

Health hazards in Bangladesh

15,000 children in Dhaka die every year from pollution

By K. Ratnayake
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Masses of people in Bangladesh face a perilous situation due to hazardous health conditions in the country, according to reports from health workers and the World Bank. The main source of these conditions is the poverty and backwardness maintained and deepened by capitalist rule.

World Bank officials, announcing a loan of \$5 million to support an institution called Bangladesh Air Quality Management, said that the exposure to lead contamination of air in Dhaka has led to an estimated 15,000 child deaths and several million related illnesses every year. Children have become the main victims of air pollution.

Dhaka is one of the worst polluted cities in the world, and the situation is not much different in the other main cities in the country. The main cause of the pollution is the use of leaded petrol and engine oil for vehicles. There are 175,000 vehicles, including 45,000 trishaws, in varying states of disrepair, polluting the air in Dhaka on a daily basis.

Dr. Naila Khan, a child neurologist, reports that tests on children in the Bangladesh capital have found blood lead levels to be at least eight times higher than that recommended by the World Health Organisation (WHO). She said, "The worst affected are the children who live in poor conditions in shanties. Our worst fear is that tens of thousands of children are being exposed to lead."

According to Dr. Khan, this "alarming presence of lead" in blood has caused "sickness hitherto unknown". "We have been watching patients suffering from serious nervous disorders, epilepsy and other problems," she said. Another serious problem is the danger of mental retardation. "High concentrations of lead in the blood curtail the development of intelligence of a child and retard his or her growth.

Such children are exposed to various problems in later life," according to the neurologist.

According to WHO more than 25 micrograms of lead in per one decilitre of blood is unsafe. But Dhaka University and the Atomic Energy Commission have found lead among people in Dhaka to measure between 93 and 200 micrograms. One study found 463 nanograms of lead in the air in Dhaka, one of the world's highest readings.

Poverty is the main cause of the spread of AIDS in Bangladesh, and health organisations warn that it threatens to become an epidemic in a few years.

In 1990 one sailor was found suffering from AIDS, who later died from the disease. Of the last eleven AIDS patients who have been traced, six have died. According to official statistics, only 105 people in Bangladesh have tested positive for HIV, the virus that leads to AIDS. However Dr. Nasir Uddin, an expert in the field, contradicts this official count. He said, "Although the accumulative number of HIV/AIDS cases now stands at 105, projections about undetected infections run from 20,000 to 100,000."

Each year the people of Bangladesh often become the victims of "natural disasters", such as floods and storms. But the HIV virus spreads silently. Due to religious and backward traditions in Bangladesh, sex related matters are not discussed publicly. But there is widespread prostitution, with about 100,000 women regularly working as prostitutes. One young prostitute reported to Reuters that she is forced to take four or five clients a day. She said: "If I insist on a condom, then I have to starve."

Added to this is the practice of the poor selling their blood to medical institutions for money, creating the conditions for the spread of HIV to unsuspecting recipients of these possibly infected blood products. In

Bangladesh 200,000 blood bags are collected annually for hospitals, with 70 percent of these collected in this booming back street trade.

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