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In the back alleys of Dhaka, plastic bags flutter like defeated flags—caught in drains, wrapped around tree roots, buried in the dust of everyday life. From household groceries to street snacks, the nation’s dependence on single-use plastic is visible in every corner of urban and rural Bangladesh. What was once hailed as a miracle of modern convenience has now morphed into one of the most pervasive threats to our environment and health. Microplastics have found their way into our rivers, our soil, even our bodies. And yet, the plastic keeps coming. With World Environment Day 2025 rallying the globe under the banner #BeatPlasticPollution, Bangladesh stands at a critical juncture—caught between past efforts and the urgent need for coordinated,

behaviour, the reality is that single-use plastic significantly contributes to environmental degradation. If reused multiple times, its impact would be far less severe.”

He further notes that plastic and polythene account for almost 90 percent of urban drainage blockages. These materials do not decompose, instead clogging drainage systems and causing frequent waterlogging. “Paper can be recycled six or seven times with ease,” he adds, “making it a far more sustainable alternative. We must regulate polythene strictly if we are to safeguard our environment.”

The data paints a stark picture. A 2023 World Bank study found that Bangladesh’s annual per capita plastic consumption has tripled in just 15 years, rising from 3.0 kg in 2005 to 9.0 kg in 2020. In Dhaka, the figure is a staggering 22.25 kg per person per year. The majority of this plastic comes from packaging, particularly low-density polyethylene (LDPE)—a material commonly used in single-use bags and wrappers. LDPE waste in Dhaka has risen from 16.8 tonnes per day in 2005 to 323 tonnes in 2020.

Packaging accounts for 73 percent of Bangladesh’s total plastic waste, with over 40 percent of household LDPE waste generated from single-use shopping bags. Of the 977,000 tonnes of plastic waste generated annually, nearly 70 percent is mismanaged—either dumped, burned, or littered. In Dhaka, only 31 percent of waste is collected by authorities. The situation in rural areas is even more dire.

This mismanagement extends beyond urban centres. Plastic waste is a major contributor to marine pollution, especially in the Bay of Bengal, which is fed by the Ganges-Brahmaputra system. While 20 percent of marine plastic originates from sea-based activities, the remaining 80 percent comes from land, underscoring the

inland roots of this coastal crisis.

Though Bangladesh led the way in banning plastic bags, enforcement has faltered over time. The initial 2002 ban showed promise, reducing visible waste. But without affordable and accessible alternatives, plastic usage crept back. In October 2024, polypropylene bags were banned in super shops, but experts agree that without stronger public engagement and viable replacements, these bans alone cannot succeed.

Some companies, however, are showing the way forward. Unilever Bangladesh has partnered with the Chattogram City Corporation and YPSA to involve over 3,000 waste workers in collecting flexible plastics and integrating them into a formal recycling value chain.

“By 2023, we collected as much plastic as we used annually, and we repeated this in 2024. We’re on track for 2025,” says Shamima Akhter, Director of Corporate Affairs,

Partnerships, and Communications at Unilever Bangladesh. “We engaged communities in 41 wards and brought scrap dealers into the loop. It’s a circular solution that improves livelihoods and reduces waste.”

Encouragingly, Bangladesh’s financial sector is also rising to the challenge. Under Bangladesh Bank’s guidance, banks and financial institutions are now required to incorporate sustainability into their operations through dedicated green finance mechanisms. These initiatives support environmentally responsible investments, from solar energy to waste management.

According to Bangladesh Bank’s Quarterly Review Report on Sustainable Finance (October–December 2024), BDT 489.53 crore was disbursed specifically for circular economy and eco-friendly projects under the Green Finance category. In total, banks disbursed BDT 7,620.20 crore, while non-bank financial

institutions contributed BDT 1,025.50 crore to green finance during this period.

M. Shamsul Arefin, Managing Director of NCC Bank, believes the next frontier lies in shaping values from a young age. “We advocate for the integration of environmental education into school banking programmes. Future generations must grow up with a deep respect for sustainability and ecological stewardship. Through collective action and a shared vision, we can secure a greener, more resilient future for our country and the world.”

Plastic waste is not just an environmental issue—it’s a national wake-up call. The way forward demands an integrated, multi-sectoral response: strict regulation, public awareness, private sector innovation, and sustained financial backing. Without coordinated and urgent action, Bangladesh risks drowning—quite literally—in its own waste.

PHOTOS: ANISUR RAHMAN

