

Chikungunya outbreak in Dhaka

Stop the blame game and act!

THE health minister has finally spoken on the chikungunya outbreak that has affected large parts of the city for the last two months. According to a report published in this paper, people living in 23 areas of the city are highly prone to catch the disease.

Two things are apparent from the minister's statement. Firstly, he would like to assure us that the incidence of the disease has not taken an epidemic proportion. Secondly, he places the blame squarely on the two city corporations for their failure to eradicate the mosquito breeding grounds which is the major cause of the outbreak.

It is futile to delve into semantics; the fact is that the disease has affected a large number of people, in the capital, and relevant agencies must bring to bear all coordinated resources to combat it, epidemic or not. We feel that it was his bounden duty as the health minister to have been more proactive in directing the DCCs in undertaking appropriate measures to combat the disease from the initial stages. In any case chikunguniya has affected us for the first time and the health ministry should have acted more promptly on its own to prevent its onset in the first place.

As for the awareness programme, we feel that it has been at best perfunctory, and there should be more sustained multi-pronged effort in this regard.

We feel that this kind of blame game does not help. In the eyes of citizens, both the city corporations and the minister for health should share the responsibility equally and, instead of playing the blame game, start acting in a coherent manner to stem the attack of this very debilitating illness.

2,700 trees to be cut down!

Madness in the name of infrastructure

FOR some odd reason, the Roads and Highways Department (RHD) in Jessore has come to the conclusion that the best way to free up space to widen the Benapole-Jessore highway is to cut down 2,700 old trees. The Executive Committee of the National Economic Council (Ecneec) in March approved the project which is going to cost taxpayers a mammoth sum of Tk 323 crore.

At a time when other countries are adopting stronger environmental policies and wide-scale campaigns to plant more trees, we seem to be doing the exact opposite. Of course this is not the first time that such a preposterous proposal has been made. At the beginning of this year, the government decided to cut down over 13,000 trees to implement a gas transmission project.

While the expansion of highways is crucial for the improvement of road infrastructure, we fail to understand how the RHD has come to the decision of cutting down such a vast number of trees—many of which are century-old. Aside from their historical value and beautification purposes, these trees are a source of respite amid the choking air pollution plaguing the country. Furthermore, such tree-cutting sprees say a lot about our commitment, or a lack thereof, to combating our rising carbon footprint.

The RHD seriously needs to reconsider its decision of felling such a huge number of trees and explore other ways to widen the highway because the ramifications of such an act are countless. Uprooting trees to make way for a project is the easy way out and this trend of thoughtlessly chopping down trees in the name of development needs to end.

LETTERS
TO THE EDITOR

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Why do we have the police?

This newspaper, on July 11, 2017, reported that a journalist in Rajshahi was brutally attacked by Chhatra League men for taking snapshots of a bus vandalised by BCL men. The most alarming part is that the policemen present at the spot didn't protect him. They came to send him to the hospital after he had already been beaten up. It is a troubling revelation of how scared our administration is of the country's politically-backed student wings to take measures against them.

I strongly condemn this attack. Why do we have the police? Are they appointed to protect political miscreants, or to serve the people of this country? The police must be more accountable for our security. They should have to answer to the authorities if they fail to take actions against anarchy.

Md. Abdullah Al Hadee
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Make English interesting for learners


English is both an important tool for global communication and a great source of knowledge through its vast store of literature. But most students these days try to learn the language only to pass an examination. The current system of teaching English is inefficient - there is no literature in the syllabi at schools and colleges, and the teachers aren't competent enough. Students are therefore not interested in learning English for its own sake; hence the low quality of grammar and communication skills.

In my opinion, the English syllabi should include literature in the first paper and grammar and communications in the second paper. I hope that the authorities will take proper steps regarding this issue.

Biplob, Faridpur

The ouster of ISIL from Mosul

STRATEGICALLY
SPEAKING


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IT is the considered opinion of scholars and observers of terrorism and extremism that the ISIL capture of Mosul was the most significant development related to an

extremist organisation after the cataclysmic event of 9/11. Among several other things, it had proved, and which must be taken cognisance of in addressing this phenomenon, that the extermination of extremist leaders, like al-Awlaki, bin Laden and al-Zarqawi, has done little to stem the violence and spread of the distorted idea of the IS in Europe and the West, the middle East, South and South East Asia.

In fact extremist attacks had intensified, and particularly after the capture of Mosul in June 2014; according to one scholar, 5,000 people fell victim in a single month, to actions by extremist groups claiming affiliation to the IS or al-Qaeda, in places ranging from Paris to Peshawar and to a distant village in Nigeria. In fact 2014 was the most bloody in terms of casualties resulting from terror attacks. According to the then US Director of National Intelligence, James Clapper, 30,000 people were killed in extremist attacks, as per the statistics.

Mosul was not an opportunity target of the IS. Reportedly, a good deal of preparatory work had taken place before a full-scale attack was launched in June 2014. And the impact of the capture of Mosul, short-lived the IS control on it may have been, has been very far-reaching too, something that has affected countries in the West as well as the East, and Bangladesh is a direct sufferer. It offered the aspirants to a so-called Caliphate an opportunity to fulfil that hope. If there have been swelling in the ranks of the IS since 2014, it is because these people who were looking for a 'liberated area' found ways and means to join the IS, Bangladesh being a contributor too.

Given the strategic importance of Mosul, it being a part of the Sunni belt of Iraq, and the fact that the city had



Smoke billows as Iraqi forces attack Mosul airport during an offensive against ISIL on February 23, 2017.

PHOTO: AFP

come briefly under the pro-Saddam forces in 2004, it was surprising that the city was taken over by the ISIL in the very first year that it announced its emergence after severing its umbilical connection with al-Qaeda, without much effort, in fact in four days only.

And the recapture of Mosul by the Iraqi and the coalition forces last week was in some ways as remarkable as its capitulation in the hands of the IS almost three years ago to the day in June 2014. What had surprised the international community in June 2014, as much as it must have the Iraqi government forces, was the celerity with which a non-state actor, an extremist terrorist organisation, had run through the city with only several hundred of its cadres against an organised force of nearly 25,000 fairly well armed Iraqi forces. This is an aspect which I am sure the students of warfare, particularly of revolutionary and counter revolutionary warfare (R&CRW), will study minutely, as they would also of the IS strategy to occupy a vast swath of land at the very

seminal stages of their existence.

If the rapidity of the IS takeover of Mosul had surprised us then, the laborious and painstaking progress of the operation to capture the same city, the second largest in Iraq, by the government forces has surprised us equally now. The strength of the defender vis-à-vis the attacker was, in both instances, very lopsided in ratio. Fighting in built up area (FIBUA) is a completely different ballgame where the traditional ratio between the defender and attacker does not hold good. However, in both the instances the Iraqi forces had the backing of the US airpower, which once again proves the military truth that airpower in FIBUA is of no consequence in the outcome of the battle except that it kills innocent people, a fact so much in evidence in the 8-month long battle for Mosul. As the survivors count their dead, newspaper reports inform us that people in Mosul are suffering from the after effect of aerial bombing, the intensity of which was out quite disproportionate to the

number of ISIS fighters on the ground.

The natural question that springs up in one's mind about the Mosul episode is, why has the IS motto of "Remain and Expand" not been followed in this instance. More so, given the background work that went behind the IS assault on, and capture of, Mosul three years ago, despite the infringement of the teachings of the classical text on R&CRW, by a terrorist organisation going for capturing and holding of ground in the very seminal stages of its life, one wonders whether there is validity in the comments that, "much of what has happened since late 2016 can be seen as an exercise in propaganda—expensive, wasteful propaganda."

There was a rationale for the ISIL to go for acquiring real estate to justify its name. The question is, is that rationale no longer extant? If so what does it signify to the rest of the world which is trying to tackle the IS?

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PROJECT ■ SYNDICATE

Asia's unhappy anniversary


BARRY
EICHENGREEN

THIS month marks the 20th anniversary of the Asian financial crisis—or, more precisely, of the event that triggered the crisis: the devaluation of Thailand's baht.

While such anniversaries are not exactly cause for celebration, they at least afford an opportunity to look back and examine what has changed—and, no less important, what hasn't.

The causes of the crisis were contested at the time, and they remain contested to

viewpoints. The Bank of Thailand's published balance sheet wildly exaggerated its available foreign-exchange reserves—hardly a shining example of financial transparency. Foreign speculators actively bet against the baht, and the short sellers included not just hedge funds but also investment banks, including one that was simultaneously advising the Thai government on how to defend its currency. And when counselling Asian countries on how to manage the crisis, the IMF erred—not for the last time, it should be noted—in the direction of too much fiscal austerity.

At a more fundamental level, the crisis reflected the mismatch between Asia's historic growth model and its current circumstances. That model emphasised

on foreign borrowing, their growth model neglected the risks.

External forces, meanwhile, compounded the problem. South Korea's admission to the OECD required its government to dismantle capital controls, exposing the economy to inflows of short-term "hot money." More generally, countries felt pressure from the IMF and the US Treasury to remove capital-flow restrictions, which magnified the risks and made maintaining pegged exchange rates still more problematic.

This sketch of the crisis highlights how much has changed over the subsequent 20 years.

For starters, the crisis countries have ratcheted down their investment rates and growth expectations to sustainable

finance, are now running surpluses. Running surpluses has helped them accumulate foreign-exchange reserves, which serve as a form of insurance.

Fourth, Asian countries are now working together to ring-fence the region. In 2000, in the wake of the crisis, they created the Chiang Mai Initiative, a regional network of financial credits and swaps. And now they have the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank to regionalise the provision of development finance as well.

These initiatives can be understood as a reaction to Asia's unhappy experience with the IMF. More fundamentally, they reflect the emergence of China. In 1997, a China still uncertain of its regional role was not a vocal supporter of the Japanese plan for an Asian Monetary Fund. Its lack of support ultimately sealed the fate of that proposal.

Subsequently, China's growing self-confidence and leadership helped to spearhead regional institution building and cooperation. This change, occurring against the backdrop of 20 years of robust Chinese growth, is the most consequential change affecting Asia since the crisis.

But if the emergence of China signifies how much has changed, it is also a reminder of how much remains the same. China is still wedded to a model that prioritises a target rate of growth, and it still relies on high investment to hit that target. The government maintains liquidity provision at whatever levels are needed to keep the economic engine humming, in a manner dangerously reminiscent of what Thailand was doing before its crisis.

Because China's government relaxed restrictions on offshore borrowing faster than was prudent, Chinese enterprises with links to the government have high levels of foreign debt. And there is still a reluctance to let the currency float, something that would discourage Chinese firms from accumulating such large foreign-currency-denominated obligations.

China is now at the same point as its Southeast Asian neighbours 20 years ago: like them, it has outgrown its inherited growth model. We have to hope that Chinese leaders have studied the Asian crisis. Otherwise they are doomed to repeat it.



SOURCE: EVOLUTION.SKf

this day. Western observers placed the blame on Asian countries' lack of transparency and on overly close relations between firms and governments—what they described as "crony capitalism." Asian commentators, for their part, blamed hedge funds for destabilising regional financial markets and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for prescribing a course of treatment that nearly killed the patient.

There is some validity to both

stable exchange rates, which were seen as necessary for the expansion of exports. It stressed investment—however much was required for double-digit growth. And it encouraged foreign borrowing as needed to finance the requisite level of capital formation.

But by 1997 the Southeast Asian economies had reached a stage of development at which brute-force investment alone was no longer enough to sustain high growth rates. In relying

levels. Asian governments still emphasise growth, but not at any cost.

Second, Southeast Asian countries now have more flexible exchange rates. None is perfectly flexible, to be sure, but the region's governments have at least abandoned the rigid dollar pegs that were the source of such vulnerability in 1997.

Third, countries like Thailand that were running large external deficits, heightening their dependence on foreign