

BITTER TRUTH

# Rampant adulteration plays havoc



Md. ASADULLAH KHAN

ADULTERATION is rampant in the country. From vegetables, fish, milk, fruit, sweetmeats, ice cream, to spices, nothing is safe. Packaged and bottled drinks mixed with harmful ingredients and chemicals, both locally produced and imported are being sold freely. Oblivious of the dangers lurking in the everyday food items, children are eating foods that are actually laced with poison!

With institutional corruption ingrained in every level of our society and societal protest and government action apparently missing, unscrupulous traders and factory owners are resorting to dishonest and unethical activities through adding harmful and toxic substances in food items. With the advent of Ramadan, dishonest traders, food manufacturers, sweetmeat shop owners and fruit vendors, even if they are performing all religious rites as Muslims, can hardly check their greed for quick money.

As long as consumers consider food adulteration a minor problem and the government plays down its impact on the health of the citizens, there is no escaping the grave health hazard. The chairman of the Pharmacology Department, BSMMUH, opined that unsafe foods containing a range of pathogens, traces of chemical pesticides, metals and food additives pose a serious threat to health. Experts say that adulterated and pesticide-laden foods have largely led to diseases like cancer, kidney damage, diabetes, jaundice and liver cirrhosis in a large number of urban people who have little choice but to eat such foods they buy from the city markets.

Illiterate and gullible farmers use pesticides to prevent insect attack and rotting as well as to ensure long shelf-life of their produce. Unless the government slaps a total ban on import of these poisons at the trader level, there can be no escape from the health hazards they pose. Unscrupulous businessmen use toxic chemicals like formalin, and another recently introduced chemical ethofen, and textile dyes for preserving fruits, milk and fish.

Experts say that one of the important reasons for infertility is the presence of residues of pesticides, growth hormones, heavy metals and mycotoxins in foodstuff. The main reason for this is that our farmers are not properly trained in the use of chemical fertilizers. Experts believe that lax monitoring and lack of adequate training are largely responsible for the serious health impacts that the nation continues to pay.

Other than BSTI, public health officials must work with motivation and commitment to arrest this menacing trend and strike at the root of the problem.

In absence of effluent treatment plants (ETP) in industries in the proximity of farmland and lack of training and knowledge of the farmers, the factory wastes, fertilizer and pesticide residues are drained out into the farmlands and ultimately contaminate the farm produce.

A study by the Institute of Public Health revealed that more than 50% of the samples of ghee, edible oils, powdered milk, juices, ice cream, sweetmeats, jam, jelly, curd, chilli powder, coriander and even the water they tested were adulterated. Reports published by the BSTI recently revealed that the production of contami-

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nated drinking water has been increasing in the country. BSTI revealed that there are about 1,000 drinking water factories in the country but only 400 of them have taken licenses from the BSTI.

Textile dyes which are highly injurious to health are being randomly used to colour sweetmeats like *kalojam*, *chamcham*, cakes and pastries. Urea fertilizer is used for whitening puffed rice. A section of factory owners, through use of low quality oil and mustard colour continue to market mustard oil that has strong bite. When import of soya bean oil becomes uncertain or the price shoots up in the international market for any reason, the local market manipulators mix palm oil with soya bean oil.

Ethylene oxide and calcium carbide are used to ripen fruits like papaya, mango and banana. Experts in medical biology point out that ethylene oxide is carcinogenic and when used on food might invite a disaster. 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 produce they consume.

Fish is considered an essential protein for people of

all categories and ages. Many fish sellers spray fish with formalin, an organic chemical usually used for preservation of tissues. It makes the fish stiff and keeps them looking brighter for longer. Regular intake of such adulterated fish might cause cancer.

Because children are consuming pesticide-laden or toxic food, they are likely to be more vulnerable to diseases than adults. Cell division in children is more rapid and organs like liver and kidney may not be as efficient in removing toxic chemicals.

The month of Ramadan will bring woes for the fasting Muslims because of the excessive fried items, mostly prepared with burnt oil, consumed during this month. Some restaurant owners use refined engine oil to fry chicken, *kabab*, *peaju* and potato crisps. Engine oil used as cooking ingredient makes food tasty, they claim. Defying health department regulations, many restaurant owners and street vendors use left-over cooking oil. This increases the peroxide limit of the oil, turning it toxic.

Drives conducted by the mobile courts during the month of Ramadan are only palliative, and are not a permanent solution. In most of them, only the manager and employees of the fake factories get caught, but the factory owners or traders remain far away from the clutches of law enforcement agency because of their high connections.

In a recent drive conducted by the mobile court set up by the BSTI, some restaurants and sweet-meat shops were slapped fines ranging from Tk.30,000 to Tk.3 lacs. Such monetary fines cannot cure the disease ingrained in the system unless the real culprits are booked and exemplary punishment is meted out to them.

Other than BSTI, no agency under the ministry of health, or the ministry of agriculture or the ministry of science and technology has conducted any examination of the pesticide-residue levels or toxic chemicals in the foodstuff being marketed. With a totally inefficient monitoring system, just having tough laws is not enough to keep unscrupulous traders from tampering with food items

Despite the fact that pure food ordinance 2005 was there, there was hardly any effort to enforce it. Even when the apex court issued orders again in 2009 for setting up food courts and food testing centres in every district, no effort was taken to implement them.

Given the political will, it will not be very difficult to control this nefarious business indulged in by a handful of traders who are out to kill people by slow poisoning simply for minting money.

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# Electric power blackout in India

ABDUL MATIN

IN northern India 670 million people, about half of the country's population, were without electric power on July 31. It is the largest power blackout in the history of electric power supply system in the world. Strangely, the second largest blackout, affecting 370 million people, also occurred in northern India only a day earlier. Two consecutive blackouts of such magnitude around the same area are unprecedented. The latest one covered the entire area of northern India from the north eastern state of Arunachal Pradesh bordering China to the western state of Rajasthan bordering Pakistan.

It is reported that hundreds of miners were trapped underground in the eastern states of Paschimbanga and Jharkhand as lifts failed to operate. Electric trains and metro services came to a standstill and thousands of passengers were stranded in and around Kolkata and Delhi. According to the Federal Power Minister Sushilkumar Shinde, the massive power outage was caused by states "drawing power beyond their permissible limits." The blackout of August 1 was thus man-made. He, however, failed to explain how two blackouts occurred on two consecutive days. For the blackout of July 30, he blamed an incident in Agra without giving details.

India, the world's fifth largest producer of electricity, generates 200,000 MW of electricity but it has a power shortage of about 10% (~17,000 MW) during the peak period, resulting in outages lasting up to eight hours in some regions. The situation has become worse this year because of a poor monsoon which forced farmers to pump more water from wells, resulting in increased power demand. Shortage of power, by the way, has become a common phenomenon in other countries in the region including Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.

Large blackouts are not uncommon in electric power systems. Even highly developed power systems in Europe and North America also suffer from similar power breakdowns. Indonesia had a power blackout in Java-Bali in 2005, affecting 100 million people. Brazil had one in 1999 and another ten years later, Italy in 2003 and North America in 1965, Western America including Canada and Mexico in 1996, to mention a few.

An electric power system incorporates a complex and

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delicate network of generating stations, transformers, transmission and distribution lines, and an elaborate protection system. One important requirement of the system is that the power generation must always balance the demand. Any imbalance in the system generation and demand may cause a surge, initiating a system breakdown. Protective relays automatically detect and isolate overloaded network components causing local disruptions. Automatic operation of protective devices sometimes causes additional disruptions. On occasions, such disruptions spread to neighbouring regions, covering large areas and causing massive power blackouts.

Overloading can occur for various reasons. Consumption of excessive loads, like in India recently, and short-circuits of transmission/distribution lines can cause overloading. Short-circuits may occur due to birds sitting on two power lines, animals physically connecting two or more lines, fires and natural calamities like, cyclones, tornados, heavy snowfall, earthquakes, tsunamis etc. Malfunction of generators, transformers or protective devices can also cause blackouts in the system. While power is normally restored within hours in most cases, it takes days to restore power if large-scale disruptions occur due to natural calamities.

Power system design postulates a major blackout at least once in a decade by probability. I witnessed only one local blackout in Liverpool during my stay in England from 1962 to 1965 and no power disruption in Stockholm during one year in 1966-67. Obviously, things have changed drastically over the years. It is now believed that climate changes and climate variations, due to global warming, cause frequent cyclones, tornadoes, blizzards, etc. Consequently we see more power blackouts than before.

The weak monsoon in India may also be due to climate changes. Power outages for days due to natural calamities have now become common in many parts of the world, including the United States of America. We may have to live with frequent power blackouts unless effective measures are taken by the international community to reduce emissions of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases.

Bangladesh is expecting to import 500 MW of electricity from India from next year. With a shortfall of 10% of the demand during peak hours, will India be able to supply this amount of electricity to Bangladesh while their own people suffer from routine load shedding? The adverse public opinion in India, which worsened after the recent power blackout, may make the supply of power to Bangladesh more difficult if not uncertain. Consequently, the present load-shedding in Bangladesh is likely to linger longer than we expected.

The writer is a former chief engineer of Bangladesh Atomic Energy Commission.

# A call against arms

RAFIA ZAKARIA

JUST as the athletes of the world were about to join hands and celebrate the world's ability to come together for sport, the concept of international unity was dealt another blow.

For most of July, representatives of 170 countries had been at the United Nations' headquarters in New York City attempting to come to an agreement on an international arms trade treaty. On Friday, the same day as the opening ceremony of the Summer Olympic Games in London, they admitted defeat.

According to the UN, the global arms trade nets \$60 billion every year, with weapons traded killing a person every minute somewhere in the world. According to Anna Macdonald, head of arms control at Oxfam, some 50,000 people lost their lives through armed violence in the very weeks during which countries squabbled over the text of the treaty. Against the background of their negotiations was the ongoing conflict in Syria where an oppressive government continued to massacre thousands with arms and weapons easily purchased precisely because there are no regulations dealing with arms moving from one country to another.

None of it seemed to matter, however, the obstacles to agreement among nations being far harder to accomplish than the theatrics of competitive sport under the umbrella of international solidarity.

The history of the arms trade treaty and the onerous job of even bringing 170 negotiators to the treaty table reveals how transnational unity, when it means agreeing on something substantive, has become an international fantasy littered with reports that go nowhere and working groups that accomplish nothing.

In 2006, the UN General Assembly requested nations to submit their views on an arms trade treaty. More than a hundred countries did so and their views were summarised in a 2007 report produced by the secretary general. In 2008, another group of governmental experts convened and produced another report. In 2009, an open-ended working group open to all states held two meetings on an arms trade treaty. A total of six sessions of this group were planned and held. At the end of those in 2009, the General Assembly decided to convene a conference on the arms trade treaty in 2012 "to elaborate a legally binding instrument on the highest possible common international standards for the transfer of conventional arms."

The General Assembly also indicated that the remaining four sessions of the open-ended working group would be considered "preparatory" sessions for the conference; they took place in July 2010, February 2011, July 2011 and February 2012. In this last meeting held last month, 65 ratifications from countries were required to put the treaty into effect.

When the representatives failed to come up with language for a treaty this Friday, they agreed of course on the one thing that all involved seemed to have

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become good at: the need for more meetings. This was supposed to be hopeful and a means of keeping the door open, with no one commenting on the impossibility of getting a two-thirds vote from 193 nations in the general assembly when 65 nations were not brought to agreement during this round.

In the meantime tanks, guns, grenades, missiles and other means of eviscerating human lives continued to make their merry, unimpeded course from one country to another. Unsurprisingly the US -- which is the biggest arms trader in the world, responsible for 40% of the world's conventional arms transfers -- walked away in the crucial last moments, saying that it needed more time. Its example was followed by Russia and China, the world's other big arms exporters,

which were only too happy to have an excuse to abandon negotiations.

They were not the only ones bent on bickering. Initial negotiations were held up on the matter of Palestinian participation. When that fire was contained early on by allowing the Palestinian contingent a place at the front of the negotiating table but without voting rights, other fires soon erupted -- the play ending with the impasse that is now known to all.

Early on in the negotiations, Pakistan's representative ambassador, Raza Bashir Tarar, said that any treaty agreed upon by member states must constitute a comprehensive approach which takes into account the priorities of all member states in a non-discriminatory manner and that "from Pakistan's point of view any treaty or agreement that is aimed at regulation of conventional arms must address both the demand and supply side of the equation."

The issue is a lethal one for Pakistan. In Karachi, 625 of the 700 people killed in target killings in the first five months of this year were killed by small weapons and were targeted from close range. According to statistics collected by the website gunpolicy.org from various weapons dealers in Pakistan, 125,000 guns were sold in Karachi in 2009, more than 160,000 in 2010 and nearly 200,000 in 2011. A Pakistan-made .22 calibre pistol could be bought for as little as Rs.4,000 (\$42) and imported weapons purchased for between Rs.10,000 and Rs.20,000.

Despite these and other more damning statistics, Pakistan was not pushing for regulation; a UN working draft of the treaty showed that even before the talks concluded, Pakistan, India, Saudi Arabia and Japan had already said they would not sign the treaty because they wished to have the freedom to equip their militaries as they saw fit.

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