

Pesticide-laced food serious health risk

BITTER TRUTH



MD. ASADULLAH KHAN

PESTICIDE use in the country has trebled in the last one decade and surveys have shown that Bangladesh's daily intake of pesticide residues in food is among the highest in the world. Tests carried out in fruit-growing districts revealed that most of the samples had pesticide residues beyond the permissible limits, because many farmers ignore rules prescribing a waiting period between spraying and harvest.

Studies done in many developed countries indicate that dichloro diphenyl trichloro ethane (DDT) and benzene hexachloride (BHC), the two most widely used pesticides in Bangladesh and India, may cause cancer, among other things. Both Bangladesh and India have banned their use in agriculture. Still, there is an underground market inducing the farmers to use these hazardous pesticides in a bid to save their crops from pest attack and increase the yield. Taken in high doses, the chemicals seriously impair brain functions, weaken muscles and cause painful cramps.

A major study by the environmental group Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) in the US showed that some chemicals like dibromo chloro propane (DBCP), dieldrin, parathion, methyl bromide and alachlor, that are considered to be very harmful to human health, are still being used. Says Jay Feldman of the National Coalition against the Misuse of Pesticides: "The food system is overly and unnecessarily contaminated and children are in the line of fire."

The National Research Council (NRC) has also launched a study to evaluate whether kids face a greater risk than adults of cancer, neurological damage and other ills from pesticides. Children may be more vulnerable for two reasons. The first is what they eat. "Pound for pound, a child consumes more food than adults do," says Jack Moore of the Environmental Protection Agency. Kids also eat comparatively more than adults do of particular foods, such as

apples and other juices. Either way, children ingest proportionately more pesticides.

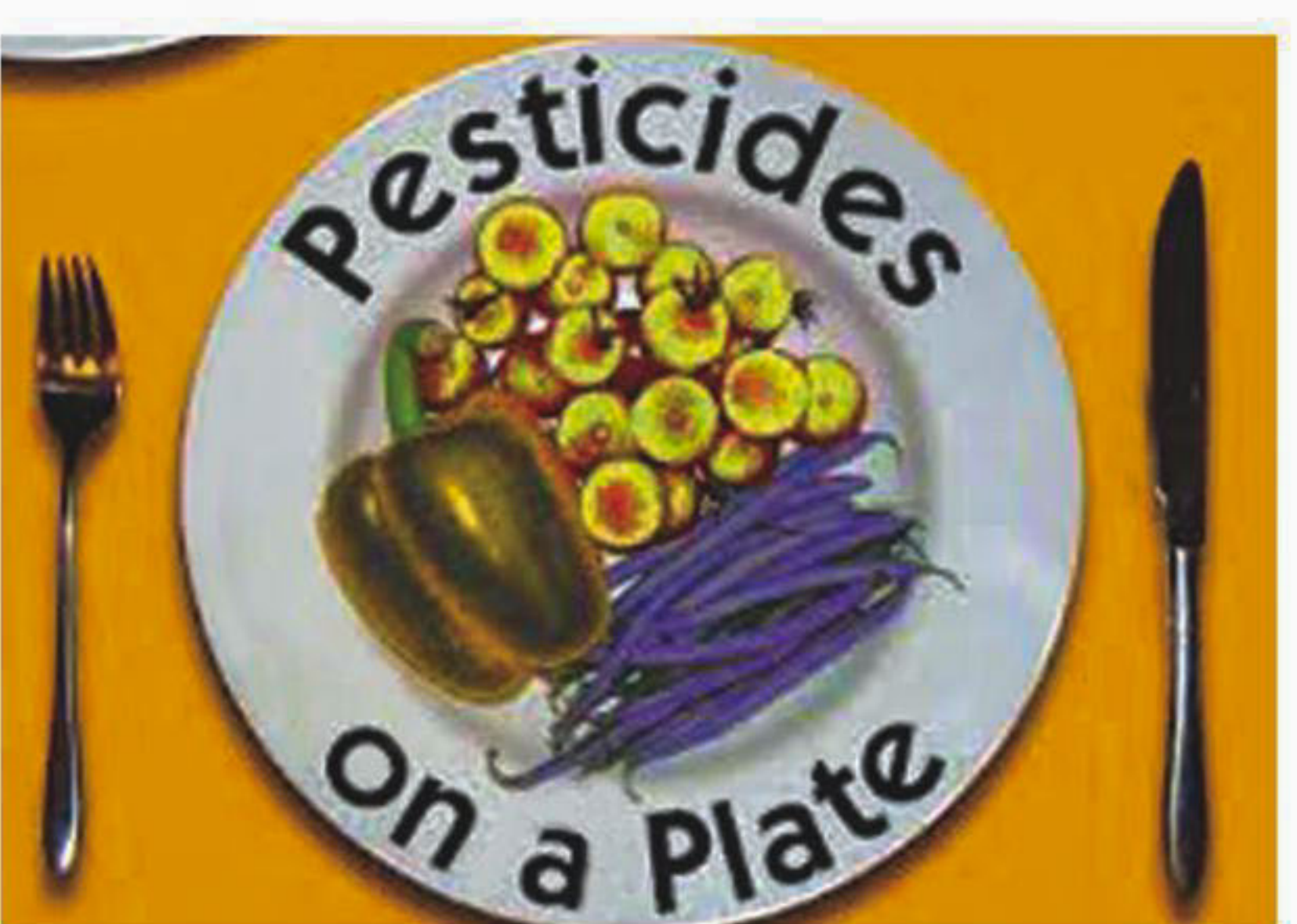
Secondly, children's physiology may be ill-equipped to handle a pesticide-laced diet. For any child, the threat may be tiny, but in the aggregate a country's pre-schoolers may face an intolerable risk.

Children may also be at heightened risk because their neurological, digestive, and other systems are still forming. In very young children, the liver is less able to metabolise, and break down toxins, and their immune systems is not well developed, says Dr. Philip Landrigan, Professor and Chair of Pediatrics at New York Mount Sinai children environmental health centre. The developing nervous system may be especially vulnerable. If baby food is of a higher standard, then about 10 million children under the age of five in our country are well cared for. But what of the 19 million children between one and five, who eat "adult" foods?

Perhaps the most worrisome possibility is that pesticide residues on food may cause cancer. In America, of the 560 million pounds of herbicides and fungicides used by American farmers annually, 375 million pounds are probably or possibly carcinogenic, according to the EPA. A 1987 NRC study showed that these chemicals may cause an extra 1.4 million cases of cancer among Americans.

Scientists suggest that the amount of pesticide allowed to remain on food should be lowered. Because if growers applied every pesticide permitted on every crop, and if the maximum allowed residue remained on every crop, the cancer risk from food would be substantial. But researchers suggest that the risk can be minimised in case of some vegetables by following simple procedures like those mentioned below:

In case of tomatoes most residues are lost if peeled; for potatoes, peeling removes some, but not all residue; for oranges most pesticide residue is in the peel; for lettuce, discard outer leaves, wash inner ones; for apples mostly laced with alar, this can't be washed or processed out; for peaches, washing and peeling recommended; for beans, washing is not enough, they have to be blanched; for car-



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rots, washing, peeling and then cooking to remove residues. The reason why there is little action is that problems caused by pesticides fall between many ministries and end up becoming no one's baby. The ministries of agriculture and health should propound the judicious use of pesticides to protect the health of the country's citizens and to ensure that agricultural exports are not rejected.

With institutional corruption in every level of our society, and societal protest and government action apparently missing, unscrupulous traders and fake factory owners are resorting to dishonest and unethical activities through adding harmful and toxic substances in food items. Farmers and traders indulge in such practices in a bid to keep their produce fresh enough in the post-production stage. No amount of intervention is going to work unless problems associated with transportation and storage are resolved.

We need integrated pest management and organic farming techniques. The popular belief is that because of large-scale smuggling of pesticides, both the yearly consumption and the list of permitted pesticides actually understate the amount being consumed as well as the variety of pesticides available in the market. For example, DDT, although it was banned long ago, is still available in retail market.

The efforts of the plant protection wing of the agricultural ministry to promote integrated pest management (IPM) techniques, which advocate a mixture of traditional practices and limited use of pesticides, have been too little and lackadaisical to have had any major impact. The tolerance levels have so far not been fixed for many of these pesticides. Worse, labels don't carry details such as waiting period between spraying and harvesting.

Negligence or callousness of the concerned section of the agricultural ministry has seen the problem of pests developing resistance to chemicals out of hand. Only now farmers in some areas of Bangladesh are listening to agricultural extension workers who have been advising them to intercrop one type with others, a measure that prevents pest attack. This has led to an overall fall in the use of pesticides in some areas of North Bengal. Much of the country's cultivable land has already been rendered toxic and it will take years for the pesticides to degrade into harmless substances.

While pesticide usage cuts both ways, the real answer lies in ensuring that we make its judicious use a reality. That means adding health costs while evaluating benefits -- apart from the rising costs of agricultural production. Whether it is advocating organic farming -- using pesticides like 'neem' derivatives, cow dung, poultry manure -- or proven inter cropping techniques, remedial measures must be taken up on a war footing. The Ministry of Agriculture, Health and Environment must wake up to the reality and seriousness of the problem before it is too late.

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The Maltese response: Key to world harmony?

MIZANUR RAHMAN SHELLEY

MALTA shone like a precious gem in the mellow Mediterranean sun. It was the close of January 2012. The penultimate day of the month saw the beginning of the ninth annual general meeting of the Commonwealth Journalist Association (CJA). Journalist and civil society leaders from 54 commonwealth countries gathered in a varied and colourful blend in the auditorium of a seashore hotel overlooking the breathtaking expanse of the marine-blue sea.

The articulate and suave tourism minister of the fabled island inaugurated the conference. In his highly interesting address he said something that stunned the audience: "Many nations invaded our shores, many more came in peace for trade and business. During our seven millennia long history Phoenicians, Greeks, Romans, Arabs, Turks, Italians, British and French left their indelible imprints on us. We are a peaceful people and very important in the Mediterranean, because we have the largest natural harbour on the ocean. We speak a language based on Arabic and we are the only Christians praying to 'Allah'! What the minister said was complex in its simplicity. He did not tell the conference that the Maltese were Muslims but simply that, though Christians, they addressed God as Allah.

The meaning and significance of the minister's statement became clearer when the conference participants went on a guided tour of the old capital Madina and the historically famous town of Valletta on the harbour. The young and smart guide repeated the tourism minister's statement that the Maltese language was based on Arabic. She said: "The common greeting is Assalamalaikum." There was more to come. "Ave Maria", she added "in Maltese language is 'sung's Slim Alekum Mari.'"

Many things happened in that memorable trip to Malta in the winter of 2012. I was invited to speak in the CJA conference as a guest speaker along with the former editor of The Statesman of India, Shunanda Datta-Ray, and the editor of Pakistan's Dawn, Zafar Abbas. That was an enriching experience.

The recollection of the splendid blend of cultures continues to be fascinating for me. I am sure it fascinates others equally, if not more. History tells us that in a strange and unexpected way Malta survived as an outpost of Christianity against the expansion of Islam in Europe. The mighty wave of conquest by Ottoman Turks in the 16th century splashed on the shores of Malta in vain.

As history records: "In the early 16th century, the Ottoman Empire started spreading over the region, reaching South-East Europe. The Spanish king Charles V feared that if Rome fell to the Turks, it would be the end of Christian

Europe. In 1522, Suleiman I drove the Knights Hospitaller of St. John out of Rhodes. They dispersed to their commanderies in Europe. Wanting to protect Rome from invasion from the South, in 1530, Charles V handed over the island to these Knights. On May 18, 1565, Suleiman the Magnificent laid siege to Malta. After a protracted siege ended on September 8 of the same year, which became known in history as the Great Siege, the Ottoman Empire conceded defeat as the approaching winter storms threatened to prevent them from leaving."

One can see clearly that it was the strength of success that made the Maltese so confident. They use the expressions and symbols of a great religion which is not theirs with easy elegance. They withstood the Muslims. The Maltese, therefore, could comfortably use the greetings of a different religious culture as their own, even in religious chants.

Another remarkable instance of such happening is found in Indonesia, the country with the largest Muslim population in the world. Here, only in the Island of Bali, Hindus form an overwhelming majority of 9%. Most other islands of the Archipelago, some 3,000, are predominantly Muslim. There, probably dating from the days of the great Indian Sree Vijaya maritime Empire, a rich cultural mix has evolved. It is studded with Hindu scriptural and mythological expression and names in an overwhelmingly and devoutly Muslim country. Thus, the Indian mythological bird "Garuda" is the name of the Indonesian national airlines. The name of the architect of Indonesian independence from Dutch colonial rule, Sukarno's father, was Mohammad Notorejo, a title of Shiva, the destroyer in the Hindu trinity. One of the wives of President Sukarno was Ratnaswari Devi and his daughter also bears a typically Hindu Indian name, Meghawati. There are many more illustrations, which simply underscore

the exciting melange of cultures. As in Indonesia, so in Malta, the Mosaic of cultures, religious expressions and mythology is at once curious and soothing. It soothes especially because it shows that peoples strengthen by history can harmoniously co-exist with different cultures and beliefs; not only that, it also displays the capacity of competent nations to make what is others' their own.

These experiences of this response are highly relevant to our strife-torn times. Our world is bleeding white as a result of religious, nationalist and sectarian violence and conflict. We have enough of conflict-riddled lands, Bosnia, Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Syria and Egypt. What we need now are more Maltas.

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Climate related losses on the rise

POLITICS OF CLIMATE CHANGE



SALEEMUL HUQ

IN recent months, the world has seen some significant loss and damage from climate related events. These have included losses of nearly \$100 billion in the United States of America from Hurricane Sandy in the northwest coast and droughts in the south and mid-west, to over €10 billion from floods in Germany and many other parts of the world. In northern China floods have caused loss of several hundred lives, and entire towns have been washed away.

When these events occur in developed countries the losses tend to be large in monetary terms but low in human lives lost, whereas when they occur in poorer developing countries the numbers of human lives and livelihoods lost are generally larger than the monetary loss and damage. Nevertheless, both developed as well as developing countries are being affected quite severely.

Several recent scientific publications, including the special report on climate extremes of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) as well as a World Bank report (called "Turn down the heat"), have shown that the severity of such climatic events in future is likely to increase dramatically due to human induced climate change.

A more recent study looking at potential loss and damage in coastal cities around the world estimated that in New Orleans and New York alone the costs may go up to \$1 trillion over this century.

While every country has some national level mechanism in place to assess loss and damage and sometimes also provide compensation (either through private insurance or public purse), they are becoming strained with insurance companies no longer willing to provide insurance against floods and droughts in many developed countries. In some cases where the country is unable to cope by itself the international community steps in to provide funding. Although such funds are not called "compensation," they are, nevertheless, given because of the sense of shared responsibilities between rich and poor countries.

In the last Conference of Parties of the United Nations

Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) held in Doha, Qatar, last December, the parties agreed for the first time to look at options for a global mechanism to address loss and damage from climate change.

The developing countries, led by the small island developing states (SIDS) and least developed countries (LDCs), have been arguing for some time for an international mechanism on loss and damage, which has been resisted by the rich countries (largely out of fear that it will give rise to demands for compensation based on liability).

However, it is time that the developed countries realised that loss and damage will not be confined to poor countries only but that even the rich countries will suffer major loss and damage if temperatures continue to rise. Hence, it is their own interests to engage constructively with the poorer more vulnerable countries in trying to



STAR ARCHIVE

address this topic. Thus, at the next conference of parties (COP19) to be held in Warsaw, Poland, in November this year, they should bring a positive response to the demand for an international mechanism on loss and damage and support the vulnerable countries in this demand.

One area for mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and information between developed and developing countries is research on loss and damage. A good example of this has recently been set by the government of Japan, which has allocated nearly \$1 million for a research programme on loss and damage in the Asia Pacific region. Other developed countries could follow Japan's example.

It is high time to move from a confrontational approach to a cooperative approach on loss and damage.

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CROSSWORD

ACROSS

- Princess' insomnia cause
- Raced
- Affirmative actions
- Oprah's TV network
- Burn somewhat
- Nastase of tennis lore
- Bumped into
- Ascended
- Actress Gershon
- Elite educational site
- Wall St. debut
- Toper
- Cowpoke garb
- Driver's license datum
- Mama's name
- "My bad"
- Bear hair
- Make muffins
- Have bills

DOWN

- Circumstance partner
- Basin accessory
- Oppositionist
- Leftovers
- Pic
- Relaxation
- Bureau
- Dark time
- Medley
- Fred and Wilma's pet
- Close up tight
- Big shots
- Early love boat?
- Bottom of the heap
- Swindle
- Remark from
- Lending site
- Sibling-less
- Poetic foot
- Michele of "Glee"
- Poker variety
- Maleficence
- Prohibit
- Basenrunner's goal
- The Amazing
- Golden Rule word
- 1930s French premier
- Leon
- Volcanic outflow
- Actress Jessica
- Back
- Tug
- Luxurious
- Rule word
- 1930s French premier
- Leon
- Volcanic outflow
- Actress Jessica
- Back
- Tug

Solution time: 27 mins.

Yesterday's answer 7-6

CRYPTOQUIP

X P M I K D B R O D M B E R B S P K

L J Z K L J I I - F I J A M B E H J C M I A ' Z

H V R B S G R R V , S P K H K I R X

O V M K G " J B A L R G A P R C K V ? "

Yesterday's Cryptoquip: IF YOU REMOVE A FEW ITEMS FROM YOUR SECRET SUPPLY, I'D SAY YOU'VE MADE A CACHE WITHDRAWAL.

Today's Cryptoquip Clue: B equals N

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HENRY

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by Mort Walker

GREG + MORT WALKER

by Don Tranchte

QUOTABLE Quotes

"Life isn't about finding yourself. Life is about creating yourself."

George Bernard Shaw