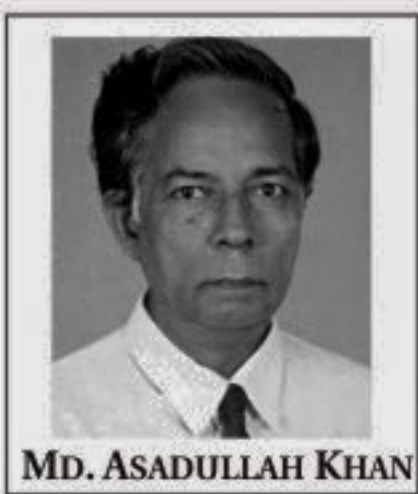


BITTER TRUTH

# Climate change influences disease pattern



Md. ASADULLAH KHAN

**H**EAVING seas, scorching summers, dying forests and watery end to the coastal areas are some of the penalties people around the globe have to pay, scientists believe, for failing to do something about global warming fueling climate change in the last one decade. Climate change will have wide-ranging and mostly

damaging impacts on health, warns Dr. Paul Epstein, an epidemiologist in the Harvard School of Public Health and one of the lead authors of the upcoming WHO study entitled "Human health and climate change."

According to Epstein, climate change could have an impact on health in three major ways: (a) creating conditions conducive to outbreaks of infectious diseases (b) increasing the potential for transmission for vector-borne diseases (c) hindering the future control of disease. There are indications, he notes, that this disturbing change has already begun.

According to him, extreme weather brings about a drastic increase in pests and rodents and hence the spread of diseases. Climate restricts the range of infectious diseases, while weather affects the timing and intensity of outbreaks. Rates of insect biting and the maturation of micro-organisms within them are temperature-dependent and both rates increase when the air warms.

He says fossil records indicate that when changes in climate occurs, insects shift range far more rapidly than do grasses, shrubs and forests. There is a strong link between climate change and the increase of pests. Heavy rains produce insect-breeding sites, driving rodents from burrows and contaminating clean water systems.

Epstein claims that global warming is predicted to bring warmer winters to many places, thereby increasing the potential for transmission of vector-borne diseases at higher altitudes. Nearly half the world's population is infected by vector-borne diseases, resulting in high morbidity and mortality. Weather affects vector population dynamics and disease transmission with temperature and humidity as key variables.

Another major conclusion made by Epstein is that the combination of climate change and environmental degradation can create ideal conditions for the emergence, resurgence and spread of infectious diseases, which kill more than 20 million people annually. Increased climate change has altered the functional balance among predators and prey, which is important for controlling the proliferation of pests and pathogens. Warmer and some-

times wetter weather may already be extending the range of infectious diseases beyond regions where they are endemic. The World Health Organisation, 1996 report states that at least 30 infectious diseases new to medicine have emerged in the past 20 years.

Dengue fever is now considered the most widespread viral infection transmitted to humans by insects, whether measured in terms of the number of infections or the number of deaths. Most of the areas of increased potential risk were predicted to be temperate zones that currently border on endemic zones. These fringe areas represent places where humans and the primary carrier, the mosquito "Aedes aegypti" often coexist but where lower temperatures now limit disease transmission.

Jonathan Patz, medical researcher from the John Hopkins School of Public Health, said: "Since inhabitants of these border regions would lack immunity from past exposures, dengue fever transmission among these new populations could be extensive." Climate conditions may contribute to the spread and geographic distribution of dengue fever, as warming trends shift vector and disease distribution to wider latitudes.

Dengue is a disease of urbanisation and human travel. According to Suchitra Nimnannitya, a Thai specialist on the disease, Aedes aegypti is a man-made mosquito. It breeds in the water in plastic or rubber or



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*In Bangladesh today, there is a total breakdown of our health system with abject lack of concern for the people.*

matters worse for themselves by the changes they make in their local environment. Destruction of habitat worldwide is reducing predator populations and global warming may be increasing the ability of many disease vectors to survive and reproduce. A common denominator in each case is that abnormal weather had caused malnutrition, weakened animal immune systems and spurred the reproduction of viruses. Epstein also notes that once ordinarily benign microbes invade weakened animals, they can become sufficiently deadly to invade healthy populations. The real threat for people may not be a single disease, but armies of emergent microbes raising havoc among a host of creations.

With more than 1,100 persons hospitalised till September 19, the number of attacks in Dhaka has exceeded all previous records. The directorate of health

services says that the actual number of attacks and deaths far exceed the official reports available now. Dhaka is close to being, what is popularly called, a "hot zone" -- ground zero in an epidemic.

Among vector borne diseases, dengue is second only to malaria in the number of people affected. Piped water systems, door and window screens, air conditioning and spraying larvicide in ditches and drains decrease the probability of the mosquitoes feeding on humans and the transmission of dengue.

After the '70s, several factors have made our country a nursery of microbes -- dangerous complacency arising from the worldwide eradication of smallpox in 1980, the misuse of antibiotics, major alterations and intervention in the country's environment, population explosion, growing urbanisation, breakdown in sanitation facilities and most prominently lack of surveillance network for new diseases.

In Bangladesh today, there is a total breakdown of our health system with abject lack of concern for the people. There is a complete lack of surveillance network or monitoring of diseases emerging as threat to human health. We only wake up from our deep slumber when a disease in the form of an epidemic strikes us. The government also needs to realise the effect of developmental activities on disease prevalence. Besides, cities and towns need clean-up. Also needed are rapid response units -- the medical equivalent of commandos -- that could handle outbreaks of the nature Dhaka is experiencing now.

Dengue is a scourge that has no vaccine and no drug, and it can't be checked by spraying larvicide alone. It is essential to fight this scourge on a war footing. Other than taking up mosquito control measures, DCC, the health ministry and residents must go for community elimination of the breeding sites.

With thousands of demoralised corporation staff and workers never confronting such a delicate situation, the DCC mayor has to rise to the occasion. People do not like to hear the DCC sanitation department chief saying that his workers are too old to carry the spray machine from one place to another, as reported in the Prothom Alo on September 19.

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Correction

In the article by Shah Husain Imam, titled "Bangladesh should feel sought after," which appeared on Sept. 23, the first sentence referring to Moni Shankar Aiyar should read "... it is in India's interest..." Error is regretted.

# Of matriarchs and their franchises

OMAR CHOWDHURY

**G**ET rich quick. Money, power, status, recognition, fame -- you can achieve success beyond your wildest dreams. All you have to do is join one of the two main political franchises in Bangladesh -- AL or BNP.

Franchise generally refers to a business method that involves rights or privileges such as sharing of a brand and central management. Franchise also refers to suffrage or the civil right to vote. A political franchise is the combination of the two, i.e. a brand (such as Bangabandhu or Zia) under central management that has a vote bank sufficient to form an elected government.

It does not matter which franchise you join (AL or BNP) because our two main political parties share the same ideology -- to grab and hold on to power at any cost and in the process reap the benefits.

Winner takes all -- no party does politics to play a constructive role in the opposition. That is why no party has ever had two consecutive terms in office, thereby alternating power every 5 years, so both parties get a turn! The franchise controls the national budget (Tk.1,60,000 crore/year) and keeps a portion for themselves. We are not one of the most corrupt nations in the world by accident.

The concept of antitrust, whereby elected representatives and government employees are prohibited from using their position for personal benefit and unfair competition, does not exist in Bangladesh. I cannot think of any business that is as lucrative or offers such immense benefits as politics in Bangladesh. And the benefits are many -- oil and gas, lakeside plots in Gulshan (or anywhere else), bank/insurance/telecom licenses, stock market "privileges," power plants and electric poles.

A former general secretary of the ruling party was granted a bank license and is now chairman of a major bank. Most private commercial banks and insurance companies are owned by former MPs and ministers. The government is in the process of issuing licenses for new banks and insurance companies -- which AL cronies will get lucky this time?

The "middle management" reaps the usual benefits of *tenderbaji*, *chandabaji* and *shontrashi* (racketeering, extortion and terrorism). During BNP's last tenure in office, so much black money had flooded the economy that they allowed investment (money whitening) in non-productive sectors like real estate and luxury cars, driving up real estate prices tenfold. The dream of owning a home in Dhaka city is now practically out of reach of most honest, tax paying citizens.

So what is the catch? How can you get a piece of the pie? The first step is to seek the party's nomination from your home district in the next national parliamentary elections. You should have enough money to finance your election expenses and "manage" the party's grassroots level leaders in your constituency.

All decisions regarding party nominations are taken at the very top by the matriarchs of their respective parties -- Sheikh Hasina in AL

and Khaleda Zia in BNP. The competition is stiff and very feudal, and first preference is given to blood relatives, then to relatives through marriage, then friends, then friends of friends, etc, etc. So definitely, you should fit into one of those categories or forget about it, unless you can make an insane contribution to the party fund.

Assuming that you do get the nomination and get elected to parliament, you are constitutionally forbidden from voicing your own opinion. You can abuse the other party with no holds barred, but you can only praise your *netri* (matriarch) and worship the ground she walks on and the grave(s) of her relatives. Any deviation from the same will result in instant expulsion from the party and loss of your seat in parliament. Or, if you happen to be president of Bangladesh, you will be impeached or compelled to resign. Even presidents must do as they are told.

In the last national elections, 90% of nominations were given to businessmen by both AL and BNP. Most of our elected representatives in parliament are businessmen who think of their own interests and do as they are told. Not a single MP of the ruling party stood up in Parliament to protest that the caretaker issue should have been resolved through consensus, instead of unilaterally plunging our fragile democracy into crisis. Neither did they dare to protest the hounding of our only Nobel Laureate Dr. Yunus as being against our national interest, instead they supported it and some even went as far as stating that Sheikh Hasina deserved the Nobel more than Yunus!

BNP's debacle in the last national elections, where they lost a two-third majority in parliament and now have a 10% minority, is widely blamed on Khaleda Zia, her sons and the unbridled corruption of Hawa Bhaban. But even the so called "reformists" within her party did not dare suggest a change in leadership, because we all know that without Khaleda Zia, the party would disintegrate and cease to exist.

As we enter the second half of AL's term in office, I have a sense of foreboding with events unfolding in the same way as 2006 leading up to 1/11. This time the stakes are higher and our economy is more susceptible to prolonged civil unrest. The people are fed up with political bickering and powerless to do anything about it. But, unlike the Arab Spring, the people will not revolt because this is a democracy, and as dysfunctional as it may be, the only way out is to exercise our democratic rights, voice our discontent, form new political parties and elect the right leaders.

I have a dream -- I dream that one day we Bangladeshis will elect brave men to our national parliament; men of integrity, ethics and morals, capable, honest and dedicated men (or women) who will protect and serve our collective interest, rather than the self-serving businessmen in our present parliament. Call me a dreamer, but you can be sure that the matriarchs will not be around forever, then what will become of their franchise?

The writer is a Chemical Engineer.

# Babies are to be banned from parts of planes!



Nury Vittachi

**B**ABIES are to be banned from parts of planes, starting with first class cabins, the news bulletin said.

I was shocked. Huh? You mean they weren't before?

I wish I'd known. I'd have been much more relaxed about sending my kids to toddle to the front of the plane to use their cuteness to steal bags of cashew nuts.

And think of the threats I could have used against the kids themselves! "You're definitely not getting a first class flat-bed seat and free airline logo pajamas if you don't eat ALL your pureed cauliflower."

My son, a world-class hedonist, would have wolfed down the loathed cauliflower puree in an instant.

Of course, I would never have actually paid for a first class seat for him. They're for people with more money than sense. They think it's smart to pay thousands of dollars for "free" extra leg room and a "free" food upgrade.

Do the math! The \$10,000 premium each first class traveler wastes on a typical flight from Asia to London could instead go to genuinely worthy causes, such as the top items on my wish list: a gym membership I'll never use, a designer man-bag, and a Kleenex used by Scarlet Johansson.

But on reflection, I decided that the babies ban started by Malaysia Airlines and expected to spread fast, is good news.

It means that Angelina Jolie and her six kids will be banished to the cheaper seats. I am very good at soothing crying babes, and I will be more than happy to offer excessive amounts of comfort, tear-drying and cuddles. I may even offer such services to her children, too.

Still, let's be aware that this is part of a terrifying global crackdown on families. The Layana Resort in Thailand bans children. The Paradise Bay Island Eco Resort in Australia forbids guests under 15. You have to be 18 to stay at The Contiki Resort in Bali. Kids are banned at several restaurants at the Hong Kong Country Club.

Karuna and son  
This subject was brought to my attention by father-of-two Karuna Menon, who said: "We should present a counter-argument that having children around increases the production of certain chemicals in the brain. A Japanese ringtone company produced scientific results that proved women's breasts grew bigger when regularly exposed to the sounds of a baby crying."

Note to self: Take video camera into mother-and-toddler group to gather evidence.

Note to self 2: Maybe not.  
Why the crackdown? Adweek magazine says businesses are providing child-free environments in response to demands from the growing number of couples who are childless-by-choice.

Unfair! Why should people who have child-free daily lives get even more of it on holidays?

Clearly the only fair system would be for DINKS (dual-income-no-kids) to look after the children of MKEDs (many-kids-expanding-deficit) while we take breaks we actually need.

But if this comes to pass, make sure you go to a no-kids resort. Otherwise your eyes will alight on someone else's brats, and you'll miss your own ones so badly that you'll fly straight home.

And all the you'll be wishing that you had one of the kids with you, so she could toddle into first class and steal the cashews for you. I speak from experience.

Over to you. Should kids be limited to the cheap seats on aircraft? Should there be kid-free hotels and restaurants? Should families protest?

Visit the writer at www.vittachi.com