

MEDIA COVERAGE OF ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES IN BANGLADESH AND ITS ROLE IN INFLUENCING POLICY AND ACTION

By
Ms Nerun N Yakub

INTRODUCTION

Bangladesh's policy makers, did not even incorporate the word 'environment' in its national development plans prior to 1990. After the two major floods in Bangladesh — 1987 and 1988 — got environmentalists linking deforestation, hydrological interventions, global warming, unwise land use and other natural and man-made phenomena with our disasters, decision-makers were stirred into considering a national environment policy, to guide development, resource utilisation and resource replenishment. Even then in the country's fourth and latest plan — which was being drafted sometime after the great floods, — environment gets only a token mention. And the draft environment policy was not worked out until 1991. But its fate is yet to be decided. In the second year of the Decade of Environment, Bangladesh finds itself still grappling with what its environment policy should incorporate and emphasise, leave out or underplay. The Ministry of Industry is reportedly resisting the national environment policy and action plan on the grounds that its adoption would retard industrialisation and economic recovery.

Bangladesh newspaper readers are literally besieged with information about the ozone hole, greenhouse gases, sea-level rise, pollution, biodiversity and related environmental issues of global dimensions. Media coverage of local and regional environmental issues is by no means limited, if we judge by the number of stories, essays or leaders that find place in the Bangladesh press. But in terms of content and treatment there is usually a gulf of difference between pieces picked up from international information services and those produced by the Bangladesh media.

Of course there are rare exceptions, but by and large, local coverage is inadequate perhaps because environmentalism did not grow from within as felt need but rather as a wish to be on the bandwagon. It is the same psychology that worked in the creation of the Ministry and Department of Environment in 1990.

Routine coverage of environmental issues and activities is usually very superficial. To be just, it is perhaps not more superficial than what high officials say in the endless speeches they make at environmental seminars and symposia. Down-to-earth problems of Bangladesh escape the notice of local journalists and thus rarely make news unless

of course development projects or research focus on the micro-environment of subsistence farmers.

The Press Picks on Pesticides

'Environment' became a buzzword for journalists in Bangladesh sometime in the mid '80s. Interested journalists, through individual initiative or at the encouragement of international activist groups, took up issues like hazardous pesticide use, wildlife poaching, deforestation and pollution. The "dirty dozens" made great news and focus fell on the DDT factory in Chittagong which till recently produced this proven toxin in spite of the fact that there was a government ban on the production or use of the powder.

The Bangladesh Times, a government-backed national daily, took editorial note of the fact that DDT is deleterious to human health, and urged the authorities to stop playing the role of both the poacher and the gamekeeper. It also referred to a FAO-sponsored survey, carried out by the Marine Biology Department of Chittagong University, which claimed that the powder was being used by fishermen to keep maggots out of dried fish. It was also being widely used for the same purpose on that are prone to pests when stored for long in grocery shops. And the municipality simply could not do without DDT in its sanitation programmes.

DDT is a chlorinated hydrocarbon, one of the "most ubiquitous molecules man has manufactured", according to ecologists Paul and Anne Ehrlich. An article in the now defunct *The Daily News of Dhaka*, drew heavily on the ecologists' information — DDT has been employed the longest and is the most thoroughly studied of all synthetic insecticides. Alarming concentrations of DDT has been found in human milk and fat, as have been other insecticides like aldrin, dieldrin and benzene hexachloride. Physiologists have enough reason to infer from studies conducted on animals that the slow accumulation of chlorinated hydrocarbons cause irreversible harm in the long run. It showed increase in the incidence of cancers, especially of the liver, alarming stimulation of the production of the female sex hormone oestrogen, increase in the weight of the uterus and the deposition of dextrose in it. There were also studies showing the correlation between DDT levels in human fat and the cause of death, established by autopsies. Concentrations of DDT and its breakdown products were significantly higher in the fat of patients who died of a softening of the brain, cerebral haemorrhage, hypertension, portal cirrhosis of the liver and various cancers than in groups of patients who died of infectious diseases. And DDT is an irreversible nerve poison.

But even after such compelling information it was only in 1990 that the decision to close down the DDT factory in Chittagong was taken.

Monitoring of the use or abuse of other pesticides is virtually absent though the media continues to report on the marketing of banned toxins. Stories of pesticide poisoning in neighbouring countries are covered but unfortunately few bother to write about similar incidents within Bangladesh.

The management of pesticides is governed by the Pesticide Ordinance 1971 and the Pesticide Ordinance Rule 1985, which extend to all pesticides no matter how or where they are used. The import, manufacture, reformulation, repacking, selling, holding in stock and advertising are all bound by registration. Following media coverage of pesticide deaths in developing countries, three-fourths of the victims of pesticide poisoning belong to the Third World — there seemed to be some attempt at monitoring. But as the authorities themselves would admit, next to nothing could be achieved to

hazardous pesticide. Even though some of the deadlier pesticides — endrin, lindane, methoxychlor, parathion-methyl, parathion-ethyl, DDT, BHC etc. — have been banned, in reality some of the highly toxic pesticides including organochlorines that are permitted for restricted use, such as, chlordane, deildrin and heptachlor — are regularly marketed without any hindrance from the regulating agency.

Marketing agencies are bound by the FAO code to train persons who are to handle the chemicals and inform them of the risks. Violation of these norms is a regular practice, and the regulating agency is well aware of it. Manpower shortage, lack of expertise and access to up-to-date information cripple those assigned to control the use of pesticides. Media people themselves know too little and rely on briefing from these “experts”. Little wonder that the cause of mysterious deaths in Putia in North West Bangladesh just a couple of years ago could not be established conclusively even though journalists and medical teams descended on the spot and kept the deaths in the news for quite some time. Some thought the victims had taken water contaminated by deworming veterinary medicine that was dumped nearby in great quantity while others suspected it must have been toxic pesticide run-off. There was a lot of confusion and in the absence of a sound expert opinion media people were obliged to close the chapter without resolving the mystery. Indeed informed sources in the Department of Environment claim that under the given constraints it is impossible to monitor what is going on.

Though the use of pesticides is still low in this country — from 7,000 tons of pesticide import in 1972 it had fallen to about 3,000 tons in 1988, dependence on it is growing as more and more farmers are switching to high yielding varieties of crops which are more pest-prone than hardy native seeds. There is no research back-up on the suspicion that indiscriminate pesticide use contribute to the ill-health of users, contaminate the food chain and also make the pests more and more resistant to the poisons. The media, under the circumstances, can only report that highly toxic pesticides are being smuggled in, stored in shops along food stuff, surmise that fish disease epidemic may be due to pesticide pollution but cannot affect tighter controls. The authorities have neither the means nor the management system necessary for disciplined pesticide use.

The Bangladesh Times, in its editorial column, has been stressing a return to organic farming and integrated pest management. Articles and reports on the subjects are often prioritised.

Lack of public awareness and political commitment renders the media campaign ineffective, which is corroborated by the fact that during every mosquito season there is a public demand for aerial spraying, and barring only this year, the authorities were only too eager to oblige.

Radiation Contamination

The pesticide issue lost media appeal for sometime when the Chernobyl nuclear disaster, April 26, 1986, gripped the world and environmental journalists focused on the dangers of radiation contamination. A proliferation of editorials and articles followed, mostly in line with international news agencies. Information about the extent of cross-border contamination was later useful in stopping a shipload of condemned Polish milk powder from being dumped in Bangladesh by greedy traders at both ends. There were however suspicions of the cargo being unloaded successfully once the furore subsided. The allegation was not substantiated, but it is not unlikely, since the people involved in the money-making like the ordinary public, hardly understood what radiation contami-

nation meant. Besides, corruption was, and continues to be, rampant.

After reading an editorial in a major English daily on the risks of radiation, one gentleman belonging to the vested interest group remarked that it is a luxury for the miserable and the hungry to bother about radiation. They consume pesticide-loaded foreign grain, don't they? The poor cannot afford to be choosy! With the same dismissiveness interested traders managed to dispel the phobia of contaminated milk and soon nobody inquired about the level of radiation.

Even people in responsible positions tended to underplay the risks because it did not have immediate effects. It is treated like any other pollution which can be washed away or recycled. Studious media stories about the half-life of radioactive elements and the genetic harm caused by over-exposure largely went over the heads of the public. In Bangladesh the Chernobyl disaster also brought X-Ray clinics under fire, most of which were found operating without the minimum safety precautions.

Under the Environment Pollution Control Ordinance 1977, which among other things, also deals with control of radioactive substances, violators are liable to a prison term up to one year or a fine of Taka five thousand or both, but the Department of Environment and Pollution Control cannot by itself enforce the penalty unless the court takes cognizance, which means cases have to be lodged against the violators. In any case the punishment is too light to deter violators. And the long-winding process of the judiciary in Third World countries, like Bangladesh, is all too well known.

Toxic Waste Recycling

The role of the media in influencing policy and legislative action need not be entirely dismissed though Bangladesh is notorious for bureaucratic sloth. Provided the press is tenacious enough on the given issue, and can command the support of key people it can affect policies. It was this determination, backed by pressure groups, that led to government action against toxic waste recycling in Bangladesh in the late 80s. In November 1988 *The Bangladesh Times* ran a story on a proposed caustic chlorine plant in Chittagong which was to be fueled wholly by imported industrial wastes. The proposal, submitted to the Department of Industries in October of the same year, said that the Taka 666 million plant would be very cost-effective if it used cheap electricity generated through the incineration of imported industrial waste of about three hundred thousand tons annually. Such a plant would save the country millions in import substitution for caustic soda and salt, argued the entrepreneurs.

The Directorate of Industries' usual formula of getting different agencies into examining the proposal was canceled due to "unavoidable reasons" according to a directorate source, which also said it had no objection to the proposed plant if the commerce ministry okayed it. Fortunately the latter invited representatives of the Department of Pollution Control and the Atomic Energy Commission to scrutinise the proposal. They raised objections to the idea of importing hazardous industrial wastes which could be a serious threat to human health and environment in Bangladesh. The authorities however had no objection if it had the clearance for the import of wastes.

It was at this point that environmental news hounds picked up the story and started a media campaign against the questionable proposal. At least seven papers carried stories and leaders on the dangers of toxic waste recycling in Bangladesh. With the help of a section of the community of scientists the media campaign finally managed to extract an official statement. By the end of November the government warned against

attempts to import toxic wastes on any pretext and banned the import of wastes under the import licensing policy. The statement also said that everyone should be alerted so that attempts to bring in dangerous materials can be foiled. The press note was followed by directives from the President's Secretariat to the Department of Environment and Pollution Control to take necessary steps and inform the public with the media's cooperation about the hazards of toxic waste import.

Toxic Waste Dumping

Toxic waste dumping became a political issue in Bangladesh in the same year. Thanks to the media's role in mobilising public opinion. In October 1988, Greenpeace, the international environmental activist group, alerted the Government of Bangladesh against the suspicious movements of a toxic waste carrier which entered the Indian Ocean. Originally named *Khian Sea*, the carrier had been sailing the high seas since it set out from Philadelphia, USA, in August 1986, laden with 15,000 tons of toxic incinerator ash labeled 'fertilizer'. It was caught red-handed unloading its cargo on a Haitian beach in January 1988 and was ordered to reload it. But the ship made good its escape in the darkness of the night on February 24, leaving about 4,000 tons of the poison on the Haitian shore. Greenpeace monitored its movements.

In May 1988 the ship cruised across the Atlantic and, anchoring at a ship yard in Yugoslavia, changed its name to *Felicia*, obtained a Honduran registration and set sail for the Indian Ocean. The Bangladesh Embassy in Washington was alerted as the carrier entered the Indian Ocean. It was refused permission to enter the harbours in Sri Lanka but must have dumped its deadly cargo somewhere as it sailed across the Indian Ocean, for *Felicia* reached Singapore with its hull empty. Its crew is said to have admitted in the US to have dump the toxic ash on the territorial waters of a country they refused to name!. On January 1989, a Californian news weekly *India West* wrote to the Bangladesh Embassy, seeking verification of an information that 10,000 tons of hazardous incinerator ash was dumped on a landfill in Bangladesh.

The media's access to this piece of disturbing information was available in March 1989 and an environmental reporter raised the issue in *The Bangladesh Times* on 13 March, triggering a series of press statements from major political parties, social organisations and concerned individuals. A "Foreign Toxic Waste Resistance Committee", comprising of women's organisations, human rights groups, researchers and social activists was formed at this point. This and another informal group in Chittagong took up the issue, protested against dumping of toxic waste and demanded explanation from the government.

The Bangladesh Navy, which was asked to investigate, informed the authorities that it lacked the means for a systematic survey of the Bay or to determine whether or not the waste was radioactive. However, it offered competent agencies free trips on their vessels to conduct surveys with the necessary equipment. And that was that. Nothing came out of the media alert. The Indian Navy however was reported to have been chasing suspected toxic waste carriers from the Indian Ocean even in April 1989. The failure of the Bangladesh share guards to be on constant alert is like an open invitation to the industrial waste disposers to use our territorial waters as often as they choose.

The Daily Inquilab a Bengali daily ran a front page story recently on the unexplained rise in the level of background radiation in Cox's Bazaar. The Atomic Energy Commission, which the paper quotes, said the increase has been marked after the last

cyclone and tidal surge — April 29, 1991. There was no follow-up of the report. Could there be a connection between the toxic waste dumping and the increase in background radiation in that coastal area? The media has not yet raised the question. The competence of the media people in this respect is obviously limited in Bangladesh. They are guided by the briefing of experts who in their turn are at the best “half-baked”.

The environmental journalists in Bangladesh have to depend on international watchdogs for problems of such seriousness as radioactive waste dumping. On January 12, 1992, the *Daily Purbokone* of Chittagong reported that the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has cautioned the Bangladesh Agricultural Development Corporation (BADC) that the 3,150 tons of zinc oxysulphate that it has imported from South Carolina may be contaminated with lead and cadmium, in which case it would be illegal export under US law. The ship *MV Bishwa Prafulla* has been lying in the outer harbour awaiting analysis of the fertilizer since the 1st of January. The Agricultural Research Centre in Bangladesh is to check for contamination and convey the results to the EPA, which has to be satisfied that US laws not been violated, before approving the release of the cargo. The analysis is still awaited.

On 20 November 1991, the *Daily Sangram* reported that the Japanese are planning to dispose of some of their toxic waste by way of “humanitarian aid”. The Japanese company ‘Hoyetsu’ proposed that it would construct the coastal embankments which were destroyed during the last tidal surge at a cost of 30 million US dollars, all of which would be given to Bangladesh as grant. The construction material — concrete slabs of a thousand kg each — would all be hauled from Japan, and each slab would contain a mixture of 700 kg waste and 300 kg concrete. Although the company claims the waste to be used is “domestic”, environmental scientists in Bangladesh have expressed great alarm suspecting that it might be a trick to dump Japanese toxic waste in Bangladesh. The Department of Environment, while exercising caution about the waste component, said it had no objection to talking to the representatives of the interested company.

Flood Action Plan

It must be admitted that the media’s coverage of major environmental issues in Bangladesh would have been difficult without the facilitating role of the NGOs and international networks like the Audobon Society and other well-wishers of this disaster-prone country. Credit goes to these international pressure groups for insisting or debates on the Flood Action Plan (FAP). The billion dollar megaproject that has been dreamed up to control floods in Bangladesh could wreck the country’s ecological system and compound the sufferings of the poor. Critiques of the FAP were published in various papers, especially the *Bangladesh Environmental Newsletter* (BEN), questioning the wisdom of the proposed embankments along the mighty rivers, and faulting the plan with marginalising environmental considerations. FAP is expected to be revised, if not shelved entirely.

The media has also been covering deforestation, land use patterns, industrial pollution, air quality, motor vehicle emissions, fisheries and the role of poverty and population in the degradation of the environment. What is unfortunate is the Bangladesh media’s projection of poverty and population is in the western stereotype. As if the global environmental mess is all the fault of highly propagation poor. The popular press is still repeating what the industrialised, over-consuming, birth-death countries have taught us. That is why the media missed the gist of a recent seminar called “The NGO

Initiative". Though it has been widely covered its true import was not even touched. The purpose of the NGO Initiative was to arrive at a joint statement that would represent NGOs — in other words, the peoples' — point of view, to be placed before UNCED.

The gist of the statement is that there is enough on earth for everybody's need, but not for everybody's greed. UNCED should aim at the alleviation of absolute poverty in the poor countries and contain the quest for unlimited growth in the rich ones. It entails resource re-allocation so that the poor who are struggling for a minimum decent life are ensured a favourable local, regional and global environment in which they can reach their very modest goals. Only then can the poor cooperate in activities for saving the earth. While the problem of population in poor countries should get its due attention, UNCED should also take into consideration the fact that it is the size of the consumption rather than the size of the population that has led to the present degradation of the environment and depletion of the earth's resources. Education for all and transfer of the right technology should be the key considerations. Sustainable development can only be achieved if the millions in poor countries cease to be liabilities and become assets for the environment. They can become valuable resources for real development with education and the right technology. Unfortunately the media, in covering The NGO Initiative, was taken up more with who was at the workshop rather than what vital points they raised.