



Examination of conscience

On May 26, Bangladeshi newspaper *New Age* published a devastating article that said the Dhaleswari river, which runs next to the Savar industrial tanning area, was being polluted by untreated tannery effluent from this cluster.

I have written several columns criticising the unsustainable situation in Savar. The government wanted the Hazaribagh tanneries to close because of the decades of uncontrolled and untreated tannery waste and effluent which had been seriously affecting public health in the area. The objective was to relocate the tanneries to Savar, where a centralised common effluent treatment plant would ensure that the environment was protected.

The tanners have always opposed the relocation plan, but court order after court order told them they were wrong. Meanwhile, the government awarded a Chinese company the contract to construct the CETP, a deal that was allegedly more about lining pockets than guaranteeing quality. When tanners eventually and reluctantly constructed their new tanneries, the CETP was not ready with chrome recovery absent, the article says. As a result, when the tanneries dumped their general wastewater, everything included, the CETP faked treatment, instead simply opening the gates at night and offloading the accumulated tannery effluent into the Dhaleswari river.

Fishermen complained more than a year ago that fish were dying, but nobody listened. Now Savar, a once clean stretch of land, has been transformed into a polluted dump. What took place in Hazaribagh over a period of 50 years, has taken place in Savar in barely 18 months; untreated wastewater enters the once uncontaminated river each night, tanneries dump their

fleshings behind the CETP, and shavings containing chrome are just offloaded alongside the roads.

The government is also delaying any attempt to turn the inadequate CETP into a functioning unit, blaming the Chinese management company for not complying rather than looking at the fundamental design errors made in the project. Using different chemicals to treat the effluent, as suggested in the article, changes nothing. The set-up must be changed and the treatment process must be changed. At the end of last year, the government had a precise and conclusive proposal to turn this disaster around, but nothing moves at the Ministry.

Bangladesh is drifting towards new elections at the end of this year and, unless a miracle happens, nothing will change in Savar. Effluent will continue to be dumped unpunished, and tannery owners will continue to look the other way and shrug their shoulders. When a new government is sworn in, everything will start from zero, while the life in the Dhaleswari river and the environment in the Savar area will be destroyed.

The leather industry, those who buy leather from Bangladeshi tanneries, must intervene to safeguard the good name of our industry, and to safeguard the environment and public health in Savar. Each buyer must search their conscience and decide if they want to be accomplices to the environmental disaster that is being perpetrated in Savar. *Stop buying Bangladeshi leather and tell the Savar tanners to get their act together!* Now is a good time because they have invested large amounts of money, which they cannot afford to lose. With a pistol to their head, they will have no choice but to comply. ☹



The CETP under construction.



The CETP could qualify as 'fake news'. They have three chrome separation stations but the separated chrome rejoins the main stream in the CETP and is then dumped at night into the river.