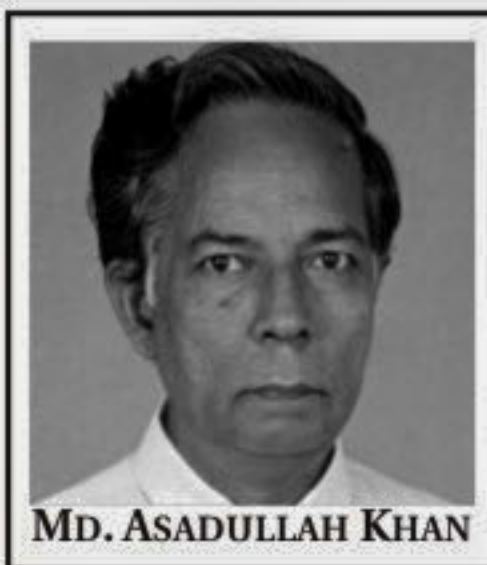


BITTER TRUTH

Rampant adulteration still a havoc



MD. ASADULLAH KHAN

ADULTERATION runs rampant in the country. Dangers lurk in every food items. From vegetables, fish, milk, fruit, sweetmeats, ice cream, to spices, nothing is safe. Packaged and bottled drinks, both locally produced and imported, with harmful ingredients and chemicals are being sold in the market.

Many of the dry food items available in the market are being produced in bewildering unhygienic locations. Oblivious of the dangers lurking in the everyday food items, parents now ask their children to eat foods that contain vitamins, iron and calcium.

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

In advanced countries, there is a strong monitoring system. Traders there can't 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 this grave health hazard.

Sensible citizens shudder to think about the enormous price the nation may have to pay in the long run. The report made public by Institute of Public Health is really worrisome. Terming the food adulteration as a major health problem, the report says that unsafe foods pose a serious threat to health. People are alarmed to learn that a large number of businessmen, simply out of greed, are involved in the production of these adulterated foods.

These unscrupulous businessmen use toxic chemicals like formalin, and another recently introduced chemical ethofen and textile dyes in preserving fruits, milk and fish. In most of the mobile court drives, only the manager and employees of the fake factories get caught, but the real culprits, the

factory owners or traders remain far away from the clutches of law enforcement agency due to high connections with these people.

Despite the fact that use of calcium carbide has been banned internationally for ripening fruit, the dirty practice goes unabated in our country. Consumers might be infected with diarrhea, skin diseases, and high blood pressure as they continue to eat fruits ripened by carbide, leading to liver and kidney diseases if taken in longer.

According to D.G., BSTI the production of contaminated drinking water has been increasing in the country.

BSTI revealed that about 1,000 drinking water factories exist in the country, only 400 of which have licenses from the BSTI. Bottlers of drinking water factories have mushroomed with little regard to compliance of standard or BSTI license.

Despite BSTI cancelling the licenses of 139 bottling factories in the last 18 months, there has been no news in setting up new factories

fruits, locally produced or imported, from malls not realising what they are bargaining for.

Many people in the country have stopped buying fruits, especially mangoes from the city markets after watching the destruction of formalin and ethofen-laced mangoes and grapes by the mobile courts on TV.

Papaya and bananas are artificially ripened by chemicals like ethylene oxide and formalin. Experts in medical biology point out that ethylene oxide is carcinogenic and when used over food might invite a disas-

such adulterated fish and vegetables might cause cancer.

The month of Ramadan will bring more such woes for Muslims because of the excessive fried items sold for a month. A section of restaurant owners use refined engine oil to fry chickens, kabab, peaju and potato crisps.

Engine oil used as cooking ingredient makes food tasty, claim a section of the restaurant owners. Defying health department regulations, many restaurant owners and street vendors use left-

conducted 1,039 mobile courts across the country in seven months from July last year to February this year and detected rampant malpractice and adulteration in the food production centres.

Some Tk.23.8 million were realised as fine during the drives while 1,086 cases were filed and 66 people were sent to jail. According to DG, BSTI, adulteration problem could be controlled easily if the DCC performed its job properly. The DCC is supposed to do so instead of BSTI. DCC have their own magistrates

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Food adulteration in the country has assumed alarming proportions. Experts in medical biology point out that consumption of adulterated food affects people with kidney dysfunction, diabetes and cardiac problems. They further 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 properly trained in the use of chemical fertilisers. Absence of effluent treatment plants on one hand (ETP) and lack of training of the farmers, the factory wastes, fertiliser and pesticide residues are drained out at will into the farmlands, ultimately contaminating the farm at large.

A study by the Institute of Public Health revealed that more than 50% food samples including water which they had tested were adulterated.

in new locations. The result: Children and aged people are facing constant threat of diseases even with the bottled water produced by these factories.

Textile dyes are being randomly used to colour sweetmeats like kalojam, chamcam, pantua cakes and pastries. Urea fertiliser is used for whitening puffed rice. A section of factory owners, through use of other low quality oil and mustard oil, continue to market mustard oil. Sadly, in most cases they are using allyl isothiocyanate to give off a mustard oil extra bite.

When the import of soyabean oil becomes uncertain or the price shoots up globally, the local market manipulators resort to dishonest means. Unscrupulous millers resort to mixing soyabean oil with poor quality palm oil or super oil.

In the domain of fruits and vegetables there prevails a total anarchy. Gullible consumers are buying

ter. The key findings of the EPA study group suggest that many children may develop cancer sometime during their lifetime as a result of the pesticide or toxic-laden products they consume.

The test conducted by BSTI-run mobile courts on fruit samples like mango, banana, liches and jackfruit collected from Badamtali, Amin bazaar and Karwan bazar show the presence of formalin and ethofen, which in the short term will cause diarrhea, food poisoning and gastrointestinal disorder but in the long-term will accumulate to serious health implications.

Fish is considered an essential protein for people of all categories and ages. Many fish sellers spray fish with formalin (formaldehyde gas mixed with methyl alcohol), an organic chemical, usually used for preserving tissues. It makes the fish appear stiff and fresh for a longer period of time. Regular intake of

over cooking oil. This increases the peroxide limit of the oil, turning it toxic.

The NRDC report goes on to charge that the governments of the countries surveyed are failing to adequately protect the youngsters from such dangers. Given the fact that children are consuming toxic food, they are likely to be more vulnerable than adults. Their organs may not be as efficient in removing toxic chemicals.

In Bangladesh, we have allowed both pollution and food contamination to run riot. No agency other than BSTI has conducted any examination of the pesticide-residue levels or toxic chemicals in the food market.

With a totally inefficient monitoring system, just having tough laws is not enough to keep unscrupulous traders from tampering with food items.

BSTI sources revealed that it

while BSTI has to hire magistrates from the district administration.

Despite the Pure Food Ordinance 2005, there was hardly any effort to enforce it. Even when the country's apex court issued orders again in 2009 for setting up food court and one food testing centre in every district, no effort was taken to implement it.

With 50million people in the country known to be afflicted with complicated diseases by taking adulterated food, the administration has got to be scary. Given the political will, it is not very difficult to control this nefarious business by a handful of traders out to kill people slowly through poison; simply for minting money.

God forbid! What will happen if one of their near relations get affected with some deadly diseases by taking such adulterated food?

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Judicial reforms: Philippines model

SHAKHAWAT LITON

A month before her term expires, President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo appointed Renato C. Corona as chief justice of Philippines. It was Arroyo who in 2002 appointed Corona as an associate justice in the Supreme Court and made him chief justice after nine years.

The appointment made in May last year triggered huge hue and cry. Not because of Corona's inefficiency or violation of any law, but because of his past career, as he was member of the cabinet under two executive presidents -- Fidel Ramos and Arroyo.

The man who held such highly political posts assumed office of the chief justice of Philippines on May 17, 2010. After taking oath, Justice Corona issued a statement assuring countrymen of serving them with utmost sincerity and honesty.

But his statement seems to have not easily defused raging criticism as people were skeptical about it. Talking to this writer at the Supreme Court premises on June 6 this year, Chief Justice Corona also acknowledged it.

"Many people questioned my appointment as the chief justice. Initially they could not accept me. But they changed their minds after examining my works. It took five to six months to obtain people confidence in me," Justice Corona told this writer.

During a study tour in Manila early of June organised by UNDP Bangladesh, this writer talked to

some other sitting and retired judges of both Supreme Court and lower courts, and officials concerned. They said the current chief justice proved his integrity and is now widely accepted by all.

It is one of the glaring examples of an effective mechanism to select individuals for judicial appointments. It was the Judicial and Bar Council (JBC) led by the erstwhile chief justice that picked Corona as one of the nominees for the post of chief justice, considering his depth experiences as a law professor and private practitioner.

In that case, what President Arroyo did was appoint Corona from nominees as the chief justice of Philippines.

The introduction of JBC in the 1987 constitution of Philippines is a major step towards judicial reform as it is undoubtedly true that the effectiveness of any judicial organisation, no matter how it is planned and structured, will suffer if it is unable to get honest, dedicated and competent judges.

Before the 1987 Constitution, a good number of citizens, bar associations and civic organisations, especially the mass media, expressed dissatisfaction over the nation's system of dispensing justice with a vehemence that reached new heights, considering a persistently staggering backlog; lazy, dishonest and incompetent members of the judiciary; cumbersome procedures; and dilatory tactics of litigants and lawyers.

In response to growing demand the JBC was finally created, empow-

ering the SC to supervise the judicial appointments. The JBC is composed of the chief justice as ex-officio chairman, the secretary of justice, and a representative of the congress as ex-officio members, a representative of the integrated bar, a professor of law, a retired member of the SC, and a representative of the private sector.

To safeguard judicial appointments, the SC has promulgated a resolution to strengthen the role and capacity of the JBC.

In fact the SC has been playing a leading role to bring necessary

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reforms in the judiciary, without depending on the executive branch of the government.

Under the doctrine of separation of powers, stipulated in the Philippines constitution, the Judiciary as the third branch of the government is co-equal to and independent of the legislative and executive branches.

Over the years, a series of reform initiatives were implemented and are being implemented under the supervision of the SC with the assistance from various international

donor agencies. The way the SC has been implementing various programmes becomes an example of effective decentralisation of its administrative power.

The SC has set up a Programme Management Office (PMO) assigning it the task to coordinate and manage the implementation of the technical and administrative aspects of the judicial reform programme. Its activities focus on project development, implementation and monitoring, and resource mobilisation, advocacy for reform etc.

Empowered by the 1987 constitution, the SC exercises administrative supervision over all lower courts. To properly discharge the constitutional mandate, the SC set up the Office of the Court Administrator (OCA). The OCA is tasked with the supervision and administration of the lower courts all over the country and to all of their personnel. It likewise reports and recommends to the SC all actions that affect lower court management, and other matters.

With the objective to bring the

court closer to the people, the SC has set up the Public Information Office (PIO). The PIO's primary task is to promptly disseminate, as widely as possible, news and jurisprudence from the SC. It is an information-based office, which cultivates the Court's good relations with the media and the general public.

It provides photos and video coverage of oral arguments and other important court activities, conducts court tours and produces information, education, and communication materials about the judiciary.

Moreover, the automation of all the courts nationwide with full access to the internet is another major success in the ongoing judicial reforms. The automation system is contributing largely to reducing backlog of cases, shutting doors for irregularities. The way the case management system was digitalised, it constantly updates judges about status of the cases, reminds them not to dodge their duties as it has been easy to evaluate the judges performance due to the automation system.

However, there is no reason to think that the Philippines' judiciary is enjoying complete and uninterrupted freedom and the executive branch does not make efforts to influence or manipulate the judiciary. No where in the world do politicians run the executive branch act like angels.

Talking to judges and officials of both SC and lower courts, it is learnt that politicians in Philippines hold-

ing posts in the executive branch sometimes try to manipulate the judiciary to get the Court's rulings in their favour in some crucial cases. But it is the SC as the head of the judiciary that does not bow its head to executive's undue pressure and it also safeguards lower judiciary. It has only been possible for the sweeping reforms in the entire judiciary.

In the words of Philippine's former chief justice Hilario G. Davide, Jr. "The ultimate beneficiary of these changes is not the judiciary itself but the entire nation. With solutions in place, the courts will be able to deliver justice more effectively and efficiently."

Now the Philippines experience in judicial reform is seen as a model in the Asean region and has inspired other countries to undertake similar programmes. Many countries have sent delegations on study tour to the Philippines.

A delegation of Bangladesh judiciary consisted judges of the SC, district courts, lawyers, and other officials concerned, on a study tour to the Philippines. During the tour organised by the UNDP Bangladesh, which is supporting the justice sector strategic dialogue project for reforms to improve efficiency of the judiciary, the delegation observed how they brought the significant reforms in the judiciary and they keep to continue the reform process. Now it's time for the Bangladesh judiciary to undertake its own reform programmes.

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