Feature: Dealing with drugs

29 May, 2007 - The first time Jurmin tried chemicals was in the winter of 1994. He was doing a temporary job at an auction yard in southern Bhutan when a friend introduced him to it. It was fun. After a month he returned to college and forgot all about it. The next winter his father lost his job and his younger sister returned home pregnant and without a husband. Jurmin headed for the medical shops. This time when he returned to college he took a stock with him. He made new friends who did stuff and who made him feel like he belonged somewhere.

Today Jurmin is a father of three children. He no longer does drugs and when he recalls those dark days it makes him break into a sweat. But what really scares him today is the way youth are taking to it. "How bad is it going to get when our children grow up?" is an issue he frequently discusses with other parents. "Sometimes I feel like leaving the country and going elsewhere," he says.

Since January this year, the Thimphu police and the National Referral Hospital recorded six deaths from drugs overdose (OD). The general hospital in Phuentsholing recorded three cases so far, the most recent being the death of a married couple early this week. This averages to one death every two weeks from drug overdose, excluding the unreported cases. "If so many people are dying from it then imagine the number that are into it?" said a Thimphu parent.

Hospital records indicate that most overdose deaths involved young people in their late teens and early 20s, who were usually unemployed and came from troubled families.

According to the national referral hospital's forensic expert, doctor Pakila Dukpa, when OD cases were brought to the hospital, only external examinations were done, because of lack of proper facilities to test drugs for forensic aspects.
Representatives from BNCA, police, customs, department of youth, health, and youth development fund were briefed by two UNODC resource persons, last week on the drug scenario in the neighbouring countries.

Most overdose cases, he said, were a result of volatile substance abuse like tablets, thinners, dendrite and petrol. "This leads to violent behavior, mood alterations, sensitisation of the heart leading to ventricular fibrillation which results in death," he said.

The most common drugs used by the youth in Bhutan are marijuana, prescription pain killer drugs like relipin, nitrosun (N10), and cough syrups like corex. Among the early teenagers it is sniffers like dendrite, thinners and petrol.

One of the biggest reasons for the ballooning drug problem is its easy availability from across the border in Jaigaon coupled with a huge population of adventurous and misguided youth under peer and economic pressure.

And with no proper facilities to tackle the problem, observers feel that it would only get worse. Many say that the drug issue is a symptom of a bigger problem in society. There are more and more dysfunctional families where parents have separated and children literally grow up on their own in the company of friends. More and more parents spend time working and doing what they like rather than with their children.

"The Bhutanese society has always been seen as a liberal one and children of broken families were always taken care by society," said a Thimphu resident. "Today with all the exposure and influence from other cultures, the situation of youth has changed vastly. It is a modern problem and it needs modern solutions."

Rewa, a support centre for drug addicts and alcoholics, was established in December 2004 by two recovering addicts with support from the Youth Development Fund.

Today, the centre has about 11 in house clients and four out house clients, the youngest being 14-years-old and the oldest 53. Most of them were unemployed from all family backgrounds.

Karma (name changed) started drugs when he came to Thimphu. He said because of his personal problems, he was into drugs for about nine years. "I used to feel that I can face people and it used to boost my ego," he said. Karma said that he was arrested by police many times and convicted as well. But even behind bars he said that they could still get his supplies. His friends would deliberately get into trouble to get locked up and carry the stuff hidden in the shoes.

According to the executive director of the Bhutan Narcotic Control Agency (BNCA), Kinley Dorji, drug abusers were from all backgrounds. "Rich people are involved because they have money and youth because they look for emotional security," he said.
But a former police officer pointed out that while the well to do had the resources and a home to go back to, it was the ones on the streets who ultimately got in too deep.

According to the director of Department of Youth and Sports, Dasho Sonam Tobgay Dorji, the problem was a reflection of where Bhutan was today.

"We have to come to terms with reality and this is reality. I think what is happening is that the Bhutanese are facing pressures that did not exist in the past, primarily an outcome of urbanisation," he said adding that it could be due to a fair amount of stress that was building amongst the people, whether out of unemployment or unfulfilled aspirations.

Dasho Sonam Tobgay Dorji said that people should have compassion and empathy for those who are addicted to substances.

He said that the overall strategy of dealing with the problem must be to come to terms with urban poverty. "Otherwise we are going to see a growing incidence of drugs and drugs is related with other social issues such as crime, prostitution which are all interrelated, which comes as a result of urban poverty and urbanisation," he said. "I think our society has to learn to come to terms with people who are addicted to substance, because they need help."

Most drug abusers and dealers were in the urban centres, according to police and 91 percent of the abusers and peddlers were under 24 years and unemployed.

Meanwhile, a rehabilitation centre would be set up in Gidakom soon to tackle the increasing number of drug addicts in Bhutan by the department of youth and BNCA.

According to the programme manager of Rewa, Ugyen Dorji who is a recovering addict, quitting drugs was not impossible. "They should know how to do it and ofcourse, social support should be there," he said. And support could start from home and family.

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