

Promoting Child Rights

SWIMSAFE

The narrow River Magra appears naïve

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

TAMANNA KHAN

Promoting Child Rights



18,000 die by drowning every year

SUSHMITA S PREETHA

VERY 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

Every day, as many as 50 children die from drowning, according to the by UNICEF and The Alliance for Safe Bangladesh Health and Injury Survey Children (TASC). (BHIS), a comprehensive survey conducted by UNICEF. Around four times ming lessons can significantly reduce this number nearly drown — over child drowning, says the report. 68,000 near-drowning a year.

number of fatalities is several times greater than actually reported. Earlier this year, two siblings, seven-

year-old Munni and five-year-old Akhi 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 Adequate supervision and swim-

But according to experts, the actual Child experts argue that the failure to address drowning-related deaths can be a major hindrance in its working areas. to Bangladesh fulfilling its Millennium both drowned at the same time as they Development Goal of reducing child mortality rate scale impact, suggest experts. by two-thirds by 2015.

> we could have avoided such a catastro-direct result of having adequate superv phe," laments their mother. "We live in sion. the village and we think that children will pick up swimming by themselves. children 4 years and older who partici-We don't pay special attention to teach-

The report shares evidence of efficacy more than 90 percent. of prevention interventions designed by UNICEF along with its local and UNICEF in partnership with NGOs. For international partners have undertaken instance, drowning death rates among initiatives to create social awareness on children attending village crèches were the issue, give training on how to swim

Meanwhile, drowning death rates in pated in swimming and safe rescue training programme were reduced by

"If only we had taught them to swim reduced by more than 80 percent as a and install bamboo-made fences "Although more children die from to address the issue."

happen on a national scale for large-

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 (CIPRB) said that drowning is a "hid- prevalence of drowning and design a

cantly reduced drowning related deaths any other infectious disease, all our programmes to reduce child mortality However, intervention needs to 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 he chances of drowning. "Beyond this, we don't have any

plans or proposals," he said. However, experts suggest that gov-

ernment can involve development organisations and relevant ministries to scale up early childhood educaadventurous child may venture out in rescue others who faces such dantion/crèche programmes, map the true the middle of the river and drown, gers," she says.

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 children continue their waddle in the SwimSafe programme, in Panchananpur, Netrokona. "Now I A UNICEF study shows that it is don't have to worry about Riad being during such unwary moments an in danger of drowning. Plus he can

because s/he does not know how to Riad has received swimming lesswim. Often another child who runs to sons and learned rescue technique last his/her playmate's rescue also drowns year from his village's community as s/he is pulled down by the weight of swimming instructor. "I can swim 25 the child in danger. In most cases metres at a stretch and float in water for these incidents occur between morn- 30 secs," said SwimSafe 2012 swiming and afternoon when elders are ming graduate proudly. "If someone not around and young children and falls into water I would first shout and

Picture: Swimming Learning Centree

Deeper area

Shallow area

Platform

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

Imparting swimming and rescue lessons

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.

and Dhaka--- this year.

SwimSafe programme, equip children like Riad between the age of 4-10 with implementing organisations life saving techniques through 21 simple steps according to SwimSafe's manual developed by the Ministry of Building Resource Across Women and Children's Affairs,

UNICEF Bangladesh, Royal Life Saving Society Australia, Bangladesh Swimming Federation and CIPRB. Launched in 2005 the SwimSafe

swimming and rescue lessons to 60000 children in eight districts --- Rangpur, Borguna, Netrokona, Jamalpur, In rural areas where incident of Sirajganj, Coxesbazar, Khulna and deaths from drowning is high, the Dhaka--- this year. Last year they had taught 63000 children with the help of Centre for Injury Prevention and Research, Bangladesh (CIPRB) Communities (BRAC) and Centre for Mass Education in Science (CMES). "Between 2012 and 2016 we have targeted to impart these lessons to 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 Natrokona 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 combreak." After recruitment CSIs carry to worry about him getting drowned" out a baseline survey in the villages to Moti said with relief.

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 wimming. 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

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 i 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.

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

They also provide their pond for free,

forgoing the income they could have

SWIMMING LESSONS THE IMMUNISATION PROGRAMME

> Children aged 4-10 taught

Free style swimming

Treading in water

They are provided with rescue knowledge and taught rescue techniques

Not to jump into the water for rescue

Cry for help and call

Reach out to the drowning child with a bamboo or a rope

Throw a floating object such as a football or coconut towards the drowning child

Tangail correspondent reports:

K Hasan Firoz, secretary of Tangail

Jatiya Krira Parishad several times to

construct a swimming pool in the

district town but it has not

Despite site selection, Rangamati

Rangamati correspondent reports:

facility to learn swimming





Portable pools help them learn to swim

TITH a view to providing swimming lessons to chil-V dren living near water 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 trage-

"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

Learning swimming in portable pool

child protection officer of UNICEF.

However, those who take longer to learn can receive the training until way for other uses.

Imtiaz. The graduates also know rescue techniques. On an average, about 3,000 chil-

dren 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 dren of these areas graduate," said working class families do not get The three portable pools—one Bangladesh everyday, most parents do not take the near Taltola, Agargaon; one near need of teaching their children how to swim very seri-Mahakhali—offer 15 days training ously. On the other hand, The water bodies in and to children aged between 4 and 10. around Dhaka are constantly being filled up to make

"Most children are quick learners and find the lessons fun," added the pools is that we will be able to move 20 years old instructor.

by floating idly for a few moments
The hour-long classes begin at In order to graduate, a child needs when I need to swim a long distance 9:00am in the morning and go on till

at a stretch," said a seven years old late in the afternoon. Batches conwater, swim 25 metres straight and Helal Rafi who live near Baunia sisting of a maximum of 18 children float for 30seconds, informed Bazar slum at Mirpur 11. His instructions take the instructions. Children begin tor Rima Akter said that he learnt to flock around the pool even before most of the swimming lessons in 12 the class of the previous batch is fin-

"The advantage of having portable them somewhere else when all chil-

The risk of drowning for urban in villages near rivers.

houses made of bamboo and thatch people of lower income bracket. nities learn how to swim.

Although about 50 children die by contracting some disease. drowning in Bangladesh everyday,

Moreover, the opportunities for children, who can't swim, increases urban children to learn how to swim when they visit their parental homes are limited. The few facilities offering swimming lessons to children Besides, there are many shanty are largely beyond the means of

on the water bodies in Dhaka. The The water bodies in and around banks of rivers flowing through Dhaka are constantly being filled up Dhaka are also crammed with per- to make way for other uses. The manent and temporary houses. It is remaining rivers and canals are so crucial that children of these commupolluted that it is hardly possible for children to swim in them without In a country where more children

most parents do not take the need of die of drowning than any other disasteaching their children how to swim ters, an initiative by the government very seriously, he insisted. As a result, to provide swimming lessons for the children of both affluent and children can save many lives.

Lessons in Swimming

Safety area

Children deprived of facilities in districts

PANKAJ KARMAKAR

Although many children die from drowning every year due to their lack of swimming ability, government's measure to teach children swimming is inadequate across the country Outside Dhaka, government has

only 12 swimming pools in 11 districts, where children are imparted training to learn swimming, said Abdur Rahman, joint secretary of the Ministry of Youth and Sports. There are two pools in Rajshahi

and one each in Bogra, Barisal,

Chapainababganj, Jessore,

Munshiganj, Pabna, Mymensingh, Sylhet, Chandpur and Rajbari, he informed. But children of other districts are tion," said Alamgir Hossain Alo, deprived of government facilities to secretary of Barisal divisional sports learn swimming. In some places, District Sports Association (DSA) association.

temporarily hire pond to teach childoes not continue. Among the 12 swimming pools, month due to unpaid electricity bills. some are in shabby condition due to

district correspondents. Responding to this, Abdur pools across the country."

many problems. Bangladesh Health and Injury

s the leading cause of death for chileach year. Among them, over 12,000 children are aged 1 to 4, and around 5,000 drowning occur amongst the older age group of 5 to 17.

The study also disclosed that there is a reciprocal relationship between drowning and swimming ability Our Barisal correspondent reports:

been remaining out of order since it

was constructed in 1997. "The swimming pool has been lying abandoned for last sixteen years due to technical faults. Cracks were found inside the pool after inaugura-

Bogra correspondent reports: The dren swimming, but the initiative lone swimming pool in the town has been remaining closed for last one

However, the officials concerned poor maintenance and negligence of said they would re-start the pool next the authority concerned, report our year after paying the due electricity

Pabna Correspondent reports: Rahman said, "I have heard that one Although the Pabna DSA arranges or two pools are in bad condition. We training to teach children swimming, will look into it and we are trying to but the district's lone swimming pool ensure proper maintenance of all the located at the stadium is affected with

"There is no water treatment man-

Survey, 2005 revealed that drowning Bangladesh Health and Injury Survey, 2005 revealed dren aged 1 to 17 in Bangladesh, with that drowning is the leading cause of death for children said, "We have plan to construct more them." aged 1 to 17, with approximately 18,000 children

> pool. We have applied to the ministry for arranging water treatment District Sports Associations (DSA) plant, but no fund has been allo- blamed their higher authorities for cated for it," Said Rejaul Hossain not constructing swimming pools Badsha, convener of swimming unit and not drumming up the swimming of Pabna DSA.

In the swimming pool, 40 students repeated request.

agement in the pool. The iron sedi- take lessons of swimming everyday ir ment has destroyed the tiles of the three shifts, he informed. Meanwhile, officials of many

training programme, despite

are already underway." Our Chittagong correspondent reports: Children of the district are DSA said they have applied to the deprived of learning swimming due

to lack of proper water bodies, swimming pools and training facilities. General Secretary of Chittagong responded. DSA AJM Nasiruddin said, "We have sent a number of letters to National

swimming pools in different districts

Sports Council to build a swimmin

DSA could not construct a swimming pool in last over 17 years due to lack of fund. The DSA only organizes swimming competition in between November and December every year, said DSA officials.

Talking to The Daily Star, the min-pool in the port city but have not

istry's joint secretary Abdur Rahman received any positive reply from

in near future, while procedure of There is no swimming pool and as a

constructing pools in a few districts result the children are deprived of the

Kushtia correspondent reports: A project of Tk 7.50 crore remains under process to construct a swim-

ming pool. Our Patuakhali Correspondent reports: The district council is constructing a Shishu Park filling up the district's lone swimming pool located at the district town. Where now the children learn swimming?

However, in absence of swimming pools and other facilities, DSA in many districts only organises swimming competition once annually, but it does not contribute to teaching the children swimming.

Not all rural children have the opportunity of learning and enjoying swimming.

In partnership with unicef unite for children

In partnership with