

# Water pollution still rampant

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IT has been around three years since the High Court ordered industries indiscriminately discharging waste water to install effluent treatment plants (ETPs) within a year. The court on June 10, 2009 also asked the government (industries secretary) to ensure that no new industry is set up without ensuring proper measures to check pollution.

However, the environmental law enacted in 1997 bars such 'untreated' filthy water discharge in waterbodies. It also states that ETPs are a must for those types of industries.

The industries minister on July 19, 2009 stressed that all new industries must have ETPs. And, on March 22 this year, he said they were working on a new industrial law to make ETPs mandatory while setting up new industries.

At a discussion in the port city, the minister said, under the law, industrial areas would be required to have a central system for treating industrial waste and that "industries cannot come up just anywhere".

The three exemplary central ETPs initiated for three large-scale indus-

trial areas -- tannery estate in Savar, Dhaka EPZ and Chittagong EPZ -- are yet to be operational despite the court order and the government pledges.

A much-awaited deal on the central ETP in the tannery estate was struck in March and it would take 15 months to set up the plant that would treat water from around the 150 factories to be shifted. But still, there would be around 50 industries left at Hazaribagh.

Currently, the tanneries are allowed to discharge water in canals connecting the Buriganga river, whereas the DEPZ industries either using their own ETPs or discharging waste water into the adjoining areas hindering agriculture and fishing. The CETP in DEPZ is likely to be operational by June this year.

Well, it gives us an outlook of how much 'less serious' the government is in restricting the businesses from whimsically harming the environment and putting the waterbodies, canals and rivers under threats with dumping wastes containing chemicals into them.

Because of the ongoing discharging trend, the farmers are losing arable lands while fishermen are

losing income. Due to lack of grasslands -- as those are already polluted in many places due to contamination of water -- people cannot easily feed their cattle.

Serious damage to the waterbodies has triggered contamination of surface water commonly used by people for bathing, washing and drinking. Forced to use the polluted water in some cases, people are falling victim to different water-borne diseases.

Moreover, polluted water provides for perfect breeding ground for mosquitoes.

And, one bad thing is that the rivers and other waterbodies and land that have already been contaminated cannot be rectified for a long time.

Though the government claims to have issued licences for setting up ETPs, there have been allegations that many of those already installed remain dysfunctional most of the time to "save money".

Here, the regulatory body, with its merely inadequate manpower to monitor and enforce the laws, is claimed to have been doing its best to check water pollution and regularly penalizing of the industries. But besides these drives, the authorities are reluctant at the same time, considering the contribution of the industries sectors in economy.

In our country, water is polluted mainly by solid and liquid chemicals and garbage, thrown largely by the industries -- mainly the dyeing and washing plants and tanneries; businesses operating on the banks of canals and rivers; government's cleaning and sewerage service providers; and individuals.

Many main rivers and some near

the cities and towns out of around 230 that crisscross the country have been facing dire situation thanks to pollution, encroachment, landfill, sand extraction, erosion and regional misconducts.

These human-made problems are on the rise due to absence of a comprehensive water policy and stern action by the government against illegal encroachers and polluters, as well as mismanagement, misjudgement and lack of coordination among the officials concerned with regard to preventive measures to save the rivers, which have been the source of irrigation, fishing, transportation and drinking water from time immemorial.

Surface water pollution refers to pollution of flowing waters (river, canal etc), and open water (nonflowing) reservoirs (ponds, haors, baors etc.). Flowing water is mainly polluted because of the disposal of untreated waste into the river system from industries and also from cities, whereas the non-flowing water pollution is caused by excessive use of pesticides and soil erosion.

Most of the liquid waste produced by the industries and households in Dhaka are dumped into the Dhaka's remaining canals and the four rivers around the city. Moreover, the industries operating around the city are hardly treating their waste water before disposing it into flowing water or small waterbodies.

Similar cases are found in the industries in Khulna and Chittagong. The pulp and paper, fertiliser and petroleum industries are dumping waste. The newly booming ship breaking and ship building industries contribute significantly to marine oil pollution.

These threats are not new, but they are still present despite pledges by the government high-ups, and at some places the degraded situation is worsening.

Industry is the largest source of water pollution, as it produces pollutants that are extremely harmful to people and the environment. Moreover, people at many parts of the country these days dump garbage on the banks of waterbodies or flowing rivers and canals and also in drains resulting in contamination of the waters and clogging of the drains. These types of conduct gradually harm the water quality and leave the poor people, dependent on the flowing water, in threats of waterborne diseases.

The shipbreaking and shipbuilding sectors most recently have become one of the fastest growing industries in Bangladesh and have



PHOTO: WRITER

Garbage dumped on the bank of a lake

also got the government's helpful assistance to grow up more. But considering probable expansion in the near future, it is not known whether any proper measures have already been taken to prevent the industries from polluting the rivers and the shore waters further.

Pollutants from industrial sources include asbestos fibres, which can be inhaled and cause illnesses such as asbestosis, mesothelioma, lung cancer, intestinal cancer and liver cancer; lead, a metallic element and a non-biodegradable substance which is so hard to clean up once the environment is contaminated; mercury, another metallic element and a poison.

Nitrates and phosphates come from increased use of fertilisers and are behind a dense growth of plant life; then the decomposition of the plants depletes the supply of oxygen, leading to the decimation of animal life. Sulphur is another non-metallic substance that is harmful

for marine life. Oil does not dissolve in water and instead forms a thick layer on the water surface. This can stop marine plants receiving enough light for photosynthesis. It is also harmful for fish and marine birds. Petrochemicals are formed from gas or petrol and can be toxic to marine life.

With the rising trend of industrialisation, concerns about the environment in the future days naturally rise. For experience cannot leave us content as strict measures are not usually put in place before a crisis actually deepens. So, besides promoting regular measures to check environmental degradation among the industrial players, the regulatory bodies should act more effectively -- fortifying the related laws and increasing the fines -- against the "polluters" to provide the citizens contamination-free water in a clean environment.

The writer is a journalist.



PHOTO: WRITER

Industrial waste water being discharged in a canal.

# Waste vitiates city thoroughfare

SUHRABUDDIN AHMED

FARMGATE is one of the busiest places in the Dhaka city no doubt. Thousands of people pass by or gather on this grand intersection to catch public transport and do low-cost shopping everyday in a regular manner.

There are a great number of restaurants, snack shops, and other business establishments at Farmgate. But it is a matter of great regret that they discard their daily garbage at the heart of this commercial hub since there is no dustbin in the area for years. There are more than 15 food outlets and hundreds of other shops near the spot.

This busy section is the starting point of Bir Uttam Maj Gen (ret'd) KM Shafiullah Road (Green Road) at the southwest of Farmgate stretching southward through Sajal Square -- the intersection of Panthapath and Green Road.

Some people say that a small amount of paper and other dry waste are disposed of on the spot in day time and the garbage from restaurants is thrown in plentiful during night time.

Owners and staff of the restaurants, food stores and others unconditionally admit the act of throwing their food waste, paper, polythene etc. While a great number of people on the hectic thoroughfare generally cross over the dumping spot in great inconvenience.

A passer-by has to cross over the area everyday. His office is located at Panthapath. He said, "I have to go to my office by passing this dumping spot with a great effort. Such open dumping spot should not remain in the capital city of Dhaka."

So many working ladies dwell at Green Road. One of them expressed her disgust because of this obnoxious problem which remains unresolved for years. "It ought to be kept clean by both day and night considering the health of a great number of people dwelling in this area," she said.

The garbage vehicles of the city corporation come once in 24 hours to collect waste from the spot. But generally they come after midnight. As a result, the spot turns into an obnoxious dumping ground again quickly.

There used to be two dustbins for throwing waste matter in the area 20 years ago. One of the two dustbins was made of concrete and it was small in size. The other was of iron. But neither of the dustbins could remain there for a long time due to objection and hardline attitude of the people residing in different residences there.

With a view to holding the waste a dustbin was erected in front of the Bata Store some 15 years back but it had also been dismantled.

The erstwhile caretaker government took the first step in this connection (waste disposal) but it did not do the work as three dividers

were raised in the front side of Ananda Cinema Hall to allow buses of different routes to move without any hindrance.

The corner most lane, along the dumping spot, was meant to be used by double-decker BRTC buses which made officials rethink a possible spot for a dustbin in the future. And the matter hangs still in a limbo.

At least there are five fruit sellers and two snack shops in front of Ananda Cinema Hall building. They throw waste on that spot all the time and at this the shopkeepers of garment and other items and business establishments are encouraged to follow them.

The place becomes more unhygienic when the boys of the street play mischief while collecting recyclable objects from the dumping spot.

At present the people living in the area demand a dustbin at the same place where the waste matters are mostly thrown.

"The previous dustbins were shifted from one spot to another as the spots for dumping the waste were not determined properly," a resident said.

The owner of Farmgate Hotel and Restaurant added it is a bounden duty of the considerate democratic government to take necessary steps immediately to remove garbage from this busiest public place. "It is not acceptable that this area remains littered with waste emitting

odour when thousands of people gather and pass through it," he further added.

There are two other hotels. They are also close to the spot. The owners of these hotels admit that they throw some of their waste on the spot by both day and night. However there are some rickshaws and vans which come to collect their waste, too.

A man has been dwelling in the area for a long time. He has a shop selling shoes on the divider and it is close to the dumping spot. He said,

"We are poor people. The bad odour of the waste cannot strike us anymore."

There are other local businessmen, they say that the problem may be solved easily if a dustbin is erected on the spot and the trucks and vans of the Dhaka City Corporation come twice in a day to collect the accumulate waste from the spot, so that the area remains clean and not vitiates with bad odour.

In accordance with the suggestion of the officials of the regional

office of Dhaka City Corporation (north) at Karwan Bazar, the owners of the business organizations and the people living in the area should hold talks on the matter among themselves for a remedy. Later on, the authorities may come forward to take necessary measures in this connection.

But then the initial responsibility of motivating the people as such lies with the authorities concerned.

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