

TOXIC GAS IN SEED WAREHOUSE 30 workers fall ill in Pabna

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Pabna

At least 30 contractual workers of Bangladesh Agricultural Development Corporation (BADC) fell sick, suspected to be from inhalation of a toxic chemical, at its warehouse at Tebunia village in Pabna yesterday.

Of the victims, 14 were admitted to Pabna Medical College Hospital while the rest left for home after receiving primary treatment.

Talking to this correspondent at the hospital, workers said they fell sick around 10:30am when they were processing seeds at the warehouse, some 10 kilometres off Pabna town.

"All of a sudden, I felt drowsy and collapsed on the floor unconscious," said Md Abdus Sattar from Badalpara village.

At least 70 workers, aged between 30 and 60, had been working there when the incident occurred, he added.

The rest of the workers rushed out unhurt.

Md Abdul Halim, joint director of the BADC in Pabna, said the workers

might have fallen ill after inhaling toxic insecticide. The chemical, which contains aluminium phosphate, is kept in the warehouse in packets to deter pest attacks in sacks of seeds.

Following the incident, processing of seed was stopped immediately and the sick were sent to the hospital, he noted.

Workers Islam, Nur Mollah, Keramat, Mukul, Mojnu, Alam, Milu, Didar, Amir, Sattar, Nur, Sazzad, Sudib and Abul were undergoing treatment at the hospital on the floor near the medicine ward as all its beds were occupied.

Dr Monzura Rahman, assistant director of the hospital, said they kept the patients under observation and would send any of the workers to Dhaka for better treatment, if required.

BADC official Halim said the state-owned corporation doesn't supply any safety gears such as masks and gloves to the workers, each of whom makes Tk 260 a day. "It was just an accident."



Chinese Defence Minister Chang Wanquan calls on Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina at the Gono Bhaban yesterday.

PHOTO: PID

Speaker Shirin ill, admitted to hospital PM visits her

BSS, Dhaka



Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina yesterday visited ailing Speaker of Jatiya Sangsad Shirin Sharmin Chaudhury at the Combined Military Hospital (CMH) in the capital.

"The prime minister visited the CMH tonight [last night] to see the ailing speaker of parliament and stayed there for some time," said PM's Deputy Press Secretary Ashraful Alam Khokan.

Hasina talked to the attending doctors and enquired about the health condition of the Speaker from them. She also wished her early recovery.

Shirin Sharmin has been undergoing treatment at the Intensive Care Unit (ICU) of the CMH since Saturday.

Sources said the Speaker suddenly fell ill on Saturday night. She was first taken to a private hospital, and later transferred to the CMH that night.

They feel sick yet they have to work

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earns between Tk 60 to Tk 70 a day.

Monir's father, mother, and elder brother aged 14, also work in the bidi factory. The boy's father Jahedul Islam said he could not bear the educational expenses for his children due to poverty.

"My wife, our two sons and I are able to earn Tk 550 a day," he added.

Monir is not an exceptional case.

Around 3,000 children, aged between seven and 15, work in five bidi factories of two upazilas in Lalmonirhat. They make up about half the workforce in bidi factories there, said Abdul Goni, manager of a bidi factory in Lalmonirhat's Aditmari upazila.

And they suffer from similar health issues.

Instead of going to schools, the children go to factories in the morning and work for a minimum of eight hours, often earning less than Tk 50 per day.

Bidi factory worker Didarul Islam, 45, of Saralkhan in the upazila said children are used in the factories since they could be paid less than adults.

"More than 60 percent of the child workers make less than Tk 50 a day. They have to work because their families depend on their income," said bidi factory worker Hamidul Islam of Sarpukur.

Bidi factory worker Sehatul Islam,

13, of Bhotmari in Kaliganj upazila said he and other child workers feel sick at work almost all the time. "We suffer from nausea, breathing problems, headaches, cough, fever, other pains and aches," he said.

An adult worker of Saralkhan said they spend quite a bit of their earnings on treatment, like buying cough and pain medicines regularly. He said this becoming sick and buying medicines actually contributes to them never overcoming poverty.

"As we have no alternative options for earning our livelihoods in the area, we are compelled to work in bidi factories despite the unhealthy working condition. We even take our children to work only for additional earnings to support our families," he added.

Lalmonirhat civil surgeon Ahsan Ali Babu said bidi factory workers, especially child workers, look like living skeletons and most of them are suffer from malnutrition.

"They are deprived of fresh air inside the factory where the entire environment is polluted by the nicotine fumes of tobacco," he said, adding that common ailments among child workers at bidi factories include fever, pain, headaches, cough, bronchitis, narcolepsy, vomiting and other recurring complexities.

Ironically, the bidi factory owners hang signboards that read "No work-

ers below the age of 18". The factories do not even offer any protective gear for their workers.

Factory manager Goni said bidi workers were mostly people with no land and of ultra poor families.

Labour leader Manir emphasised the need for policy measures and enforcement of existing laws to prevent child labour and creating alternative jobs for the bidi factory workers.

"If special social safety net programmes, targeted towards these people from the ultra poor condition, are taken, then the parents of child biri workers may be interested in sending their children to school instead of bidi factories."

Admitting bidi factories were the reason for increased rates of dropouts at primary schools, Rasheda Begum, the headmaster of Saptabari Govt Primary School, said the children want to quit their jobs but cannot.

"We carry out campaigns against this job, which pose health risks, but parents hardly respond," she said.

Nine-year-old Afsana Akhter, who works in the same factory as Monir, had dropped out of school after studying up to class-II.

"I earn Tk 50-55 a day by working in the bidi factory along with my parents. I do not like this work, but I am helpless as I am controlled by my parents," said the child.

Too inadequate to raise

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which remained almost static for the last 14 years, said the study.

Citing World Development Indicator (WDI) data, it said Bangladesh was ranked 155th among 161 countries in 2014 in terms of the education sector's share in the GDP.

Bangladesh committed in the Dakar Declaration and in various global forums that it would spend six percent of the GDP or allocate at least 20 percent of the national budget for education.

The Unesco stipulates that the budgetary allocation for education should constitute at least six percent of the GDP and 20 percent of the total budget.

But the allocation for education in the national budget was only two percent of the GDP and 11.6 percent of the budget in the outgoing fiscal year, the study pointed out.

Besides, a large portion of the education budget is spent for non-development purposes, mainly for teachers' salaries and allowances, leaving limited scope for investment in improving the quality of education.

Take, for example, the allocation of Tk 17,103 crore to the education ministry in the outgoing fiscal year.

Of the amount, around Tk 12,677 crore was spent for non-development purposes and Tk 4,000 crore for development purposes, according to budget documents.

Educationalists and experts say there should be more investment in training of teachers, improvement of curriculum, construction of classrooms and setting up of libraries and laboratories.

The country has achieved 97 percent enrolment for primary education, but the government should pay more attention to the secondary and tertiary education and improving their quality, they said.

Last week, educationalists at a meeting pointed out various problems, including heavy curriculum, complex textbooks, and faulty examination and evaluation systems in secondary level education, and advocated the increase of budgetary allocation for the education sector.

Now, there are more than 66,000 government primary schools in the country. But the quality of education at many of those institutions is poor as they continue to suffer from many problems.

Shabby classrooms, lack of qualified teachers and libraries, and low pay of teachers are some of the reasons behind their poor performance.

Of the schools, more than 26,000 were nationalised in 2013 when questions were raised about academic and professional competence of a large number of the teachers in those institutions.

There have been allegations that many of them were not recruited in a transparent manner while many others got the job using political influence.

On the other hand, dearth of competent teachers of science and mathematics and lack of training facilities remain as major challenges to ensuring quality education at secondary level.

There are only 338 government secondary schools in the country, and the rest 19,000 are non-government schools, quality of many of which is in question, said the experts.

Education ministry officials said the government secondary schools are considered quality institutions as they have better teachers and infrastructural facilities. But due to lack of adequate funds, the ministry cannot set up more secondary schools.

Talking to The Daily Star last night, Education Minister Nurul Islam Nahid said the allocation for the education sector needs to be increased for ensuring quality education.

"The finance minister announced that the allocation for this sector would be increased in the upcoming budget, and we are hopeful of getting a bigger allocation," he added.

Experts and educationists say the country should invest more in education if it wants to achieve the goals set in the National Education Policy 2010 and Vision 2021.

"Our future would be bleak if we do not increase our investment in education," eminent educationist Prof Serajul Islam Choudhury told The Daily Star.

It is a matter of regret that the government investment in the education sector is poor, and the allocation has been declining over the years, he said.

"Naturally, we expect that the investment would gradually increase to 20 percent of the total budget. Otherwise, we won't be able to move forward."

"We are spending on many unproductive areas which would not bring any good in the future," said the Professor Emeritus of Dhaka University.

Prof Serajul noted that the government must make education its top priority for the sake of the country's future.

"Allocation for education should not be seen just as an allocation, it should be considered an investment for the future," he added.

Noted academician Prof Siddiqur Rahman said, "The current investment is very inadequate for ensuring quality education."

The government needs to invest more to execute its plans such as extending primary education up to class-VIII. It should put more emphasis on teachers' training as a number of them at both primary and secondary levels are still not competent, he said.

Besides, it should invest more for upgrading infrastructure in the sector, said Prof Siddiqur, a former teacher at the Institute of Education and Research of Dhaka University.

He suggested the government should gradually increase the education budget to a minimum of four percent of the GDP.

The government must make sure that the money is spent in a transparent manner and the students get the benefit, he added.

Around four crore students are now studying at primary and secondary levels.

Why strikes

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particularly at public hospitals across the country, with medical interns, doctors and nurses staying away from work on different grounds. They even hold patients hostage to their demands.

In March, physicians in Khulna division enforced a 24-hour strike protesting an alleged assault on one of their colleagues. They padlocked the gates of emergency departments of their respective hospitals during the strike, according to media reports.

On April 22, 2014, a patient died at Rajshahi Medical College Hospital during a work stoppage by the interns over an untoward incident involving journalists and them. The patient's family members alleged that there was nobody to administer oxygen.

The rights body in the petition said doctors and nurses reportedly enforce strikes for different reasons, causing sufferings to patients.

It requested the court to direct the director general of the DGHS to form a three-member committee to monitor twice in a week if doctors and nurses enforced any strike at any hospital.



A good number of children along with their parents make bidi (local cigarette) at a factory in Lalmonirhat's Aditmari upazila. The photo was taken recently.

PHOTO: S DILIP ROY

Contrasting price rise

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Currently, 3.5 million people die globally every year from tobacco-related diseases. By 2025, it will rise to 10 million, said the World Health Organisation in a report last year.

A majority of these deaths will occur in the Third World countries and Eastern Europe, as the West sees a drop in tobacco consumption.

Bangladesh is one of the developing countries having high prevalence of tobacco use. It has a commitment to make the country tobacco-free by 2040.

Realities are different, however.

The CTFK's comparative analysis of price rises of three items -- eggs, milk and an average brand cigarette 'Cegare' -- early this year found that the cigarette packet that cost Tk 10 in 2001-02 went up to Tk 24 in 2012-13, an 140 percent increase.

On the other hand, the price of four pieces of hen eggs that was less than Tk 12 in 2001-02 went up to Tk 37, a rise of over 200 percent. During the same

period, price of milk rose by some 150 percent.

Price of fine rice rose from Tk 24 a kg in 2001-02 to Tk 42 in 2012-13, which is a 75 percent increase.

In another analysis, the CTFK found the price of 5,000 tobacco sticks (bidi) in 2008-09 was 1.82 percent of per capita GDP, which went down to 1.34 percent in 2013-14.

"Apparently, we see a rise in tobacco taxes and prices in the budget, but it is not commensurate with people's income rise and also inflation," said Shariful Alam, lead consultant of the CTFK in Bangladesh.

Ideally, tobacco price should be much higher than that of daily essentials to discourage tobacco consumption, but just the opposite is happening in Bangladesh, he told The Daily Star.

Dr Syed Mahfuzul Huq, national professional official of the WHO in Bangladesh, said price increase through taxation has been globally proved as the most effective tool to

reduce tobacco use.

However, Bangladesh has no taxation policy to achieve the goal of making the country tobacco-free by 2040, he said.

ABM Zubair of PROGGA said a strong lobby from tobacco industry was a major factor behind low taxation, but complicated tax structure for tobacco is also to blame.

There are four price slabs for four types of tobacco products -- low, medium, high and premium. For each slab, there are different prices and taxes.

"Such a price and tax structure creates scopes for tobacco companies to dodge taxes. They can present medium category tobacco product as low category and pay low taxes," Zubair added. He suggested that the NBR simplify the tax structure and impose 70 percent of excise tax equally on all tobacco products.

By increasing tax from 32 percent in 1993 to 52 percent in 2009 on retail price of tobacco, South Africa man-