Nagging Questions about Milk

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After a month of turmoil people are still confused about the great milk scandal. The controversy regarding melamine detection in powdered milk continues as different testing laboratories detected different levels of the chemical substance. So far the Dhaka University Chemistry Department (DUCM) has detected melamine in samples of all of the eight powdered milk brands provided by Bangladesh Standards and Testing Institution (BSTI) for testing, while Bangladesh Atomic Energy Commission (BAEC) detected existence of the toxic substance in seven brands. However, four other laboratories-- BSTI, private laboratory Plasma Plus, Bangladesh Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (BCSIR) and an FAO recognised private laboratory in Thailand named Department of Medical Science-- could not detect melamine in the samples of most of the eight brands. People will have to wait yet another month to come to a solution since a High Court (HC) bench last Monday ordered for a third round of tests of samples of all of the available powdered milk brands at DUCD, BAEC and BSTI laboratories. It has also ordered to submit the test results of the controversial eight brands within 21 days from issuing the order. But, it also stayed HC's previous order to stop sales and display of eight brands of 'melamine-contaminated' powdered milk at shops until the final judgment. HC made the order in response to the writ petition filed by Human Rights and Peace for Bangladesh (HRPB).

Four children have died in China after developing kidney stones as a result of drinking contaminated milk, while 53,000 others are currently suffering from kidney failure due to the same reason.

The milk scandal in Bangladesh has revealed the bureaucratic tangle in the government and it's interest to serve only the multinational companies at the cost of public health. The government's hide and seek game on the issue of not disclosing the BAEC test for a whole week and it's unexplained dilly-dallying over the issue raised further questions.

In fact, like most of the inquiry committee formed by the preceding governments, the current caretaker government tried to hide the facts from the public, though it has recently enacted the Right to Information Act. Moreover, government advisers and bureaucrats opting to downplay the top scientists who have detected melamine in milk decided to rely on inexperienced young researchers who could not detect the melamine when testing.

> Meanwhile, following the propaganda by the local distributors of multinational powdered milk companies government agency BSTI has been briefing the media on the 'safe level of melamine contamination', instead of warning the public about its disastrous impact on health, especially on children's health.

Health and Food Adviser Dr AMM Shawkat Ali said on November 3 that BAEC and the DU chemistry department are not capable of conducting complicated tests like finding melamine in milk. He told The Daily Star referring to the BAEC and DUCD, that these laboratories are not suitable for complicated tests such as detecting melamine in milk. The government also hid the test results of the BAEC laboratory for a week.