

Slow poisoning continues unabated

We have allowed things like pollution and food contamination to run riot. Till now, no agency, either under the health ministry or the ministry of science and technology or the ministry of industries, has conducted any examination of the pesticide-residue levels or toxic chemicals in the foodstuff being marketed.

MD.ASADULLAH KHAN

FOOD adulteration runs rampant in the country. From vegetables, fish, milk, drinks, sweetmeats, ice cream to spices, nothing is safe. Oblivious of the dangers lurking in everyday food items, parents are asking their children to eat foods containing vitamins, iron and calcium.

With institutional corruption deeply ingrained in every level of our society and societal protest and government action totally missing, unscrupulous traders and fake factory owners are resorting to dishonest and unethical activities through adding harmful and toxic substances in food items.

Dangers lurk in almost every item of food. A

report released by the National Resources Defence Council (NRDC), an environmental group based in New York, suggests that farm produce sold in the supermarkets and groceries may contain so much pesticide that they pose a serious health hazard to the nation's children.

In advanced countries, there is strong monitoring system. Traders there can't sell contaminated food or tamper with food items. As long as consumers consider food adulteration a minor problem and the government plays down its impact on the health system of the nation, there is no escaping the grave health hazard. Sensible citizens shudder to think about the enormous price the nation may have to pay in the long run.

Food adulteration in Bangladesh has assumed alarming proportions. Experts in medical biology point out that one of the important reasons for infertility is the presence of residues of pesticides, growth hormones, heavy metals and mycotoxins in our food. The main reason for this is that our farmers are not appropriately educated or trained in the use of chemicals.

A study by the Institute of Public Health (IPH) revealed that more than 50% of the food samples they tested were adulterated. Textile dyes, which are highly injurious to health, are being randomly used to colour many types of food. Urea fertilizer is used for whitening puffed rice. Cyanide is used to give mustard oil extra bite. Papaya and bananas are artificially ripened by a carcinogenic chemical called ethylene oxide.

Fish is considered to be an essential protein for people of all ages. Many fish sellers spray fish with formalin, a chemical usually used for preservation of tissues. It makes the fish stiff and keeps them looking fresh for longer. Milk in rural areas is usually adulterated with dirty water, which can cause hepatitis. People have now come to know about a new milk adulteration technique that uses a thickening agent, sorbitol, and detergent.

One way to avoid tainted fruits is by not eating fruits that are out of season because chemicals are used to preserve them during the off-season. Vegetable and fruit samples collected from around Savar, Dhamrai and Tongi show the presence of textile dyes, which, in the short-term, will cause diarrhea, food poisoning and gastrointestinal problems, but in the long-term toxic materials will accumulate in the body with serious health implications. In the absence of effluent treatment plants (ETP), the factory wastes are drained out at will into the farmlands, and ultimately contaminate the farm produce.

The month of Ramadan will bring woes for the rozadars because of the unscrupulous restaurant owners and vendors who sell fried items. Cooking oil that is used to deep fry items like peaaj, alur chop, ikabab should not be used for the second time, but many restaurants recycle the burnt oil, which severely affects the digestive system.

The key findings of the EPA study group suggest that many children may develop

cancer sometime during their life as a result of the pesticide-contaminated produce they consume. Daminozide, a chemical that penetrates through the fruit's skin, is the greatest cancer hazard.

The NRDC report goes on to charge that the governments of the countries surveyed are failing to adequately protect youngsters from such dangers. Given the fact that children are consuming pesticide-laden or toxic food, they are likely to be more vulnerable than adults. Their body cells are rapidly dividing and organs like the liver and kidney may not be as efficient in removing toxic chemicals.

Most encouragingly, baby food companies in the US have already got the message. Gerber and Beech-nut, for example do not use Daminozide-treated fruits in their products, and pesticide-residues on the crops they accept for processing into baby foods are much lower than federal limits. This only speaks of the concern the environmental groups and the federal government share on the safety limits.

In our country we have allowed things like pollution and food contamination to run riot. Till now, no agency, either under the health ministry or the ministry of science and technology or the ministry of industries, has conducted any examination of the pesticide-residue levels or toxic chemicals in the foodstuff being marketed.

In the backdrop of reports of raid and seizure of fake and adulterated food items pouring in everyday, people wonder whether what they are eating is food or poison. With a totally inefficient monitoring system, just having tough laws is hardly enough to keep unscrupulous traders from tampering with food items.

Encouragingly, the D.G. BSTI revealed that, in the current year, it had conducted country-wide drives against fake and adulterated food through operation of mobile courts, instituted 1,822 criminal cases, and realised over Tk. 4 crore as fine. But realisation of fine has not helped to curb this criminal offence. The government can't allow a handful of unscrupulous traders to play with the lives of the citizens, especially the children, and get away with impunity.

Md. Asadullah Khan is a former teacher of physics and Controller of Examinations, BUET. e-mail aukhanbd@gmail.com



A small daily miracle

COMMENT-posters complained when this columnist reported that he had recently handed out "best courier" awards to Fed Ex and DHL.

You should have given the award to the dabbawallas, they said. "In parts of India, food is delivered to multiple customers every single day at the same time without fail," said Vernette Lydiard, a Malaysian Chinese living in Hong Kong.

She's right. The dabbawallas are a legendary team of illiterate homemade lunch deliverers who speedily move millions of food items between the right kitchen and the right office without new technology, such as "pencils" and "paper."

Instead, team leaders concentrate members' minds with advice: "Deliver beef to a Hindu or bacon to a Muslim and the customer gets a free dinner: dabbawalla au gratin."

How do they achieve the impossible? Having seen them in action, my suspicion is that they use quantum mechanics to move things like in Star Trek.

"Scotty-sahib, set the teleport controls to beam this plate of rogan josh to Mumbai High Street at warp speed."

Staff at Forbes, a business magazine, calculated that the odds of a dabbawalla fouling up a lunch delivery was one in six million, roughly the same odds of a Chinese court finding a not guilty defendant not guilty.

Top US business experts described the dabbawallas' delivery system as the "world's most efficient supply chain." But they were the ones who thought defunct mortgages were a good investment, so who listens to them anymore?

Yet here's the bad news. Big businesses are muscling in. Some are introducing SMS and on-line ordering options into dabbawalla systems. It's only a matter of time before some multi-national corporation buys up the whole industry.

Who will it be? And how will the service change? Here are some possibilities.

If IKEA delivered lunch, your food would arrive a week after ordering, it would have some weird name like flubglok and you'd have to assemble it yourself with a tiny Allen key.

If Adobe Systems delivered lunch, you would have to register online and receive a special 37-digit code to type in before you could open the box.

If Nintendo delivered lunch, it would come in the shape of a remote control that you wave up and down as fast as you could to feed virtual food to a virtual diner on a screen.

If Apple delivered lunch, it would be a smooth, white geometrical cube which wasn't actually edible but would look cool.

If Tiffany Jewelers delivered lunch, staff wearing black gloves would arrive in a limousine and hand you a turquoise package containing a lead crystal replica of a sandwich.

If eBay delivered lunch, there'd be an easy online ordering system, but the food would never arrive because someone on the other side of town bid a few extra rupees for it.

If Rolex delivered lunch, it would arrive bang on time, but would cost \$40,000.

If McDonald's delivered lunch, you would get a greasy 900 calories fat-bomb that would kill you within... wait, a minute, they DO deliver lunch.

For more on efficient food delivery, visit our columnist at: www.vittachi.com.



You have 30 minutes to evacuate

Will we sit back and allow such human rights violations to happen in our backyard? Will we not hold our civil servants, politicians and policymakers accountable to why these people who support our entire economy are not given adequate housing?

SHAHANA SIDDIQUI

THURSDAY, 5 August. The police assure concerned basti bashis of Sattala, Mohakhali that no eviction would happen. The people believe the police officers and go on with their daily activities. The noon prayers end. Riot police suddenly appear, armed and ready to go. Demolition workers from nearby slums accompany the enforcements.

A high up government officer takes a microphone and obscurely tells the people that their homes will be demolished. You have 30 minutes to evacuate. The race against time starts... NOW!

Chaos takes over. Two bulldozers appear. Riot police take position to put anyone out of line. Because to protest against the destruction of one's home would be wrong, would be illegal.

Oh wait, that's what they are -- illegal. Thousands of people, homes, households are all illegal. They should not have been here to begin with.

Go back to where you came from. If you are not going to go on your own, our bulldozers will help pave the way for you. Few hours is all that was needed to destroy 2.5 acres of households, communities, homes. Approximately 8000 men, women, and children, about 2400 households evicted, destroyed one fine Thursday afternoon.

The evictees take whatever they can. Personal belongings, construction materials, electrical wiring -- anything they can live on or sell to get them through the next few days.

The question is then, where are the activists, where are the well off neighbours? Where are all that cultural, political and religious ideals of pro-poor, pro-people, socialism, inclusion, Constitutional rights?

Bangladesh is a leading example in post natural disaster relief yet, we don't know what to do in manmade disasters. Suddenly mandates, policies, project limitations chain our basic sense of citizenry and humanity. Yet, manmade destruction is in many ways worse -- a human consciousness is at failure here, a choice is made, humanity and respect for fellow humans are purposefully left aside.

Bengali bhadrals romanticise the rural poor and despise the urban ones. We see the latter as freeloaders and their living spaces as den of evils. Our decent Bengali way of living is always under threat by these bastis.

Our sons would never get into drugs if it wasn't for the dealers living in the slums. Neither would they ever be tempted by carnal sins if it wasn't for those street prostitutes. And of course women from good families are never

to be seen on streets that are roamed by these meyers of dubious character. Our cities would be safe if the mastaans did not emerge from these shanties.

Our footpaths would be cleaner, our lakes prettier if it wasn't for these makeshift homes and latrines. Because of them, there is such pressure on our electricity, water and other amenities. Not to mention how inconvenient it is to have these beggars, ferriwallahs, street vendors, hustling us to buy or give something while we sit in traffic, go for a walk, or enjoy a plate of phuchka.

It's all their fault that they are poor and trying to just survive one day at a time. It's their fault that they do not have the education, options and orientations to lead the bhadrakol life. It's their fault that government and non-government provide band aid solutions and no long terms economic and social opportunities to the urban poor. They will leave soon, so what's the point of investing?

Millions of urban poor both in Dhaka and in secondary cities have been living in those areas

for generations. Yet, they are not our equals as city dwellers. To be a basti bashi, no matter how many years of residency, immediately means you are an illegal occupant and therefore do not have any rights. The threat and reality of eviction are constant without any protection from government or non-government.

Yet it is these basti bashis that run our homes and industries, our society and the economy. They break their backs everyday to clean our streets, drive our vehicles, build our fancy apartments and commercial buildings, carry goods from one end of the city to another, maintain our households and raise our children, watch over our homes while we sleep so peacefully at night. And it is these thousands of basti bashi men and women (whose minimum wage we refuse to pay), who are generating the highest export earning for Bangladesh.

The informal economy constitutes over 65% of all employment in the city. Those employees live in over 3000 slums and squatter settlements throughout the capital. Of over 2.5 million (a quarter of Dhaka city population) slum residents and other poor segments of the city, less than a third own land or have access to decent housing.

In all our talk of saving people and establishing a democratic, accountable governance system, the bhadrakol shomaj of the city fail to take a strong stand against evictions and

atrocities against the urban poor. Just because we depend on them, does not mean we have to like them, right?

While the largest NGO in the country has been raising money in the past week for the Pakistan flood victims, at the heart of Dhaka city 8000 people (and rising) are now homeless -- yet no single facebook update on that.

Within days of the Nimtoli fire, friends and families rushed to the site to stand by the victims. One week into Sattala eviction and not a single human cry for help, justice.

Difference -- Pakistan is a misfortune, Nimtoli a tragedy, Sattala is illegal.

Will we sit back and allow such human rights violations to happen in our backyard? Are we to accept government's blatant disregard and disrespect of High Court stay orders? Will we not hold our civil servants, politicians and policymakers accountable to why these people who support our entire economy are not given adequate housing?

Is it not our Bengali value to stand up against atrocities? Is it not our religious duty to fight for social justice and help the less fortunates especially during the month of Ramadan? Are these duties and values not the foundation of our bhadrakol shomaj?

Shahana Siddiqui works on urban poverty and is a member of the Drishtipat Writers' Collective (www.drishtipat.org/dpwriters). She can be contacted at dpwriters@drishtipat.org.



Few hours is all that was needed to destroy 2.5 acres of households.

Wage push a factor in China's pace of reform

EDITORIAL DESK The Straits Times

WAGES are rising steadily in China and this is not necessarily a bad thing for the economy or the nations it does business with. The surge of labour unrest in recent months, with workers being unusually assertive in seeking more pay and better working conditions, had government and employers scrambling to respond.

Several provincial governments raised the minimum wage, by 10%. Japanese carmaker Honda raised pay by 24% after a series of strikes at its Chinese plants. Taiwanese contract manufacturer Foxconn raised wages by up to 100% after a spate of suicides at its Shenzhen plant.

Wages are set to rise further as young, better-educated workers are no longer willing to slog like their parents did, working long hours in bad conditions for low pay. The shortage of workers, particularly in southern China, will also put pressure on wages.

Rising wages have several implications for China as well as the world. For China, its export competitiveness could be affected. How to manage workers' rising expectations so that it does little damage to its export machine is a challenge. Wage rises ultimately will force China to restructure the economy. Many of its factories work on thin margins.

Higher wages would force these factories to rework costs, move out to cheaper locations or raise their asking prices. Or they could move up the value chain.

It is expected that labour-intensive, low-end manufacturers will either move inland to the cheaper regions -- thus spreading economic activity to less well-off parts -- or out to countries like Viet Nam, Cambodia and Laos where labour cost is still low. These can be replaced by high-tech industries that are less polluting and less labour-intensive, and make better use of workers who are better educated and trained.

One of the outcomes of higher pay is higher domestic consumption, to redress the trade imbalance with Western nations. However, consumers elsewhere may have to pay more for Chinese goods and face the prospect of higher inflation. The less developed countries of Southeast Asia, besides benefiting from factories relocating from China, will be able to attract more foreign investment, which would have gone northwards in the past.

The question is how to make good use of the new conditions that rising wages in China have thrown up. Southeast Asian countries will have to tackle their own labour issues as well as factors that deter investors, such as under-developed infrastructure and high-energy costs. For China, managing well the transition from low to higher wages and economic restructuring is crucial for social stability.