hazardous to public health, experts said.

Unscrupulous manufacturers and traders of polythene shopping bags are making extra profits while Dhaka residents are returning to the old habit.

Polythene is available in every kitchen market. Every vegetable seller in the kitchen and fish markets use polybags. It is also available in the grocery shops, general stores and even with the street side hawkers and vendors.

Unlike the previous ones, producers are now making polythene bags without handles. The factories are located mostly in

the old part of Dhaka while the main wholesale markets are at Chawkbazar, Begumbazar, Moulvibazar and Karwanbazar.

Polythene shopping bags were introduced in Bangladesh in 1980s, which quickly replaced the use of traditional jute bags in every household of Bangladesh.

It was reported in the early 2000 that every day nearly 10 million polythene bags were disposed of by Dhaka residents. The discarded polythene bags as a non-biodegradable environmental hazard played havoc with the city's sewerage system.

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On January 1, 2002, the government imposed a ban on production, marketing and use of polythene (below 100-micron thick) in Dhaka city, followed by a nationwide ban on April 8 of the same year.

Fourteen items were exempted from this ban. These include biscuit, chana-chur, bread, salt, vermicelli, medicine, flour, naphthalene, fertilizer, chocolate and milk powder. However, polybag produced for these items must be above 100 microns. The law was not applicable for export-oriented polythene production.

With the hazardous polythene coming back in the market, environmentalists say the campaign

against polythene must be restarted before it goes back to its previous extent.

"The campaign was successful for a few years in the beginning. However, changes in the political scenario in recent time have been overshadowing all the efforts that was made to combat the havoc caused by polythene," said Syeda Rizwana Hasan, director of programmes, Bangladesh Environment Lawyers Association (BELA).

"Monitoring from the government is completely missing. The government needs to restart the

the Environment Conservation Act 1995.

"We cannot conduct mobile court drives after the separation of judiciary. Earlier, we used to request the DC office for a magistrate. But now their job is not under DC office," said Neyamatullah Bhuiyan, director (Dhaka Division), Department of Environment.

"We have requested the law ministry to include Environment Conservation Act under the Mobile Court Ordinance so that we can conduct mobile court drive," he added.

Separation of the judiciary from the executive was implemented on November 1 last year.

"We are conducting drive with the help of law enforcers. However, the situation requires more frequent drives and follow-ups, which we cannot maintain for severe manpower shortage," Neyamatullah added.

The officials said a drive was conducted last month with the help of Rapid Action Battalion in which 8 warehouses of old Dhaka was sued for hoarding a large quantity of banned polythene bags.

Under the Environment Conservation Act punishment for manufacturing and marketing polythene shopping bag is 10 years' rigorous imprisonment, or a maximum fine of Tk 10 lakh, or both. The sentence can be given only by the Environmental Court.

The fine for using polythene shopping bags for purposes other than export trade is Tk 500.

entire campaign immediately," she said.

"At the same time it is important to create alternative packaging items. The big stores have already developed alternative products but the kitchen markets did not yet start use of alternative packaging materials," Hasan noted.

Officials concerned however said it has become hard to combat illegal polythene producers because of the absence of mobile court drive.

They said under the newly promulgated Mobile Court Ordinance it is no longer possible to conduct a mobile court to stop anything going harmful to environment as it does not mention



The use of polybags increases during Ramadan. Unlike previous years the bags are now being produced without handles.

RECYCLED BAGS POSE SERIOUS HEALTH HAZARD

Recycled polythene has become the newest threat to public health.

According to experts, ingesting polythene-wrapped food is harmful for health, especially the recycled and coloured polythene. Newly produced polythene bags can also cause harm to human body as these are not food-graded.

"During remoulding plastic bags, a chemical agent called plasticizer is used for making it soft. This agent remains in the plastic item after pro-

duction. Food wrapped up in polythene can be contaminated with plasticizer which is harmful for human body," said Dr Reza-ul-Jalil, chairman, Department of Pharmaceuticals Technology, University of Dhaka.

"There is no immediate effect of plasticizer to human body. However, it can cause harm if food wrapped in polythene is ingested for a longer period. Plasticizer is an agent of cancer, skin diseases, allergy, gastronomic illness and other

health problems," he said.

Plasticizer is also present in newly produced polythene in smaller amount, he added.

Polythene-wrapped fish, meat and vegetables also get infected by anaerobic bacteria, a germ responsible for skin disease and cancer, according to a study.

It is possible to identify recycled polythene or plastic item. Usually it gives away a strong odour, Jalil said.



Patients waiting for receiving treatment at the outdoor of Birdem.

Birdem's free one-stop service

Specialist doctors, surgeons soon to attend emergency patients round the clock

CITY CORRESPONDENT

Aklima Khatun, an elderly woman from Narinda is waiting in a long queue outside the doctor's chamber at the Birdem Hospital. She has been suffering from kidney ailments due to uncontrolled diabetes.

"The doctor asked me to do some tests a few days ago and today I have come to take the test results," she said.

"It would have been better if I could get the results in a few hours. Then I would not have to come from Narinda once again to get the results," she added.

Aklima is one of around 3,000 patients that come to get the outdoor service every day at Birdem hospital where around 10,000 tests are being carried out daily.

For poor patients like Aklima Birdem is now going to introduce one-stop service to provide better treatment free of cost. Here they will be able to get test results within hours. The service will be available within six months. At present the hospital

has a paid one-stop service for those who can afford it.

Dr Sarwar Ali, joint secretary general, Diabetic Association Bangladesh, said that the free service will be a part of the voluntary work of the association.

"From the very beginning it was the mission of the association that no diabetic patient will remain unfed, unemployed and untreated and this service is being introduced to provide better treatment to the poor patients."

"When this service will come into effect one will be able to get reports within a few hours. Like if one gives samples in the morning before going to his office he will be able to get results in the evening after his office is over," he said.

Every year around Tk 35 crore is being spent for providing free insulin and free treatment to the poor patients. Of this cost government donates Tk 3 crore. Thirty percent of the 600 beds are free of cost, which is partly financed from the earning of the rest of the beds and other means.

Around 33 percent of the total expenditure is done for free treatment.

Not all of the free services are covered by paid services. So the association went for the paid one-stop service. It is available at a three-floor building within the compound.

At present the ground floor is providing pathological tests. The hospital is also planning to expand its emergency service. There is an observation unit, which provides service to ten patients at a time, said hospital sources.

"To finance our free treatment programmes we will introduce the paid one-stop service for those who can afford. A team of full-time consultants will be put on stand-by who won't practice outside the hospital. The rate will be much lower than the private hospitals of our level," he said.

Here specialist doctors will be kept available round the clock for emergency patients, both diabetic and non-diabetic unlike most city hospitals where specialists are available on call. They

will perform surgery whenever it is needed for emergency and other patients. Surgery charge will also be cheaper. A high-dependency unit will also assist the expanded emergency service.

There will also be a day-care service where patients will be able to get released within a day after undergoing surgery.

This service is being introduced keeping in mind the problems of the middle class people who avoid a free service but are unable to pay exorbitant fees to get proper treatment and to lend a hand to the serious patients as emergency service is almost non-existent in the city hospitals.

According to many this service will help alleviate the current crisis of emergency services in the city.

"Emergency treatment is now almost non-existent in the city. If you have lots of money then you can go to shiny private hospitals where they charge an exorbitant amount that the middle class cannot afford," said a resident of Mirpur.

Drive needed to drive out fake driving licences

RIZANUZZAMAN LASKAR

A few months ago Radya Yousuf was in desperate need of a driving licence. She did not know driving well. However, she soon found the 'easiest solution' to get the licence.

The undergraduate student from Gulshan contacted some of her friends and their chauffeurs. After a few phone calls she went to Sayedabad and found a 'driving school' in a small, run-down building with a large signboard.

As Radya appeared at the so-called driving school, a shabby looking person sitting behind the desk asked her to take a seat.

"He asked whether I could really drive a car. I replied with an 'yes', trying to be as convincing as I could," said Radya, "and that was it for my driving test. I filled out a form and gave him the money for a driving licence."

"I got my licence around two weeks later. It looked absolutely perfect!" she said.

"I never actually planned to drive around Dhaka with my fake licence. But the whole incident made me think about what is happening here. Is it really so easy for people to get a driving licence? Can anyone with a little amount of money, the right contacts and a couple of stamp-size photographs get a permit this easily?" she said.

"Driving in Dhaka is a frightening experience. It almost feels like a jungle where animals are fighting to defend their territory -- a place where only the strongest will survive," she said. "How many of these drivers have learnt the rules of driving? How long will it be before someone makes a fatal mistake? How many of them have proper licence?"

This correspondent tried to dig deep into the trend. And sources at the Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA) say they found one out of every two licences fake a year ago.

"But the situation has improved thanks to the regular drives against counterfeited driving licences," said an offi-

cial at the BRTA. "More importantly, people are now more wary of fake driving licences. They are keener on getting authentic licences."

Sources said organised gangs issue fake licences in exchange for money.

The BRTA-issued driving licence is a basic identification document and gives people access to other forms of identification. Driving licences are often used as proof of identity for everything from welfare applications to opening bank accounts.

The BRTA licence incorporates numerous anti-counterfeit safeguards, including holographic images, ultra violet ray layering and optical coding.

"The hologram featured plastic licence cards were introduced in 1999 for better security over the paperback ones. But counterfeiters started to duplicate the plastic cards too," said S S Biswas, deputy director of BRTA. "So we introduced the high-

security Optical Variable Device (OPD) licence card in 2006 for superior security."

The OPD technology provides the card with optical properties. This renders a change in the image, colour and luminosity of the card depending on different view-angles. This provides extra security to the card, making it all but impossible to duplicate, sources said.

"This technology would make it easier for on-duty traffic officers to verify the legality of licence card with more ease," he said.

Despite the introduction of the high-security cards, the paperback and plastic cards have also been valid over the years. But they would not be for long.

"BRTA has finally decided to revoke the paperback licence cards due to its poor security features," said Biswas. "We have asked motorists with the paperback cards to upgrade to the high-security cards by October 16. Or else their licence will be

considered invalid."

"We have also requested the plastic licence holders to upgrade their cards. But the upgrade is not mandatory for them like the paperback card holders," he said.

Soon after the deadline in October, the BRTA will initiate a drive against the counterfeit driving licence holders and their makers, sources said.

However, concerns remain elsewhere. Increased difficulty of counterfeiting licences means that people unable to obtain them may try to buy them by bribing clerks.

"There are numerous gangs who, in association with a section of unscrupulous BRTA officers can provide an authentic driving licence in a mere few days without any tests," said Tarek Hossain, driving instructor and owner of a driving school in Khilgaon.

"The BRTA should take a good look inside its own office and smoke out the anomalies and corruption by its staffs," he said.



One has to go through lots of hassles to procure a genuine licence at BRTA office at Mirpur but it takes just a few hours to have a fake licence by bribing.