

LITCHI PESTICIDE

No end yet to risk of child poisoning and deaths

KONGKON KARMAKER with ANDREW EAGLE

Across the country people wait with bated breath for the arrival of Dinajpur's litchi crop. Local children are likewise excited to sample the sweet fruit, so much so that they are easily tempted to wander into any nearby orchard to savour a few samples. But if the children venture into the orchards after they've been sprayed with pesticide, it's a trip that can prove fatal.

"My daughter is just alive," says Parveen Akter from Purba Sadipur village in Dinajpur's Kaharol upazila. "She likes to sit in my lap. She can't walk unassisted and she doesn't speak anymore. She's stopped growing." Yet ultimately 4-year-old Nishi and her family can be considered fortunate. Of the 12 children hospitalised after Dinajpur's litchi orchards were sprayed with pesticide last year, Nishi is the sole survivor.

Nishi's tragedy began quite unceremoniously last year when she went to eat fruit in a nearby litchi orchard. On the following morning, as soon as she woke she asked for water; and when she drank it, it made her sick. Nishi's father sold all the family's belongings trying to save his daughter.

The head paediatrician of Dinajpur Medical College Hospital Dr. Wares says that all of the children brought to the hospital from 30 May 2015 with suspected pesticide poisoning were aged between 2 and 6 years old.

Their symptoms included severe fever, convulsions and unconsciousness.

The deaths of eleven of those children brings the total number of child fatalities linked to litchi orchard pesticide poisoning in Dinajpur over the past several years to 23. Experts from the Institute of Epidemiology, Disease Control and Research in their report findings following an inquiry into the child deaths notes that orchards are found near all of the victims' homes.

It's a situation that has litchi farming communities distressed. This year, several orchardists have set



up signboards with warnings to alert people to the use of pesticides. One orchardist anonymously told The Daily Star that he has reduced his pesticide use.

The department of agriculture extension meanwhile has installed sex pheromone traps on 100 litchi trees at Mashimpur in Dinajpur sadar upazila and at Robipur in Biral upazila in search of a safer alternative. While farmers are reporting promising results from the trial, the majority of orchards continue to rely on pesticides.

"You can smell the pesticides in the air," says Rafiqul

Alam, resident of Sadullahpara village in Birganj upazila.

Despite the danger, during a visit to any of the litchi growing villages, a common sight is likely to be children roaming and playing under the litchi trees, collecting and eating the fallen fruit.

Even parents who are aware of the problem and want to protect their children find it hard. "It's absolutely difficult to guard children all the time," says Chan Mia, also from Sadullahpara. He lost his 5-year-old son during last year's litchi season and is desperate to protect his

other children.

His neighbour Mohsina agrees. "It's not easy for everybody to stay at home when the pesticide is sprayed," she says, demanding orchardists fence their crops to prevent intrusion by children.

Mostafizur Rahman, a department of agriculture extension official in Birganj says he has held meetings with orchardists and litchi traders in an attempt to at the least systematise pesticide use. He says that the spraying of pesticides is closely monitored. His counterpart in Biral upazila, Ashrafur Islam, says

they are also closely monitoring litchi growers' activities. "We have decided to run a mobile court to deal with anyone who violates the warnings of the pesticide companies on how their product should be applied." Litchis should not be picked within two weeks of being sprayed.

Yet until safer alternatives can be found and applied on a large scale, families in litchi-growing communities are unlikely to be spared the risk of tragedy, of child illness and death.

Dinajpur hosts 2,000 litchi orchards covering nearly 5,000 hectares. About half of these orchards are in Biral upazila.

Abducted schoolgirl rescued in Nilphamari, one held

Munshiganj schoolgirl traceless for a week

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Nilphamari

Police rescued a schoolgirl from Domar upazila town in the district on Wednesday, three months after her abduction.

They also arrested one Selim Islam, 25, of Moujapanga village in the upazila, for his alleged involvement in the abduction.

On March 3, Selim abducted the eighth grader of Dimla upazila when she was going to her school in the area, said police. They quoted victim's family as saying that Selim often teased the girl, 14, on her

way to and from the school. The victim's family filed a case with Dimla Police Station against Selim and two others in connection with the abduction.

On Wednesday evening, the law enforcers arrested Selim from Domar upazila bus stand and interrogated him.

Following his confessional statement, police rescued the girl from a rented house in Domar upazila town at night.

The arrestee was produced in a court that sent him to jail yesterday, said Sahabuddin Ahmed, investigation officer of the case.

Away in Munshiganj, students of Abdullahpur High School yesterday formed a human chain in Tongbari upazila, demanding steps to rescue an abducted girl student of the institution and arrest of the culprits.

Several hundred students of the school joined the programme beside Nimtali-Mukhtarpur link road from 10:00am and blocked the road for about half an hour.

On June 2, one Sohail Mridha, 46, and his accomplice Swapan, 38, picked up the 14-year-old girl from the upazila headquarters.

Rly land under illegal occupation

Grabbers building commercial structures on the land

S DILIP ROY, Lalmonirhat

Illegal commercial structures are being built on Lalmonirhat-Mogholhat abandoned railway track at Uttara Road in Lalmonirhat town, but the railway authorities are not taking any action against the grabbers.

Abdur Rahim, a trader at Uttara Road in the town, said he built his establishment on railway land at Lalmonirhat-Mogholhat abandoned route as he leased the land from the authorities concerned. "I give money regularly to the railway authorities concerned," he added.

Bhuttu Miah, another trader of the same area, said they did not grab railway land. Some businessmen constructed shops and other structures on railway land as they leased it from the railway authorities, he said, adding that all businessmen regularly pay money to them.

However, Hafizur Rahman, head assistant of railway divisional estate office (DEO) of

Lalmonirhat Railway Division, said the estate office did not lease any land of Lalmonirhat-Mogholhat abandoned track. "We don't know how some people got lease for the land," he said, adding that estate officials visited the area and an eviction drive would be conducted soon.

Eight northern districts--Lalmonirhat, Kurigram, Rangpur, Gaibandha, Bogra, Dinajpur, Thakurgaon and Panchagarh--under Lalmonirhat Railway Division.

Officials of the DEO said there are a total of 11,296 acres of railway land under Lalmonirhat Railway Division of West Zone Railway, of which 397 acres lands have been sold by the railway authorities. Of the rest 10,899 acres, 5,753 acres are being used for railway operational work. Of the remaining 5,146 acres, 3442 acres have been leased as agricultural land, 31 acres as commercial land, 75 acres as fishery land and 2 acres as nursery land, while 1,596 acres are under

illegal occupation. Sources said, of the 5,753 acres for railway operational work, about 1,600 acres have been grabbed by influential in different areas under the division.

Mohammad Ohidunnabi, divisional estate officer of Lalmonirhat Railway Division, said railway authorities did not lease any land on Lalmonirhat-Mogholhat abandoned route to anybody, adding that he will conduct a drive to demolish all the illegal structures that have been built on railway land.

"We have been conducting regular drives to demolish illegal structures on railway land in eight northern districts under Lalmonirhat Railway Division," he said, adding that they have to face difficulties during the drive due to political musclemen in different areas. "I will also find out how some people got lease of railway land, and will take strict action if any railway official is found guilty in this connection," he said.



Grabbers are erecting commercial structures on the abandoned Lalmonirhat-Mogholhat railway track at Uttara Road in Lalmonirhat town, but the railway authorities have turned a blind eye to the illegal act.

DEMANDING RE-POLLING AT A CENTRE IN RANGAMATI

PCJSS to enforce road, waterways blockade June 13, 14

A CORRESPONDENT, Rangamati

Parbatya Chattagram Jana Sanghati Samity (PCJSS) yesterday announced road and river-ways blockade in Rangamati district on June 13 and 14, demanding re-voting at a polling centre under Bhusonchhara union of the district's Barakal upazila.

PCJSS Rangamati unit Secretary Suborno Chakma announced the blockade programme at a rally at the district town's gymnasium field yesterday morning.

The party alleged that the Awami League nominated chairman candidate with the help of law enforcers prevented indigenous voters from casting their votes at Chhoto Harina Government Primary School centre during Bhusonchhara Union Parishad election on June 4.

Addressing the rally as chief guest PCJSS chief Jyotirindra Bodhipriya Larma alias Santu Larma reiterated the demand for full implementation of CHT Peace Accord. "Law enforcers directly worked for the AL's candidate by preventing indigenous people from casting their votes at Chhoto Harina Government

Primary School centre." he alleged.

Santu demanded repolling at the centre. Otherwise, he threatened to continue the ongoing agitation programme. PCJSS has been continuing the riverways blockade programme in the district since June 7 to press the demand for re-voting at the centre.

PCJSS central committee member Udayan Tripura, NN Larma Memorial Foundation Convener Bijoy Ketan Chakma, Bangladesh Adivasi Forum CHT unit President Prakriti Ranjan Chakma, and Pahari Chhatra Parishad central president Bachchu Chakma addressed the rally with Suborno Chakma in the chair.

Later, leaders and activ-

ists of PCJSS took out a procession from in front of the gymnasium and paraded the main streets in the town.

At least 20 people, including a candidate for reserved seat, were hurt during the polling at Chhoto Harina Government Primary School.



Parbatya Chattagram Jana Sanghati Samity (PCJSS) brings out a procession in Rangamati town yesterday, demanding re-voting at Chhoto Harina polling centre in Bhusonchhara union of the district's Barakal upazila.

Man beaten to death over land dispute

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Dinajpur

A man was beaten to death by goons hired by his relatives over a land dispute in Parbatipur upazila of the district on Wednesday night, police said.

The deceased was Saib Uddin, 45, of Dungupara village under the upazila.

Locals said Saib Uddin had an altercation with his aunt Momena Khatun over nine decimals of land on Wednesday afternoon, but they settled the matter.

On the same night, around four to five people allegedly hired by Momena Khatun caught Saib Uddin while he was on way to his house and beat him up mercilessly. The hired goons also beat up Saib Uddin's younger brothers as they tried to rescue him.

Mominul Islam, 35, and Jamil Ahmed, 30, younger brothers of the deceased, were also injured badly. They took treatment at Parbatipur Upazila Health Complex.

Locals rescued Saib Uddin and took him to Parbatipur Upazila Health Complex. The doctors of the hospital referred him to Dinajpur Medical College Hospital as his condition deteriorated. He succumbed to his injuries early yesterday.

Robbers abduct 5 fishermen in Sundarbans for ransom

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Satkhira

Indian Robbers abducted five Bangladeshi fishermen and looted their valuables from Garal River under Satkhira point in the Sundarbans on Wednesday.

They also demanded Tk 3 lakh as ransom from the victims' families for their release, said Abdur Razzak, one of the fishermen who fled the scene and reached his home in Shyamnagar upazila yesterday morning.

The kidnapped fishermen are Mosharrif Gazi, 25, Shaftiqul Gazi, 35, Attiar Gazi, 25, and Fazlu Gazi, 40, of Parshekhali village; and Fazar Ali, 25, of Tengrakhal village in Shyamnagar upazila of Satkhira.

Razzak said they went to the Sundarbans for fishing on Tuesday night after taking permission from the forest department.

On Wednesday morning, members of an Indian robbers gang known as 'Master Bahini' abducted the five

fishermen while they were fishing near Kappuri area in the Sundarbans.

They later took the Bangladeshi fishermen inside the Indian territory and demanded the ransom, said Razzak, who informed the victims' families.

Contacted, Nazrul Islam, Koikhali station master of Satkhira range of the Sundarbans, said none had lodged any complaint in this regard as of 6:00pm yesterday.