

Expediting clean environment movement

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WHEN the government is not capable enough or unable to monitor and stop the ongoing violations of environmental laws, it is the people who can contribute significantly in assisting the regulator by informing the officials of any shocking environmental degradation that is posing severe threat to their surroundings, and also by following the rules properly themselves as sensible citizens and raising awareness among others to stand against pollution.

The current scenario is grave in the fields of air pollution, caused by emissions from

bad in a day or two. It is the result of reluctance of the government in recruiting adequate number of workforce in the regulatory body -- Department of Environment (DoE) -- to curb environmental offences. It also gives an impression of poor monitoring and command by the officials concerned since awareness among the majority people is still to be created.

Apparently, air pollution seems to have been the most disturbing issue for the country now. When the extent of air pollution is rising in the urban areas due to density of population, dust in the streets and at construction sites, higher number of fuel oil-run and unfit motor vehicles, industries and

precisely on crops and trees. Contaminated air irritates eyes, throat and lungs, and thus leads to different breathing problems, visibility problems, and heart complications. Some chronic health effects include decreased lung capacity and lung cancer resulting from long-term exposure to toxic air pollutants. In addition, it is to be noted that people, mainly the poor, living in or near industrial areas and highways are the most exposed to such pollutants. Among them, the infants and the pregnant women are more vulnerable to such pollution.

Meanwhile, dumping of waste is still a major problem in Dhaka as well as other parts of the country since the matter is yet to be fully-settled. A major portion of the everyday rubbish is still thrown away at open places other than at the designated dustbins, while the garbage, which the authorities take away for dumping to distant sites from localities, is not regularly treated. Thus, the discharging sites pose threats to the people living around and passing thereby since these result in low weight births and trigger other health hazards. Open waste often becomes a major breeding ground for the mosquitoes and other insects that carry germs and transmit that in human and other living beings. Decomposition of waste produces huge carbon dioxide, too.

Recycling business can here play a vital role by reusing the valuable components including polythene, plastic goods, glass, iron, hospital or medical and the organic waste. But, when the mega city and many other urban centres are expanding and population is increasing, the lack of a good number of recycling businesses has kept the waste management issue still unaddressed to a large extent. According to the minister concerned, the authorities are able to manage only half of the waste produced.

Unprotected industry is a huge source of water pollution, as it produces pollutants that are extremely harmful to the environment and people. Across the country, dyeing and washing plants, pulp and paper mills, fertiliser and petroleum refineries/industries, and others are diluting the waterbodies unabated, even though they are supposed to use waste treatment plants as per environment laws and special directives of the High Court. Moreover, people at many parts of the country these days dump garbage on the banks of waterbodies or in flowing river or canal waters and also in drains resulting in contamination of the waters and clogging of the drains.

Pollutants from industrial sources include asbestos fibres, which can be



Hamful emission vitiating the atmosphere

inhaled and cause illnesses such as asbestosis, mesothelioma, lung cancer, intestinal cancer and liver cancer; lead, a metallic element which is so hard to clean up once the environment is contaminated; mercury, another metallic element is also a poison.

Nitrates and phosphates come from increased use of fertilisers and are behind a dense growth of plants decomposition of which depletes the supply of oxygen, leading to the extinction of animal life. Sulphur is another non-metallic substance that is harmful for marine life. Most recently, the shipbreaking and shipbuilding sectors have become emerging industries in Bangladesh. But here lies the concern whether it would be possible to regulate the yards so that they check pollution of the rivers and the Bay while working.

Noise pollution is another disturbing thing that harms people and living beings if not the environment. Although the noise pollution level in the major urban centres of Bangladesh exceeds the legal standards, the issue hardly gets attention of the authorities concerned and in pollution discussions. People on the streets, poor people, mainly children, elderly and women living in industrial and dense slum areas are the most affected by such pollution. Studies show that there are direct links between noise and health. Problems include stress related illnesses, high blood pressure, speech interference, hearing loss, sleep disruption, and lost productivity.

Most of the businesses operating in the country take the chance of dodging envi-

ronmental rules eyeing larger profits. And since the authorities' efforts to refrain these businesses and industries from polluting further are meagre, given their manpower and other shortcomings, the people should come forward now individually and in groups to help.

Once aware mass people should use the available tools to expedite the anti-pollution movements to press home action against the major polluters. Regardless of urban or rural areas, the people, in cooperation with the government officials concerned, may constitute forums for motivation and action. These organisations may play a key role in making others aware through door-to-door campaigns to check different forms of pollution caused by individuals and establishments.

The DoE, only responsible body for the environmental management in the country, organises a public hearing chaired by its director general on the second Thursday every month at its Agargaon office in the capital. It is arranged to hear and note complaints from the people who are directly or indirectly affected or those who want to bring an issue into light for an immediate solution. People may also submit their comments or enquiry on the DoE's website (www.doe-bd.org). The DoE officials can be reached through phone or could be written about any environmental issues. Through such a concerted move by the people and the government, a cleaner and better country could be envisaged in the near future.

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Imprudent dumping of waste polluting the surroundings.

vehicles, brick kilns and industries, and dust; contamination of flowing waters (river, canal etc) and open water (non-flowing) reservoirs (ponds, haors, baors etc.) because of industries and also households discharging untreated waste therein; environmental and atmospheric pollution by dumping of solid waste at open places; soil pollution due to excessive use of pesticides, and noise pollution, and overall environmental degradation by deforestation.

In a global survey report published last month, Bangladesh ranked second from last among 132 countries in terms of air pollution. The situation has not turned so

brickfields, it is slowly approaching towards the suburban and rural areas too with further establishment of brickfields and industries. A policy support has to be there from the government side to decide how many approvals to industries would be issued, in what manner and where -- considering the ability of the regulator in overseeing those after coming into operation.

Polluted air containing excessive carbon monoxide, sulphur dioxide, nitrogen dioxide, ozone and particulate matter has recently raised much concern because of its short- and long-term impact on the people's health, as well as the environment --

The best part about global warming

There are concerns that a series of soft flu seasons may actually increase our susceptibility to an epidemic, since our bodies would have devoted less energy to fighting the flu and creating immunity.

CHARLES FINCH

A popular cold-weather complaint of recent winters -- if the world is getting warmer, why is there 15 inches of snow in Central Park right now? -- has been quietly laid aside this year. Schoolchildren who had anticipated snow

days and sledding will tell you that the weather has been disappointingly mild; in fact, since record keeping began, the park has experienced only one warmer winter, in 2001-2.

The trend holds at a national level, too. According to the National Oceanic and

Atmospheric Administration, this January was the fourth warmest in the documented history of weather in the contiguous United States.

If anything, the exceptional snowstorms of last winter and the uncommon gentleness of this one are further evidence of global warming, which is characterized by extreme and erratic weather patterns rather than an unceasing rise of the planet's temperature.

The long-term troubles this sort of weather predicts are alarming. In the short term, however, our warm winter may have one unforeseen and felicitous consequence: a drastic reduction in the incidence of influenza.

Flu seasons can begin as early as October, and end when the number of positive tests for the virus approaches zero, generally sometime in March or April. There has been a wide variation in the number of deaths attributable to influenza in past seasons -- it has reached as high as 49,000 -- but the average is around 12,000.

This year's flu season, however, didn't officially begin until late last month. And while a true number is difficult to reach -- not every sick person is tested, for instance, and the cause of a death in the hospital can be clouded by co-morbidities -- it is likely that no more than a few hundred people in America, and possibly far fewer, have died of the flu this winter.

Indeed, by any measurement, the statistics are historic and heartening. For every individual who has been hospitalized this season, 22 people were hospitalized in the 2010-11 flu season. Even more strikingly, 122 children died of flu last season and 348 during the flu outbreak of 2009-10 -- while this time around that number is three.

It is hard to overstate the relief hospitals are experiencing as a result -- particularly after the rising prevalence in the last decade of avian and swine flu, which led to fears in both the medical community and the public of a widespread outbreak. As a fellow in infectious diseases at Weill Cornell Medical College told me: "Three years ago I was



Prolonged summer may retard eradication of disease-spreading mosquitoes also in temperate zone.

sitting in an amphitheater being briefed on the influenza pandemic. We were worried we might have to ration ventilators. Now we've seen just a handful of cases all winter. I personally haven't treated a single case of influenza."

Scientists are still studying the complex relationship between flu and climate, and other factors, like an absence of new strains or immunity from past vaccinations, may have contributed to this season's low numbers. But there is reason to believe the weather is an important factor.

For one thing, studies have established that the flu virus thrives in low humidity, and therefore low temperature -- there's a reason, after all, that the flu usually hits us in January, not July. Cold weather also dries out the nasal passages, making it easier to get the coughs and sneezes that transmit the flu. And it keeps us cooped up inside, passing illnesses around.

The hallmark of the flu is its unpredictability, and it is important even this late in the year to stay vigilant; the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is still urg-

ing everyone to get a flu shot. There are also concerns that a series of soft flu seasons may actually increase our susceptibility to an epidemic, since our bodies would have devoted less energy to fighting the flu and creating immunity. On top of all that, of course, this temporary reprieve is only the scantest mitigation of the probable ultimate consequences for humanity of unchecked global warming. If the world keeps getting warmer, New Yorkers might have to fret more about malaria than pneumonia.

Still, when one considers those who are most likely to die from influenza, often with shocking swiftness -- children, the elderly, cancer and HIV patients, pregnant women -- the weather this winter comes to seem like a very cheerful development indeed. Even the loss of a season's sledding, you might say, is a small price to pay.

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Untimely floods can increase susceptibility to cold and influenza as well as waterborne diseases anywhere in the world.