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Drowning: Bangladesh's invisible epidemic

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BBC News, Dhaka

Earlier this year, 16-month-old Sumaiya Tabassum was playing just outside her house in the village of Moheshpur, in the Sirajganj district of north-western Bangladesh.

Sumaiya's mother, a handloom worker, was busy working inside their house and checking on the baby once in a while.

After some time, Sumaiya disappeared and her panic-stricken parents searched for her everywhere.

Soon, they recovered the child's body from a nearby pond.

It was too late to resuscitate her. Unknowingly, Sumaiya had walked into danger.

Her parents are yet to recover from the shock.

Sumaiya is not an exception. Thousands of children die in Bangladesh's numerous rivers, ponds and lakes every year, as well as along its extensive coastline.

A recent study estimated that at least 50 children drown every day in the country - more than 18,000 a year.

The victims are mostly children from poor sections of society, who live close to major

bodies of water.

Most drowning occurs between the hours of 0900 and 1400, when many carers are busy doing housework and not supervising their children.

In an attempt to reduce the alarming number of deaths, a new International Drowning Research Centre (IDRC) has been set up in the capital, Dhaka.

"Drowning is the leading cause of death among children between one and four years. We have found out that most of the drowning happened within 20 metres of the residence," says Dr AKM Fazlur Rahman, the centre's director.

The centre hopes to study the various factors behind these drownings and create awareness among parents and communities to reduce the risks.

Researchers say more children drown in Bangladesh than die of diseases like measles, cholera, diarrhoea or pneumonia.

"Those which were leading killers of children 20 or 30 years ago are no longer that. Drowning has risen to the fore and has become the invisible epidemic," says Dr Michael Linnan, technical director of the Alliance for Safe Children, one of the IDRC's partners.

"Our surveys in seven Asian countries have shown us that in each of these countries the leading killer of children from infancy to 17 years old is drowning."

Justin Scarr of the Royal Life Saving Society Australia, which funds the IDRC, says drowning has not been tackled in the past because the deaths are almost never recorded.

"Drowning is a public health issue that has escaped attention for many years, primarily because the child who drowns in rural Asia very rarely gets to the hospital," he says.

One of the most important ways to reduce drowning is to teach children to swim. However, most cannot normally learn until they are about four years old.

To get around this, the IDRC wants to teach older children - who can not only save themselves but can also help others.

The centre also aims to promote the need for people to be taught cardio-pulmonary resuscitation (CPR) and basic rescue skills.

The other option, experts recommend, is to include swimming as part of education in the

primary and secondary level to reduce drowning deaths.

Since Bangladesh may not have resources to build swimming pools all around the country, they say local ponds and lakes can be converted into safe training facilities.

IDRC officials also say that putting up locally-made fences around ponds and bodies of water near residential areas can help protect toddlers from drowning.

Researchers say many Asian countries, including Thailand, Vietnam and the Philippines, have the same problem and would benefit from the expertise offered by the centre.

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