

## The anthrax issue

*Urgency to tackle its effects on public health and economy*

**E**IGHTEEN new cases of anthrax have come to light in Lalmonirhat district. Reports of an incidence of anthrax in Lakshmipur have also been there. As far as we are aware, no fewer than 520 people all over the country have in the past couple of months been affected by the disease and, we are informed, half of them have already been provided with treatment. There may be a bit of hope here and we might tell ourselves that the disease, contracted through eating meat, especially beef, will soon go away. And yet new reports such as the one from Lalmonirhat raise the very pertinent question of how effective the measures so far taken to combat the problem are. Our conclusion is that a whole lot more, in terms of prioritising the issue, is called for. If one individual is cured of anthrax and then two fresh cases crop up, it is a sign of the huge difficulties we are confronted with.

Meanwhile, there is the economic fallout of anthrax that one cannot lose sight of. For rather valid reasons, people have scaled down their consumption of beef, with the result that sales of the commodity have slumped considerably. While that means a loss for traders, it also points to something bigger. And it concerns our tannery industry, which with the outbreak of anthrax has had to cope with declining revenues because of the slide in supplies of hides and skins. One hardly need remind oneself that among the industries which have made good and encouraging progress in Bangladesh in the last three decades is the tannery sector, both in terms of internal supply and exports to nations beyond our frontiers. It is, therefore, in everyone's interest to ensure that the decline that now characterises the sector be rolled back. But for that to be done, swift and effective measures are an absolute necessity. Let us not forget that it is not merely the major tannery factories located in urban regions that have been bearing the brunt of anthrax. There are too the small traders in hides and skins at the local level whose economic conditions have deteriorated as a result of the outbreak of the disease. Add to that the woes of cattle traders whose inability to sell their animals has brought new economic pressure on their families.

Our options are clear. While we expect medical measures to be stepped up towards treating those who have already been infected with anthrax, we do think that the health authorities, especially in the veterinary sector, have to come up with hard, foolproof measures to ensure the health of cattle all over the country. Treating anthrax patients without at the same time looking to the conditions of cattle can only be a half step and a costly one at that. Unless the entire issue is handled with a sense of urgency, both the health of people and the wellbeing of an important sector of the national economy will remain at risk.

## Buriganga cleanup

*Major concerns need to be addressed*

**W**E understand that the second phase of the plan to clean up the Buriganga will be launched sometime next month. We take it that the first phase of the cleanup, which commenced early January this year, has been completed.

Cleaning up of the Buriganga has been a long felt need. In fact when we call for saving the Buriganga the underlying message is the compulsion to save the capital, because without saving the Buriganga it is well nigh impossible to save Dhaka. And Dhaka may go the way many habitations have gone in the past with the demise of the river on which they were established, survived and flourished.

But cleaning up the Buriganga is but one small element of the larger effort to save the Buriganga. And while one talks about saving Dhaka by cleaning up this river one must not fail to take into consideration the other three rivers, the Dhaleshawri, Turag and Sitalakhya, that also serve the capital and may soon fall in a moribund state if actions are not taken to resuscitate them.

Before the second phase is launched it would be nice to know the lessons of Phase - I. If the target in the first phase was to remove 3000 tons of solid waste within a particular stretch of the river within a specified time, we wonder whether that has been achieved in full.

There is the problem of different type of solid wastes that have been, and will be, excavated from the river bed which need different areas for dumping and some of these wastes are not bio-degradable while some can be recycled. The cleanup also requires preventing further dumping of garbage, and our understanding is that dumping is going on everywhere along the banks. There is need to prevent commercial effluence, that happens to be the largest single cause of contamination of the river water, from being disgorged into the Buriganga, apart from the large amount of liquid waste that comes from domestic sources. Unless these steps are taken, the clean up drive may not deliver the expected benefits.

The clean up drive also requires policy interventions that among other things deal with issues like demarcating the shoreline to define the river, managing the river banks, levying taxes on polluters to pay for the cleaning, and a continuous oversight mechanism.

A project such as this is indeed a huge undertaking and that is where we feel is the need for a comprehensive long-term plan that will address among other things the issues mentioned above. There is a whole raft of concerns that must be addressed in the plan, which involves both policy and technical interventions. Also the scheme is a continuous process and requires taking the people along to make the plan successful.

## Nation's war against child labour



MINIR UZ ZAMAN/DRINK NEWS



FOYSAL MAHILDI/DRINK NEWS

What kind of future can they look forward to?

The nation cannot continue to look the other way, while its future citizens are getting systematically robbed of their childhood. The government, the rights bodies, the charities and voluntary organisations working in this field must find a common ground to wage an all out war against the scourge of child labour, their exploitation and slavery.

SYED FATTAHUL ALIM

**T**HE print media from time to time runs stories on children working as peddlers, pushcart drivers, rickshaw-pullers, factory workers, or even as beggars to feed their families. Where poverty is still the worst problem the nation is fighting hard to mitigate, child labour is nothing unnatural.

In fact, the scourge of child labour and exploitation of children in various forms has to do with the poverty-stricken families. Even if these families have able working adults as the main bread earner, they still consider their children as an additional source of earning. In the countryside, the peasant families, as a matter of tradition, use their children as additional farmhands and in this way train them as future farmers.

The children involved in work are thus deprived of their right to grow unlike the children of families that are better off, whether in the rural or the urban areas.

So, child labour is both a part of tradition and compulsion among the peasantry and the households from poorer backgrounds. And there is no reason to think that the parents who engage their children in work in the fields, factories or

other workplaces are heartless ones.

Except in a negligible number of extreme cases, where one comes across parents who sell children for money or force them into pure slavery just to live on their sweat and blood, the majority are loving parents who would do anything to give their children a better opportunity in life. But poverty always comes in the way and their dreams for their children remain unfulfilled.

But how are we then to get rid of this national curse of child labour when abject poverty is still staring us in the face? Are we to wait until the day when, as some visionary social reformers would like to say, "poverty would become an exhibit of the museum?"

There is no simple answer to social problems like poverty, child labour, exploitation of women and children and various types of disparities in society. Notwithstanding the fact that the different social maladies have poverty as their common denominator, each one is also unique in its own characteristic ways. Moreover, all these problems are also deeply interlinked to one another.

The issue of child labour, for example, cannot be fully addressed, if the approaches to tackle it are also not latched

onto the government's overall strategy to fight poverty. In this context, it would be topical to make reference to the various laws that exist against employing children in any organisation as full time workers. Such laws have existed since the colonial times, such as the Children Act, 1938 and the Factories Act of 1965.

Again, in the 1990s after the country regained its democratic traditions, the government framed a policy keeping an eye to the rights of children in 1994, which redefined the age of children as under the age of 14.

Engaging children under the age of 14 is also prohibited according to the Bangladesh Labour Law 2006. The employing institutions fall under the ambit of this law. Parents, too, are barred from forcing their children into such employment under this law and there is provision for penal measures in case the employing organisations or parents are found violating the law.

Unfortunately, the laws are there in the book for reference for the legal practitioners, whereas in practice the number of child labourers has gone on increasing with every census on the country's population. Meanwhile, the poverty situation also worsened, forcing more families to depend on their children as income earners.

A report published in this paper on its September 17 provides a classic example on the worst form of child labour in the heart of the capital city, where the laws to safeguard the children's right are being enacted and where the various bodies fighting for child's right are working.

The report narrates the woes of children working in brass mould factories that produce various wares including electri-

cal parts, bathroom fittings, etc. The extremely high temperatures and toxic vapour from the molten metal inflict irreparable damage to the health of around 4,000 children working in similar factories in different parts of the city. The reporter concerned has given only a rough picture on the state of child labour in only a single sector of sweatshops that thrive on the labour of children fewer than 14.

The last drafted policy to protect child rights, titled "National Child Policy, 2010" has further defined the age of a child as under 18 years. Once made into law, this policy will provide employment of individuals under the age of 18 as full time workers. But as it happened before, this policy, in spite of all its promises to restore a child's birthright to its health, education and security, will have to watch helplessly as millions of children sweat blood in the most hazardous workplaces in the country.

In the document of the Child Policy 2010, it is said that 45% of the population are children and that the number of children suffering under extreme poverty is 26.5 million. What portion of these children are already working as well as being exploited through various means?

No one knows for sure the exact number. But the nation cannot continue to look the other way, while its future citizens are getting systematically robbed of their childhood. The government, the rights bodies, the charities and voluntary organisations working in this field must find a common ground to wage an all out war against the scourge of child labour, their exploitation and slavery.

Syed Fattahul Alim is a senior journalist.

## Wages of GDP-ism

The term "licence-permit raj" is a pejorative, which detracts from a primary responsibility of governance. Surely, Dr. Singh doesn't want profiteering corporations exploiting and defiling precious resources. Or has he learnt no lessons from Bhopal? Dr. Singh must give up his obsession with environmental deregulation. Or India's citizens will have to pay dearly for his myopic GDPism and pampering of Big Business.

PRAFUL BIDWAI

**I**N a recent media interaction, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh hinted that he might reshuffle his cabinet. We don't know what its shape will be. But it's near certain that he'll replace Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF) junior minister Jairam Ramesh by someone more pliable and pro-industry.

The Singh-Ramesh relationship began spiralling downwards with the MoEF's banning of genetically modified brinjal after Mr. Ramesh held unprecedented public hearings on the issue. Next came the refusal of a mining licence to the Vedanta group in Orissa's Niyamgiri Hills, which would destroy a fragile ecosystem and a vulnerable tribal community.

Mr. Ramesh's latest "offence" was his reluctance to clear the Navi Mumbai airport project. Dr. Singh is pressing for the new airport, although it will destroy 400 acres of mangroves. These sturdy saltwater trees uniquely protect the coastline against sea-storms and waves.

Dr. Singh is pushing large mining/industrial projects of South Korea-based multinational POSCO, and Indian groups like the Tatas and the Mittals.

An official report found the POSCO project to have violated clauses of the Forest Rights Act and Panchayat (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act which require the entire tribal village to consent to transferring land. But under pressure from global and Indian business and South Korea, the government has

appointed a committee to countermand the report.

Dr. Singh believes -- wrongly -- that India's environmental regulations are excessively tight and discourage industrialisation; they will "perpetuate poverty" and bring back "the licence-permit raj."

Actually, India is one of the world's least regulated countries, with a deeply flawed environmental impact assessment (EIA) process, few enforceable standards (on safety, or pollution levels), and no penalties.

India ranks extremely low in the Columbia-Yale University Environmental Performance Index--123 of 163 countries.

As a former member of a MoEF Expert Committee on River Valley Projects, I can vouch that most EIA reports are fraudulent or doctored by unscrupulous consultants who merely change the project name. Yet, the MoEF approves incomplete applications, without wildlife and hydrological clearances.

The MoEF approves 92% of all project applications. In recent months, it was clearing 4 to 5 applications a day -- clearly without much scrutiny!

Two major laws to protect fragile ecosystems, the Forest Conservation Act, 1980 and Coastal Regulation Zone Notification, 1991, have been cynically manipulated for their exception and exemption clauses to transfer forest land to industry, and permit construction dangerously close to the high-tide line.

India is losing prime rainforest year after year. Trees are planted over 1-1.5

million hectares a year. But plantations aren't natural forests. An alarming 27,000 ha of forest land is being transferred to non-forest uses annually.

According to the MoEF's State of Environment Report-2009, ecological deterioration is pervasive in India. 45% of India's land is degraded from deforestation, poor drainage, mining, water and wind erosion, water-logging and salinity.

All of India's 14 major river systems have been heavily polluted with industrial and municipal waste. Half of them have turned into sewers. Total coliform bacteria count in the Ganga ranges from 17,000 per 100 ml in Allahabad to 240,000 in Kanpur and 500,000 in West Bengal. The safe limit is 50 per 100 ml.

Potable water is a rarity. Water is contaminated with fertilisers and pesticides, industrial effluents, and animal and human excreta. Heavy metal and arsenic pollution is increasing alarmingly. People spend 5 to 10% of their household budgets on filtering and boiling water, or buying treated water.

It is impossible to walk 50 yards in any Indian city without noticing discarded plastic wrappings, carry-bags, soft-drinks bottles, and "disposable" plates, which are choking rivers, springs and storm-water drains.

India's vehicle population is rising at 25%-plus annually, clogging roads, poisoning people, squeezing out pedestrians and bicyclists, and killing 120,000 people a year.

Urban concentrations of respirable suspended particulate matter are two or four times higher than the air-quality standard. A grey haze of suspended particulates, oxides of sulphur and nitrogen, and soot from the incomplete burning of coal and biomass, constantly hangs over most Indian cities.

Using wood, animal dung, crop residue/grasses, coal, etc. as cooking fuel releases toxic air pollutants, which cause acute respiratory infections, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, asthma, lung cancer and heart disease. 74% percent of India's urban households and 91%

of rural households use such fuels. Prevalence of tuberculosis among them is as high as 924 per 100,000.

Related to all this, and to global climate change, is an acceleration in the melting of Himalayan glaciers, which feed seven of Asia's greatest river systems (the Indus, Ganga, Brahmaputra, Salween, Mekong, Yangtze and Huang Ho) and are vital for 1.3 billion people. The Greater Himalayas are warming two to four times faster than the globe.

India is following China's trajectory of ecological destruction. In 2006, a Chinese official estimated that "environmental damage (everything from crop loss to the price of healthcare) costs 10% of GDP -- all of the economy's celebrated growth."

In India, The Energy and Resources Institute -- no radical think-tank that -- estimates environmental damage at 7 to 10% of GDP -- a little higher than the GDP growth rate. These estimates, if even half-way right, cast doubt on the sustainability of India's growth path.

Clearly, India's top priority is to tighten regulations to protect land, water, air, forests and the coast to ensure people's survival and well-being. Yet, Dr. Singh sends out the message that the environment is dispensable, but growth isn't.

He wrongly counterposes poverty to environmental protection. Sustainable industrialisation demands protection of natural resources, which support peoples' livelihoods. Reckless, unsound industrialisation uproots and impoverishes people.

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Dr. Singh must give up his obsession with environmental deregulation. Or India's citizens will have to pay dearly for his myopic GDPism and pampering of Big Business.

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