



Promoting Child Rights



18,000 die by drowning every year

SUSHMITA S PREETHA

EVERY year, a silent killer strikes the lives of at least 18,000 children in the country.

It's so deadly that it's actually considered the number one cause of death of children over the age of one year – more fatal than diseases like pneumonia, tuberculosis or polio. It's so swift that a child doesn't even have the chance to call out for help, and it's so mundane that no family sees it as a potential threat.

Every day, as many as 50 children die from drowning, according to the Bangladesh Health and Injury Survey (BHIS), a comprehensive survey conducted by UNICEF. Around four times this number nearly drown – over 68,000 near-drowning a year.

But according to experts, the actual number of fatalities is several times greater than actually reported.

Earlier this year, two siblings, seven-year-old Munni and five-year-old Akhi both drowned at the same time as they were playing by the pond near their house. Their parents had never thought that they would lose their precious children right from under their nose.

As in the case of the two siblings, a vast majority of drowning deaths occur within 20 metres of the home, when unsupervised children slip and fall into local water bodies, according to a report by UNICEF and The Alliance for Safe Children (TASC).

Adequate supervision and swimming lessons can significantly reduce child drowning, says the report.

"If only we had taught them to swim

Child experts argue that the failure to address drowning-related deaths can be a major hindrance to Bangladesh fulfilling its Millennium Development Goal of reducing child mortality rate by two-thirds by 2015.

– we could have avoided such a catastrophe," laments their mother. "We live in the village and we think that children will pick up swimming by themselves. We don't pay special attention to teaching them."

The report shares evidence of efficacy of prevention interventions designed by UNICEF in partnership with NGOs. For instance, drowning death rates among children attending village creches were reduced by more than 80 percent as a

direct result of having adequate supervision.

Meanwhile, drowning death rates in children 4 years and older who participated in swimming and safe rescue training programme were reduced by more than 90 percent.

UNICEF along with its local and international partners have undertaken initiatives to create social awareness on the issue, give training on how to swim and install bamboo-made fences

around the ponds which has significantly reduced drowning-related deaths in its working areas.

However, intervention needs to happen on a national scale for large-scale impact, suggest experts.

Despite the alarming statistics, drowning-related deaths have remained undetected as a significant health issue. In fact, child experts argue that the failure to address such deaths can be a major hindrance to Bangladesh fulfilling its Millennium Development Goal of reducing child mortality rate by two-thirds by 2015.

Dr Jahangir Hossain, programme coordinator for the Centre for Injury Prevention and Research, Bangladesh (CIPRB) said that drowning is a "hidden epidemic."

"Although more children die from

drowning in Bangladesh than from any other infectious disease, all our programmes to reduce child mortality focus on infectious diseases," he said.

State Minister for Health and Family Welfare Mujibur Rahman Fakir told The Daily Star that the government wants to teach swimming to children at the upazila level to reduce the chances of drowning.

"Beyond this, we don't have any plans or proposals," he said.

However, experts suggest that government can involve development organisations and relevant ministries to scale up early childhood education/crèche programmes, map the true prevalence of drowning and design a multi-sectoral intervention programme to address the issue.



Imparting lessons on swimming



Portable pools help them learn to swim

AKRAM HOSEN

WITH a view to providing swimming lessons to children living near water bodies in the city, UNICEF runs three portable swimming pools offering free swimming lessons to children for more than three years.

While many of the children living in the slums near the swamps in Dhaka are at risk of drowning, swimming lessons can avert many tragedies.

"Much of the risk of drowning can be minimized by teaching the children of those slums how to swim. As their parents can't afford swimming lessons for them, our portable pools are an effort to make them immune to

drowning," said Syed Imtiaz Ahmed, child protection officer of UNICEF.

The three portable pools—one near Taltola, Agargaon; one near Mirpur 11; and one in DOHS, Mahakhali—offer 15 days training to children aged between 4 and 10. However, those who take longer to learn can receive the training until they graduate.

In order to graduate, a child needs to display the skills of survival in water, swim 25 metres straight and float for 30 seconds, informed Imtiaz. The graduates also know rescue techniques.

On an average, about 3,000 children graduate every year since 2009, when the pools were installed.

"I know that I have to gain energy

Although about 50 children die by drowning in Bangladesh everyday, most parents do not take the need of teaching their children how to swim very seriously. On the other hand, The water bodies in and around Dhaka are constantly being filled up to make way for other uses.

by floating idly for a few moments when I need to swim a long distance at a stretch," said a seven years old Helal Rafi who live near Baunia Bazar slum at Mirpur 11. His instructor Rima Akter said that he learnt most of the swimming lessons in 12 days only.

"Most children are quick learners and find the lessons fun," added the 20 years old instructor.

The hour-long classes begin at 9:00am in the morning and go on till late in the afternoon. Batches consisting of a maximum of 18 children take the instructions. Children begin to flock around the pool even before the class of the previous batch is finished.

"The advantage of having portable pools is that we will be able to move them somewhere else when all children

of these areas graduate," said Imtiaz.

The risk of drowning for urban children, who can't swim, increases when they visit their parental homes in villages near rivers.

Besides, there are many shanty houses made of bamboo and thatch on the water bodies in Dhaka. The banks of rivers flowing through Dhaka are also crammed with permanent and temporary houses. It is crucial that children of these communities learn how to swim.

Although about 50 children die by drowning in Bangladesh everyday, most parents do not take the need of teaching their children how to swim very seriously, he insisted. As a result, the children of both affluent and

working class families do not get swimming lessons.

Moreover, the opportunities for urban children to learn how to swim are limited. The few facilities offering swimming lessons to children are largely beyond the means of people of lower income bracket.

The water bodies in and around Dhaka are constantly being filled up to make way for other uses. The remaining rivers and canals are so polluted that it is hardly possible for children to swim in them without contracting some disease.

In a country where more children die of drowning than any other disasters, an initiative by the government to provide swimming lessons for children can save many lives.



Learning swimming in portable pool



SWIMSAFE

Imparting swimming and rescue lessons

TAMANNA KHAN

The narrow River Magra appears naive and peaceful from the distant as its snakes it way along the villages near Netrokona Sadar. As the sun moves towards mid-sky, village women along with their children are seen taking a dip in the river. While the mothers dry their hairs, sitting on the shore, the children continue their waddle in the water nearby.

A UNICEF study shows that it is during such unwary moments an adventurous child may venture out in the middle of the river and drown, because s/he does not know how to swim. Often another child who runs to his/her playmate's rescue also drowns as s/he is pulled down by the weight of the child in danger. In most cases these incidents occur between morning and afternoon when elders are not around and young children and

toddlers are left at the care of their older siblings.

It was once such afternoon, five years ago, when Bilkis Begum lost her two-year-old son, whose body was later found in a pond near her house. Leaning against a tree, she narrated the story of her child's untimely death and explained why she enrolled her youngest son, 7-year-old Riad in Unicef's SwimSafe programme, in Panchananpur, Netrokona. "Now I don't have to worry about Riad being in danger of drowning. Plus he can rescue others who faces such dangers," she says.

Riad has received swimming lessons and learned rescue technique last year from his village's community swimming instructor. "I can swim 25 metres at a stretch and float in water for 30 secs," said SwimSafe 2012 swimming graduate proudly. "If someone falls into water I would first shout and

Launched in 2005 the SwimSafe programme has targeted to impart swimming and rescue lessons to 60000 children in eight districts --Rangpur, Borguna, Netrokona, Jamalpur, Sirajganj, Coxesbazar, Khulna and Dhaka--- this year.

call elders for help. If possible, I will throw a bamboo, rope, football or any other floating object for the person to grab, by kneeling down at shore. I won't jump into water to save the person and endanger my life," he recounted the lessons he learned at the programme.

In rural areas where incident of deaths from drowning is high, the SwimSafe programme, equip children like Riad between the age of 4-10 with life saving techniques through 21 simple steps according to SwimSafe's manual developed by the Ministry of Women and Children's Affairs,

UNICEF Bangladesh, Royal Life Saving Society Australia, Bangladesh Swimming Federation and CIPRB.

Launched in 2005 the SwimSafe programme has targeted to impart swimming and rescue lessons to 60000 children in eight districts --Rangpur, Borguna, Netrokona, Jamalpur, Sirajganj, Coxesbazar, Khulna and Dhaka--- this year. Last year they had taught 63000 children with the help of implementing organisations --Centre for Injury Prevention and Research, Bangladesh (CIPRB) Building Resource Across Communities (BRAC) and Centre for Mass Education in Science (CMES). "Between 2012 and 2016 we have targeted to impart these lessons to 3 lakh children in Bangladesh" said Syed Imtiaz Ahmed, Child Protection officer, Unicef.

Selim Miah, area coordinator of Netrokona, SwimSafe projectsaid that swimming is taught in 61 villages of six upazilas of Netrokona where the project has targets to impart swimming lessons and rescue techniques to 15000 children this year. "In every village there is a young male and a female community swimming instructor (CSI)," he said. "In January and February we carry out the recruitment and pond selection process." He explained how village meeting is carried out with community leaders and local government representatives to create awareness about drowning and the necessity of the SwimSafe programme. "Villagers then refer young men and women of the community who are good swimmers," said Selim. "However, while recruiting we check if he or she is fit and can swim at least 100 metres without break." After recruitment CSIs carry out a baseline survey in the villages to

enlist children aged between 4-10, their gender, swimming knowledge and such. "Our survey shows that almost 60 percent children do not know how to swim," said Selim.

Seventeen-year-old Shapna Akhter was recruited last year as CSI. "I knew dog s swimming. After joining this programme I learned free style swimming, which allows you to swim for a longer time without losing too much energy," she said. Shapna is one of the adolescent CSIs of SwimSafe. "Before I was just an ordinary girl, now people in the area respect me and come to me for advice when they suffer minor injuries like burns and cuts," she added. Besides a 5-day long basic training on swimming and rescue, CSIs are also trained on Cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) and first aid. They are given Tk100 as honorarium for every child they teach.

During the rainy seasons between May to October, swimming and rescue lessons are imparted to children everyday in groups of 15 for two hours. "A child on average needs 12 days to learn these techniques," informed Mahboob Alam, a 22-year-old CSI who worked in a pharmacy. He took five children to an enclosure in one side of a pond, surrounded by bamboo, which is a swimming structure installed in ponds with a ramp entry into the water and a shallow water platform for children to practice skills before advancing to deeper water. Community support is an integral part of SwimSafe's programme. "Village people maintain and guard the swimming structure. They also provide their pond for free, forgoing the income they could have earned by leasing it out for fish farming otherwise," said Selim.

Mohammad Moti Miah had failed to teach his son Anwar Miah swimming because he was afraid to go into the water. But he took up the challenge when he saw his peers taking swimming lessons under SwimSafe. "He can now cross the Magra and I do not have to worry about him getting drowned" Moti said with relief.

