

The poison diary of 1996 - part 1

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THE YEAR 1996 PROVED TO BE another year of surprises in terms of poisoning incidents, though not as shocking as that of the previous year. Nevertheless, 1996 continued to remind us that poisonous substances are very much part of our daily lives, both locally and globally.

Below are the same of the month-to-month highlights of what happened last year. These highlights are frequently accompanied by many more smaller events of no less worrying consequences.

January

The year started with a big bang as a result of the use of nitrofurantoin and related compounds in pre-mixed poultry feed.

Nitrofurantoin, a highly toxic anti-bacterial drug widely used as a growth promoter in this country, was confirmed to be banned in countries such as the United States and Japan after it was found to have caused cancer in laboratory animals.

Meanwhile, an official report of its excessive usage with residual amounts of the drug found in the meat and eggs of chicken was made known to the Malaysian public. This issue caused grave concern among consumers, leading to a number of heated debates for many months until its use was finally banned later in the year.

The aftermath of the cyanide dumping at the resort island of Pangkor in March the previous year still prevailed in the month of January. Discussions emerged again, requiring the Environment and Health Committee to reassure the public and local fishermen of the safety of seafood from the waters off Pangkor.

At the same time, the problem relating to the use of "ecstasy" caught the attention of the Malaysian public when a boy was reported dead after he collapsed at London disco, while another managed to survive only after undergoing a tracheotomy. "Ecstasy" began to rear its ugly head in Malaysia in 1996, adding another dimension to the dadah scenario locally.

On the international front, the French exploded their sixth nuclear bomb in the South Pacific. This was part of a series of eight tests planned since 1995 which provoked outrage and condemnation world-wide. Prior to this, France was accused of deceiving the world when it denied that there had been radioactive leaks involving iodine 131, a toxic radioactive substance, during its previous nuclear tests.

February

This month was filled with the discussion of the use of teeth whiteners advertised by several companies promoting direct sales over the television. The controversy arose when it was highlighted that the products contained between 3% and 6% of bleaching agents such as hydrogen peroxide and carbonyl peroxide. At such concentrations, these substances can result in enamel weakening, gum irritation and tooth sensitivity.

Experts warned that the use of hydrogen peroxide may alter the normal oral flora and can cause palillae of the tongue. The government eventually tightened the sales of such products by gazetting all teeth whiteners under the Control of Drugs and Cosmetic Regulations 1984.

In the same month too, it was announced that there were 26 cases of illegal toxic waste dumping recorded between January 1995 and February 1996. Penang had the most cases of dumping over the same period, while the most serious was dumping of 41 drums of potassium cyanide at a landfill in Pangkor in March 1995.

Internationally, a landmark settlement was reached in Japan's worst case of industrial pollution after more than 40 years.

In the 50s, more than 1,000 people were killed and thousands of others horribly crippled when they ate chemically contaminated seafood around Minimata Bay. Nearly 100 victims of mercury poisoning were receive 2.6 million yen each under the agreed settlement.

Meanwhile, in Geneva, representatives from 54 European and North American countries met in a bid to cut down dangerous pollution caused by motor vehicles and agricultural activities such as nitrous oxide emissions and the use of certain insecticides, which along with sulphur oxide, are blamed for cancers, respiratory and cardiovascular diseases and birth defects in humans.

March

March 1996 was a relatively quiet month on the local front, apart from a number of deaths reported due to poisonings.

Internationally, however, it was a "mad" month beginning with the "mad cow" disease which brought about a global health scare. A number of young Britons were reported to have died of a new strain of Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease (CJD), the human form of "mad cow" disease. This led to several political rows throughout the years.

March also saw the celebration of a number of anniversaries. First, it marked the 50th anniversary of the Bikini Islanders' forced exile to make way for more than 20 nuclear tests conducted by the United States. A full-fledged nuclear clean-up effort was planned in 1996 to rid the island of residual nuclear test radiation so that the people can return home safely since their eviction in March 1946.

Another anniversary was related to the nerve gas attack in Tokyo's crowded subway station on March 20, 1995. Nearly commuters collapsed and 11 died from the gas attack confirmed as sarin. This was reported as the worst such incident ever to occur.

Similarly at home, March 20, 1995 remained an important day in Malaysia's calendar. It marked the day when 41 drums of potassium cyanide were found dumped in Pangkor. Though no untoward incidents took place, it could have resulted in about seven million deaths should there be a disaster.

April

April 1996 was the 10th anniversary of the world's worst nuclear catastrophe. On April 26, 1986, the Chernobyl nuclear power station in Ukraine leaked, causing a total of 180,000 deaths. The total radioactivity released from the blast was 200 times more than the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945.

Despite the concrete and steel dumped on top of the doomed structure, the reactor was earlier reported to leak again, from which radioactive gas can escape. On the occasion of its anniversary, an international conference was held in Vienna to address the health problem encountered in the affected areas and related environmental issues.

Meanwhile in Tokyo, another subway scare was reported after fumes likened to that of burned rubber was detected. In Edinburgh, an allegation was made to link the "mad cow" disease to the use of excessive organophosphate pesticides over 10 years ago.

At home, the question of chemicals used in animals was raised again. This time it concerned the use of anabolic steroids to stimulate growth in pigs. In one survey reported, 90% of the pork samples taken contained steroids. Also detected was a scheduled poison, a drug similar to a beta-agonist.

Two new regulations were introduced in April - the Pesticides (Advertisement) Regulations 1996 and Pesticides (Highly Toxic Pesticides) Regulations 1996, which took effect on April 1. The former is aimed at curbing unsubstantiated and misleading claims from being made, while the latter covers guidelines on the usage and handling of highly toxic pesticide by agricultural workers.

At the same time, new regulations under the Occupational Safety and Health Act were introduced to include the proper handling of hazardous chemicals and mandatory registration of occupational safety and health doctors. The regulations also specify permissible exposure limits of about 400 types of hazardous chemicals used at work-sites. The introduction of these regulations were commendable, considering the number of poisoning cases involving workers that took place in the country throughout the year.

May

The big story in May was of course the cholera outbreak which started in the island of Penang, alleged due to the contamination of ice cubes distributed throughout the states.

By the middle of the month, the number of people stricken with cholera rose to well over 600 nationwide. In Penang alone, the number of cases jumped from 143 to 482 during the same period. By the end of the outbreak, more than 900 cases were recorded, making it the state's worst epidemic.

During the cholera attack, two schools in Georgetown were sealed while trainee teachers in a nearby college (where the problem first started earlier in the month) were confined to their hostels and their classes were cancelled. However, through a series of concerted efforts by various agencies, the epidemic was later put under control after more than 1,000 cases were reported nationwide.

As the cholera attack raged on, a number of school children were reported to be down due to food poisoning. Some of this cases numbered to more than 100 pupils. Food poisoning cases were reported almost every other month throughout the year and seemed to be a major concern in schools.

Overshadowed by the cholera outbreak was the World No-Tobacco Day held on May 31. Two United Nations agencies - WHO and Unesco - and the International Olympic Council (IOC) sponsored the occasion under the theme *Sports And Arts Without Tobacco*. Athletes and artistes were urged to promote a tobacco-free environment by being healthy role models. It was also reiterated that the sponsorship of sports and arts by tobacco companies was now widely recognised as ethically unacceptable.

In conjunction with this, the National Poison Centre held a month-long tele-campaign against smoking together with a series of radio talk shows on how to stop smoking.

Meanwhile, the Penang State Health Department submitted a proposal to gazatte Komtar, a popular city centre shopping mall as a "no-smoking" area. This was part of a discourage smoking among Malaysian.

On the international front, Beijing too imposed a new ban on public smoking. This was a very significant move as the city is regarded as the heart of the world's biggest cigarette market with about two million smokers.

In another development, Taiwan's Health Department declared May as an anti-drinking, anti-smoking and anti-betelnut-chewing month.

"Ecstasy" pills continued to hog the headline in May. The biggest haul involved a Singaporean woman with 4,050 pills strapped to her waist and under the armpit. Ecstasy is listed under the Dangerous Drug Act 1952.

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