

Pesticide poisoning proving lethal

High time we put a brake on its indiscriminate application

THANKS to the investigation of a committee formed by the Institute of Epidemiology, Disease Control and Research (IEDCR) under the health ministry, we come to know how the excessive use of pesticides has been taking a toll of human and animal lives in our villages. People are falling sick, thick and fast, without any clue as to why the indisposition! What is patently risky is the vulnerability of children whose immunity to disease remains undeveloped.

Although the findings relate to two villages in Dhamrai upazila, the incidence of toxic poisoning must have been widespread as we have it on the watch of director, IEDCR that 'it's happening in other parts of the country as well'. The Dhamrai eye-opener appears to be a chance revelation; but for the 'mysterious deaths', no investigation would have been initiated and facts revealed.

This brings us to the question as to whether any authority remains designated to be monitoring the use of pesticides across the length and breadth of the country. Is there any mechanism for regular oversight once the farmers have sprayed or applied insecticides afield? The agriculture officials or extension workers are supposed to be keeping an eye on it. But do they?

There are clear parameters of pesticide use that can neither be overlooked nor short-circuited except to the peril of land, crop and human and animal lives. For instance, certain pesticides are tabooed because of having already proven hazardous; there are recommended doses and the requirement of phase-by-phase application. The farmers will have to be made thoroughly conversant with the rules of insecticide application. Simultaneously, a sustained awareness campaign will have to be launched at the grassroots level to sensitise the farming households about the dangers of unscientific use of insecticides. Since several high-risk pesticides are in use, the farmers must also be instructed to report any unusual physical symptoms they might have observed to local public representatives. The media, both electronic and print, may be pressed into service in highlighting the concerns.

But basically it seems that a survey will have to be carried out to identify and weed out the dangerous pesticides from amongst a whole mass of them that have been in use over the long haul.

The gathering crisis in Nepal

Its political stakeholders must arrive at a solution

THE resignation of the Maoist prime minister of Nepal certainly does not bode well for the country's nascent democracy. And it does not because it has brought the head of government into direct conflict with the army on an issue of a sensitive nature. Clearly, Prachanda's move to have the chief of the army sacked has backfired, given that the president has refused to countenance it. Now, a fundamental issue arises here, which is that in principle the supremacy of civilian authority must prevail in a democratic society. To that extent, when a government decrees that the army chief must go, it is the duty of the latter to obey.

In the Nepalese case, however, the matter appears to have been complicated by the prime minister's inability or reluctance to carry his coalition government with him on the issue. His rather brash move also did not quite take into account the difficulties the army thinks it faces in trying to absorb into its ranks the Maoist guerrillas that had for years fought the soldiers. Significantly, with many of Prachanda's coalition partners refusing to back him on the army chief's dismissal, President Ram Baran Yadav (he belongs to the leading opposition party) has found it easy to override the prime minister. One cannot be quite sure, though, that he had anticipated a piqued Prachanda's sudden move to quit office.

Obviously, the prime minister's resignation has grave implications for Nepal. It is so because of the fragile nature of democracy in a country which until recently was a monarchy. To have this crisis on its hands at a time when its democratic institutions are still evolving can only slow its progression to constructive pluralism. Prachanda and Yadav, especially the former, ought to have borne such truths in mind before precipitating the crisis. That has not happened.

Nepal cannot afford to slide back into disorder. For one thing, its democracy, though tenuous, is promising. For another, its politicians are all united in their belief that the monarchy is necessarily a thing of the past. It should now be for all constituents of political power and all political parties to get down to the business of tiding over the present grave situation. A face-saving way out of the national predicament is a must.

EDITORIAL

The diplomats we should be sending abroad

A good number of former diplomats are certainly excellent men. But should that be a reason for them to be brought in again? That act blocks the path for scores of equally brilliant, younger men and women in the diplomatic service.

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

No, we will not be speaking of foreign policy or the making of it today. We have done that before; and if circumstances necessitate such deliberations again in the coming days, we will do so. But today we mean to go into some serious talk on the class of diplomats we should be sending abroad, on the expectations we have of them. And, of course, there are all the grievances our career diplomats, at various levels of service, have not been able to voice for a long time.

The Awami League-led grand alliance government, in its wisdom, has just named an academic as the nation's next high commissioner to the United Kingdom. It is a political appointment and the government has all the right in the world to place in strategic positions individuals it feels will accomplish the tasks it has set out to do where projecting Bangladesh's diplomacy abroad is concerned.

Even as we say this, though, we recall our experience of political appointees as diplomats at the senior level in recent times. Their performance did not quite make us happy, for they were too beholden to the party in power to be able to speak for all of us abroad. Much the same, however, can be said about some career diplomats. Their ingratiating attitude to the government of the day put paid to any brilliance they might have been able to bring to foreign policy.

Be that as it may, there are certain points the government will need to bear in mind, in the overall national interest, as it dispatches ambassadors, high commissioners

and press ministers abroad. It must do that in order for these individuals to be able to articulate the interests of the country at important global capitals. In the first place, these diplomats should not be guided by the sentiments of the expatriate Bengali community as they go about their business.

All too often, expatriate supporters of the party in power intimidate diplomats into plain pusillanimity, to a point where the diplomats come to depend on the good word of the community for their survival in office. Add to that the fairly regular manner in which the expatriate Bengali press goes after our diplomats, eventually convincing the governing politicians back home that the diplomatic missions are actually falling apart. Many bright and dedicated diplomats have over the decades come to grief because of such constant knifing from expatriate Bengalis.

In the second place, it must be the responsibility of the government to ensure that diplomats stationed abroad are not reduced to being protocol officers owing to the endless arrivals and departures of high profile visitors from home. The time and resources expended in keeping visiting ministers, lawmakers and relatives of the mighty and powerful happy leaves little room for diplomacy on the part of our high commissioners and ambassadors.

There have even been instances of ministers travelling to London or Washington on private visits and yet demanding constant care and attention from the missions. The resultant fear among the diplomats all too often leaves them cringing before such august presences, for they need to keep



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their jobs. Dignity goes missing and political brashness abounds.

In the third place, it would do well for the government to remember that morale in the Foreign Office, in any office for that matter, is important. Such morale suffers when serving diplomats are pushed aside and retired ambassadors are given postings that should have gone to the former.

In the BNP-Jamaat era, the Foreign Office man who expected to be appointed envoy to Egypt saw his chances go up in smoke when a superannuated diplomat was eventually sent to Cairo.

In this past month, it appeared that the Awami League government had decided on sending to Delhi a new high commissioner in the person of the current ambassador to Moscow. That move appears to have been reversed; and now, as we understand, a former ambassador, no longer in service, will be moving to the Indian capital.

A good number of former diplomats are certainly excellent men, brilliant in their comprehension of foreign policy and

global realities. But should that be a reason for them to be brought in again? That act blocks the path for scores of equally brilliant, younger men and women in the diplomatic service.

One last point: it is time the political classes stopped treating the Foreign Office as a dumping ground for men from other services. The inane practice of placing the services of senior serving or retired military officers at the Foreign Office for onward posting as ambassadors surely does not take Bangladesh's diplomacy to new heights. On the contrary, it enervates the foreign service and does little to create enthusiasm at the missions. As with political appointees, soldiers have not had much of an impact as our diplomats abroad. That is the unblemished truth.

It is on the quality of its diplomacy that a nation is enthusiastically cheered or brusquely shunned abroad. Will the powers that be make a note of it?

Syed Badrul Ahsan is Editor, Current Affairs, The Daily Star. E-mail: bahsanreq@yahoo.co.uk

Rivers belong to everyone

Bangladesh is one of the top ten countries that would be seriously affected by climate change. It is feared that water shortages in much of South Asia will constitute a grave threat to economic development.

HARUN UR RASHID

In 1997, the UN General Assembly adopted, for the first time on a global scale, legal norms on cooperative use of waters of trans-boundary rivers, known as the Convention on the Law of Non-Navigational Uses of International Watercourses. This is the global water law on international watercourses (trans-boundary rivers) for the use of non-navigational/consumptive uses.

River water is used in two ways: (a) non-consumptive and (b) consumptive. Navigation is a non-consumptive use of water because river water is not depleted. Consumptive use of water means withdrawal of water for various purposes, which reduces water in rivers and interferes with the natural flow.

The UN Law Convention is a document that was approved by the General Assembly in 1997. The 103 affirmative votes of the states show that the convention is generally accepted and indicates broad agreement.

The geographical and hydrological area within which the law of the convention is operative is defined by the term international watercourse -- "a system of surface waters and ground waters constituting by

virtue of their physical relationship a unitary whole and normally flowing into a common terminus [...] parts of which are situated in different states" (Article 2(a),(b)).

This definition replaced the drainage basin concept of the Helsinki Rules of 1966. Instead, the states favoured an approach based on definitions which are used in earlier treaties and relate to the water channel of a river.

The salient features of the convention are, briefly:

- It creates a legal framework for equitable utilisation of the waters of trans-boundary rivers;
- It also calls for development, conservation, management and protection of international watercourses, and optimal and sustainable utilisation for the present and future generations;
- It recognises relevant factors in equitable utilisation of waters, taking into account geographic, hydrographic, hydrological, climatic, ecological and other factors;
- It requires co-riparian countries to exchange data and information on trans-boundary rivers;
- It envisages co-riparian countries

taking appropriate measures to prevent harm to other co-riparian states;

• It affirms the importance of cooperation and good neighbourliness of all riparian states.

Bangladesh has 57 trans-boundary rivers, of which 54 are with India and 3 with Myanmar.

The water dispute with India is as old as the birth of Bangladesh. It started even before Bangladesh when India's ill-conceived Farakka Barrage on the Ganges was built to divert water for flushing silt from the Hooghly river, not for agriculture.

India has, without any agreement with Bangladesh, been constructing dams or diverting water from many trans-boundary rivers. India had reportedly disturbed or changed the natural flow of trans-boundary rivers by constructing spurs or embankments on the Muhuri, Chagalnaiya, Fulchari, Kachua and many others in Tripura. As a result, eight chars (islets) in the tributaries of Muhuri and Kachua were detected together with change in the flow of rivers, to the disadvantage of Bangladesh.

The Tipaimukh project on the Barak River is expected to dry up the flow of Surma and Kushiya, the source of the Meghna, according to Bangladeshi water experts. However, it is good to note that India has invited Bangladeshi experts to visit the Tipaimukh project to inspect the impact on Bangladesh.

Brahma Chellany, an Indian academic for strategic studies, wrote an article (*International Herald Tribune*, June 27, 2007)

where he stated that China was attempting to dam or redirect flow of waters from the Tibetan plateau, including the Brahmaputra River.

According to the same writer, China's intensive farming need waters, and it is increasingly turning its attention to water reserves of the Tibetan plateau. China is presently planning inter-basin and inter-river water transfer projects, including re-routing the Brahmaputra waters.

Furthermore, several Chinese projects in west-central Tibet have a bearing on river-water flows into India but, according to the writer, China refuses to share information with India.

Being a lower riparian, Bangladesh is most vulnerable to unilateral withdrawal of waters of trans-boundary rivers by upper riparian countries. Bangladesh is also one of the top ten countries that would be seriously affected by climate change. It is feared that water shortages in much of South Asia will constitute a grave threat to economic development.

Given the above background, the 1997 UN Water Law Convention will provide a set of international norms for Bangladesh to cooperate with upper riparian countries (Nepal and India) for utilisation, development, management and adequate protection of flows of trans-boundary rivers. The water resources ministry may take the lead, on a priority basis in consultation with the foreign and law ministries, to examine and ratify the UN Law Convention.

Barister Harun ur Rashid is a former Bangladesh ambassador to the UN, Geneva.

Violence and response

Political violence should call for a political response from the state authorities rather than a police response. In a situation of large scale institutional malfunctioning, politics acquires an appetite for all spaces, both public and private.

MOHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

THERE is no denying that Bangladesh in recent years has experienced the politics of violence, which in practical terms means resorting to physical violence to promote a political objective. At the same time, we have also seen violence of politics built into the institutional structure of politics despite the ideal that liberal democracy abhors violence of politics.

The rule of law, though a civilising factor, has often led to violence for purposes of governance without ensuring to check indiscriminate use of power in our polity. We have also seen any serious policy discussion on the phenomenon of violence.

Political violence should call for a political response from the state authorities rather than a police response. The latter may be necessary, but not sufficient. In a situation of large scale institutional mal-

functioning, as is feared in our case, politics acquires an appetite for all spaces, both public and private.

Under circumstances as above, all violence becomes political and our state authority relies largely on the police machinery, not only for information gathering pertaining to social conflict and violence but also for the analysis and interpretation of the phenomena of violence in terms of their nature, causes and solutions.

As such, the colonially derived significance of the police machinery on such a crucial matter, and its influence in determining the state response to violence, has not been seriously looked into.

It is an unfortunate facet of our political existence that the political class has quite often shifted to the police the burden of providing a response to many socio-political movements, which are essentially an expression of people's aspiration for a life of dignity and self-respect. The Kansat tragedy of the not-too-distant past is a

glaring case in point.

Terms such as "law and order," "public order," or "security of state" are often used in Bangladesh to deploy state violence with impunity. The police in our situation tend to make indiscriminate use of the provisions of Section 144 of the Criminal Procedure Code to disperse unlawful assemblies even when the demands made by such assemblies are legitimate and lawful. No effective guidelines in law are provided for the use of force to deal with such assemblies, except the general specification that minimum force be used. Such use of force often leads to loss of life and liberty.

A degree of militancy on the part of the poor and the disadvantaged in pressing for their constitutionally guaranteed minimum human, social and legal rights is understandable in a developing democracy, but at the district level development and police officials are often indifferent to such concerns.

It is a sad fact that our state has quite often remained a mute witness to the non-state violence inflicted by the politically powerful class against marginalised adversaries. Unfortunately, the independence in 1971 and democratic struggles thereafter have not resulted in any basic administrative changes in the structure of government. Under such circumstances, shall one assume that the basic features of our

republican constitution, parliamentary democracy and development administration are in conflict with the inherited political-organisational characteristics of our administrative structure?

It needs to be noted that the police administration continues to be a more centralised paramilitary organisation and still functions as it did during the colonial rule. A large number of human rights violations, including extra-judicial executions, are the consequence.

We have to address the issue of inaction vis-à-vis political violence that is at the heart of our political system. While security of the state is important, it must not exceed the limits of legitimacy and indulge in unacceptable levels of violence.

We need to examine the real and potential political violence in view of the currently charged situation, and determine the policy and response to it in the context of the overall challenge of "humane governance." The institutional mechanisms for policy analysis and action at government level need to be freed from the colonial attributes and restructured to address the challenge. There is, admittedly, a need for far-reaching administrative and police reforms, which has been neglected for too long.

Muhammad Nurul Huda is a columnist for The Daily Star.