

A wake up call to industrialists

Ministers, experts and activists yesterday warned Dhaka's rivers are in danger of death unless industrialists stop polluting rivers and called on the government and its agencies to step up its enforcement of environmental regulations.

Dilip Barua Minister of Industries

Industries minister Dilip Barua said, industries are one of the main contributors to river pollution. "We have been destroying the natural environment in the name of development," the minister for industries said.

"Soon the tannery industries from Hazaribagh will be relocated. We have already instructed the government attorney to resolve the cases regarding the relocation of Hazaribagh tanneries," said the minister adding the government will strengthen its implementation of mandatory installation of Effluent Treatment Plants (ETPs).

Barua said industries regularly flout environmental rules and ignore their social responsibilities, adding, "Recently I have visited plants of Meghna group and City group...most of the industries either have not installed ETP or do not use it despite having it."

Criticising land developers, the minister said, developers filled up rivers and developed housing projects without considering the environment.

Since Independence, pro-liberation and democratic governments have not always called the shots so others who have ruled the country pillaged the Bangladeshi environment. He said the governments mostly had a hidden agenda behind all projects, which prevented pro-people policies. Barua stated 80 percent of all project money was misused in the past.

Barua stressed that political power was abused to pollute the environment, while there's been a lack of political will for environmental reform. Now the whole world is going for 'green industrialisation', he added.

The minister committed at the roundtable that his ministry would work for green industrialisation in the country.

Mostafizur Rahman Fizar, MP

State Minister for Environment and Forest

State minister for environment and forest Mostafizur Rahman Fizar said there is no way to compromise with environmental pollution and the government will work to protect the environment, especially to save the rivers in and around the capital.

But, he said, political leaders need to discuss the issue in parliament to form a national political consensus needed to protect the country's environment.

"All political parties should have a common interest to save the environment of the country," the minister said.

Fizar said he would take the experts' recommendations on saving river systems.

Admitting the overall situation, the state minister said he had recently visited rivers in and around the city and was distressed by the poor condition of the rivers.

Fizar said the rivers are like our mother and they have been killed for years. "Too much time has been spent and now we should start working together to save the rivers as well as overall environment," he said.

The environment and forest minister said the prime minister is very keen to save the rivers, improve the environment of Bangladesh and reduce the impacts of climate change.

In the last Executive Committee of the National Economic Council (ECNEC) meeting, the state minister for environment said, the prime minister has directed her cabinet and bureaucrats to protect the environment and stressed for dredging all important rivers of the country.

Khawaja M Minnatullah

Senior Specialist

Social Environment and Water Resource Management World Bank, Dhaka Office

Khawaja M Minnatullah, a World Bank Social and Water Resource specialist, said Dhaka is facing a severe water pollution crisis as the surface water is highly polluted.

Citing a French water expert working in the city's Syedabad area, he said the river waters have gone beyond treatment as they have set up water treatment plants and not waste treatment plants.

Minatullah said inappropriate disposal of solid wastes and effluents has increased chances of contaminating the underground water source, which may create public health hazards. He added that groundwater levels have gone down beyond 'aquifers levels' and cannot be recharged.

He said implementation is of the highest priority. "We are not short on information, but what we need now is implementation."

And the rate of admission of people at the ICDDR,B because of several waterborne diseases clearly indicates the adverse impact of Dhaka's water pollution and the even the city elite are not immune.

Md. Abdul Mannan Howlader,

Chairman, Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority (BIWTA)

Md. Abdul Mannan Howlader, chairman of Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority (BIWTA), said the number of rivers in Bangladesh have come down from 1,500 to a paltry 230.

"Many of them may be found in the maps only," he said, adding it is vital to save the five rivers around Dhaka.

Mannan said that although BIWTA is responsible for river navigation, the process of which prevents pollution, they are not sufficiently empowered to carry out their duties.

"We have responsibility, not power to carry out decisions," said Mannan.

He added untreated discharge of industrial wastes constitutes 60 percent of the river pollution around Dhaka city. While the Court's frequent injunctions on evicting illegal structure encroaching on rivers and water bodies are a major obstacle to BIWTA drives to reclaim river.

Mannan warned pollution in Buriganga is all the more alarming because it has been polluted with thick layer of various toxic industrial wastes, as a thick layer of polythene and industrial sludge is not removable with

traditional dredgers.

"We need special excavators to remove thick layer of polythene," he said.

Currently the BIWTA can dredge only 30 percent of the required one crore cubic metres of mud to keep the rivers navigable.

The BIWTA has been working with seven dredgers, two of which were procured in 1972 and rest in 1975.

He said first phase of the circular waterway around Dhaka was a Tk35-crore project, of which 60 percent was

result we have to use underground water as the major source for the Dhaka City dwellers," said Shahjahan.

"At present we supply 86 percent water from the underground source and only 14 percent from the surface water source, which is very unusual," he said adding that perhaps Dhaka is the only city in the world that is totally dependent on underground water.

On the other hand, the developers have filled up the water bodies that prevent the recharge of groundwater, said Shahjahan. Consequently, he said, the water level is

centre of Dhaka are carried through several canals into Balu River that fall into Shitalakkhya near the intake point of Saidabad Water Treatment Plant. As a result the treatment plant is struggling and the development works of the second and third phase of the treatment plant are in jeopardy.

The professor said the government also lacks interest, as the planning commission has not moved for nine months on a proposal to install a treatment plant at the Dasherbandi sewage and effluent treatment facility. I



Discussants at The Daily Star roundtable on "How to save our rivers: step to remove pollution" held at the newspaper's conference room yesterday.

dredging work and the rest was construction work and the Tk 65-crore second phase is mainly dredging of the rivers Turag and Balu.

Syed Monowar Hussain

BIWTA Secretary

BIWTA secretary Syed Monowar Hussain lamented that navigable river routes have been halved to only 6,000 kilometres from a total of 12,000 kilometres in the 1960s.

He said the Buriganga's water flow has been halved because a water channel bringing in water from the Jamuna has been cut off due to the Jamuna Bridge.

According to Hussain, a separate authority needs to be formed to coordinate agencies in the river-saving project. "An integrated approach to protect the rivers has always been missing," he said.

Monowar also said there are 147 writ petitions at present against eviction of illegal structures occupying the rivers and permanent injunctions.

Dr Kamal Abdul Naser Chowdhury

Additional Secretary, Ministry of Information

Dr. Kamal Abdul Naser Chowdhury, additional secretary to the information ministry and former convener of the government-instituted River Pollution Mitigation Committee, said that it is impossible for a single organisation to protect rivers from pollution.

There should be coordination among the government agencies.

Citing the committee's recommendations, Chowdhury said, "A River Cleaning Authority with adequate executive power is imperative to enforce decisions and measures for river protection."

He suggested immediate measures for waste collection from the kitchen markets on the riverbanks and demarcation of the river area.

"It is possible to undertake various short-term actions practicable in two to three months to prevent river pollution," Chowdhury said.

Muksudur Rahman Chowdhury

Chief Conservancy Officer, Dhaka City Corporation (DCC)

Chief Conservancy Officer of Dhaka City Corporation (DCC) Muksudur Rahman Chowdhury said that although they collect around 3500 tons of solid wastes from DCC area every day they cannot properly collect highly hazardous tannery wastes.

According to different expert estimates, at least seven thousand tons of solid wastes are generated in and around the DCC area everyday.

There are many areas immediately beyond DCC's 344-square kilometres jurisdiction that are under Union Parishad where there is no system of solid waste collection and disposal, he said.

Tariq-bin-Yousuf, project director of Landfill Improvement Project (Clean Dhaka) of DCC, said that chromium mixed tannery wastes are being used as poultry feed, which is hazardous for human health.

Shahjahan Ali Mollah

Managing Director, Dhaka Wasa

The Dhaka Wasa MD said his organisation is directly affected by river pollution since the rivers surrounding Dhaka are highly polluted.

"We cannot depend on surface water source. As a

decreasing by up to three metres per year, which may cause land collapse and other natural disasters such as earthquake.

He said the existing surface water treatment plants are struggling because of river pollution.

Shahjahan said that factory discharge of untreated chemicals and heavy metals such as cadmium, magnesium into the rivers, may cause serious health hazards because improper disposal of effluents from tanneries, plastic and dyeing industries, are even polluting the groundwater.

He said no new industries should be built in Dhaka, while the DoE must force the red and orange rated industries to install ETPs. Shahjahan informed that a World Bank-financed project will be started to ensure better water supply system for the Dhaka dwellers.

Dr ABM Badruzzaman

Professor, Department of Civil Engineering, Buet

Prof Dr ABM Badruzzaman said that paper mills are also a major source for river pollution. River pollution in greater Dhaka has reached such a level that dissolved oxygen levels is at 0.5 milligram per litre down from 6.5mg a few years ago, making it difficult for any marine life in the Buriganga.

"At first, we shall have to work on 'waste load allocation', so that we may have detailed idea on the nature of pollution from the industries," he said adding, factories with ETPs do not implement this plan.

Rather, he said, they use alternative channels to discharge the untreated wastes into the river water. In most cases, they only use ETPs at times of inspection by the monitoring team.

The professor also blamed Wasa of avoiding responsibility as it has sewage lines that cover only 30 percent Dhaka. What is worse, he said, only 20 percent of these sewage lines that carry sewage to the Pagla Sewage Treatment Plant are active.

Rest of the huge volumes of sewage is disposed through the storm sewerage lines into the rivers, which is also a major cause of river pollution.

Badruzzaman said Wasa must immediately target priority areas in Dhaka and implement long-term plans.

Moreover, he said, the government should address the issue where the effluents of proposed Adamjee Export Production Zone would be disposed.

Professor Mujibur Rahman

Department of Civil Engineering, Buet

Prof Mujibur Rahman of Buet warned Dhaka would have to be abandoned if the current rates of pollution persist.

However, the civil engineering professor said he hoped the Buriganga River can be regenerated, but warned it would be expensive and time consuming. "To me, we should work on regenerating life into the Buriganga, the dead river. Simultaneously, we should concentrate on saving the dying rivers like Balu and Shitalakkhya."

Prof Mujib said Shitalakkhya is the most strategically important river for Dhaka dwellers in terms of its use in domestic life. The adjacent areas of Shitalakkhya River has been termed by Dhaka Metropolitan Development Plan (DMDP) (from 1995 to 2015) as an 'environmental pollution protected zone'.

But, he said, the reality is exactly the opposite to the plan as both domestic and industrial effluents from the

don't find any reason behind the delay in making any decision.

Mujib said industries are polluting with impunity and said he was alarmed by the slow death of the Bangshi river by the untreated effluent from the Dhaka EPZ.

Syeda Rizwana Hasan

Executive Director (Programme)

Bangladesh Environmental Lawyers' Association (Bela)

The award-winning lawyer and activist, Syeda Rizwana Hasan, said priorities must be set to control pollution. She said most industries have not installed the ETP though they have been operating their industries for decades. But if the government wants to take any measures against them, they use their workers to protest against the government, she said.

"May be the polluters have been providing job for thousands of workers, but they have no right to take away the rivers forever from millions of people," she said.

But she said "We are not against industrialisation. But environmental protection has to be ensured first."

Rizwana lamented the government's lack of cost-benefit analysis of building industry and its cost to the environment while vested interest groups pressure the ministry of environment from taking measures against polluters.

She said the MoE must set its priorities, such as stopping industrial pollution first by selecting dyeing, pulp and papers, tannery, pharmaceuticals and fertilizer industries. If this is done, she said, almost 60 percent of pollution will be stopped.

Rizwana expressed her frustration at the pollution by government-owned fertilizer, paper industries do not have ETPs. She also blamed the DCC for filling up flood-flow zone by dumping solid waste in Amin Bazar.

She proposed the formation of a small working group for the environment comprising civil society members and government officials.

Iqbal Habib

Bangladesh Paribesh Andolon (Bapa)

Architect Iqbal Habib from Bapa said the government has to implement and enforce the existing environmental laws and make it compulsory for the industrialist to reduce the pollution.

He said the environmental cost of pollution is far higher than the foreign currency earned from exports.

"May be they have been earning \$500 million but causing damages of \$700 million," he said. He asked the local government authorities to work with the city corporation in managing domestic waste, which, he said, would reduce the 40 percent river pollution.

Mahfuz Anam

Editor, The Daily Star

The Daily Star editor Mahfuz Anam said, "We have our backs to the wall so we have to work now otherwise Dhaka will not be inhabitable."

He said rivers are in danger of being killed by the pollution and called upon the state minister for environment to take some pro-active role with an 'intellectual and emotional commitment' to save the rivers as sources of drinking water.

The editor moderated the discussion held at The Daily Star office.