

Filariasis, a curse to northerners

Women in 5 districts suffer most

EAM ASADUZZAMAN with ANDREW EAGLE

Two years ago, Asma Begum, then 18, had everything to look forward to. She was a newlywed, having married Enamul Hossain who once worked in Dubai. She was enjoying life at her in-law's home in Kundopukur village of Nilphamari sadar upazila. But a year later, she was divorced. Her husband had detected that Asma was an acute sufferer of filariasis.

Spread by mosquitoes and black flies, and caused by a species of round-worm, filariasis is a debilitating, parasitic disease. While it is treatable in its early stages, the condition often gives rise to the symptom of elephantiasis, a swelling of the limbs or other body parts such as the breast, sexual organs and scrotum.

The swelling, regularly accompanied by itching and high fevers with shivering, is unbearably painful. Moreover, the swollen body parts are unsightly and attendant sores emit a foul-smelling fluid. Sufferers displaying elephantiasis are unable to do any strenuous work at risk of permanent disability. There is no established treatment to reverse the elephantiasis, though good hygiene can help.

Lack of acceptance of her disease ended Asma's hopes for a happy family life. She was compelled to return to her childhood home. Her story is not unique; there are thousands of others.

Taslima Begum, 35, of Digoldangi village in Nilphamari sadar upazila is a mother-of-three married to a farmer, Samsul Islam, for upwards of fifteen years. Then, four years ago filariasis symptoms appeared. Her husband moved her to a separate house where she lives in isolation. He has since taken a second wife.

The Daily Star met Asma and Taslima recently at the country's lone filariasis hospital, in Dhalagachh village of Nilphamari's Saidpur upazila, where they came in search of treatment. Both termed the disease their 'curse'.

"The disease is particularly prevalent in Nilphamari, Panchagarh, Thakurgaon, Lalmonirhat and Rangpur," says Dr Raihan Tareque, resident medical officer at the hospital. "We see up to 50 patients daily and routinely women are the worst victims since many are forced to divorce their husbands."

Nilphamari's civil surgeon Dr Abdur Rashid agrees. "Women filariasis

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Protesters and police in scuffle inside Bashundhara Residential Area yesterday.

PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

Worker killed in landslide

Illegal hill cutting to blame

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Moulribazar

A worker died in a landslide in a hillock in Companiganj upazila of Sylhet yesterday evening.

Yakub Ali, 22, of the upazila's Purba Narayanpara village, died at Shah Arefin Tila, said Nasrin Jahan Fatema, vice-chairman of the upazila.

In the last two months, at least 11 people were killed in similar incidents in stone quarries in Bholaganj, Bichnakandi and Lohbhachara areas of the district.

Asked about the illegal practice, Altaf Hossain, officer-in-charge of Companiganj Police Station, said, "We raided the areas but could not detain anyone red-handed."

Landslide may occur anytime due to indiscriminate stone lifting and hill cutting, said Abdul Karim Kim, general secretary of Bangladesh Poribesh Andolon, Sylhet chapter.

Paan on fire!

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At his Allahar Dan Jaliler Misty Paan, he adds 20 ingredients to the regular Paan, one after another. He sprinkles honey on a layer of coconut. And then adds jafran, jelly and various syrups to be topped up with a drop of special syrup. And finally he lights it.

As the flame grows he asks his customer to open his mouth wide and take it in one go. You have to immediately shut your mouth and chomp the delicious thing. Ahh! Now that is called a Paan! It costs Tk 50 for a single Paan.

Taking to The Daily Star, Jalil Mia said he learnt the technique of making the Paan from India and started selling it here some six months ago.

Asked how his business was going, he said, "It is pretty good. I am happy."

He declined to disclose all the ingredients of the Paan, saying he did not want others to learn to make the special thing.

A customer can find some 20 types of Paan at his shop. Each of them costs Tk 10 to Tk 300.

Jalil said he started selling Paan in the 1980s. At that time, he used to work at a Paan shop on the nearby Alauddin Road. Later, he had his own shop.

"It's a great delight to see people having Paan. I like it when they leave my shop happily ...," he said.

Antarctica

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about 60 meters (200 ft) if it were all to melt, meaning scientists are concerned to know even about extremes around the fringes.

The heat record for the broader Antarctic region, defined as anywhere south of 60 degrees latitude, was 19.8°C (67.6°F) on Jan 30, 1982 on Signy Island in the South Atlantic, it said.

And the warmest temperature recorded on the Antarctic plateau, above 2,500 meters (8,202 feet), was -7.0°C (19.4°F) on Dec 28, 1980, it said.

Wednesday's WMO report only examined the highs. The lowest temperature set anywhere on the planet was a numbing -89.2°C (-128.6°F) at the Soviet Union's Vostok station in central Antarctica on July 21, 1983.

Weighed down

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Each of these subjects carries 50 marks. If taught practically, these subjects could expand children's knowledge of real-life work and instil determination, enthusiasm and curiosity in them. But instead of going for such an approach, the curriculum designers have imposed on them page after page of theories to memorise.

Some of these subjects are not meant to be taught in the classrooms alone. Students should rather learn them through participation in practical lessons, and so the provision for any sort of tests on these subjects should be dropped, said eminent educationist Rasheda K Choudhury.

The subjects have been introduced in class six over the last few years, taking the total number of subjects to 13 from just six in class five.

For class nine and ten students, two additional subjects -- Work and Life-oriented Education and ICT -- were introduced in 2015, taking their total subjects to 14. So for the first time, SSC examinees took tests on 14 subjects this year.

These changes have been brought even as government high-ups, including the education minister, often speak about improving the standard of education and gradually take it to international level.

As Rasheda sees it there is no continuity and consistency in the curriculum.

As for the international standards, if the country's English-medium education is considered, studying 14 subjects in SSC level seems a daunting task.

English-medium students, who follow either Cambridge or Edexcel O-level curriculum, equivalent to SSC, have to pick at least five subjects, from more than 20 options, and pass them to be eligible to enroll in the next level. However, they can choose more than five subjects, depending on their learning ability and interest.

At SFX Green Herald International School in the capital for example, about 4-5 percent students take 12 subjects at O-level. While the school recommends that students take at least eight subjects, most students don't study more than nine, said Sister Gracie Gomes, senior section-in-charge.

But Bangla-medium students are overburdened with a huge pile of books, which is why they memorise answers from guidebooks instead of reading the textbooks thoroughly, teachers and guardians say.

Against such a backdrop, educationists last year recommended that the government drop a few subjects, among other things, to lighten up the burden on students, Education Minister Nurul Islam Nahid told a press briefing in November.

Excessive pressure drives away students' interest in studies, said renowned academic and author Prof Serajul Islam Choudhury.

According to him, education has become more exam- and result-centred with little focus on acquiring knowledge. Children fail to gain insights if they remain busy studying so many subjects.

TRAINING TO BE BOOK-SMART
The 2010 policy provides for extension of primary education up to class eight. But no step has yet been taken in that direction, which is why the education system remains faulty, said Rasheda, also a former caretaker government adviser.

In addition, before introducing a particular subject, the authorities hardly consider the facilities that should be in place. Take the case of Mukta Khatun from

Doyrampur village of Faridpur. Just days before her SSC exams that began last month, she didn't know what to do in the practical exam of ICT.

She didn't attend a single practical class of the subject in the last two years, since her Doyrampur Higher Secondary School has no power connection, let alone computers.

Her score in the subject will depend on her combined performance in written exam of 25 marks and 25 marks for practical. She has memorised certain answers and is relying on the written exam to pass.

The problem is not unique to Doyrampur school though, said Akram Hossain, who teaches ICT and three other subjects there.

He would arrange for viva exams for the students and send the marks to the education board.

Though this is how he seeks to solve the problem, Akram said, the main objective of incorporating the subject in the curriculum will not be achieved. Regarding Physical Health, Masuma, studying in BAF Shaheen School in the capital, said she spent more time in her study room than doing something for real.

For example, the Physical Health textbook for class seven had 42 rules of cricket laid out, which she had difficulty remembering. She was never interested in cricket.

But unlike Mukta, she likes ICT. She had no chance of sitting before a computer in her school, but that was not an issue for her since she has a computer at home.

Another city student, 13-year-old Vaskor Srabon studying in class seven is fascinated with computer and internet. But subjects like Arts and Craft and Agriculture Study do not interest him. Also, he does not like drawing and painting.

Regarding Agriculture Study, he points out two chapters for class six focusing on how to prepare seedbeds, use of fertiliser and pesticides and how to control pest attacks and diseases of crops and vegetables.

Vaskor, of Udayan Higher Secondary School in Dhaka, had a tough time last year memorising so many numbers that farmers can easily get on the internet and in different software applications.

Yet he had to study all these subjects. "I struggle to find time ... I can manage time for maximum nine subjects."

Jubeda Khanom, who teaches Agriculture Study, Bangladesh and Global Studies and Life-oriented Education in different classes at Auronee, said that children's interest in these subjects declines as they climb to higher classes.

In class nine and ten, students consider them as an unnecessary burden, which they have to carry no matter how hard it is.

Jubeda especially points out the curriculum of Bangladesh and Global Studies for class nine and ten. The subject is designed as if to prepare the children for Bangladesh Civil Service exams, she said.

Weighed down by so many subjects, many students are losing interest in studies, said Durjoy Roy, an SSC examinee from Jessore Zila School.

A science student, Durjoy thinks ICT is a good incorporation. But subjects like Work and Life-oriented Education and Physical Education add to their already heavy burden.

"My son is bright. But I'm concerned that he may lose interest in studies under so much pressure," said Mousumy Shill, mother of Vaskor.

Assault on students sparks clash

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retreat, they threw brick chunks at police and set fire to placards and posters.

Police fired dozens of teargas canisters to bring the situation under control, witnesses said.

Pragati Sarani was cleared for traffic around 12:30pm.

However, chase and counter-chase between the protestors and the police continued inside Bashundhara until 5:00pm.

The protestors vandalised the Bashundhara Group's corporate office, about a dozen cars parked at the office and three restaurants.

All shops were closed and vehicular movement was suspended inside the residential area during the incident, witnesses added.

NSU student Zunaid Hossain told The Daily Star that three of his fellow students on a motorbike went to have dinner at a restaurant near Apollo Hospitals around 10:25pm on Wednesday.

As they parked the bike in front of the hospital, some Ansar members approached them and asked them to move the bike. And soon an altercation ensued.

NSU student Md Samrat said that at one stage, the Ansar members started assaulting the students. Bashundhara security guards in plain-clothes also joined in and beat up the students.

Shahriar Hasnat Topu, an eighth semester BBA student, was seriously injured.

The two other students managed to run away. They informed other students, and 20 to 30 people gathered in front of the hospital and demonstrated, sources said.

Belal Ahmed, deputy director public relation of NSU, said the students stopped in front of the hospital when they realised they had dropped something on the way and wanted to look for the item leaving the bike there.

They had even informed a security guard of what they were doing.

"But the security guard beat up the student for parking in a 'no-parking' area. Later, over a dozen guards joined in the assault," he told The Daily Star.

NSU Proctor Syed Azizul Islam went to the spot and calmed the situation after a meeting with Bashundhara authorities.

Injured Topu took treatment at Dhaka Medical College Hospital first but he was later moved to the Apollo Hospitals as the Bashundhara authorities took responsibility for his treatment, according to students and NSU authorities.

The Bashundhara authorities even paid the injured student Tk 25,000 for damage done to his motorbike, Mohammad Abu Tayeb, adviser (media) of Bashundhara Group, told The Daily Star.

The proctor said that those who vandalised establishments and cars yesterday were not students of NSU and that the issue had been settled the night before.

Bashundhara Group's Tayeb claimed their security guards were not involved in the assault on the students Wednesday night, and that it was the Ansar members who were to blame.

Tayeb said the victim had parked the bike at a sensitive place near the hospital. When the Ansar members tried to interrogate him, it turned into a scuffle.

Even though Tayeb claimed their security guards were not involved, Bashundhara decided to take action against the security guards responsible after talking to the Dhaka Metropolitan Police (DMP).

Bashundhara Group also compensated the victim by deciding to take care of his medical expenses and had paid for the damage to his bike, Tayeb added.

The students stopped their dem-

onstrations yesterday after Bashundhara Group agreed to meet all their demands following an emergency meeting at the NSU Proctor's Office where NSU authorities, DMP, Bashundhara Group and student representatives were present.

The students had demanded appropriate actions against the Ansar and Bashundhara security personnel concerned by Bashundhara Group and the DMP, and improved compensation package for the victim by Bashundhara.

The students had also demanded that vehicles be allowed to park in front of the hospital at night.

Bashundhara agreed to allow parking there until 8:00pm and said they would extend the time to 10:00pm later on.

Talking to this correspondent, several locals alleged that many Bashundhara security guards have a cavalier attitude and often treat locals poorly.

SM Mustak Ahmed, Deputy Commissioner of Police, Gulshan division, told The Daily Star that in their preliminary probe they found that both Ansar and the security guards of Bashundhara were present at the scene on Wednesday night.

He said more time was needed to find out what had actually happened.

Mizanur Rahman, additional commissioner (Crime) of DMP, said police drove the students into their campus yesterday to maintain law and order after they blocked the road, damaged properties of Bashundhara Group, and hurled brick chunks at police.

He said police would decide on their next course of action after analyzing CCTV footage.

NSU cancelled classes and tests until Friday.

Police picked up some students and locals from the spot.

Strike over, should we be happy?

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And why was so much misery inflicted on people? Was there any political uprising? Was there any popular agitation against the government? Was a section of people made victim of some unlawful events? No.

It's all because of two rare court verdicts that sentenced one killer driver to death and another to life. But transport leaders and workers found the verdicts too harsh. They indeed have rights to feel aggrieved. And the legal remedy for it was to fight those in higher courts and win verdicts in their favour. Instead, they chose to cross the line of law, held people hostage, and challenged the rule of law.

What can we interpret out of this brazen demonstration of total disregard for law? Drivers should be given licence to kill, and they are above the law. Neither the government nor the judiciary has the power to stop them from inflicting sufferings on people and causing financial loss to businesses. In order to achieve what they deem right, they are allowed to block roads, clash with cops, damage public and private properties, and cause death. And they expect to get away with all these unlawful actions by calling an end to mayhem.

This turn of events has sent a serious wake-up call to the government. It

should investigate the dubious role the two labour leaders-cum-ministers -- Shajahan Khan and Moshir Rahman Ranga (state minister for local government and rural development) had played in the strike.

The decision to enforce strike was reportedly taken at Shajahan's government residence, where Moshir, also the president of Bangladesh Road Transport Owners Association, was present.

Shajahan is the Executive President of Bangladesh Road Transport Workers Federation that enforced the strike. When his cabinet colleagues -- Obaidul Quader (road transport and bridges minister) and Anisul Huq (law minister) took a strong position against unlawful actions, Shajahan sided with workers. He even refused to term it strike, telling on record: "The workers have voluntarily abstained from work. They did not call any strike."

Shajahan is certainly proving his loyalty, but to whom? It's not to the government, for sure. When all other ministers were desperately trying to bring the transport strike to an end, Shajahan was allegedly plotting against it. A powerful minister was working against the interest of the government from his very government residence. What an irony it turned out to be for the

government! And when all government efforts bit the dust, a mere "Shajahan request" ended the strike. The Shajahan loyalty is really very quizzical. The sooner the government sorts out the issue of his divided loyalty, the better it is for the government.

As the strike is over, should we just shrug and move on with the typical reaction of "forget and forgive"?

The state machineries -- the executive, the legislature and the judiciary -- must take some exemplary steps against the main culprits of this strike so that no one in future dares to cross the line of law.

The government must demonstrate that nobody is above the law by bringing the strike-plotters to book, punishing the law-breakers for people's sufferings, making them compensate for the losses to businesses and suing instigators for the death of a worker in clash with cops at Gabtoli.

Does this lawful demand sound unreal? Yes, in a way, may be. But a failure in enforcing the rule of law can only send out a single message.

And that message is transport workers are above the law.

Now, should people brace themselves for the next round of mayhem and learn to live with sufferings, compromise and financial loss? Is that our destiny?