



WAHID ADMANI/DRINK NEWS

Bell tolls for Dhaka Wasa

If Dhaka Wasa is unable to procure the necessary generators, let it appeal to the consumers to donate these generators. This will be a worthy investment by the consumers. It will ensure reliable water supply, and prevent Wasa from increasing people's misery by disrupting the supply from time to time.

A.K.M.A. QUADER

ONE of the major responsibilities of Dhaka Wasa is to supply water to those living in Dhaka city. There have been structural changes in Wasa but the supply of water to the citizens has remained unsatisfactory, and sometimes certain areas of the city are left without supply for days -- not only in the beginning of summer but also throughout the year.

When the crisis is reported in the media, the Wasa people take pleasure in being recognised for their services to the people. When the media stop reporting about Wasa and water shortage, it does not mean that the consumers are engulfed by Wasa water. What is wrong with Wasa? Why is it unable to perform to the people's satisfaction? Who is responsible, both inside and outside Wasa, for its non-performance?

Dhaka Wasa supplies both ground and treated surface water to seven zones of greater Dhaka, including Naryanganj. The Wasa supply covers about 70 percent of the city while the remaining 30 percent use groundwater drawn with their own deep tubewells. There

are 1179 such tubewells, including 562 in the industrial/commercial category.

There is hardly any complaint from these 30 percent consumers about disruption of water supply on the pretext of power outage, non-availability of stand-by generators, fall in water table and so on.

Dhaka Wasa receives about 12 percent of its water from four surface water treatment plants and the rest from groundwater drawn by about 530 deep tubewells located in seven zones. About half of these stations do not have stand-by engine generators for use during power outage. Why has Wasa failed to procure the needed generators? Is it because of suppliers' cartel or something else?

Frankly speaking, Dhaka Wasa has become infamous for being highly corrupt at all levels. They multiply the people's misery by initiating supply disruption on the pretext of power outage, poor quality of the Buriganga water etc.

The media has already reported that Dhaka Wasa last year planned to procure about 200 generators at an estimated cost of Tk.54 crore. They did not do so on the pretext of faulty technical specification of the generators and

external interferences in the bidding process.

It is hard to believe that Dhaka Wasa cannot prepare a technical specification for a generator when it had procured more than 200 generators in the past and while the industries around Dhaka could procure more than 1,000 generators. The capacity of the generators is in the range of 125-200 kVA. Was it to embarrass the government and multiply the people's misery?

What was the controlling ministry doing when the procurement got stuck? Did the minister and the concerned secretary realise the political damage it was going to cause? How could Dhaka Wasa sleep over it?

An independent investigation is necessary to fix responsibilities for the failure and punish those who were responsible. By bringing the prime minister into the scene, Dhaka Wasa and the concerned ministry have committed a cardinal sin to save their skins. This is unpardonable and unacceptable.

Dhaka Wasa has become too large for the present style and attitude of the Wasa authority and its employees. There is no accountability in the organisation because they share the booty collected by increasing the people's misery.

The areas under Narayanganj district must be separated from Dhaka Wasa. The treated water from the surface water treatment plants should be supplied to two zones close to the plants instead of five zones as it is now. Accept the fact that the prescription for supplying surface water has failed.

Let Dhaka Wasa divide the six operating zones, excluding Naryanganj, into fifty inde-

pendent operating zones to serve about two hundred thousand people under each zone. Let the supply of each zone be independent of surrounding zones, and the connectivity amongst these be severed to measure the performance of each zone.

Administratively, each zone, having 8-12 deep tubewells serving a smaller area and population, can be better managed. Oversights, irregularities, waste, theft and corruption can be monitored and rectified immediately. It requires a change in the mindset of Wasa to realise that small is beautiful.

If Dhaka Wasa is unable to procure the necessary generators, let it appeal to the consumers to donate these generators. This will be a worthy investment by the consumers. It will ensure reliable water supply, and prevent Wasa from increasing people's misery by disrupting the supply from time to time.

Wasa considers the interest earned from the consumers' security deposit as its operating income; but this belongs to the consumers and should be spent to improve services for them.

Finally, if necessary, dismantle Dhaka Wasa and build a new Wasa with new employees and leadership who can deliver. It may sound harsh but the realities call for drastic measures. A democratically-elected government can no longer afford a non-performing and corrupt organisation like Dhaka Wasa.

Dr. A.K.M.A. Quader is Professor of Chemical Engineering, BUET.

Lessons from Mayapuri

The only way to ensure that the agency does its job is to make it accountable to Parliamentary and public oversight -- beginning now. Or else, we'll have more radiation disasters on a horrendous scale.

PRAFUL BIDWAI

THREE weeks after a Delhi scrap dealer was exposed to cobalt-60 and developed acute radiation sickness, the radioisotope was finally traced to a Delhi University chemistry laboratory.

Radiation is an especially insidious poison, being invisible. One of the 11 exposed scrapworkers died. Others are, reportedly, gravely sick.

This exposes the irresponsibility of Delhi University and the Atomic Energy Regulatory Board and the incapacity of Indian agencies to cope with mishaps. In February, the university prematurely auctioned a gamma irradiator to a scrap dealer. The apparatus, containing cobalt-60, was imported in 1968.

A university committee certified that disposing of the entire 300 kg assembly, including cobalt pencils and lead containers, would be safe. The poisoning was revealed six weeks afterwards.

It's extraordinary that a committee of science professors assumed that the cobalt-60 irradiator, a powerful source with 3,000 Curies (a unit of radiation), had ceased to be hazardous.

The half-life of this radioisotope -- the time during which it naturally decays to half its original mass -- is 5.27 years. This means that about 10-20 Curies would still remain even after 42 years. Even one-billionth of a Curie is harmful. The US Environmental Protection Agency sets a limit of 8 to 20 trillionths of a Curie per litre for water.

The university committee's indefensible decision to auction the irradiator endangered the lives of innocent scrap-workers. Its members must be severely punished.

The other authorities haven't conducted themselves exemplarily either. The Atomic Energy Regulatory Board was slow to find the irradiator's 16 cobalt needles. It couldn't track the source of the cobalt-60 -- the police did.

Three other scrap traders were involved, and groups of workers were exposed to the cobalt-60 at different intensities for different durations. Also, the irradiator assembly was reportedly sent from Delhi to Rewari in Haryana, to be melted in a furnace. Everyone who handled, transported or stored the needles would have been exposed.

It's imperative to scientifically establish the whole chain of transactions, detect every case of radiation injury and extent of exposure and treat it over long periods.

However, the AERB hasn't done this -- despite help from the Canadian exporter of the irradiator. This is how the AERB and its parent, the Department of Atomic Energy, function.

The DAE has never met a target or completed a major project within budget or on time -- despite generous subsidies. By its own projections, it should have installed over 50,000 MW by now. The current installed nuclear capacity of 4,100 MW -- 3 percent of India's total electricity capacity -- has cost thousands of people their health and safety.

Shielded by the Atomic Energy Act, the DAE isn't accountable to the public. It has a poor safety culture. The AERB, set up to regulate the

DAE's installations for safety, has no independent personnel, equipment or budget, nor even the will, to gain functional autonomy within the DAE. Instead, it has imbibed the DAE's callousness.

The AERB's performance as the regulator of all non-DAE radiation-related equipment and activities has been equally irresponsible, shoddy and corrupt.

The AERB -- created in 1983 -- has no full record of radiation-emitting activities going back to the 1950s. Its current records are also sloppy and its reports incomplete.

There are 50,000 X-ray machines, 735 radiotherapy units, 1,754 industrial radiography units, and thousands of apparatuses and radiochemicals used in physical, biological, chemical and agricultural experiments in India's public and private laboratories and other facilities.

The AERB is meant to track all these. Under the Atomic Energy Act 1962, it alone is authorised to finally dispose of all radioactive material, which it's legally mandated to collect.

It only rarely monitors regulation enforcement. It doesn't order labs to hand over to it material for final disposal. It doesn't have the personnel, will or culture to track "use-by" dates of X-ray units.

Under the Atomic Energy (Safe Disposal of Radioactive Waste) Rules 1987, any venture using radioactive material must appoint a radiological safety officer. This happens rarely, but the AERB doesn't enforce the rule.

The AERB is supposed to regularly inspect 62,110 installations in 3,210 institutions. It conducted only 110 inspections last year. Of the 16 cases of theft or loss of radiation-related devices reported since 2000, it solved only three.

Scientists in three Delhi-based institutes complain that the AERB never provides technological support or guidance and ignores requests for help with radioactivity disposal. Sometimes, AERB personnel "informally" encourage persis-

tent inquirers to dump the waste. On their rare visits to an institution/lab, they expect to be wined and dined or bribed outright.

The AERB hasn't installed radiation monitors at all major ports and airports. It refuses to monitor radioactive waste-dumping at Alang, the world's ship-breaking capital, itself a big disaster. Now it wants to transfer its responsibility for handling radioactive waste to scrap dealers, whom it proposes to train.

So when Minister of State Prithviraj Chauhan claims that the AERB is efficient and can account for "every gramme" of radioactive material in India, and hence the Delhi cobalt-60 was illegally imported, he talks through his hat.

The AERB's failure has allowed metallic products recycled in India to be contaminated with radioactivity. Many countries have recently refused shipments of Indian-made steel after they were found contaminated, including 67 shipments to the US since 2003.

Shockingly, the controversial nuclear liability Bill solely empowers this very AERB to declare that a nuclear mishap has happened, for which the public may be compensated.

The AERB must be made answerable or, better, replaced with a competent and independent agency accountable to Parliament, the public and the Right to Information Act. It should strictly license all nuclear and radiation-related activities and establishments for safety; monitor their radioactive material stocks, safety practices and precautionary approaches; and secure the safe disposal of radioisotopes.

The only way to ensure that the agency does its job is to make it accountable to parliamentary and public oversight -- beginning now. Or else, we'll have more radiation disasters on a horrendous scale.

Praful Bidwai is an eminent Indian columnist.



7 worst celebrity dads

DON'T you just love celebrities? I do. I like them fried, boiled or fricasseed. I particularly like to see them on the "court proceedings" page of the newspapers, and some look really good on the obits page.

Celebs were on my mind after a reader set me an interesting challenge. "I just read an article saying that 'celebrities make great dads. Can you comment?' he wrote.

After giving the matter a great deal of thought -- almost two-billionths of a second -- I came to an important conclusion. One should never read emails before your first coffee.

I raced to the nearest Starbucks for an espresso. "Gimme a double," I said. The barista went into the back room and came out with this guy who looked exactly like me. No, actually, I'm waiting for that day.

But after fortifying myself with legal drugs (good grief, when and how did I become a responsible adult?), I went back to my desk and read the article that the reader had attached.

It came from a Canadian magazine called Sympatico and it said: "Everyday dads can take tips from celebrity fathers." (I took this personally, realising that the word "everyday" in that sentence meant "pathetic non-celebs like you, Mr. Jam.")

The piece went on to list male movie stars who had been seen in their presence of their children, sometimes more than once. Some celebrity dads had been heard to call their children by their first names, occasionally even getting them right. Wow.

Reading this left me open-mouthed with admiration. It must take an astonishing amount of skill to write a feature so irritating that it was almost impossible to read without actually murdering the next person you see.

An hour or so later, after mopping up the blood of the unfortunate people who crossed me, I made a list of celebrity dads.

1. Sports star OJ Simpson chopped off the head of his children's mother.

2. Woody Allen loved his partner's daughter. A bit too much.

3. Actor Ryan O'Neal recently went to his wife's funeral and promptly started flirting with someone he later described as "a beautiful blonde woman." He thought she looked Swedish and asked if she had a car so they could go somewhere. She stopped him by pointing out that she was his child. "Daddy, it's me," she said.

4. Singer Pete Doherty's two children have different mothers. He sees one child occasionally but never refers to the other. When a reporter asked him to say something about his secret second child, he said: "Poor #\$\$%-er."

5. Michael Jackson liked children. A lot. All his children (even the girl) were given the name Michael and removed from their mothers. While promising to be a good father, he blew his entire fortune on useless items such as statues, fell into debt, and got himself addicted to deadly drugs. The picture below shows him dangling a baby out of a window.

6. Singer John Phillips loved his daughter. Let's not go there.

7. When the daughter who rock star Steven Tyler had ignored her whole life grew into beautiful actress Liv Tyler, he said: "I wish I'd changed her nappies."

So, in conclusion, there's a lot to be said for being a poor nobody. Celebrities often make terrible parents. Almost as bad as journalists. Now don't get me started on them.

For more parenting tips visit our columnist at: www.vittachi.com.

