

## Banishing a menace

**WEEKEND MAGAZINE** (January 05, 2013) : The Environmental Protection Agency has finally moved to remove the hazard of unsafe plastic bags, glasses and bottles. According to a press report, a proposed regulatory framework, already vetted by the law ministry, is soon expected to get the approval of the newly established Ministry of Climate change, following which the manufactures would be given three months to replace all such items with ones made from biodegradable materials. First introduced in Pakistan back in 1982, plastic bags caught on quickly because they were both cheap and convenient growing by 15 percent per year. At this rate, their production is expected to touch the 112 billion mark by 2014-15. Plastic bags and bottles have fallen out of favour not only in the developed world but in also a number of developing ones for littering the landscape, clogging sewage flow, and also harming wildlife on land and in the seas. In countries like Pakistan where awareness level is low, they are also a serious threat to human health. It is common for people to use them for carrying, even heating food. Heating makes them particularly lethal as it releases carcinogenic substances. Sadly, it is not only the uneducated people who use plastics for wrong purposes. At least in one instance a provincial public health department carried out a campaign telling people to place drinking water bottles- glass or plastic- in the sun for heating to disinfect water. The situation being what it is, the need to banish such use of plastic cannot be overemphasised. It may be recalled that black plastic bags were banned in 1993 for their harmful effect on health. The measure worked because it was backed by an effective public awareness campaign. Later when provincial governments prohibited manufacturing of very thin polythene bags the industry offered considerable resistance. Some of the manufacturers still continue to by-pass the existing regulations. A complete replacement of non-biodegradable bags and bottles with degradable ones is fraught with challenges. It is good to note therefore that the new plan attempts to take care of possible violations. Adopting a comprehensive approach, it aims to prohibit manufacturing as well as import, stockpiling, trade, supply, distribution, sale and use of any non-degradable plastic product. And to ensure that over 8000 manufactures of such products are not badly affected, it has been decided to introduce oxo-biodegradable materials from petroleum waster products, which do not require technological change. The products thus made would decay within three months due to a natural chemical reaction. The price, though, would go up by five percent. In order to make up for the higher cost of the new material the EPA has requested the government to waive the six percent duty on the required additive. Even without a duty waiver, the consumers should not hesitate to pay a little extra for extra value.-BR

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