

Eco-friendly, life-saving toilet

STOCKHOLM: By rethinking the humble toilet, Indian sanitation expert Bindeshwar Pathak has found a way that can save water — and lives — in developing countries.

For four decades, his Sulabh Sanitation Movement has equipped more than 1.2 million households with eco-friendly toilets and installed 7,500 public lavatories across India.

Yet, almost three out of four Indians, or around 700 million people, still have no access to basic sanitation.

This led to half a million deaths each year, Pathak, 66, said at the World Water Week conference here, where he was awarded this year's Stockholm Water Prize for his groundbreaking work.

To lower the risk to human health, Pathak developed a twin-pit, pour-flush toilet known as the Sulabh, that uses a pair of tanks to store waste matter with no smell or soil pollution, pending recycling as fertiliser.

It uses significantly less water than a standard toilet.

"It requires only one to 1.5

litres to flush instead of 10 litres. It saves trillions of litres of water each year," said Pathak.

The idea is to discourage both open-air defecation and the use of bucket toilets — options that ramp up the risk of the spread of disease and diarrhoea.

"People have died of cholera cleaning the bucket toilets," Pathak explained.

When a Sulabh is sold to households, its price is adjusted according to a family's ability to pay. The poorest families pay US\$15 (RM54), whereas richer families can be asked to pay up to US\$1,000.

The Sulabh Sanitation Movement's campaign to raise awareness of health issues has also seen more and more Indians prepared to pay user charges for its 7,500 public toilets.

Staffed 24 hours a day, they cost US\$1 a month to use them by subscription — with an exemption for slum dwellers, women and children.

The Sulabh has been exported to Afghanistan and Bhutan. — AFP