

BITTER TRUTH

Save children, save future



Md. ASADULLAH KHAN

IN the backdrop of May Day this year, the administration and leaders in different segments of the society pledged to establish the rights of workers but, appallingly, the plight of the millions of child workers in informal sectors remains unnoticed.

Though child workers have been withdrawn from the garment sector following international pressure, there are still thousands of children eking out a living under oppressive situations in other vocations. They are the most neglected section of the society.

Children who work as domestic help, break stones for construction work, pick trash from the streets, pack groceries, work in small factories, or as hotel boys or coolies in bus and railway stations, outnumber the only 10,000 withdrawn from the garment sector. The poignant part is that they belong to the informal labour sector and are excluded from legal protection, which make them even more vulnerable.

The National Child Domestic Worker convention 2010 held in January, 2010, under the auspices of the Save the Children Sweden-Denmark and Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK) pointed out the sad plight of the vast mass of unfortunate child domestic workers.

According to a baseline survey

(BBS and Unicef), other than the 7.4 million working in the informal sector, as many as 4 lakh 21 thousand children aged between 6-17 years are working as domestic help (CDW), and are almost invisible and inaccessible to government surveillance, NGO inspection or even to the neighbours.

A report published in a Bangla daily on April 11 about the torture on Hasina (11), a domestic help, for months by her lady employer is really disquieting. As her condition deteriorated due to lack of medical attention, she was left abandoned in Malibagh, where her elder sister worked. She is undergoing medical treatment in the Feni hospital.

Taslima (12) was a meritorious student of Class-V in a school at Kishoreganj, but her parents could not afford the cost of her education. Lured by a broker that Taslima could earn at least Tk. 2,000 per month by working as a domestic help in the capital, her father sent her with one Madhu Mia to Dhaka. But Taslima was tortured and ultimately died.

With more incidences of such barbaric torture and even murder of tender-aged girls published in the newspapers, the list could be dauntingly endless.

A report in a daily on April 25, quoting a human rights activist group, said that during the last four months 14 domestic help, mostly children, were tortured to death while eight others were severely tortured. The whole society must be feeling scared about the way these

crimes are increasing in the country. Poverty coupled with lack of proper education has made these tender-aged girls extremely vulnerable to repression and exploitation.

All these horrific incidents are happening while we speak glibly about our children, the future of our country, in seminars and meetings and make lofty promises to ensure their rights. While other countries

160 million, live virtually unnoticed. They are a vast untapped wealth that could be turned into a most effective and potential manpower of the country. Born mostly of poor parents, the male children supplement their meager income, while the female children in most cases fall into the clutches of child-traffickers and find their ultimate abode in brothels.

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talk about the need to invest in their youth, much of Bangladesh has converted its youth force into a pernicious capital investment.

In too many factories and work houses, even after promulgation of the "Repression against Women and Children Act," employing tender-aged boys and girls in hazardous job still continues. In a host of such work places, it is the children who dip the matchsticks into phosphorous, mix the gun powder for fire crackers and roll bidis and work the metal stamping machines.

Bangladesh's young population (under 16), about 50% of the total

The condition of the children lacking the support of their parents reflects a beggar's description. They wander in the streets of big cities, often surviving by begging, ferrying household consumer goods and, most shockingly, by peddling drugs.

The city's garbage dumps are home to many of them. These rubbish pickers spend their days sifting through the mountains of smelly and poisonous refuse, looking for recyclable objects. How can the administration and society face the cruel fact that these children, only because they were born poor or with no mother or father to support

them in the most formative years of their lives, are destined to end up in garbage dumps and cardboard shanties?

The number of children initially enrolled in primary schools ranges up to 75%, although the official figure claims this number to be 99%. Almost 60% of them dropout mainly due to poverty. The report made public by the mass literacy campaign, an NGO, says that if the trend continues only 20 students out of 100 enrolled in the primary level in 2010 will be sitting for the SSC examination in 2019.

The grim fact is that more than 50 million children of school age, 60% of them girls, have not yet stepped into classrooms despite the vigorous efforts by the government and some NGOs.

People believe that the government's avowed programme of spreading literacy in the country could get some momentum by introduction of mid-day meal in the primary schools. Believing that the challenge of poverty remains as a big barrier to spreading education, you have to keep them in the school premises by incentives such as food.

The affluent think about these unfortunate kids only when they come up to their cars at the road intersections and ask the passengers to buy some flowers or popcorn from them.

Most of the poor children live in a state of violence, persecution, rejection and forced labour. In this sad setting the only escape for

many is drugs and other anti-social activities.

The state must intervene in such a critical aspect of national life. The root cause of such problems is abysmal poverty. Education is an essential component in the eradication of poverty. Coupled with illiteracy and poverty, it is the population boom that turns all development activities into a fiasco.

Some development agencies and NGOs are imparting learning skill to some men and women. But to combat poverty effectively, it is not enough that the illiterate be taught to read only.

Equally important are what they read, what they learn, and how this learning can be put to effective practical use to improve their everyday lives. Education must be relevant to the "real world."

Debt payment contributes to slashing of health and education budgets, which results in such a dismal state of health and education of the children. The international Monetary Fund also calls upon the under-developed countries for structural adjustment of their economies.

The agency favours a policy it calls "adjustment with human face," meaning that programmes to feed and house children must have "first call" on national resources, whatever be the debt burden or perceived needs.

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Unsafe at any cost

HELEN CALDICOTT

SIX weeks ago, when I first heard about the reactor damage at the Fukushima Daiichi plant in Japan, I knew the prognosis: If any of the containment vessels or fuel pools exploded, it would mean millions of new cases of cancer in the Northern Hemisphere.

Many advocates of nuclear power would deny this. During the 25th anniversary last week of the Chernobyl disaster, some commentators asserted that few people died in the aftermath, and that there have been relatively few genetic abnormalities in survivors' offspring. It's an easy leap from there to arguments about the safety of nuclear energy compared to alternatives like coal, and optimistic predictions about the health of the people living near Fukushima.

But this is dangerously ill informed and short-sighted; if anyone knows better, it would be doctors like me. There's great debate about the number of fatalities after Chernobyl; the International Atomic Energy Agency has predicted that there will be only about 4,000 deaths from cancer, but a 2009 report published by the New York Academy of Sciences says that almost 1 million people have already perished from cancer and other diseases.

The high doses of radiation caused so many miscarriages that we will never know the number of genetically damaged fetuses that did not come to term. (And both Belarus and Ukraine have group

homes full of deformed children.)

Nuclear accidents never cease. We're decades if not generations from seeing the full effects of the radioactive emissions from Chernobyl.

As we know from Hiroshima and Nagasaki, it takes years to get cancer. Leukemia takes only five to 10 years to emerge, but solid cancers take 15 to 60. Furthermore, most radiation-induced mutations are recessive; it can take many generations for two recessive genes to combine to form a child with a

particular disease, like my specialty, cystic fibrosis.

We can't possibly imagine how many cancers and other diseases will be caused in the far future by the radioactive isotopes emitted by Chernobyl and Fukushima.

Doctors understand these dangers. We work hard to try to save the life of a child dying of leukemia. We work hard to try to save the life of a woman dying of metastatic breast cancer. And yet the medical dictum says that for incurable diseases, the only recourse is

prevention. There's no group better prepared than doctors to stand up to the physicists of the nuclear industry.

Still, physicists talk convincingly about "permissible doses" of radiation. They consistently ignore internal emitters -- radioactive elements from nuclear power plants or weapons tests that are ingested or inhaled into the body, giving very high doses to small volumes of cells.

They focus instead on generally less harmful external radiation from sources outside the body, whether from isotopes emitted from nuclear power plants, medical X-rays, cosmic radiation or background radiation that is naturally present in our environment.

However, doctors know there is no such thing as a safe dose of radiation, and that radiation is cumulative. The mutations caused in cells by this radiation are generally deleterious. We all carry several hundred genes for disease: cystic fibrosis, diabetes, phenylketonuria, muscular dystrophy. There are now more than 2,600 genetic diseases on record, any one of which may be caused by a radiation-induced mutation, and many of which we're bound to see more of, because we are artificially increasing background levels of radiation.

For many years, physicists employed by the nuclear industry have been outperforming doctors, at least in politics and the news media. Since the Manhattan Project

As we know from Hiroshima and Nagasaki, it takes years to get cancer. Physicists had the knowledge to begin the nuclear age. Physicians have the knowledge, credibility and legitimacy to end it.

in the 1940s, physicists have had easy access to Congress. They had harnessed the energy inside the center of the sun, and later physicists, whether lobbying for nuclear weapons or nuclear energy, had the same power. They walk into Congress and Congress virtually prostrates itself. Their technological advancements are there for all to see; the harm will become apparent only decades later.

Doctors, by contrast, have fewer dates with Congress, and much less access on nuclear issues. We don't typically go around discussing the latent period of carcinogenesis and the amazing advances made in understanding radiobiology. But as a result, we do an inadequate job of explaining the long-term dangers

of radiation to policymakers and the public.

When patients come to us with cancer, we deem it rude to inquire if they lived downwind of Three Mile Island in the 1980s or might have eaten Hershey's chocolate made with milk from cows that grazed in irradiated pastures nearby. We tend to treat the disaster after the fact, instead of fighting to stop it from happening in the first place. Doctors need to confront the nuclear industry.

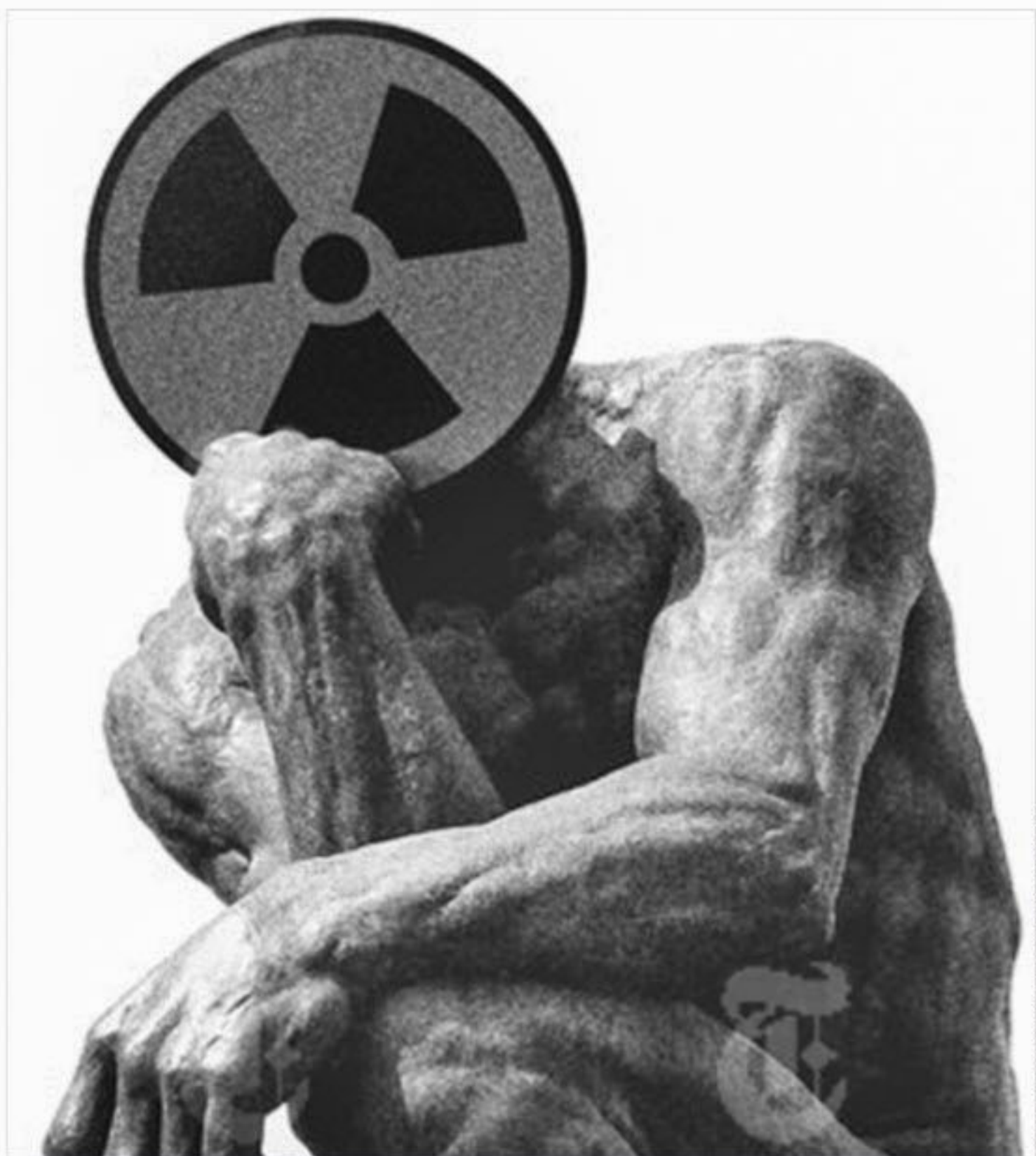
Nuclear power is neither clean, nor sustainable, nor an alternative to fossil fuels -- in fact, it adds substantially to global warming. Solar, wind and geothermal energy, along with conservation, can meet our energy needs.

At the beginning, we had no sense that radiation induced cancer. Marie Curie and her daughter didn't know that the radioactive materials they handled would kill them. But it didn't take long for the early nuclear physicists in the Manhattan Project to recognize the toxicity of radioactive elements. I knew many of them quite well. They had hoped that peaceful nuclear energy would absolve their guilt over Hiroshima and Nagasaki, but it has only extended it.

Physicists had the knowledge to begin the nuclear age. Physicians have the knowledge, credibility and legitimacy to end it.

Helen Caldicott, a founder of Physicians for Social Responsibility, is the author of Nuclear Power Is Not the Answer.

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