

Building Environmental Health Movement in Asia: Lessons from Korea

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From Korea to United Kingdom hard road to justice

May 2015 - in London, a group of victims of humidifier disinfectants from Korea are assembling just outside the Westminster - the power centre of the United Kingdom, all demanding justice from a powerful UK corporation - Reckitt Benckiser, one of the key companies whose subsidiary in Korea manufactured and sold the chemical disinfectants for the humidifiers causing severe and fatal lung damage, particularly among the young children. I happened to be there, to support on behalf of the Asian Network for the Rights of Occupational and Environmental Victims (ANROEV) - a victims' network with members from more than 15 Asian countries, including South Korea. I could not take off my eyes from the youngest protestor among the group - nine year old girl Kang Narae. She was actively organising the banners and getting ready. "It is a miracle that she is alive", said her father Kang Chan-ho, who was also representative of the Victims group. "She had severe lung disease due to the use of disinfectant. She continues to be under treatment and medical supervision, we never knew a product that was marketed as - 'harmless and safe' would cause so much damage and devastation to our lives and families" I could sense the pain and anger in his voice. Among the victims and families

was a fire fighter Kim Deok-jong. "I lost my 5-year-old son in May 2009, at that time I was told from a mysterious lung condition, but now I know it was due to the humidifier disinfectant. He was a very cheerful boy and should not have died so young. I want to ask the boss of Reckitt Benckiser - why did they do it to us".

Victims and families were planning to go to Slough, the headquarters of Reckitt Benckiser the next day. "I want them to apologize" said Maeng Chang-soo, who lost his wife in 2011 to the humidifier disinfectant, after a long ailment. "We suffered a lot during her illness and now I have two children without mother, no amount of money can compensate the loss, but we want people who bought it on us to be held accountable for their actions." Maeng's word echoed the sentiments of majority of victims. The trust of families was broken-inside the sanctity of their homes. A humidifier disinfectant that was supposed to protect the families from bacteria and mould was instead killing people and impacting babies and mothers the most. At the time of protest in 2015, the death toll stood at 140 with majority of them being children and infants, which has risen to 1131 by Feb 2017¹⁾ and the number of impacted/sick people to 5432. It is clear it has become one of the worst environmental health disasters due to a home supply product. Yet the accountability and apology were

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hard to come but the persistence by the victims' groups, led to a transformative process that would define the future of environmental health not only in Korea but also in rest of Asia. This was possible due to solidarity support from various civil society organisations in Korea and abroad with key role played by the -Asian Citizen's Center for Environment and Health that played a pivotal role in providing organising and support platform for the victims. It would also lead to building a broader support network for environmental victims in Asia and lead calls for a broader environmental health movement in Asia.

The slow poisoning of masses

It is hard to believe how nearly 8 million²⁾ people in Korea over a period of 18 years were potentially exposed to harmful humidifier disinfectants. In Korea, to escape the harsh dry winters people use humidifiers to increase the humidity inside their homes. The disinfectants were introduced since 1994 was specifically targeting families with children. Aerosolised water droplets laced with chemicals could go deep inside the lungs and by early 2000 clusters of rare acute interstitial pneumonitis of children were noticed every spring in Korea. However, it was not till 2011 when 7 pregnant women with severe lung disease of similar nature were hospitalised³⁾, the Korean Center for Disease Control started an investigation, that pinpointed humidifier disinfectants as cause for the severe respiratory illness. Two of the most toxic humidifier disinfectants, polyhexamethylene guanide phosphate (PHMG) and poly (oxyalkylene guanidine) hydrochloride (PGH), were identified as the most damaging that had potential of not only causing the lung damage but possibility of other impacts on body. It was identified that more than 20 products manufactured by local companies and international brands continued PHMG and PGH. Among them OXY SSACK SSACK was the leading humidifier disinfectant

brand, covering majority of the market share produced by brands. Reckitt Benckiser Korea since 2002.⁴⁾

The key question remained why and how would this happen in an industrialised and developed country like Korea? The answers are not simple but lie in the structural problems including deregulations taking place not only in Korea but in many parts of the world strengthening the existing atmosphere of corporate impunity and lack of any corporate accountability. This disaster was just waiting to happen and can happen anytime in any other place since the underlying problems continue to exist. In this case, the harmful molecules PHMG and PGH were not tested for their toxicity under the de-regulation campaign and at the same time, companies also marked their product as 'safe' and even boldly claimed - 'harmless for human body' and 'safe for children'. The unsuspecting population has no idea what was in store for them. The deceit is beyond imagination and unparallel in the modern industrial age. Many campaigners and environmental activists in Korea believe the estimates given by the government, is just tip of the iceberg, considering the vast population that got exposed systematically over a period of nearly 2 decades. They also believe the health impacts can be much broader, beyond the pulmonary impacts - something that has verified yet.

Asian Victims Network Solidarity

Korean victims' movement - both occupational and environmental health, have been founder and active members of the Asian Victims network (ANROEV). Asian Citizen's Center for Environment and Health, Supporters for the Health And Rights of People in the Semiconductor industry (SHARPS) and Won-jin Foundation for occupational diseases all play an important role in the Asian Victims Network. ANROEV was formally established in 1997 as a result of two major industrial disasters (fires) in China and Thailand that killed more than

250 workers.⁵⁾ It was understood that victims' organising and self-representation was critical to seek justice as well as empowerment. ANROEV was initially focusing mostly on occupational accident victims owing to most accident victims, but soon, occupational disease victims started to outnumber the accident victims, highlighting the severity of occupational diseases in the region. In 2010 ANROEV meeting in Bandung, Indonesia, the victims' network was renamed to encompass the occupational and environmental disease victims in the network. It was also felt that the workers movement and the community movement need to come together to fight collectively against the common cause and for that reason occupational and environmental victims need to join forces. It was happening to some extent under the - 'Ban Asbestos movement', where both occupational and environmental victims were coming together in ANROEV demanding a complete Ban of Asbestos in Asia and justice for victims. However, unlike asbestos where the victims were joined by common hazard, humidifier disinfectant victims opened a completely new dimension for victim solidarity within the ANROEV network. Choi Ye-yong from the Asian Citizen's Center for Environment and Health, while working with the victims of the humidifier disinfectant approached ANROEV for solidarity, in 2016. This led to a series of solidarity actions from the network in support of the Korean Victims, that included seeking support from all the members and starting an online petition for the support, participation in joint press conference in Seoul in May 2015 seeking immediate justice for all the victims and also one man picketing at Kwang Hwa Moon in Seoul in 2015. Soon the solidarity also started to come beyond the Asia network - also from the like-minded partner network in Europe - European Work hazards network and the UK hazards network. Hazards magazine published by the UK hazards network also published an article in support of the humidifier victims.

Victims Plight highlighted in UN general Assembly in August 2016

The solidarity campaign led by the Korean Victims and supported by Korean Civil Society and the Asian network was also able to attract the attention of Mr Baskut Tuncak- United Nations Special Rapporteur on Toxic Waste. He visited Korea in 2016 and was able to talk to victims and other stakeholders. In his report to UN Human Rights Council on Rights of Child and Toxics, which was presented in the UN general assembly in August 2016 highlighted the plight of the victims of the humidifier disinfectants in Korea. It explicitly mentions the toxic exposure to children as 'silent pandemic' violating the rights of children. The report also reaffirms that states have duty to prevent the exposure to toxic chemicals to children and businesses are equally responsible to prevent this from happening. However, in case of the humidifier disinfectant, both state as well as companies have failed in Korea and can be quoted from the report.⁶⁾

"Businesses should prevent exposure to toxics and to substances with unknown risks as the best measure of respecting human rights, including children's rights. The tragic deaths and injuries due to toxic humidifier sterilizers in the Republic of Korea illustrate this clearly".

Internalising Environmental Health in Asian Victims Network and 2019 Meeting in Korea

Besides the solidarity support, ANROEV network has been actively engaging with the Humidifier Disinfectant Victims. They have become part of the network and have participated actively in the network's meetings in Hanoi, Vietnam in 2015 and in Kathmandu, Nepal in 2017. They have been part of the occupational and environmental lung disease panel workshops and integrating environmental and occupational health movements. The ANROEV

meeting in 2019 is going to be held in Seoul, Korea in 2019 October and will be jointly hosted by the Asian Citizen's Center for Environment and Health and the Supporters for the Health and Rights of People in the Semiconductor industry (SHARPS). This meeting will put a special emphasis on Environmental Health. What happened in Korea with Humidifier Disinfectant can take place in any country. In fact, Asia is prone to environmental health disasters with legacy of Bhopal in India and Minamata in Japan whose victims are still struggling for justice. To build a movement on environmental health, organising and self-representation of victims is critical. The world Health Organisations attributes a quarter of deaths in the Asia-Pacific region to environmental health.⁷ Lack of proper diagnosis and awareness is not presenting the victims. The problems that led to the humidifier disinfectant victims continue to be present in many parts of Asia and at times in more serious form. This includes deregulation, many states in fact do not have yet the capacity to test the toxins so there is lack of institutions to test the harm, and corporates continue to use substances that may be banned elsewhere with impunity. The biggest example is Asbestos, that continues to be used in many parts in Asia. It will not be an exaggeration to state that Asia is sitting on a time bomb, with respect to the environmental health. Business continue to externalise the problem without doing due diligence and not upholding precautionary principle while introducing toxic substances in the market. The cost of death and diseases is borne by the society or the state. In this context, the ANROEV meeting 2019, will have a special emphasis on strategies to assess the issues of environmental health in Asia building on the experiences of Korea.

Finally, the apology, accountability and the boycott

Just when this letter is being written, Rakesh

Kapoor the Chief Executive of Reckitt Benckiser, has decided to step down by the end of 2019. Just when thousands of victims in Korea are struggling for justice, Rakesh earned more than US\$ 110 million⁸ leading the company, as one of the highest paid top executives in United Kingdom. It seems ironic he is being rewarded when thousands of Korean families have been shattered. The business accountability goes for a toss in thin air.

In 2015 May, when the victims went to see him in Slough, he refused to take any accountability neither did he apologize, to the dismay and anger of the victims. However, as the campaign progressed, and the boycott campaign took strong shape in Korea. Rakesh admitted in an interview with reporters in 2016, "Practically we have nothing selling in South Korea,⁹" The impact was far beyond Korea for a Corporation whose tagline is 'healthier lives and happier homes' and sells multiple well-known brands ranging from Strepsils-lozenges to Durex condoms. The public apology came in 2016 and the head of its division in South Korea Ataur Safdar, apologised in a hotel in Seoul. The apology, which came too late and too little, was promptly dismissed and rejected by victims. The public campaign also prompted Reckitt Benckiser to set up multi-million-dollar fund to compensate the victims.

As, the true extent of the tragedy is still unfolding and the number of victims keeps growing, what would be an adequate amount to money to heal the wounds, is anybody's guess but what is clear the impunity with which the corporations operate can be dealt with a combined pressure of solidarity between various civil society organisations, victims organising and clear boycott campaign to force change. However, to sustain the change, the state institutions need to be strengthened that can protect its citizens from any harm and criminalize any wrong behaviour whilst providing effective and timely remedy to impacted population.

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