

Deluge fallout turns dengue full-blown

SULTANA RAHMAN

Dengue turns full-blown in Dhaka, infecting 66 people a day on average in the wake of floodwater run-off as the deluge released a disease epidemic.

As many as 1,540 people have been taken ill with dengue this monsoon dengue-breeding season, according to the health directorate control room.

Apart from the vector of dengue, Aedes mosquito, Culex mosquitoes have also increased because of stagnant floodwaters, turning the city into a virtual mosquito-breeding ground.

Dhaka City Corporation stopped

spraying insecticide only from July 25 to August 3 and a huge volume of rain and floodwaters forced the DCC to suspend its anti-mosquito drive.

"Mosquitoes bite not only at night, but in the day as well," said Mazharul Islam, a Basabo resident, adding: "We can't go out because of filthy floodwaters, nor can we stay at home because of the mosquito menace."

Like Islam, many residents of Khilgaon, Sabujbagh, Madartek, Badda, Gulshan, Banani and Dhanmondi accused the DCC of inactivity. Last week, a ward commissioner in Demra, also blamed the corporation in public for the mosquito menace.

"Floods added to surface water and provided a breeding ground for

mosquitoes. We will take a large-scale action to control the breeding of mosquitoes," said DCC Chief Health Officer Azizul Hoque.

The deadly dengue has landed at least 300 people in the city's hospitals and clinics for treatment and killed nine since July 15.

Two-year-old Dyuti diagnosed with dengue at Lab Aid was crying in pain when she was taken to the diagnostic centre for blood test for the fifth time. Her parents were also crying and asked the lab assistant not to inject her again -- a common scene at diagnostic centres.

"She (Dyuti) cannot stand it," said Dyuti's mother Bilkis, tears rolling down her cheeks.

Ibne Sina, another diagnostic centre, found 1,073 people infected

with acute dengue from early July to August 4, Lab Aid diagnosed 1,309, Popular Diagnostic Centre 1,114 and Medinova 986.

"People are now aware of dengue and rush to hospital in the early stage of infection," said Dr Harunor Rashid of Dhaka Medical College Hospital.

Despite the alarming situation, the DCC remains silent on mosquito control, experts alleged, pointing to the need for a survey on aedes population.

The health directorate records show that the number of people infected with dengue was 486 with 10 deaths last year and 6,132 people were infected in 2002 and 58 of them died.



A health worker distributes medicines in relief among flood victims in Khilgaon, but not water-purifying tablets brand-named Halotab as their prices soared high.

Safe water goes beyond easy reach

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The prices of water purifying tablets shot up three times the normal as the demand for the medicine soared high because of large-scale water contamination by floods.

People in the flood-ravaged areas have been advised to drink water using water-purifying tablets, but their only manufacturer -- Sonar Laboratories -- was forced to stop its production last month because of complications about raw material import and expiry of import permission.

As a result, the prices of tablets brand-named Halotab, still available in stockpile, have increased from Tk 41.32 to Tk 120 a box of 100 in foil-strips.

"We could not open a letter of credit

from any commercial bank as we had a banking problem. Our import permission from the Drug Administration for raw material expired on June 30 to make things worse," Dr MA Obaidah, managing director of the pharmaceuticals company.

"However, we received permission to import the raw material -- Halazone -- on July 22," he said.

"A shipment of 100 kilograms of the raw material was to arrive by air from India on August 1, but we did not receive the consignment for unknown reasons. Once we get it, we can manufacture 50 lakh tablets in seven days," Dr Obaidah said.

The company has increased its manufacture of Halodrop, a brand of liquid water-purifying agent, each priced at Tk 10 a 10-millilitre container.

Another manufacturer of liquid agent

that kills bacteria in contaminated drinking water has also increased its production because of high demand.

The product brand-named -- Clotech made by Global Heavy Chemicals -- is now available in plastic containers priced at Tk 52 a two-litre bottle and Tk 97 a four-litre bottle.

The manufacturer claims that 16 drops of the liquid in five litres of pond or open surface water can kill any bacteria.

"Before adding the liquid, users must remove suspended particles from water. It is safe and convenient," said Md Kamruzzaman, chief coordinator of Global Heavy Chemicals. "We have outlets in 17 greater districts and are ready to face any consumer demand."

The crisis of safe drinking water turned severe, as most tubewells have been inundated.

Uncovered death traps

Manholes have remained uncovered for long posing danger as neither the DCC or Wasa takes responsibility in closing them. Zonal offices are expected to supervise the roads, alleys manholes

SABRINA KARIM MURSHED

City dwellers in flood-affected areas find themselves exposed to the threat of major accidents, as many uncovered manholes on the roads have gone underwater making it virtually impossible for vehicles and pedestrians to spot them.

In places where the water level is high enough to travel by boat, the danger is minimal. But it is very risky in areas where motorised vehicles and especially rickshaws are moving in knee-deep water. There have been incidents where the tyres or wheels have fallen awkwardly into a gaping manhole and turned the vehicle off-balance causing injury to the people on board.

Even when there is no flood, the uncovered manholes remain a constant cause for concern. On June 23 this year, a street urchin in Arambagh fell into one such manhole and died. His elder brother jumped after him only for his dead body to be retrieved later by fire brigade personnel. The first boy was never found as he was washed away.

Uncovered manholes are more prevalent in the old part of the city. Roads in Lalbagh, Nawabpur, Chawkbazar, Moulvibazar, Begumbazar, Mitford, Islampur, Patuati, Sadarghat, Bangshal, Sikkatuli, Nimali, Aga Sadek Lane and Jimkhana are pestered with holes without covers. Open manholes can also be spotted in major roads and alleys all around the capital.

In most cases, thieves and drug addicts who sell to scrape metal traders, steal the iron tops of manholes in the dead of night. With the increase in the number of drug users over last few years, stealing of manhole covers has also seen a rise.

"Drug addicts will sell a manhole top for a very small sum of money. A cover costs us around Tk 2,000. Thieves sell it for about Tk 200," said S.D.M. Kamrul Alam Chowdhury, superintendent

engineer of drainage circle of Dhaka Water and Sewage Authority (Dhaka WASA).

"WASA has around 1,200 manholes in its 240-kilometer long drainage line in the city. A manhole exists in every 20 metres. But their covers are often stolen and sometimes we find it difficult to replace them as the lids are not always readily available," Alam added.

Sewage section of Dhaka WASA has nearly 42,000 manholes with each of its six zonal areas having around 7,000.

"Manholes remain uncovered sometimes as the metal lids are stolen. But we try to replace them as early as possible. A large number of manholes belong to the Dhaka City Corporation (DCC) but people think WASA is responsible for them," claimed Syed Kamrul Ahsan,

superintendent engineer of sewage section of WASA. He cited Shantibagh as an example where there are some 42 uncovered manholes of the DCC.

DCC authorities said that there were no specific departments to look after manholes but every zonal office supervises roads and alleys and manholes in their respective areas.

Abul Hasnat, executive engineer of DCC zone six said they regularly monitor the area to see the conditions of the roads and the manholes. He however admitted that it becomes hard for them to replace the missing and damaged manhole covers due to fund shortage.

"The zonal offices get only Tk three or four lakhs annually for all sorts of maintenance," he said.

WASA officials said the manhole

covers, which are made of cast iron, had resale value and that is why thieves steal them.

"They even steal the iron rods inside the RCC (Reinforced Cement Concrete) covers," said one of the officials.

WASA is now planning to make covers with 'Ducktile cast iron' which does not have any resale value. The superintendent engineer of sewage section said they have already made spheroid carbon cover for 18 manholes as part of a pilot project.

"If it provides a solution to the stealing, then we could introduce it on a larger scale," said Kamrul Ahsan. He also informed that such manhole covers would cost more but they would go for it considering the safety of the residents.



Open manholes in major roads and alleys pose danger to pedestrians and vehicles as well.



HELPING THE SMALL WAY

Floodwater has begun to recede but people affected by the floods still need a lot of assistance to get back to normal life. Lack of drinking water, food and medicine and devastation of their homes still haunt them. Relief work is on, although inadequate. Students of the Institute of Fine Arts stretched their hands to help victims collecting funds through sales of their paintings. The students are also preparing oral saline for them.



SYED ZAKIR HOSSAIN