

Case goes into trial at last

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mentioned that the syrup was "substandard".

Lacking is also noticed in testing the syrup. Products from the same batch were tested in government and private laboratories. While the private tests showed presence of diethylene glycol, the government lab did not. No effort was put to check the validity of the government lab tests, and the private test result was not mentioned anywhere in the cases.

Tests at the government lab of another batch however found traces of the toxin as well, but when a case was filed the quantity of the element was not mentioned, making it unclear whether the presence was fatal or not.

In two months starting from June 2009, the 28 children died from acute renal failure (ARF) after they had been allegedly administered Temset paracetamol syrup for fever. Rid Pharma did not have the license to produce paracetamol syrup -- which is another offence.

In Dhaka Drug Court hearing on charge framing in one of the cases, was deferred six consecutive times till February 28 this year, on flimsy excuses like inability of the accused and defence lawyers to appear before the court either due to illness or being occupied otherwise. Finally the charge was framed yesterday by accusing the five.

Director General (DG) of the Directorate of Drug Administration (DDA) Abul Kalam Azad admits to the flaws.

"What you are saying is right, the cases were not filed properly," said Azad. "Probably it should have been mentioned in all the cases that Rid Pharma used diethylene glycol. Without an autopsy you cannot claim that diethylene glycol was the cause of deaths."

The lone petitioner who complained about detection of diethylene glycol in the case filed in Narayanganj, DDA's Drug Superintendent Nayar Sultana, is not hopeful of a conviction either. "The case may not stand at all because we tested only one sample instead of customary eight," Sultana said.

The Daily Star investigation also found that the private laboratory test that detected traces of diethylene glycol in a batch of Temset was officially ordered by the then DDA Director General Brig Gen Ismail Hossain, but the findings were mysteriously not mentioned in any case.

When contacted, Ismail could not recollect why he had not taken into account the private laboratory test result. He also avoided clarifying why he had sent the sample to a private lab for testing in the first place.

But he faulted drug superintendents for making the cases weak, because they were the ones who filed those. He also blamed the health ministry for not conducting autopsies of the dead children, although according to his claim, he had reminded the ministry to do so.

Current DDA DG Abul Kalam Azad surprisingly sympathises with the adulterators. He said, "The owner's business is already devastated over this single incident. This is also a kind of punishment, particularly financial punishment. Serving jail time is of course another kind of punishment."

Hopes of trial of the adulterators, however, still remain as many samples of the syrup collected, are still available from local DDA offices while the private laboratory that conducted a test, also preserved the sample it tested, said sources in DDA and the laboratory, adding that an immediate test of the samples may help the case towards a fair trial.

The Rid Pharma cases are utterly reminiscent of the fate of four other cases filed in 1992 against four other companies for adulterating paracetamol syrups using the same toxin, in which the same authorities were dealing with estimated deaths of 2,700 children

over a period of more than ten years. Two of the 1992 cases are still pending with the High Court (HC) while trial of another just resumed, 16 years after it had been stayed by the HC. In the fourth case the accused were acquitted.

THEWHISTLE-BLOWER
Prof Mohammad Hanif, the man who blew the whistle first in 1992 confirming presence of diethylene glycol in four brands of paracetamol syrup, was again the first to announce presence of the same element in Temset of Rid Pharma around mid July of 2009.

Deaths of 20 children admitted to Dhaka Shishu Hospital with acute renal failure in June-July 2009 prompted Hanif to send for laboratory test of a sample of Temset that he had collected from the family of a victim. The test found the toxin in the sample, Hanif told The Daily Star.

Following his alarm, the government formed a committee to probe the incident. DDA collected a few samples of the drug from Sylhet and Narayanganj, although children died in a wide area including Brahmanbaria, Comilla, Sylhet, Rangpur, Madaripur, Bogra, Narayanganj, Habiganj, and Narsinghdi.

THETESTS
The committee tested different brands of paracetamol syrup including Temset at government affiliated Essential Drug Company Ltd under the supervision of analysts appointed by the government and detected diethylene glycol only in the 5th batch of Temset.

Temset samples were also tested at Plasma Plus, a private lab, where the toxin was traced in two samples of the 8th batch of the drug.

"But the tests done at Plasma Plus cannot be counted, as the testing laboratory is not a government one," said Drug Superintendent Shafiqul Islam, who sent the samples for test to both the government and the private labs.

Though documents show that DDA collected samples of Temset belonging to the batches 3rd, 5th, 7th, 8th, and 12th, the government only had two batches tested. Nobody could answer why the remaining samples were not tested.

Even the sample of Temset belonging to the 3rd batch, which DDA collected from a victim's family at Shishu Hospital, was never produced for test for reasons unknown.

A member of the probe body Prof Moazzam Hossain said they only tested the samples provided by DDA.

FILING OF WEAK CASES

DDA filed four cases against five people of Rid Pharma Ltd on August 10 and 11, 2009 in four districts -- Narayanganj, Brahmanbaria, Sylhet, and Dhaka.

But ironically no reference of use of diethylene glycol by the manufacturer was made in three cases. Only the one filed in Narayanganj mentioned it.

"Separate cases were filed on separate tests. Diethylene glycol was not detected in the sample I collected," claimed DDA Drug Superintendent Shafiqul Islam, who collected the sample from Shishu hospital, and filed the case with Dhaka Drug Court.

Since DDA in its depositions in three of the cases had not mentioned that diethylene glycol had been found in Temset, the drug adulterators soon managed bail from all the three courts, said public prosecutors. The courts in their orders for bail mentioned since no diethylene glycol was detected, the drug cannot be said to be life threatening.

Gaining bail from the three courts, the accused a p p r o a c h e d t h e Narayanganj court with a submission that three other courts had already granted them bail as their drugs were tested negative for diethylene glycol. Narayanganj court also granted them bail, the public prosecutors added.

DDA officials who filed

the cases said the depositions had been prepared in the same format by someone in the head office and were sent to them.

Shafiqul said he had no hand in the depositions. "Actually we are not legal experts. Under the DG's instruction we filed the case after taking suggestions from lawyers. Our office doesn't have a legal expert, and we had to take advice from our personal lawyers."

The DG DDA back then was Brig Gen Ismail Hossain.

ABULKHAYER FACTOR

The then Drug Superintendent in Brahmanbaria Abul Khayer was ordered by DDA to seal off Rid Pharma's factory situated in that district, following a wide media coverage of the children's deaths, and Prof Mohammad Hanif's finding that Temset had diethylene glycol.

He was also ordered to collect samples of all medicines produced by Rid Pharma.

After sealing off the plant, Khayer initially reported to the head office that he had collected Temset samples, but when he filed a case in August 2009 in Brahmanbaria, he did not mention anything at all about Temset.

Khayer is the only DDA official who has been dealing since 1992 with the allegations of the toxin's use in paracetamol syrups. In his Rid Pharma case statement, he stated that he could collect samples of only two batches of Ridaplex Syrup, which is a vitamin B complex.

When asked how he could not find even one sample of Temset, Abul Khayer said, "From where would I collect the sample when there wasn't anything left in the factory. I searched through the entire area of Comilla and Brahmanbaria, but did not find even a bottle of Temset syrup."

But when he was reminded that his initial report to the head office said that he had collected some Temset samples, he remained quiet.

The Daily Star obtained a copy of the letter dated July 23, 2009 in which Khayer clearly wrote to a DDA director that he had obtained "Temset from batch no 5, 7 and 12".

He also told The Daily Star recently that he managed to get hold of 1,200 bottles of Temset soon after the government ordered tests were done. "I requested the local chemist and druggist associations and other drug related bodies, to collect the 1,200 samples swiftly," he said adding that at Brahmanbaria DDA office still has those.

Abul Khayer came under strong media criticism once before on October 20 last year during a trial of a case filed in connection with paracetamol syrup adulteration in 1992, when he sided with drug adulterators.

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DDA officials who filed

2 traders

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M Saiduzzaman, an executive magistrate asked the police to arrest them after he found them reselling the OMS rice to wholesalers.

Rab members following day-long investigation found City Rice purchased 2000kg of OMS rice for reselling while Mita Rice purchased 850kg at about 4.30pm.

A team of Rab led by Assistant Superintendent of Police (ASP) Humayun Kabir found that the some people were purchasing rice at Tk24 per kg from the OMS centres several times only to resell those to the rogue rice traders at rates varying between Tk27 per kg and Tk29 per kg.

Humayun told this correspondent that around 10 people were employed by the rice traders with money for purchasing the OMS rice.

After collecting the OMS rice, the rice traders used to resell those to wholesalers at Tk31 per kg, Humayun said quoting confessional statements from the arrestees.

They said they were "not aware" that such trading of OMS rice is prohibited by law.

Many local rice traders at Shaheb Bazar told this correspondent that they are finding it quite hard to survive in the market due to some dishonest traders.

"I usually collect rice from haats or larger rice markets at Tk 19 commission per sack containing 84 kg of rice. But some rice traders are making profit of Tk2 or more per kg by buying OMS rice and eventually they are doing better than us," said Muhammad Harun, a rice dealer.

"Although trading OMS

rice is prohibited by rules, some rice traders make easy money by exploiting poor people to buy OMS rice and reselling those to wholesalers," Saiduzzaman told The Daily Star.

He also said he asked police to check whether any officials of the food department are involved in practicing such illegal activities.

The District Controller of Food Hafizur Rahman said at least 90 tons of rice are allocated daily to 30 OMS dealers at every ward of the city and some 18000 people are purchasing the rice daily.

PM warns

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supplies to people.

"But there are some unscrupulous syndicates who create artificial food crisis to hike price of food and cause suffering to the people. We must take stern actions against those engaged in playing foul with food of hungry people," she said.

The prime minister informed the House in detail about her government's various measures to keep food price at a tolerable level through open market sale, fair price cards, social safety net programme, etc.

In a scripted reply, she also described the government's different steps to increase food production in the country by strengthening agriculture sector.

On tackling the climate change impact on agriculture, the premier said her government has collected drought resistance Nerica paddy seeds from Africa.

Cultivation of this paddy is now under trial at a farm in Bangladesh Agricultural Development Corporations. Nerica can be cultivated three seasons a year, she said.

Hasina took 20 minutes out of 30 minutes of question hour session to read the eight-page reply to a single written question on country's food situation.

Hasina also described various measures taken by her government to bring pace in the civil administration by utilising modern technology including automation of the public service commission, introduction of e-tendering, coordination with field level administration by e-centre of 4,501 union parishes.

On holding union parishad elections, the premier said her government will provide all out support to the Election Commission to hold the elections in a free, fair and non-partisan manner.

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Khaleda Zia.

Biman to fly in evacuees

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"The government will share the cost of repatriation with Biman," said Zafar Ahmed Khan, expatriates' welfare secretary.

The decision comes when the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) is struggling to repatriate thousands of Bangladeshi nationals stuck at Ras Adjir of Tunisia and Sollum of Egypt after evacuating politically troubled Libya.

So far, IOM has repatriated around 4,500 Bangladeshis from the borders while over 4,000 returned with the help of their employers and some on their own, said officials at the foreign ministry.

According to IOM around 12,000 Bangladeshis are in refugee camps at Ras Adjir while over 6,000 in Sollum.

Those who have returned home said quick repatriation is crucial as the people stranded at Egypt and Tunisia borders are immensely suffering from food crisis, chilly weather and lack of sanitation.

Many of the refugees at Sollum border have been sleeping in the open for nearly two weeks, said an IOM statement Tuesday.

Meanwhile, Italian government has organised and financed two civil flights operated by Alitalia, to transport some 600 Bangladeshis home from Tunisia border, said a press release of the Italian Embassy in Dhaka.

The first flight was sched-

uled to arrive here early today, while the second Friday evening.

Asif Munir, IOM spokesman in Dhaka, said the organisation is arranging repatriation -- mainly from Tunisian border -- of around 2,000 Bangladeshis a day.

International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) said the flow of incoming refugees from Libya to the borders has now slowed down.

On Sunday, for instance, only 2,000 people showed up at the camp.

The population of the camp at the Tunisian border has dropped to 15,000 from 20,000, owing both to dwindling number of arrivals and surge of departure.

A foreign ministry release says a flight of Korean Airlines chartered by Daewoo Engineering and Construction Co was scheduled to arrive here today at 1:00 am with 206 Bangladeshis.

The flight was also supposed to bring the bodies of three Bangladeshis who died at Hania Port, Greece after jumping from a ship that was carrying foreign workers from Libya.

With this departure, repatriation of all Bangladeshis (around 3,000) who arrived in Greece from Libya, except for the 11 who jumped from the ship and remained missing, will be completed.

Meanwhile, the returnee workers yesterday demanded that the government negotiate for compensation with Libyan govern-

ment, he added.

Overnight and threw me down from top of the building," said Shahidul.

"Moments after I was thrown down, I discovered myself lying on the ground. I cried for drawing attention of the locals. As no-one came forward, I walked somehow and hired a rickshaw for my brother's house. But before I could reach there, I fainted on the way," he added.

The rickshaw-puller, with the help of pedestrians, informed his brother and admitted him to DMCH, he continued.

Contacted, Sutrapur police said they have heard of the incident, but no-one filed any complaint.

Boy survives 7-storey fall

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banana plants and later rolled down on the ground.

During a visit to the spot

where the boy fell, two

banana plants were found

smashed as the boy first fell

on those.

Talking to The Daily Star,

the boy alleged his