TOXIC MILK

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PHOTOS: ZAHEDUL I KHAN

After China's devastating milk scandal, Bangladeshi scientists have found traces of the harmful substance melamine in eight brands of powdered milk although there are discrepancies in the findings. Which tests are reliable? How long have we been feeding our children this poison? Bangladeshi consumers are desperately waiting for answers.

When news about the melamine milk contamination in China, that killed four babies and left over 53,000 sick, was spreading like wildfire, it was only a matter of days before consumers in Bangladesh would start to panic. Bangladesh imports around 4,000 tonnes of milk powder from China, the rest from other countries. Tests at the Dhaka University's Department of Chemistry laboratory, detected that milk from the eight brands of powdered milk had melamine traces in the milk. But the real controversy began when the three different testing laboratories detected different levels of the chemical substance. It was later discovered that only the Department of Chemistry has more efficient equipment to do the tests thus casting doubts about results of the other two institutions. In the end, the results of the Department of Chemistry seemed most acceptable to the public. This lab found melamine traces in eight brands of milk powder. The Government's unexplained dilly-dallying over the issue raised further questions. The discrepancy in test results of the samples, government's lackadaisical response to the crisis has in turn opened up a can of worms. The milk scandal in Bangladesh has revealed the total lack of quality control measures for food products and the overpowering influence of milk powder companies to control the market, sometimes at the cost of public health.

The confusion was compounded further when a few well known brands published advertisements in the newspapers announcing that their own tests conducted abroad had found their products to be completely 'safe', thus rejecting the Dhaka University's Chemistry Department's findings. At the time of writing this report the government had sent samples of milk from the accused 8 brands to FAO labs abroad for testing and the results had not yet arrived. However, a high court bench after, Human Rights and Peace for Bangladesh (HRPB) filed a writ petition, ordered the government to stop sales and display of eight brands of 'melamine-contaminated' powdered milk at shops until it took any decision after receiving test results which is to be conducted at two local and one foreign laboratories. The government was slapped with a contempt petition when it continued to procrastinate from taking action.