

# Garbage dump-a serious health hazard

BY NEOMI KODIKARA

Three-year-old Nuwan could not go to Montessori for days. He wonders why he has to visit 'doctor uncle' quite often now and swallow a heap of pills and drink bitter medicine. His face is gaunt, his limbs are scrawny. With dull eyes he stares at us.

According to his grandmother, Nuwan suffers from frequent cough, throat irritation, vomiting and diarrhoea. And he is not alone. For the past month or more these symptoms have been observed in many children in the neighbourhood of Madinnagoda, along Buthgamuwa Road in Kotte where '24 Watte' and 'Ranwan Eliya' are located. The two sites are being used as dumping ground for garbage collected from the Sri Jayawardhanapura, Kotte, Municipality.

Heaps of garbage dumped on the banks of the Diyawanna Oya in Madinnagoda, have become not just a public nuisance but a major health hazard for the people living in the vicinity.

Every 30 minutes or so of the day tonnes of stinking garbage are discharged by Municipality lorries and within seconds it gets raided by dogs and crows. The area is marked for the intolerable stench emanating from the heaps. Polythene and cardboard lay strewn all over the vicinity, alongside litter from shops and restaurants, waste material from houses and even hospital litter that are nauseating. The reeking garbage is dumped without any consideration of the harm it causes both to the immediate environment and to people nearby.

Clara Cooray (72) who is a resident of the '24 watte,' worries about the health of the children living close to the garbage dump. "We have been pleading and appealing to the authorities and the politicians but there has been no response," she says.

Recently, the residents of the '24 watte' joined forces to launch a protest where they barricaded the area and had demanded that the authorities prohibit garbage-dumping. Mountains of garbage remained uncollected in the Kotte area for days. Only then did the authorities wake up to reality. Municipal workers were advised to take necessary measures to reduce the harmful effects of garbage by following the proper procedures of dumping. A board was erected marking the boundaries of the dumping site. Sadly, however this was followed only for a few days, for within a few days the workers were back to the same old routine, haphazardly dumping their stinking load, with no care for the environment or the people.

Land-filling is a convenient and popular way of disposing of waste. But haphazard land-filling can cause long-term, sometimes even irreparable damages to the environment, especially since the toxic substance called leachate produced by the garbage could seep into the ground and permanently contaminate the ground water. The proper way to use garbage for land-filling is to spread it on a plastic base, seal it and later pump on the leachate and neutralise its toxic effects. But this is an extremely expensive process and requires a lot of expertise. The next proper, easy and cheap way is to use a layer of good earth over each layer of garbage but this is also not done by the labourers.

The residents complain that they often face the harmful health consequences of indiscriminate garbage disposal. They say the toxic fumes emitted in the mornings make the children cough and adults suffer from throat irritation and sometimes even cracked lips.

Another woman who did not want to reveal her identity alleged that the health authorities seldom visit the site and on the rare occasions they do visit, do not even bother to get out of their vehicles. She added that due to political threats many people were reluctant to come out with the injustice happening to them. "Some



Garbage dump at Madinnagoda

Pix. by Saman Mendis

men who spoke out against this injustice were assaulted in the night when they were returning home from work," she said.

All complain that it is impossible to live in the 'watte' with the noxious odour that goes on for 24 hours. "We find it difficult to eat or sleep as flies and mosquitoes have multiplied. On some days, the whole day is spent inside the house, with windows and doors tightly shut," said another young woman. She also said that as the canal, by '24 watte' is blocked, during the rainy season, they are vulnerable to floods. "As the canal is stagnating, it also cause the toilets to overflow," she pointed out.

Madinnagoda had been a most sought

of some officials. "Garbage disposal is an obligation of every Municipal Council, but they should make sure it does not cause any nuisance to the public," he said pointing out that the CEA has power to intervene. "The MCs who break the law can be prosecuted under the National Environmental Act," he said.

## PATIENTS AFFECTED

A paediatrician attached to the Lady Ridgeway Hospital said that several patients from the Madinnagoda area suffering from cough, throat irritation, vomiting and diarrhoea have been treated at the LRH. But she said the number was not quite significant. Most of the cases reported were of upper and lower respiratory problems, acute diarrhoea and lead poisoning.

## NOT SO SERIOUS

J. M. Somadasa, Deputy Mayor of Sri Jayawardhanapura Kotte Municipality is of the opinion that the situation at the moment is not so serious. "We have taken various measures to reduce the menace it creates," he said pointing out the measures that include using good earth with garbage, spraying oil in the canals. He said two persons are also placed at the site to monitor the work. "We were informed that several private company lorries had been using the site to dump their garbage too, but from now onwards the lorries will be strictly monitored and only MC vehicles will be allowed in," he said.

He also said that though they are well aware of the fact that the residents have to face many a hardship due to the garbage disposal the municipality too is not left with any other choice. He pointed out that a few days ago the residents of the Kotte area also had to face many difficulties, when the disposal of garbage was blocked by the Madinnagoda residents.

"The MC spends huge sums of money, sometimes even using funds set aside for development work for the disposal of waste material. But still there is no end to the accusations, complaints and criticisms," he complained. Somadasa said that they will seek the assistance of the Land Reclamation Authority to clean the river waters though it will cost enormously.

## NATIONAL STRATEGY

Padmini Batuwitage, a Director of the Environment and Natural Resources Ministry said that National strategy for solid waste which is based on a broad policy of solid waste management from generation to final disposal is ready for implementation with the private sector participation. The strategy covering waste avoidance, reduction, reuse, recycling and thereafter, final disposal of the residual waste in an environment friendly manner is expected to be an economical means of reducing the garbage menace.

The National strategy was launched by the Ministry in collaboration with relevant authorities in 2000. She said that many local authorities have responded positively but some try to avert it by pointing out various difficulties.



Siriawathie carrying her grandchild Dilshan Siriwardhane, one of many children from the area exposed to health hazards

after residential area prior to it being converted into a garbage dump. "We paid our hard earned money to buy plots of land and build houses, only to see our small children suffer from asthma, fever and frequent sore-throats," a parent lamented.

Indunil Lakmali (13) is a student of Hewavitharane Maha Vidyalaya, Rajagiriya. She is a regular absentee in school. "I want to go to school," she sighs. But frequent fever and cough does not allow her to do so. "When I went to school last week they sent me back home with a note saying not to come until I am fully recovered. This unbearable stench makes my headache, I cannot study," she says.

'Ranwan Eliya' is another area affected by the stench. Dilshan Siriwardhane is one of many children from the area who faces health hazards. His mother said that her other child, a baby of ten months also suffers from cough, particularly in the early hours of the day.

Siriawathie (62) complained that health officials of the area had taken no steps to tackle this problem so far. "Why are we given step-motherly treatment? Why should we have to pay for other's sins?" she questioned.

## WRONG PLACE

Environmentalists claim that the municipal authorities have chosen the wrong place for waste disposal at Madinnagoda. A spokesman for the Public Interest Law Foundation said that toxic substance the garbage emits spoils the waters of Diyawanna Oya and not only the residents of the area but hundreds of people who use the river are affected by this. According to him, the lack of a proper system of waste disposal is due to political tug-of-war and lethargic attitude



Clara Cooray a resident of the '24 watte'