

Dengue: Fact and Fiction

If each of us did our part say in April onwards this year, we would perhaps not have had this outbreak creating so much furor, so much misery and sufferings, so much panic, and so much wasteful expenditure of resources. Enough in good time is surely better than too little too late.

by Dr M Zakir Husain

THERE is a saying 'knowledge is everything', and knowledge is power, power to act. So what about Dengue — the current rage in Dhaka? Indeed dengue is here and is lapping up wide publicity: public reaction ranges from apathy to panic, from ordinary to bizarre. The print media has done a commendable job raising public awareness and voiced concern urging upon public and government to be alert and active. But there are limits and enthusiasm and energy sometimes need to be tempered with judicious balance based on hard facts and evidence. Let us get a few facts right.

Dengue is not a sudden visitor to Bangladesh. At least since 1964, dengue fever has come and gone attracting more passing interest. This time, few unfortunate deaths, including those in the elite group seem to have grabbed much attention. All of that is good; at least people are taking notice.

Dengue fever is ordinarily like any other fever caused by virus; common cold is also caused by virus. Dengue virus infection may not always cause fever or other symptoms; dengue fever is most common in older children and adults; dengue infection is rarely severe; the haemorrhagic (bleeding) type is most common amongst children under 15 years. Currently, dengue is endemic (naturally occurring) in almost half the world: the Aedes Aegypti mosquito population is even more widespread in the world. Dengue has shown gradual increase in at least 10 countries of South and South East Asia in the past years. According to WHO, despite its known incidence and gradual increase, governments in this region are not developing efficient control programmes using all means available for vector (carrier insect) control which must include heightened awareness of the public and its full participation in vector control and prevention. Due to increased urbanisation and deterioration of environment in human settlements, breeding of the carrier mosquito has increased. The mosquito has invaded urban, suburban, and even rural settings in many countries in the tropics.

No one should die of dengue even if it is of haemorrhagic (bleeding) type provided it is diagnosed and treated early. There is no drug to cure or vac-

cine to prevent. But there are things one can do to prevent spread of the virus. Dengue is mosquito-borne cycle of transmission. So if you break the cycle at any point, you stop infection and the most effective point to break the cycle is mosquito-to-man transmission.

To stop infection, attack the breeding places and conditions that favour breeding. These are simple and easy but only effective if done. Problem is, much of the activity stops immediately after the temporary scare is over. The same is likely to be seen in this current episode also. Breeding of Aedes mosquito will stop only if all of us care to keep houses and neighbourhoods clean, do not allow moist dark and water filled breeding places sheltered in pots and pans and the like to be there.

What the people can and should do can only be done by the people themselves, no one else can. By the same token, what the municipalities and government agencies can and should do must be done by those responsible. Unfortunately, all this noise, hurrying, blaming, finding excuses, and high profile photo opportunities are neither the correct response nor are they effective.

What is most unfortunate is that high publicity with little real action, dissemination of half truths and misinformation only helps certain sections of the trade and commerce make windfall profits. So in effect it is in their interest if there is panic without correct information to the public. Out of anxiety people have rushed to get their blood tested at great cost but to little, if any, real benefit for treatment. As if that is not enough, according to media stories, vaccines and drugs have been distributed 'free', while such claims are known to be scientifically untrue. Panic, anxiety, misinformation are a fatal combination that will be seized by those who wish to make profits.

Like most other outbreaks of insect borne infectious diseases, the current dengue outbreak will disappear in due course naturally. But what will surely not disappear is the potential if not near certain outbreak perhaps even more severe the next time around.

Are there lessons to be learnt? Indeed there are. First, we need to change our behaviour. At the private level

and at the government level. Privately, in homes and neighbourhoods in cities, towns, and villages people must take care and do their own part to prevent or reduce breeding places of mosquitoes. And this is better done throughout the year as a normal behaviour. Can our Imams include the subject of clean environment in their Friday Khutbas? Can the civil society and its leaders take it upon themselves by deeds rather than pontificating before television cameras?

Second, the civic governments can and should maintain efficient garbage removal and cleaning of drains and other collections of rain and sewer water throughout the year and not wake up in fits and passion only after the event.

Third, will the medical and allied professions give accurate information to patients and their families, remain knowledgeable and practice rational management of medical care specially in this case of dengue fever? The World Health Organisation, in addition to its continuing technical assistance to countries, has published numerous documents (at least 10) which disseminate valid technical information on the epidemiology, control, and clinical management of dengue and dengue haemorrhagic fever.

We shall never eliminate the offending mosquito, for mosquitoes must also live as part of the animal species on this planet, and this planet is not the sole property of the human race. But we can control the breeding of mosquitoes to such extent that it no longer poses a threat to public health. So the target is not to kill all mosquitoes to entirely eliminate that species from the earth.

In the context of the present outbreak of dengue fever, if each of us did our part say in April onwards this year, we would perhaps not have had this outbreak creating so much furor, so much misery and sufferings, so much panic, and so much wasteful expenditure of resources. Enough in good time is surely better than too little too late. One other thing: Dengue is no political football so let us keep it where it belongs — that is outside human settlements.

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Problems of Neoliberalism

The question now is how long will neo-liberalism last. For if the global system starts to break down, if more and more people suffer the consequences of a dearth of social services, if more and more powerlessness characterizes the political system, then crises will begin to emerge. At that point, a new felt need for alternatives will be a necessity.

by Edward W. Said

wealthy, although the middle and working classes also had to pay for the benefits that accrued to them (education, health, social security mainly). Many of these benefits were the result of an aggressive and well-organized labour union system, but there was also a prevailing idea that the large costs of health and education, for example, which the individual citizen could not afford to pay alone, should be subsidised by the corporate body of the welfare state. By the beginning of the '90s all this was not only under attack but had started to disappear.

First the labour unions were dissolved or broken (the British miners, and the American air traffic controllers). Privatization of major services like transportation, utilities, education, heavy industry followed, mainly in Europe. In the US, where except for utilities, most industries were already in private hands but prices were controlled by the government in the basic services sector, deregulation was the order of the day. This meant that the government would no longer play a role in making sure that the price of travel, basic commodities, health, education, as well as utilities such as gas and electricity, should stay within certain bounds.

The market was to be the new regulator which meant that costs and profits of individual airlines, hospitals, telephone companies, and later gas, electricity, and water were left to the private companies to set, frequently at considerable financial pain to the individual consumer. Soon even the postal

service and a major part of the prison system were also privatized and deregulated. In Britain, Thatcherism virtually destroyed the university system, since it viewed each institution/university as a supplier of learning, and hence like a business that in terms of profit and loss tended to be a loser, rather than a maker of money. Many teaching positions were slashed, with an extraordinary loss in morale and productivity, as thousands of professors and teachers looked for positions abroad.

With the collapse of socialism everywhere and the triumph of aggressive right-wing parties and policies such as those headed by Reagan and Thatcher, the old liberal Left in British Labour and the U.S. Democratic Party had two alternatives. One was to move closer to the successful policies of the Right. The other alternative was to choose an approach that would protect the old services but make them more efficient. Both the British New Labourites under Tony Blair and the American Democrats under Bill Clinton chose the former course (moving towards the Right), but skillfully kept some of the rhetoric of the past, pretending that many of the welfare services the state used to provide were there, albeit packaged differently.

That was simply false. Deregulation and privatization continued, with the result that the profit motive took over the public sector completely. Budgets for social welfare, health for the poor and aged, and schools were slashed; defence, law and order (i.e. police and prisons)

were fed more state money and/or privatized.

The major loss has been in democracy and social practices. For when the country is ruled by the market (in the US a period of great prosperity for the top half of the country, poverty for the bottom) and with the state in fact given over to the most powerful corporation and stock market businesses (symbolized by the tremendous growth in electronic business), there is less and less incentive for the individual citizen to participate in a system perceived as basically out of control so far as the ordinary population is concerned.

The price of this neoliberal system has been paid by the individual citizen who feels left out, powerless, alienated from a market place ruled by greed, immense transnational corporations, and a government at the mercy of the highest bidder. Thus elections are controlled not by the individual voter but by the major contributors, the media (who have an interest in maintaining the system), and the corporate sector.

What is most discouraging is the sense most people have that not only is there no other alternative, but this is the best system ever imagined, the triumph of the middle-class ideal, a liberal and humane democracy. Or, as Francis Fukuyama called it, the end of history. Inequities are simply swept out of sight. The degradation of the environment and the pauperization of huge patches of Asia, Africa and Latin America — the so-called South — are all secondary to corporate profits.

Worst of all is the loss of initiative that could bring significant change. There is hardly anyone left to challenge the idea that schools, for instance, should be run as profit-making enterprises, and that hospitals should offer service only to those who can pay prices set by pharmaceutical companies and hospital accountants. The disappearance of the welfare state means that no public agency exists to safeguard personal well-being for the weak, the disadvantaged, impoverished families, children, the handicapped, and the aged.

New liberalism speaks about opportunities as "free" and "equal" whereas for some reason you are not capable of staying ahead, you will sink. What has disappeared is the sense citizens need to have of entitlement — the right, guaranteed by the state, to health, to education, to shelter, and to democratic freedoms. If all for the individual citizen to become the prey of the globalized market, the future is deeply insecure for the large majority of people, despite the reassuring (but profoundly misleading) rhetoric of care and kindness spun out by the media managers and public relations experts who rule over public discourse.

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Lest We Forget

'Noman Sir' — a Teacher with a Difference

by Mizanur Rahman Shelley

TEENAGE is a many splendoured time. At that period of one's life, the varied, splashing colours of childhood's world steadily graduate into more organised and sophisticated hues of expanding experience. Encounters with new institutions and people open new horizons of learning and interaction. The wonder-eyed child of yesteryears is not totally gone. The mature and wiser youth is yet to take final shape. It is a time of breathtaking transition in which the first happy impressions come to last forever.

That was the juncture of our life when, after crossing the barrier of school, we entered college as students of the intermediate level. For us it was to serve as a hyphen between the school and the university, a pause pregnant with immense and virtually infinite possibilities.

The time was our middle teens, the years 1957 and 1958. The college was the Dhaka College — a reputed government institution with a rich and proud heritage extending at that time, over nearly three quarters of a century. In the late fifties the college had just moved to its new and sprawling campus near the New Market in Dhaka. The fresh smell of the new habitat felt as captivating as the flexibility and relative freedom of our newly emerging young adulthood. It was here at this turning point of our youthful beginning that one of the best things happened to us: we met Mr Mohammad Noman, teacher of English language and literature, who virtually initiated us into an enchanting world of romanticism, sensuousness and sensitivity manifest in the irresistible works of master-poets of English literature.

The first contact with Professor Noman was exhilarating. It is difficult to remember, now after a lapse of nearly four decades, the first English poet that "Noman sir" introduced to us. Was it Shelley, Keats, Coleridge, Wordsworth or Longfellow? It doesn't matter. He took us on an ever-exciting journey with the poems of each one of these master painters of resonant words charged with a significance that reached beyond themselves. He was a superb teacher and incomparably kind human being rolled into one. He was just about to be thirty when we first met. There was a blend of cheerful optimism and a lingering sadness that constituted the profile of his young but mature personality. Dark and well built, he often dressed

in impeccable white and wore his curly hair long at the back. His kindly face and alert eyes reflected the good natured man who proved to be a natural born teacher of writings that move minds at all time and at all climes.

It was a motley group of restless adolescents who met Professor Noman in the Dhaka

College during the years 1957 and 1958. Among us were urban and sophisticated "samples" from such Dhaka schools as St. Gregory's, Collegiate, Muslim High, and Armanitola. There were also those who took their first tentative steps into the premier college of the then provincial capital as they came from the four corners of East Bengal. English and Bengali were compulsory subjects at intermediate level for Arts and Science and Commerce students. The English language and literature classes tended to be big and crowded but these were also interesting and exciting especially when conducted by such fine and humane teachers as Professor Noman.

First year intermediate students in Dhaka College in 1957 were taken on a rewarding journey to the planet of poems by Professor Noman. There can be little doubt the encounter with him left an indelible imprint on those young minds. There is reason to trust that in a corner of their hearts those young men of yesteryears now fully mature leading citizens, have reserved a place which forever is poetry. And all that was possible because a wonderful human being and a skilful teacher called Noman met them and became a part of their embossed existence.

Professor Noman reflected the temper of his time. He was

born in the penultimate period of the British Raj in the subcontinent. The year was 1928. Barely two decades later, in 1947 the British departed and independent States of India and Pakistan emerged. Like others of his generation Professor Noman was live witness to the sanguinary partition of the subcontinent primarily along religious lines. He completed higher studies in what was then the East Bengal Province of the new born State of Pakistan. He took his Masters' degree from the Dhaka University in 1950 just before the climactic upsurge of the Bengalee in the then Pakistan in the form of historic movement for recognition of Bangla as State Language in 1952. As a Masters student and later young teacher of the Dhaka University, he was fully exposed to these significant historic developments. No doubt, the politico-social convulsions of the 40's and the 50's left deep and lasting impressions on his sensitive mind. These also led to the maturing of his personality as a teacher.

He stuck to the noble profession though he moved from the University to teaching in Government Colleges. Thus we got him as our teacher in the Dhaka College during 1957-58. Years later, he became the Principal of the Dhaka College and retired from government service in 1985. He became the Treasurer of the Jahangirnagar University and held charge as Vice Chancellor in 1988. During the pre-1971 days Professor Noman received the award for best teacher. He was also adorned with 21 February Medal (Ekushey Padak). These were recognitions that a dedicated and competent teacher like him richly deserved. The most striking trait of his noble character was the composure and calm that he maintained throughout his life. The traumatic partition of the subcontinent in 1947, the continuous struggle of the Bengalee nation of East Bengal against the internal colonial rulers of pre-1971 (Pakistan) and the War of Liberation of 1971 formed historic part of his experience.

The lessons Professor Noman imparted to us during our early youth reached beyond the demands of the curriculum. There was something in the techniques and style of his teaching which made poetry come alive. There was an intense sincerity in the content and mode of his teaching in the class which instantly and

deeply touched the minds and hearts of the taught. Whether it was Wordsworth's "Daffodils" or "Nutting" or Coleridge's "Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner" or Gray's "Elegy", he appeared to draw virtual pictures with all of splendidly appropriate words delivered with the incomparable sincerity of a committed teacher. His melodious recitation of these timeless poems still rings in our ears. They assumed the form of virtual songs, musical and profoundly moving. The deprecation of the orchard in "Nutting" which painted and saddened poet that also made us feel sad as Professor Noman put it across with mastery skill. The sad notes of unfulfilled promises struck a responsive chord in our young minds as he recited from Gray's "Elegy":

"Full many a gem of purest ray serene,
The dark unfathomed caves
Of ocean bear,
Full many a flower is born to blush unseen,
And waste their sweetness in
desert air."

The cruelty of the Ancient Mariner as he killed the Albatross, his subsequent sufferings and eventual redemption through learning to love the creatures of Almighty God—all came to vivid life as Professor Noman described, annotated and analysed in poetic language the meaning and significance of each happening so skilfully chronicled in rhyme by the magic of Coleridge's genius.

In essence the experience we shared with our teacher in the airy class rooms of Dhaka College during the late 50's was unique and unforgettable. In meeting Professor Noman we got rare opportunity to not only enlarge our knowledge but also to re-discover ourselves in a new and exciting world where words became pictures, and poems, masterly painting of a moving mosaic of all the colours of life. Our teacher, Professor Noman breathed his last on the 6th September 1996. He had the satisfaction of an active life well-lived. He is no more. But the magic key that he transmitted to us, his beloved students, will continue to be with us as a timeless gift with which we will keep on opening new doors of thrilling experience of the inner mind.

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Free East Timor Awaits Promised Pot of Gold

A year after voting for independence in the face of Indonesian threats and violence, the people of East Timor are waiting for the United Nations to match their grit and help aid political and economic development. International foot-dragging, reports a Gemini News Service correspondent, has led one senior UN official to resign in protest and brought many East Timorese close to losing patience.

Tom Fawthrop writes from Dili

THE spectacular sunset over Dili harbour has been obscured by a seafloor intrusion. Floating hotels loom over the landscape in the capital of East Timor, a country battered by violence a year ago.

The ships, the largest of which is named Hotel Olympia, have been chartered by the UN logistics department — a bureaucratic response to an accommodation crisis.

Hotels and housing, like everything else, were destroyed by the post-referendum terror campaign unleashed in September 1999 by a vengeful Indonesian military and its pro-Jakarta militias. More than 80,000 public buildings and houses were gutted by fires and vandalism — mostly by the militias under the direction of Indonesian Special Forces Kopassus.

The arrival of the floating Hotel Olympia is to many locals a symbol of UN waste and lack of consultation. But there were other blunders. Among the first commitments was to build an administrative structure to run the country, but this was dominated by international civil servants and bureaucrats with no attempt to accommodate in any positions of authority the East Timorese who would eventually administer the new country.

One of the sharpest criticisms of UN administration in East Timor came from within the UN itself. Professor Jarat Chopra resigned from the UN Transitional Authority in East Timor (UNTAET) in protest at what he called "UN Czars who carved out bureaucratic fiefdoms without any genuine concern for the mission and the people of East

East Timor



UN PEACEKEEPING FORCE

STRENGTH: 7,905 military, 1,268 civilian police, 179 military observers, 803 international civilian personnel, 1,848 local civilian staff

COUNTRIES: 48 in all, from Africa, North and South America, Asia, Middle East, Australia/Pacific and Europe

BUDGET FOR JULY 2000-JUNE 2001: \$584.1 million

UN MANDATE:

- provide security and keep law and order
- establish an effective administration
- help develop civil and social services
- coordinate delivery of humanitarian aid
- help build self-government

Timor. "Integral to repeated failures of peace missions is a hierarchical system that cannot be adapted to the novel mandates and the unique conditions of each deployment," wrote Professor Chopra in an article titled 'The UN's Kingdom of East Timor' in the Autumn 2000 issue of the journal of the International Institute for Strategic Studies.

East Timor marks the first time that the UN has been called upon to operate in a year zero scenario, where the infrastructure has been totally destroyed, and assume full sovereignty on behalf of the population for a transitional period.

Recent UN efforts in Cambodia and Kosovo have been quite different. In Cambodia the UN helped bring warring parties together and supervise a national election to ensure it was free and fair and see the return of democratic government.

In Kosovo, it was bringing humanitarian help and security to a territory that was technically

still under Yugoslav sovereignty. In East Timor, the experiment of running a UN transitional government for 2-3 years, until the local population is groomed for full independence, has been far less successful than the peacekeeping and humanitarian efforts there. Far more money has gone into peacekeeping than development.

Many disillusioned East Timorese are insisting on UNTAET's immediate departure and independence ahead of time. The UN's chief administrator in Dili, Sergio Vieira de Mello, has admitted some of the failures and has responded by introducing a policy of "Timorisation" — bringing local people into responsible positions.

Representatives of the Timorese Resistance Movement, CNRT, have been given four ministerial portfolios.

The newly-formed joint international and Timorese La'o Hatmuk (East Timor Institute for Reconstruction and Monitoring)

found that humanitarian relief had been fairly successful with good coordination between international NGOs and UN agencies to deliver food and shelter during the emergency period.

The new era of political and cultural rights has created an air of freedom unknown for almost 25 years. International donors have helped to launch two new newspapers — the Timor Post and Laleno (The Mirror) and three radio stations.

More than 60 Timorese NGOs are also operating in the new country where the first free elections will be held next year. But although East Timorese now breathe the air of political freedom, economic recovery is a long way off. After the long drawn out deprivation as Indonesia's 27th province, now it is foreigners who are ready to line their pockets. Foreign businesses are savouring the taste of quick money to be made from contracts to service the foreign aid community.

by Jim Davis

Garfield @

