

NEWSCLIPPINGS

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SOLID WASTE MANAGEMENT



Urban Resource Centre

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Medical waste fouls city's streets, beaches, nullahs

Nearly half a year has passed since the issue of unsafe disposal of medical waste in the city was highlighted on social media. The sight of Sea View Beach and hazardous implications on the health of citizens became the source of much hue and cry, prompting the relevant authorities into action. Assurances were given by the authorities that all hospitals negligent in their waste disposal would be taken to task. And yet, around six months later, the most the authorities can claim is that letters have been issued in this regard. Meanwhile, medical waste is disposed of anywhere at the whim of hospital authorities as Sindh Environmental Protection Agency (SEPA) struggles to maintain a check over health facilities.

On Friday, officials of the Sindh Environment Protection Agency (SEPA) found over 40 kilogrammes of medical waste dumped in an open nullah, near Khamiso Goth, along Super Highway.

The medical waste disposed at three different locations within a radius of 400 metres was burnt by unidentified persons. "I can't say who has disposed of the waste in the nullah," said SEPA Deputy Director Waris Ali Gabol. "A proper investigation will be initiated," he pledged.

The environment department's officials claim that they had been directing hospital managements to share their hospital waste management plans. But despite tall claims, the harmful waste is being dumped in different localities of Karachi.

On December 16, medical waste was found at the one the famous beaches of the city – the Hawkes Bay Beach. "I have seen used syringes and other stuff at different spots," said a government official, speaking on condition of anonymity. He told The Express Tribune that he had often collected needles and removed them from spots outside the spots where citizens often stroll barefoot.

"You'll see everything on the beach and who cares if it could hurt the visitors," he commented, saying that many visitors had been injured by needles and other objects.

Earlier, The Express Tribune had reported of medical waste spilling out of trash bins placed outside Dow Dental College and metropolis' streets, in different areas, often found strewn with the hazardous detritus.

An estimated 100 tonnes of medical waste is produced by hospitals in Karachi, accommodating 10 or more beds, on a daily basis. According to health department officials, there are over 225 such hospitals in the metropolis.

In September last year, the environment department's officials had written letters to various hospitals and different stakeholders, seeking details of their waste management plans. The initiative was taken after Shaniera Akram, wife of former cricketer Wasi m Akram, posted several photos and a video of hospital waste dumped at various points along the Clifton Beach on social media.

According to Environment, Climate Change and Coastal Development Secretary Khan Muhammad Mahar, letters are written to hospitals daily. He claims that hospitals are duly carrying out the department's instructions. However, contrary to Mahar's claim, one of the officials from the department, who asked not to be named, told The Express Tribune no improvement is seen. "There is no mechanism to keep a proper check on the hospitals," he said, adding "We can only ask private hospitals to abide by the laws but cannot strictly bound government hospitals to obey the orders."

When asked for the record of hospitals abiding by the department's orders, Mahar refused to provide the data, stating "it is not possible for him." He was also unable to provide an answer when asked to specify which hospitals, whether public or private, have been abiding by the department's directives.

Of all the public hospitals in Sindh, only five teaching hospitals have standard operating procedures to dispose of waste using scientific methods, including sterilisation and incineration. These hospitals include the Jinnah Postgraduate and Medical Centre, Dr Ruth Pfau Civil Hospital and Lyari Hospital in Karachi, and Liaquat Hospital and Benazir Bhutto University Hospital in Larkana.

Speaking on the matter, a SEPA official claimed, "Private hospitals have a proper mechanism of incineration." However, he added, "Honestly, we have started asking hospitals to share their waste management plans recently," saying that it would take time for the hospitals to fully implement the orders.

Talking to The Express Tribune, a SEPA official revealed that despite multiple drives against the unauthorised dumping of medical waste, the agency's teams have found medical waste dumped at a number of locations in the city, including the Korangi River. "Sometimes medical waste is dumped by the contractors in an attempt to save fuel," he said. "But we cannot say if hospitals are not responsible for the offence because it is their responsibility to monitor where the waste is being dumped and via what process," he added.

In 2005, the Sindh government crafted rules regarding the scientific disposal of medical waste, while in 2012, the rules were amended under the Environmental Protection Act of 1997. According to the rules, medical waste must be dumped in secure places according to scientific techniques. The irony is that most medical facilities don't even know that such a law exists, let alone take steps towards its implementation.

Repeated attempts were made to contact Adviser to Sindh Chief Minister on Environment, Coastal Development and Climate Change Barrister Murtaza Wahab, however, he remained unavailable for comment.

(By Sameer Mandhro The Express Tribune, 04, 04/02/2020)

Sindh govt adviser passes buck on garbage issue

Adviser to Sindh Chief Minister on Law, Environment and Coastal Development Barrister Murtaza Wahab has called for collective efforts to solve problems plaguing Karachi, stressing that ridding the metropolis of its myriad issues was not just the provincial government's responsibility. Speaking at a round table conference organised by the Karachi Citizens Forum (KCF) on Saturday, Wahab pointed out that cantonment boards and residents of the city were equally responsible for curbing various menaces faced by the financial hub of the country.

Speaking at the conference, aimed at initiating dialogue on 'Creating a Clean and Green Karachi through Public Private Partnership', Wahab said that the Sindh government was certain that solution to the city's problems lied in introducing public private partnership models in various sectors. Underlining its significance for Karachi's progress, he said, "We need to invest more in public private partnerships and set aside politics [and political differences] to clean the city."

He further said that Karachi's issues could not be solved until citizens too made efforts in this regard, and added that ground realities needed to be considered in order to come up with practical solutions.

Referring to the tree plantation drive initiated by the Sindh government, Wahab said that it was of immense importance that trees and plants were maintained and taken care of properly. Appreciating extensive participation of the public in the plantation drive, he said that while, on one hand, several people partook in planting trees, on the other, "many others stole the plants."

Speaking about cleaning the city of garbage piles, Wahab deflected responsibility from the Sindh government and said that cantonment boards also needed to be actively engage in cleaning garbage. "[However], neither cantonment boards, nor the Sindh government is responsible for garbage littering the city," he said, adding that "as responsible citizens people too need to abide by laws."

He complained that the Sindh government was often questioned on garbage piles openly lying around the city in areas like Defence Housing Authority and Karsaz, which fall under the jurisdiction of cantonment boards.

The barrister also pointed out that "only talking about corruption will do little to solve the problems." He said, "instead, we need to [focus on] addressing actual issues."

Later, he apprised the participants of the conference that a "master plan for Karachi is being prepared" and the chief minister has constituted a committee to work on the development of Karachi. The committee includes city's stakeholders and engineers as members, he added.

Also speaking on the occasion, Pakistan Medical Association (PMA) Secretary General Dr Qaisar Sajjad said, "Karachi first needs to be cleaned and then it will turn green, eventually." Indicated towards the rise in cases of various diseases in the city, he attributed the issue to ever-growing piles of garbage, besides other factors.

"There are [around] 30,000 garbage pickers in Karachi who contract several diseases," said Sajjad, talking about epidemics gripping the metropolis.

Dr Abdul Ghafoor Shoro of PMA said that diseases like diarrhea and typhoid were already rife in Karachi and now its residents are afflicted by drug-resistant typhoid, which is not easily cured. "The situation is worsening day by day," he lamented.

Pakistan Women's Foundation for Peace Chairperson Nargis Rahman, echoed Wahab's words as she stressed the need for collective efforts to solve Pakistan's problems. Saying that Karachi is on the brink on an environmental disaster, Rahman criticised the authorities for their neglect towards the city.

"Karachi needs a master plan that it never had," she said. "Its problems cannot be solved without a master plan," she added, and expressed hope that Wahab would take steps for getting one prepared.

She drew attention towards the dismal state of the metropolis' drainage, sewerage and garbage disposal system and rued that even educated people openly threw garbage on the streets. "Nobody here is willing to take the responsibility," Rahman lamented.

Former governor of Karachi, Kamal Azfar, however, informed the participants of the conference that three master plans were prepared for Karachi in the past and 'Karachi Improvement Act' was also passed in 1950. "We don't need new acts [and laws] but work on city's infrastructure to solve its problems," he stressed. "In this regard, empowering the mayor is also of significance," he added.

Korangi Association of Trade and Industries (KATI) President Sheikh Umar Rehan and others also spoke on the occasion. (By Our Correspondent The Express Tribune, 04, 06/01/2020)

Recycling plastic bags

The ministry of climate change is taking effective steps to curb environmental pollution with the aim of reversing the process of climate change. It is on the instructions of the ministry that the provinces have banned the use of plastic bags, and their efforts are giving out encouraging results. It is now only the ignorant and uninformed who have not cut down on the use of plastic bags,

otherwise the government's drive against plastic bags is having a positive effect on the educated classes as they are voluntarily shunning the highly harmful plastic.

Now the ministry of climate change has decided to recycle the seized plastic bags into dumpsters and waste bins. This is a two-pronged strategy. Getting rid of plastic litter and then using them to keep neighbourhoods and the environment clean. An official says since Aug 14 last year, around 21,00 kilogrammes of polythene bags have been seized and Rs1.2 million in fine have been collected from violators of the ban on plastic bags. The seized bags would be recycled into more than a thousand dumpsters and garbage bins and they would be placed in schools, hospitals and other government organisations. The official says a fine of up to Rs100,000 can be imposed on manufacturers and wholesalers of plastic bags, up to Rs10,000 on shopkeepers and Rs500 on individual consumer for first-time violation. The fine increases for subsequent violations. The use of plastic bags, according to the official, has now been reduced by 80%.

Plastic bags affect human health, wildlife, marine life and ecology. The biggest problem with plastic is that it takes 500 to 1,000 years to degrade, so it badly affects the environment. It chokes flows in gutters, rivers and other wetlands. Most plastic waste ends up in the ocean and this affects marine life. Fish eats plastic waste through which harmful substances are transmitted to humans. So far not much plastic waste has been recycled or incinerated.

(By Editorial The Express Tribune, 16, 11/02/2020)

Toxic city

ON Sunday evening, residents living and working close to Karachi's bustling port noticed a strange smell in Keamari and its adjoining areas.

Then came the news of several deaths as hospitals' emergency wards began flooding with people complaining of dizziness, stinging eyes, itchy throats, chest tightness and breathing problems.

Since then, schools and offices close to the site have shut down for an indefinite period of time.

Last evening, the total number of confirmed deaths rose to over a dozen, which may unfortunately rise in the coming days.

Heartbreaking videos of family members weeping over the loss of their loved ones were being circulated, as Keamari's Jackson Market erupted in protests, with residents demanding answers from the authorities. And yet, two days on, the government still cannot trace the source of the noxious fumes.

In a press conference, the chairman of the Karachi Port Trust denied that the poisonous gas originated from the areas within its jurisdiction, but the city's commissioner has speculated that a ship offloading soybean or a similar commodity could be behind the string of deaths — which was then strongly contested by the federal minister for maritime affairs.

While various authorities such as the Sindh Environmental Protection Agency and police have launched probes to ascertain the cause of the supposed leakage, the chief minister has issued evacuation orders from the affected areas, and private bodies have released safety precautions for residents over what they should do in such times. But explanations are still not forthcoming.

In the absence of information and clarity, multiple theories have arisen, with responsibility then being shifted from one authority to another, which seems to have now become the default mode each time tragedy strikes the metropolis.

Amidst all this confusion and panic, one thing is certain: Karachi is seriously unequipped and underprepared to deal with a crisis of this scale.

This leads to the inevitable conclusion that the authorities are not prepared to handle a disaster of a larger magnitude, let alone relatively simple tasks of having functional monitoring systems in place that would help mitigate future disasters.

Chemical or industrial leakages such as these are usually the result of human negligence caused by not following proper risk assessments or implementing safety standards. At the very least, the concerned authorities must ensure that emergency protocols are in place.

(By Editorial Dawn, 08, 19/02/2020)

Facing piles of trash, Sindh officials take the easy way out in Karachi

An unpleasant stench wafts through the Malir riverbed, in front of a number of high-rise buildings in Defence View. At frequent intervals, the foul odour mingles with acrid smoke. The riverbed is home to a garbage transfer station (GTS), where over 1,200 tonnes of domestic waste are dumped and burned day and night.

While the smoke and smell from the garbage makes the lives of area residents miserable, the authorities ignore the immense pollution emanating from the dump. While the federal, provincial and city governments have all claimed to fix the trash problem of the metropolis, it appears those in charge of the matter are taking the easy way out by resorting to an old practice — burning the waste.



According to residents, the practice of dumping and burning trash in the riverbed has continued unabated for the last few years, despite their repeated appeals to the Sindh chief minister, the Karachi mayor and the Sindh Solid Waste Management Board (SSWMB).

Work at the station begins in the wee hours of each day, continuing into the night. "Dozens of vehicles loaded with garbage wait for their turn to be offloaded," pointed out Afzal Ahmed, who lives in nearby Junejo Town.



"Every other day, they burn the solid waste inside the river, a portion of which has been encroached," he explained. Gesturing towards the dump, he said one can see the thick smoke hovering over the area, which causes respiratory problems and other issues.

Zainur Rehman, who lives in an apartment building in the neighbourhood, claimed the garbage station has made life hell for people residing in the area. "We can't even open the windows or doors of our flats because of the stench," he complained.

Two government employees supervising operations at the dumping site denied burning any waste. "Scavengers lit the waste on fire," claimed one of them, refusing to disclose his identity. "It was only piled up here because of a dispute between the contractor and the government over payment."

The site in question falls under the remits of the East district municipal corporation (DMC). However, speaking to The Express Tribune, East DMC chairperson Moeed Anwar distanced himself from the matter.

"We have nothing to do with the dumping. The SSWMB is responsible for creating the problem," he insisted. "We receive complaints about it every day from people in the area. We have written to higher authorities in the Sindh government, but no one has given us any tangible response."

According to officials, there are five such GTSSs, located in Sharafi Goth, Baldia, Qasba Colony, Dhobi Ghat and here at the Malir riverbed. Almost all of them are either in densely populated areas, or near them.

"These are temporary stations, where garbage is shifted from nearby areas. Our contractors move the waste to landfill sites in Surjani Town's Jam Chakhro the same day as it is dumped," said Almas Saleem, the SSWMB spokesperson.

A criminal offense

"Burning the garbage is a criminal offence," stated Zahid Farooq, the joint director of the Urban Resource Centre. "The Sindh Environmental Protection Agency and other related authorities must take action against those involved."

When asked why the waste was being burnt, Saleem expressed ignorance about the matter. "Our GTS directors will be in a better position to explain that," she added.

However, GTS director Ali Raza refuted allegations of burning the garbage. "A fire may have occurred because of rotting garbage, which releases methane gas," he claimed, adding that they had devised a plan to use the latest facilities for the GTSSs so that the waste does not pollute the environment.

(By Hafeez Tunio The Express Tribune, 04, 27/02/2020)

Garbage burning

According to the World Air Quality Report, Pakistan was the second-most polluted country in 2018. Karachi and Lahore are among the 10 cities in the world to have the most polluted air, with Lahore's air quality index at 188 and Karachi's at 182. These are dangerous levels. A report in this paper says at a garbage transfer station (GST) in Defence View residential area of Karachi more than 1,200 tonnes of waste are burned round the clock, making life miserable for those living in and around the locality. Defence View is next to the Defence Housing Authority, one of the upscale residential areas in Karachi. The GST is located in the Malir river bed.

According to area residents, the practice of garbage burning has been going on unabated for the past few years, and all their complaints against it have gone unheeded. Government officials supervising the unloading of garbage at the dumping site said they did not put the garbage on fire, and it was scavengers that did it. The area is under the jurisdiction of District Municipal Corporation-East. The DMC chairman says, "We have nothing to do with the dumping. The Sindh Solid Waste Management Board is creating the problem. We have written to higher authorities in the Sindh government, but no one has given us any tangible response."

Experts say burning garbage is a criminal offence, and the relevant bodies must act to stop this harmful practice. Government officials are reportedly resorting to buck passing. One official explained that the fire might have been caused by rotting garbage, and in the process he made a startling disclosure that rotting garbage released methane gas. This gas even causes death. Garbage burning in river bed might also be aimed at land grabbing. Despite knowing full well that garbage burning produces carbon monoxide and other harmful gases, the authorities are turning a blind eye to the monstrous practice. The show goes on.

(By Editorial The Express Tribune, 16, 29/02/2020)

Plastic menace

The Pakistan Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has recently initiated action against violators of the ban on plastic bags in Islamabad's rural areas. Plastic bags pose a serious hazard to marine life and the environment as well as to human health due to the fact that plastic can take up to 2,000 years to completely decompose. Plastic bags annually kill about 100,000 sea animals that mistake them for food, pollute our oceans, and block drainage systems which had partially caused the Bangladesh floods twenty years ago. Studies have also shown that meals eaten or heated in plastic bags cause ulcers, asthma, obesity and certain types of cancer. Alarmingly, the oceans are projected to contain more waste plastic than fish by the year 2050.

Concrete steps are essential, therefore, to eliminate the use of plastic bags. Firstly, people must be urged to either decline plastic bags and simply hand-carry items out of stores or take reusable shopping and produce bags with them when they go shopping. It may take a little time for them to get in the habit of doing so — but there is no easier way to cut down on plastic bag use. Secondly, recycling must be encouraged to effectively address the problem. Last month, the Ministry of Climate Change had announced plans to recycle bags seized from ban violators and turn them into more than 1,000 garbage bins and dumpsters which would be placed in the federal capital's schools, hospitals and other government institutions. This is a great plan and we certainly hope the ministry not only executes it as planned but also expands all anti plastic bag measures countrywide. Thirdly, it is vital that a nationwide media awareness campaign be launched to convey to the public the importance of implementing the above-mentioned measures.

These easy and economical steps can make a world of difference for our planet's well-being.
(By Editorial The Express Tribune, 16, 16/03/2020)

Halting waste disposal efforts is a recipe for disaster: NFEH

As the municipal waste disposal system came to a virtual halt in several areas of the city during the ongoing lockdown, environmental experts voiced concern, calling it a 'recipe for disaster' amid the coronavirus health crisis.

"We are simply inviting a disaster if we stop municipal waste disposal in Karachi during an epidemic, as resultantly, issues related to public health will worsen," pointed out National Forum for Environment and Health president Naeem Qureshi in a statement on Monday.

He stressed that waste disposal should not be stopped in a city like Karachi, which generates 12,000 tonnes of garbage in a single day. Instead, he maintained, it should be quickened, with minimum human resources and maximum mechanical means being used, in order to protect the health of municipal workers.

"Most importantly, the municipal workers should be provided with safety gear to protect them against the viral disease [coronavirus]," he said.

Qureshi also pointed out that the Sindh local government department, municipal agencies, Sindh Solid Waste Management Board, Karachi Water and Sewerage Board and Karachi Metropolitan Corporation were not on the list of the government institutions that had been shut down during the current crisis.

"The very reason these institutions are not on the government's shutdown list is that they have to provide seamless municipal services in the province, as the most important service in this regard relates to the waste disposal work," he asserted.

He demanded that garbage disposal should be resumed in the city in order to safeguard the public's health. To this end, he appealed to the Sindh Chief Minister, Local Government Minister and Sindh Chief Secretary to take notice of the situation and order the resumption of waste disposal in the metropolis as soon as possible.

"Doing so is also in the best interest of the proactive campaign of the Sindh government to tackle the COVID-19 health emergency in the province," he added.

(By Newspaper's Staff Reporter The Express Tribune, 05, 31/03/2020)