

Defenceless against Dengue

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MIZANUR KHAN

Dengue threatens to strike Dhaka off guard as the health ministry, health department and Dhaka City Corporation (DCC) are in apparent inaction to fight a repeat of the deadly outbreak that killed 193 people on record since 2000.

Dengue that breaks out in May and rages full-blown in the three months since is still a major threat to public health but has been ignored over the last two years.

Entomologists say the population of aedes mosquito, carrier of dengue virus, increases in rains. "The prevalence of dengue peaks at the beginning and at the end of the monsoon," a DCC entomologist said.

On any anti-dengue measures, a DCC health official said: "Let the time come. We will start work when monsoon arrives."

"We have plans as we work on it every year. When the time comes, we will review our previous work and go for action," said Nasimus Seraj, a DCC mosquito control officer.

A DCC official, who declined to be named, said there has been no expert in the corporation since 2002 to lay out plans to head off mosquito menace. The chief health officer was suspended last year and the health officer was made an officer on special duty for what other officials said were political links to the previous government.

The DCC has no surveillance and runs short of adulticide and larvicide to spray in city wards. "Examining and purchasing chemicals take a lot of time a minimum of two months, but the DCC has not taken any decision yet," he said.

Entomologist Manzur A Chowdhury says no institution now works on dengue because of non-cooperation from different government bodies and information on aedes population of this year is not available.

"Without data I cannot predict whether there will be dengue outbreak this year. It was not serious last year, but that does not mean it will not make a comeback," he said.

The disease-control institute carried out small-scale surveys in some DCC wards in 2001 and 2002 in the wake of dengue outbreak. "No more survey has been done ever since," a source in the institute said.

Dengue turned epidemic in 2001 and 2002, but the ministry and DCC brushed aside the deadly disease as a minor problem.

About 12,000 people have been infected and hospitalised since 2000, the year dengue struck Bangladesh for the first time. According to the control room at the health department, 136 people died of dengue in 2000, 36 in 2001 and 21 in 2002 in Dhaka. How many people were killed last year could not be known.

"As temperature is high this year, the city may see intermittent rain, which fuels the breeding of aedes, an entomologist said.

Ashraful Huq, a resident of Agargaon, said: "I have not seen anyone here from the DCC to work on mosquito control this season, although the month of dengue is closing in on us."



Tightening grip on easy access to corrosive acid



From top left: A procession protesting acid attacks, and acid victim and (bottom) 'easily available' chemicals at scientific stores.

At the moment acid producers, distributors, carriers and consumers do not require license to conduct business. "Licensing will help restrict availability of acid and will minimise the risk of corrosive chemicals getting in to the wrong hands," said a member of the NACC

AVIK SANWAR RAHMAN

The government has finally woke up to tighten grip on the chemicals that have often been used as a tool for revenge attacks.

The National Acid Control Council (NACC) at a meeting last month finalised the draft of the Acid Control License Rules and it now awaits the law ministry's approval.

The NACC meeting was attended by representatives from the ministries of law, health and family planning, women and children affairs, Khan Foundation, Acid Survival Foundation (ASF) and chairman of the Department of Chemistry of Dhaka University and president of the National Press Club. Immediate past Home Minister Altaf Hossain Chowdhury chaired the meeting.

The license rules have been tightened to put an end to uncontrolled access to acid under the Acid Control Act 2002. At the moment acid producers, distributors, carriers and consumers do not require license to conduct business.

"Licensing will help restrict availability of acid and will minimise the risk of corrosive chemicals getting in to the wrong hands," said a member of the NACC.

According to the rules, the Ministry of Commerce will issue licence to importers, producers, distributors, wholesalers, retailers and carriers. Consumers will have to get their license from the District Commissioners.

The importers will have to pay Tk. one lakh, producers Tk. 1.5 lakh, commercial wholesalers Tk. 25 thousand and retailers Tk. five thousand for an Acid Control License. Consumers have to pay a permit fee of Tk. Three thousand for up to 10 litre acid and Tk. seven thousand if the quantity is more than 10 litres.

Sulphuric and nitric acids are usually used in attacks. As the jewellery and leather industries use these acids for washing, the criminals have easy access to them. It is also not difficult to procure acid from other intermediaries of this business.

"The rules may restrict availability but it will not eliminate the risk altogether because there are many clandestine businesses that use acid and don't even have a trade license," said Monira Rahman, executive director of ASF.

An ASF study has observed that people of all ages and sex are vulnerable to acid attacks in our country but women between 18 to 45 years of age constitute the highest number of reported victims.

An AFS research reported that acid attacks have seen a rise in recent times. In the year 2000, there were 222 victims while in 2003, the numbers shot up to 410. This year, 62 persons have already been attacked till March.

The members of the NACC demanded that those charged under the Acid Crime Control Act 2002, should face trial by the Speedy Trial Tribunal.

The council also launched the National Acid Control Fund for creating social awareness and treatment for the acid victims.

Flyover lacks mechanism to face earthquake

Deadline may be missed again as anti-quake system being installed

SULTANA RAHMAN

A moderate earthquake may destroy the flyover in Mohakhali, as builders have yet to install a shock transmission unit (STU) in the structure due for launch by June to cut traffic jam.

But the flyover runs the risk of missing the deadline as STU will not be set up by September to prevent damage in the event of an earthquake, said Dhaka Transport Coordination Board (DTCB) officials.

"If an earthquake jolts the city, it may destroy the flyover," a top DTCB official said, asking not to be named.

The DTCB asked the Roads and Highways Department (RHD), the implementing agency, and the consultant to install STU without delay. The RHD ordered STU two months ago to be purchased from the US at about Tk 70 lakh.

"If the RHD had asked for STU at least six months back, the flyover could have met the deadline," the official said.

Builders have completed 78.25 percent of construction of the first ever flyover, including two ramps and railings in a Tk 130 crore project that began on December 6, 2001.

DTCB Executive Director Quamrul Islam Siddiqui said: "We have asked the consultant and the RHD to minimise the delay and keep the traffic flow uninterrupted until STU is installed."

"A total of 400 segments have been complete. With the monsoon passing by, the fixing of other segments will gain speed," he said.

The RHD blamed the failure to meet the deadline on the DTCB. "STU is generally installed after construction is over and more than 20 percent of the work is incomplete which is not RHD's fault," a high official of the project said, declining to be named.

The flyover stretching 1.01km from Shaheen College is expected to reduce traffic snarl-ups on the Airport Road.

The construction work is seriously hampering traffic movement on the important road at rush hour. Although authorities are allowing traffic movement through the cantonment area, gridlock is commonplace in Mohakhali.

It is alleged that maintenance of the diversion roads around the flyover has been neglected, adding to inconvenience of people.

