

Another impending mosquito attack

Why haven't the city corporations paid heed to the experts?

IN a worrying development, a report in this daily said that experts are warning of a record increase in Culex mosquito population next month. What is even more concerning is that the city corporations that are mainly responsible for controlling the menace seem to have become lax in their mosquito fighting efforts after the mayoral elections. We do not need to point out the results of such delays and how dangerous an increase in mosquito population will be in terms of spreading diseases like dengue, chikungunya, malaria, filaria and other deadly diseases.

Two recent surveys—one by the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS) and another by a team of researchers from Jahangirnagar University—have found that the mosquito population density will multiply in the next two weeks. Such findings are ominous for such a densely populated city like Dhaka where disease spreads like wildfire. After last year's experience with dengue, which caused numerous deaths and thousands getting infected, it would have been logical for the city corporations to take preventive measures well in advance this time around. But as many city-dwellers have stated, there has been very little initiative from the city corporations so far, especially after the elections. Such laxity is highly irresponsible as we all know that mosquitoes breed very fast and become very difficult to control after the larvae have hatched. So what have the city corporations been waiting for? Why hasn't there been fogging in various localities? Why have not the breeding grounds of mosquitoes, like the waterbodies, in the city been cleaned out?

It has been said that there is an acute shortage of manpower and logistics to carry out adequate drives. A former ward councillor said that there are three people in his ward for fogging and spraying, and that at least 15 people would be required to do the job properly. He further said that he had submitted a request to the DSCC for the required equipment and manpower six months ago, but to no avail. This seems to be the case in many other wards. How can the city corporations sit on such requests that literally can save lives?

The DSCC has announced a weeklong crash programme to identify and destroy breeding grounds and the DNCC has apparently started a two-week crash programme for the same purpose. Why couldn't they have started this months ago when the dengue season was at its peak and experts had already warned of a resurgence of disease-carrying mosquitoes in the months to come?

We hope that these crash programmes do not prove to be too little, too late—something, it seems, our city corporations have been afflicted with for a long time.

Air pollution has reached choking levels

Time to address this urgently

THE poor quality of air has been a pressing concern from the beginning of this month, when the High Court directed the public administration secretary to deploy five executive magistrates within a month under the Department of Environment (DoE) to take necessary measures in tackling air and environmental pollution across the country. What is shocking is the degree to which our air remains polluted. We get a picture of this from the 2019 World Air Quality Report released recently. According to it, Bangladesh has emerged as the country with the worst particulate matter (PM) 2.5 pollution in the world, followed by Pakistan, Mongolia, Afghanistan and India.

As we continue to breathe in this air, we're looking at a cocktail of health issues such as asthma, heart disease and lung cancer. And this toxic PM 2.5 had already hit New Delhi last year, before it made its way to us. Despite these glaring problems, what still prevail are the many man-made establishments and irresponsible societal habits that further contribute to our already toxic environment.

From the illegal brick kilns in Savar and garbage strewn in every corner of the capital to dust from construction sites, burning of leaves, cigarette consumption, and the countless unfit buses releasing dark smog on the streets—all have played a substantial role in gaining us this notoriety. An effective way out of this would be to assess the types of local pollutants and seasonal public health status to better understand air quality management. It requires conducting a city-based evaluation of air quality, as per the Clean Air Act, with the help of multi-stakeholders. Also, there needs to be location-specific solutions for areas with industrial zones, waste disposal sites as well as market places. On a societal level, awareness needs to be spread among citizens, providing them with life choices that aren't detrimental to the ecosystem or themselves.

Additionally, the government needs to work on that directive sent by the HC earlier this month. It is evident from the PM count that merely shutting down brick kilns isn't going to be enough. A report from *The Daily Star* had stated that the DoE had experienced a shortage of manpower in this regard, mentioning that a total of eight executive magistrates are needed to launch drives against environmental pollution across the country.

With only three magistrates at hand, there's little that can be done. In these trying times, it's imperative that the government takes into account the understaffing issue of the DoE and equips the officials with necessary instruments and facilities so that measures to control air quality and protect the environment are not delayed further.

DELHI RIOTS

Where does India go from here?

A CLOSER LOOK



TASNEEM TAYEB

WHAT was supposed to be the celebration of friendship between two of the largest democracies in the world—India and America—turned out to be a sideshow to a bloodbath of communal hatred, exposing the undemocratic underbelly of BJP's India. The world watched in horror as anti-democratic elements supporting the recently passed Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA)—which aims to fast-track Indian citizenship to migrants belonging to six minority religions, excluding the Muslims, from Pakistan, Bangladesh and Afghanistan—swooped in on peaceful protesters in northeast Delhi and unleashed unspeakable savagery on them. The atrocities committed by the rioters were enough to overshadow the maiden official visit of US President Donald Trump to India. The BJP government is said to have spent 130 crore rupees or about USD 18 million to present a positive image of the country before the US president.

While Modi was busy beautifying India, it seems his cronies were getting restless to quell the anti-CAA demonstrations. Local goons, inspired by the provocative comments of BJP leader Kapil Mishra—who had threatened the peaceful protesters, mostly women, to free the roads or otherwise face music while standing right next to a police officer—resorted to violent means to disperse them. Soon the streets turned chaotic: people exercising their democratic rights were mercilessly beaten up, houses and mosques torched, and belongings of the residents looted by the rioters, all the while chanting "Jai Sree Ram", a chant that was meant to pay respect to the celebrated Hindu deity, Ramachandra, widely revered for his virtue and greatness... and all this in full view of the police.

In fact, there had been reports in various news outlets and TV channels of the police often provoking the rioters to beat up the protesters, or simply turning a blind eye to the atrocities. Goons wielding swords and weapons were seen roaming around the streets and alleys of northeast Delhi for the next three days. The result: at least 42 deaths, including a police constable, and thousands of lives shaken forever. What is also alarming is that a Delhi High Court judge, Justice S. Muralidhar, who had on Wednesday severely criticised the role of police during the riots in Delhi, and directed them to register FIR against Kapil Sharma, had been transferred to Punjab on the same day, around 11pm local time. The timing and suddenness of the action certainly brings into question the reason behind it.

While Indian Home Minister Amit Shah on Tuesday asked all political parties to avoid making provocative statements, the same day one of his party leaders, B. L. Santosh, had this to tweet: "The game starts now. Rioters need to be taught a lesson or two of Indian laws." This inconsistency between what Shah and his party man had to say on the riots exposes the fault lines within the BJP: either Shah's words do not hold water amongst his party members—which is highly unlikely because Shah is the closest ally of PM Narendra Modi and known as the second most powerful man in the country—or his words are hollow, a show for the public, which is most likely the case. Meanwhile, Modi asked the people of Delhi to exercise restraint after a good 69 hours of the riots. One wonders what took him so long to react to the situation.

All this was long in the making. The repeated attacks on the students of Jamia Millia University by police and goons alike, and the ransacking of the university campus,

including the library, all in the name of quelling protests, were manifestations of the extreme hatred that the pro-CAA ultra nationalist elements harboured towards the liberals and the minorities, especially the Muslims.

The derogatory and inflammatory comments made by many BJP leaders over the last few months, often bordering on direct threats, had been warning signs of the chaos that had unfolded in Delhi over the last few days. Case in point: Karnataka's BJP MLA Somashekar Reddy had recently said, while threatening anti-CAA protesters and minorities during a speech, that "we are 80 percent and you are just 17 percent. Imagine what will happen to you if we turn against you." This is my warning to you (anti-CAA protesters), only 5 percent are here (at the event). If you create more trouble, if 100 percent of us come, what will happen to you?" Although he was later booked, such comments were not short in coming from various other BJP leaders.

Amit Shah in 2019 had himself termed Muslim migrants in India "infiltrators" and "termites" who, he said, the BJP government would pick up "one by one and throw them into the Bay of Bengal".

And the 17-year-old boy open firing at peaceful protesters in broad daylight in Delhi in January, that too

communal unrest in a city where people of different religions, castes and ethnicities have traditionally lived in peace? Who are provoking these incidents and why? And what can restore harmony in one of the celebrated cosmopolitan cities of the world?

To ask these questions, the government will need a strong political will.

India right now is facing crises at two levels: political and economic, and perhaps one is related to the other. The ongoing unrest is only going to add to the country's economic woes—it will affect investor confidence leading to lower investments in India; the persecution of minorities will have a negative impact on the morale of the affected workforce leading to lower productivity; the riots will affect the demand-supply equilibrium increasing inflation; and these are just a few of the basic outcomes that entail any political unrest, triggering a wider chain of events that slows down economic growth and development. With India's economic growth already slowed down, this will be highly undesirable for the people and the government.

As India's next-door neighbour sharing close historical ties with it, we watch with concern and apprehension as the country descends into chaos. We would like to see



A man walks past a vandalised shop following clashes between supporters and opponents of CAA in northeast Delhi.

PHOTO: AFP

after a Facebook live where he said he was about to make his "final journey", was a telling sign that storms were brewing over the horizon, ready to wreak havoc anytime.

It seems all these ominous signs that so clearly pointed towards an all-out conflict had been ignored by the government. Lack of foresight or perhaps an apathetic indifference had clouded the judgement of the people in power that they did not try to stop this in time. Or perhaps, they wanted to teach the relentless protesters a lesson after all?

But the democratic crisis of India has clearly been exposed before the world by the macabre spectacle that unfolded in full force last week. And although the government can now put the blame on "rogue elements" and move on with business as usual, it is time they asked themselves some essential questions: what is triggering

our neighbour flourish and prosper, and would like to strengthen our bilateral ties, be it economic or cultural.

But for India to steer its economy back towards the growth trajectory and to re-establish peace, the government must now demonstrate a strong political will to root out all the factors creating rift among the people. If it requires the BJP government to rethink its decision to implement the CAA and NRC across the country and revisit its approach towards Kashmir and Assam, then it must do so immediately, placing national interest above all else.

India is one of the world's oldest and largest democracies, and everything that can be done should be done to uphold the secular and pluralistic spirit of the nation.

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Bernie or Bust?

Democratic race for US presidency heats up



ASHFAQ SWAPAN

THE primary process for choosing a presidential candidate in the US can be inordinately long drawn and unwieldy. There is no dearth of narcissistic politicians who fancy their chances, and as in the 2016 Republican primary, this year's Democratic primary started off with an unwieldy gaggle of candidates. (The first debate, held way back in June last year, had a whopping 20—I kid you not—candidates.)

Here we are in February, and the slate of candidates is still far too big. In the recent debate in Charleston, South Carolina, seven candidates battled it out on February 25.

However, a clear trend is beginning to emerge. Vermont Sen. Bernie Sanders has won the most votes in the first three states: Iowa, New Hampshire and Nevada. While these victories are a minuscule part of the process, it drives the media narrative.

Sanders is beginning to rule the roost.

Earlier, former Vice President Joe Biden had thrown in his hat into the race somewhat late in the game. His main argument was "electability," a euphemism for avoiding someone too liberal or leftist.

In the beginning, Biden led in opinion polls. He is a nice enough guy, but an extraordinarily lacklustre candidate who seems out of touch with the current Democratic zeitgeist—which is assertively progressive. He is from an older era of smoke-filled rooms where party bigwigs anointed successors and political connections counted. His claims of bipartisan camaraderie seem particularly tone-deaf and naïve in an age of shrill partisanship; his policy stands and overall demeanour seem oddly vacuous. All of this translated into a precipitous performance in the first two primaries.

The undisputed, if unlikely, frontrunner in a fragmented primary electorate is Sanders, a proud, unabashed "democratic socialist." Sanders has two things going for him. For decades, he has braved the opprobrium of conventional wisdom and railed against the gross inequality of American society. The second, related to the first, is a solid base of devoted supporters he has drawn following his robust campaign for the Democratic nomination in 2016.

Sanders has gone after billionaire fat cats who control the Democratic Party's purse strings and, by extension, the party itself. He has proudly eschewed a staple in American national politics: expensive fundraisers. Instead, he has built a formidable engine of fundraising from grassroots supporters—in effect democratising one of the most plutocratic aspects of American politics.

Yet ideologue that he is, his support, while passionate, was limited in the beginning. Luckily for him, a bunch of centre-left candidates are jostling like crabs in a bucket, pulling each other down. South Bend, Indiana, Mayor Pete Buttigieg and Minnesota Sen. Amy Klobuchar are peeling away possible votes from Biden. Billionaire Mike Bloomberg, a former New York mayor and a late entrant

into the race, is throwing around hundreds of millions of dollars like confetti.

Then there is Massachusetts Sen. Elizabeth Warren, who is actually closer to Sanders ideologically than the centre left. She created waves initially, but has seen her support falter.

After close wins in Iowa and New Hampshire, Sander's decisive victory in Nevada has cemented his front-runner position. He has also silenced his critics with an overwhelming 46 percent vote, followed by a modest 20 percent by Biden. His grassroots campaigning has built a diverse supporter base, with massive Latino support for Tio (Uncle) Bernie.

Sanders is already rising in national polls, and he has overtaken Biden. The next round of elections will be critical. South Carolina hosts its primary on February 29. Then there is Super Tuesday on March 3, when 14 states representing 40 percent of the US population select their nominees. Biden could win South Carolina, but Super Tuesday might not be all that super for him. Polls show Sanders in a commanding position. The election

will sink him in Florida.

Local sensitivities matter. Texas Sen. Ted Cruz discovered it the hard way when he tried to wean Iowa farmers off ethanol subsidies during his presidential campaign in 2016. It went down like a lead balloon, and sank his campaign with it.

On the national level, Sanders' backing for Medicare for All, which will abolish private insurance, is giving establishment Democrats nightmares. Polls show Obamacare is popular and healthcare is a winning issue for Democrats, but voters are wary about Sanders' position.

Some of Sanders' critics clearly have an axe to grind. Andrew Sullivan's argument in *New York* magazine raising the spectre of Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn's disastrous defeat in recent UK politics is patently false: The problem for Labour wasn't Corbyn, it was Brexit, which divided the party right in the middle with young, urban supporters against it while rural and working-class supporters backing it.

Among members of Congress, there is a curious divergence. Several Democratic House members in more conservative constituencies are distancing themselves from Sanders, but *Politico* reported that Democratic senators seem okay with a possible Sanders candidacy. David Wasserman, a veteran Congressional district analyst, thinks even House Democrats have little to fear about a Sanders candidacy.

Political scientist Rachel Bitecofer, an election forecaster who shot into the limelight with her uncannily accurate prediction of the Democratic victory in the 2018 House elections, has already stuck her neck out and predicted a Democratic victory in the 2020 US presidential elections.

It is driven, she says, by a phenomenon political scientists call "negative partisanship." In a supreme twist of irony, it is Trump himself who will help Democrats win the presidency.

"The complacent voting ranks of 2016 who believed (at the energetic prompting of polls and pundit forecasts) that Donald Trump could never be president have been replaced by the terrified electorate of 2020," Bitecofer writes in *The New Republic*. "These voters know all too well the hazards of granting great power to a figure like Trump and view the president as a Terminator-like political figure who simply can't be stopped." She adds: "Trump has a basic math problem. As the electorate is currently constituted, there are more potential Democratic voters out there than there are Republican, and not just in California. There are more in the Midwest and in the Sun Belt. There are so many more in Virginia and Colorado that both states have moved off the swing state map...."

"The 2020 election will be a battle of the bases, with nothing less than the country's survival as a functional democracy on the ballot."

So, will Sanders have the last laugh after all?

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