



Drug addiction on the rise in **Bangladesh**

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Bangladeshi father Aslam Hossain still remembers the shame and despair that forced him to turn his heroin addict son in to police. Two years ago the 23-year-old got hooked on heroin, one of a growing number of better-off Bangladeshis -- from female college students to farmers -- who are falling victim to a problem once confined to the ultra-poor.

"Almost everyday neighbours would complain to me about his crimes like stealing from their homes, pickpocketing, or even robbing passers-by at knife-point," says Hossain, a retired bureaucrat from the western Jhenaidha district.

"Every time they lost something they would come to me and complain that my son had stolen it to get drugs, and in most cases they were right," he says. But his decision to turn him over to the police failed to put an end to his habit.

"Twice I took him to police and twice he went to jail, but both times he came back in an even worse condition," he says. "I was told that jails are awash with drugs and my son Faruq had a very good time."

Drug addiction, particularly to heroin and a cough syrup containing the painkiller codeine, is on the rise in Bangladesh. The US State department said last year drug that abuse appeared to be becoming a "major problem" among the wealthy and well educated in the mainly Muslim nation. Ziaul Alam, chief of police in the northern town of Bhairab, says he believes



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big problem. Two out of the three I believe are now drug free, and most of the boys who came to talk to me have been abstaining from drugs," he adds.

A recent Department of Narcotics study estimated the number of drug addicts in the Muslim-majority country at two million and rising. Local non-governmental organisations, however, say anecdotal evidence suggests the figure is much higher in a country where 60 percent of the 140 million population are under the age of 30. Psychiatrist Golam Rabbani began treating a very small number of drug addicts in the early 1980s.

In recent years, however, he says there has been an exponential rise in drug abuse, apparently reflecting the impoverished country's steady economic growth, said psychiatrist Golam Rabbani.

Although nearly half the population still lives on less than a dollar a day there is increasing affluence among the middle classes. The economy has grown at least five percent annually since 1991 and is predicted to grow by a record 6.7 percent this year. "I hardly had any patients at the beginning, now I have to tell dozens of people every week that I haven't got time for them," Rabbani tells AFP.

"It's a disease of development. In Bangladesh it is no longer just a problem of the poor. I have treated hundreds of rich young men and dozens of university educated girls," he says.

"A lot of them have too much money and their fathers give them too much freedom. They are doing what they like. It's a globalised world now. They are very much influenced by Western ways and they enjoy taking drugs. The old values are breaking down," he adds.

Rabbani, like the police, recommends that parents try to break their son's or daughter's addiction by securing them jobs abroad. The ploy succeeded for Hossain whose son is no longer a source of embarrassment and worry for his family. "We heard that in Saudi Arabia there is no supply of heroin so we got him a job there," he said. "Because of that he has been drug free for two years now; we feel very lucky," he says.

police need to adopt a pro-active approach.

Earlier this year he invited a group of drug addicts and their parents to tea to discuss "the problem in a free and frank manner".

The parents of 35 local drug addicts from all walks of life turned up with their sons. "These boys are all types. There were farmers, the sons of rich men, brilliant students as well as ordinary village boys," he says.

"The parents said they were helpless to deal with their addicted sons. They knew their sons were involved in all sorts of crimes. But they couldn't help," he added.

Alam, who successfully adopted the same approach in the southern town of Mongla, advised the parents to try to find their sons jobs abroad in countries with tough anti-drugs laws.

"We told them that unless we worked together these bright young men would slowly kill themselves. We told them to find jobs for their sons, or send them to the Middle East where we heard that there is no addiction problem," he says.

In the previous eight months more than 20 parents have brought their sons in hoping that a spell behind bars would break their habit, he says.

"But we no longer send these kids to prison because drugs are easily available there," Alam says. The police chief also went door to door warning off drug dealers. "Three villages had a