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SITAKUNDA

Living in death trap

MD NAZRUL ISLAM WITH PINAKI ROY

Unplanned industrialisation in Sitakunda without proper safety measures has made local people live in constant fear especially after the BM container depot disaster.

Spanning 273.47 sq km area with a population of five lakh, the upazila houses a total of 126 shipbreaking yards, about two dozen LP gas plants, three container depots, and 155 other industries – small and large.

Most of these industries are located in residential areas. As many as 12 LP gas plants have been set up in only two villages of the upazila, leaving villagers in constant worry about their safety.

In the past six years, at least 35 people have been killed in explosion and fire incidents in the shipbreaking industry of Sitakunda. On Wednesday, an accident left a worker killed in a shipbreaking yard of Sonaichhari union.

Two workers were killed due to toxic gas leaks from explosions in two shipbreaking yards last year while two others died in two yards in 2020. Gas leaks from explosions also left nine workers dead in seven shipbreaking yards in 2019.

The incident at the BM container depot made people even more horrified.

Gias Uddin, president of Sitakunda Samiti in Chattogram, told The Daily Star that the entire upazila has become a death trap. LP gas plants, shipbreaking yards, cement and steel factories, jute mills and container depots are mushrooming in the upazila without any proper planning.

Influential people have built these industries by squandering the agricultural land of the villages. LP gas plants are being

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constructed by the sea without considering the environmental impact.

Vested quarters are also using their power to get clearance from the Department of Environment, he added.

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Samsul Alam, a former official of the Explosives Department, said the



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country would not move forward without industrialisation but it should be done in a planned way.

He further said the private container depots are an extension of Chattogram port.

Just as there are separate sheds for storing different types of goods inside the port, it is necessary to see whether the sheds in these private depots are separated and whether they have skilled workers, he added.

Preferring anonymity, a resident of

Mandaritola village told The Daily Star, “We, the common people, are living with gas bombs. Deadly accidents may occur anytime in this area.” Mandaritola and Nadalia villages, where 30,000 people live, house the 12 LP gas plants.

Urging all not to panic, Sitakunda Upazila Nirbahi Officer Shahadat Hossain said there was no risk of fire from these gas factories unless there was a major accident.

“However, we cannot say whether these industries have adequate firefighting systems, because the approval of about 19 government agencies is required to set up the industries. So we can't monitor those directly. However, I will not be able to avoid liability in case of any accident.”

Asked whether the construction of so many LP gas plants in such close proximity is risky, Ashraf Uddin, assistant director at the Department of Environment in Chattogram, said there was no obligation regarding distance in setting up industrial plants. But, as per the law, industries cannot be built in residential areas.

He further said it is time to ensure adequate security measures in these industries.

CHEMICAL MANAGEMENT

It needs to be comprehensive and integrated

MOHAMMAD AL-MASUM MOLLA

Bangladesh needs a comprehensive approach for the management of its rapidly growing chemical businesses that pose risks of fatal accidents, a chemical management expert has said.

“It needs to be comprehensive and integrated. Big industries may have some mechanisms in place for chemical management. But the situation is really alarming in small and medium enterprises,” said Prof Syeda Sultana Razia of Department of Chemical Engineering at Buet.

In a recent interview with The Daily Star, she said with increasing economic activities, the chemical market is expanding, but with no comprehensive policy for its safe management.

“It is high time that Bangladesh enforced a chemical management law through a proper regulatory authority,” said Prof Razia, also a member of Scientific Advisory Board of Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons based in the Netherlands.

Her suggestions come in the wake of the massive fire on Saturday night at Chattogram's Sitakunda, triggering a series of explosions.

At least 43 people were killed in the accident at privately-run BM Container Depot.

According to Prof Razia, people tend to ignore taking safety measures on their own, as it does not reap any immediate benefits.

“Safety measures require investment. Around the world, safety issues are ensured through enforcements [by governments].

When enforcement is ensured, people invest in safety and get benefits in the long run.”

She suggested offering incentives, also a global practice, for businesses for adopting proper safety protocols.

Prof Razia also stressed the need for building an integrated national inventory of hazardous chemicals.

“Different regulatory authorities have their own partial inventory, which is not integrated and verified. There must be a mandatory hazard labelling system and chemical registration system,” she added.

The existing inventory preparation system is complex as a whole lot of authorities are involved in approving chemical import and storage, she noted.

At the moment, chemical imports require approval from 14 authorities, including city corporation, commerce ministry, NBR, Department of Explosives and Department of Environment and fire service.

But none of them cover some crucial issues, such as transporting and sorting of chemicals, said the expert.

Bangladesh signed the Strategic Approach for International Chemical Management (SAICM), also known as the Dubai Declaration, in 2016. SAICM recommends establishing a chemical authority, a chemical act, and a national inventory of hazardous chemicals.

Bangladesh Labour (Amendment) Act 2013 included a new section on the formation of a safety committee (section 90a); and provides a Chemical Management Guide to the safety committee.

In the textile sector, there are some examples of chemical management to fulfil buyers' requirements. The textile sector also faces challenges as different buyers require different safety measures due to the absence of national rules and standards for chemical management.

But if there is an accident, thousands may die even outside the chemical facility as it happened in Bhopal, India.

“We have huge storages of ammonia, chlorine, and other toxic chemicals. If they are not managed properly, they have the potential to create a catastrophe,” she said.

She also stressed on firefighters' safety.

“Although every chemical facility must have clearance from the fire service, most of the time we hear that they are clueless about the chemicals in the facility,” she added.

Often, they go for operations without knowing the type and amount of chemicals and put their lives in danger.

In some cases, evacuation is preferred to firefighting. In case of an uncontrollable fire, the recommended practice is to evacuate and let the things burn, she said.

