

PRESS RELEASE

Seminar Speakers Urge Immediate Halt to Illegal Lead-Acid Battery Recycling to Protect Children from Lead Pollution

June 10, 2024, Dhaka: On the occasion of World Environment Day, a seminar titled “**Empowering Youth to Combat Lead Pollution**” was organized at the auditorium of Department of Environment on 9th June. The seminar was organized by Pure Earth Bangladesh, an international environmental NGO, in collaboration with two youth organizations - Bangladesh Youth Environmental Initiative (BYEI) and Volunteer for Bangladesh - Dhaka District (South). About 150 youth representatives, NGO workers, researchers, doctors, educators, government officials participated in this two-hour long seminar.

Professor Dr. Md. Atiqul Haque, Dean of the Faculty of Preventive and Social Medicine and Chairman of the Department of Public Health and Informatics at Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University (BSMMU) was present at the seminar as a special guest, Dr. Abdul Hamid, the Director General (DG) of the Department of Environment (DoE) was present as the chief guest, and the seminar was presided by Md. Siddikur Rahman, the Additional Director General (ADG) of the Department of Environment (DoE).

Other speakers at the seminar were Dr. Mahfuzar Rahman, Country Director of Pure Earth Bangladesh, Shamir Shehab, Founder and Executive Director of BYEI, and Md. Shawket Arafat, Vice President (National Board), Volunteers for Bangladesh.

Speakers in various discussions at the seminar said that there are about four to five lakh easy bikes, mishuk or e-rickshaws in Bangladesh which are powered by lead-acid batteries. 80 percent of the lead-acid batteries used in these unregulated vehicles are recycled illegally and informally. Pure Earth Bangladesh has identified and analysed more than three hundred contaminated sites in Bangladesh, most of which are informal and illegal recycling factories for lead-acid batteries. According to the World Bank, this number is more than 1100. All over the country, these open-air lead-acid battery breaking and lead smelting factories pollute the soil, water and air at the same time. Lead is also used in various consumer products such as aluminum utensils, children's toys, wall paints, spices etc.

Children are the most vulnerable to lead pollution. About 36 million children which is 60 percent of children in Bangladesh are impacted by lead poisoning, the average blood lead level of children under 5 is about 6.8 micrograms per deciliter. Lead destroys children's brains, reducing intelligence. According to a World Bank study, the country's children under the age of five have lost nearly 20 million IQ points, which is putting the country at risk of mental retardation, a threat to children's normal growth and development.

The special guest of the seminar, Professor Dr. Md. Atiqul Haque, Dean of the Faculty of Preventive and Social Medicine, BSMMU said, "There is no safe level of lead exposure. Even small amounts can damage the human brain, blocking neurotransmitters and causing memory and cognitive decline. Lead can stay in the blood for 30 days and in the bones for 25 to 30 years, making it difficult to eliminate. We must protect ourselves from constant lead exposure. When a woman exposed to lead contamination becomes pregnant, her unborn child is also at risk. If we do not stop lead pollution now, future generations will suffer the consequences."

The chief guest of the seminar, Dr. Abdul Hamid, Director General of the Department of Environment, said, "Lead pollution has become a severe issue in Bangladesh, with excessive levels found in children's blood. We have implemented a buy-back policy for lead-acid batteries under the Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR), where consumers receive money back when

they return old batteries for new ones. Although this policy is institutionally recognized, many batteries end up in the informal sector, where makeshift lead furnaces, or Bhattis, are common. These furnaces relocate whenever shut down, driven by the demand for molten lead. We are now working to regulate these buyers and enforce legal measures.”

Addressing the youth representatives at the seminar, he continued, “Today's youth are future environmental ambassadors. They must take a stand against all forms of pollution, including lead pollution, and understand the power dynamics at play. Youth will lead the way, raising awareness among their peers and communities, and reaching out to the Department of Environment through social media for support. We will assist them in their efforts.”

The chair of the seminar, Md. Siddiqur Rahman, Additional Director General of Department of Environment said, "Environment protection requires everyone's participation. Sustainable development requires a sustainable environment. Be vocal about all environmental pollution, including lead. It has to start at the individual level."

Dr. Mahfuzar Rahman, Country Director of Pure Earth Bangladesh, said, "Our youth are the future. It is crucial to involve them in lead pollution prevention, as lead is a neurotoxin and extremely harmful to children. Pure Earth is collaborating with the government, NGOs, youth organizations, academics, civil society, and development agencies to address this issue."

Samir Shihab, Founder and Executive Director of BYEI, said, "PFAS, or Per- and Polyfluoroalkyl Substances, are commonly known as 'Forever Chemicals' because they can persist for hundreds of years. Various international studies show that lead and PFAS contribute to chronic diseases such as heart disease, cancer, and stroke, which are on the rise in our country. The solution lies in being self-aware, educating others, and addressing the root of the problem through preventive measures."

Md Shawket Arafat, Vice President of Volunteers for Bangladesh said, "We are committed to achieving sustainable development goals, and preventing lead pollution is crucial for environmental protection. Youth are the driving force of change and have always stepped up during pivotal moments in our country's history. Volunteers for Bangladesh can play a significant role in spreading Pure Earth's research findings to a wide youth audience. We are dedicated to raising awareness in schools and institutions across the nation."

In celebration of Environment Day, Pure Earth Bangladesh organized a photography competition titled "A Pollution-Free, Safe World for Children." Approximately six hundred photographers from across Bangladesh participated in the online competition, showcasing their skills in mobile and digital photography. During the seminar, the esteemed guests presented the winners with crests, certificates, and prize money.

Shafaet Hossain from Kushtia won first place in the digital photography category, followed by Md. Shakib Hossain from Kumarkhali in second place, and Niamul Chowdhury from Ashtagram, Kishoreganj district in third. In the mobile photography category, Tahmid Mobasshir from Chittagong secured first place, Munem Sharear Nihon from Gopalganj district took second, and Md. Ratul Mia from Joydevpur, Gazipur district, claimed third place.