

Rumours and mob killings: What are the underlying causes?

Dengue has been allowed to go out of control

What preparatory steps did our city corporations take?

THE failure of the city corporations to prevent the frightening outbreak of dengue has prompted the High Court to intervene and summon officials of the bodies and ask them what steps they have taken in this regard. Now the HC has asked to be informed how effective medicine to kill the mosquitoes and destroy their breeding grounds can be imported within seven days. It points out to the need to act with a greater expediency than what the corporations have so far demonstrated.

In fact, in the midst of a vicious dengue outbreak in Dhaka city, we are now hearing of cases of this terrible fever in other parts of the country. What is of greater concern: doctors and medical staff in places outside the capital neither have proper training in dengue management nor the NSI kits that help in instantly detecting whether a person has dengue. Due to these reasons, patients are being sent all the way to Dhaka for diagnosis and treatment in hospitals that are already overwhelmed with dengue patients. All these smack of a lack of planning and poor preparedness for a crisis that was predictable and preventable.

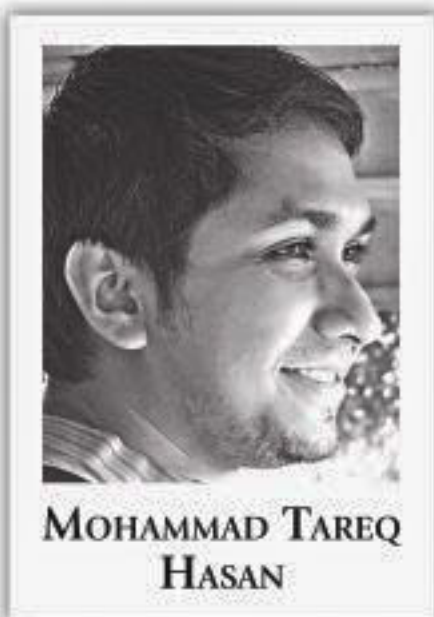
This is especially true for Dhaka where thousands of people have already been infected, with some patients (the actual number of deaths is unknown) dying of the fever within days. We have learnt that the insecticides used by the city corporations have been ineffective in containing the breeding of the Aedes mosquito. There is no justifiable explanation why our city corporations would not be able to replace the ineffective insecticides with effective ones, well in advance of a possible outbreak. We would like an investigation into what preparations had the DCCs taken to fight the menace and how the funds allocated for this purpose were utilised. In this regard, those who were responsible in making sure the mosquitoes and their breeding grounds were destroyed, should be called to account.

Suffering of passengers on waterways

Transport workers and owners can't hold people hostage

THE sudden strike and counter-strike called by workers and then owners, shutting down waterways which carry thousands of people all over the country, is a demonstration of how utterly oblivious people in this sector are to public suffering! While workers called off their strike at 4pm on July 24 and other vessels at 7.30pm on the same day, launch owners decided to start their very own strike in the afternoon in protest to the strike called by workers. And seldom has one heard of owners calling a strike, which was withdrawn on July 25 after a meeting between owners and BIWTA. The whole incident could be called comic had their actions not caused so much hassle for people. Thanks to the combined actions of vessel owners and workers, people of many southern districts were unable to come to Dhaka and vice versa.

While authorities were able to negotiate a truce with the Bangladesh Water Transport Workers Federation in the interests of smooth movement of vessels and people, we are, however, totally perplexed by the counter-strike. Perhaps this was a message meant for workers not to get out of line next time. The whole matter of work abstention has come from a number of issues including the lack of progress (according to workers) on implementing the 2016 pay scale. This is 2019 and if there has not been sufficient progress in this area, then this sector will see future unrest, all at the cost of public suffering. We are told demands would be resolved over a series of tripartite meetings that will involve representatives of transport workers and vessel owners and of course, government officials. It is imperative that a binding agreement is reached because the economy and the people can do without these sudden strikes.



MOHAMMAD TAREQ HASAN

MANY of us have been left stunned after witnessing a series of mob attacks on people being accused of kidnapping and murdering children. In the past weeks, several

such attacks injured 25 people and killed at least seven people in different parts of the country. The attacks were sparked off by a rumour that the Padma Bridge requires "human heads" for its completion by December 2020. That rumour spread quickly through social media and mob attacks on the suspected kidnapers have become rampant.

The most tragic of these attacks took place at the heart of Dhaka. A mother of a four-year-old child went to a school in Badda to enquire about the admission process. She was accused of being a kidnapper and was beaten to death by an angry mob. Videos of the event have gone viral on social media. A few young men had beaten her mercilessly and scores of others, including women, stood idly by watching and recording the event on their mobile phones. One of the attackers who was instrumental in the killing even seemed to be posing for pictures with the motionless body of the suspect.

The basis of the rumour is an age-old myth regarding human sacrifice needed for construction of sturdy structures (e.g. bridges). Of course, the myth (or urban myth) is not unique to Bangladesh. Similar urban myths are found in different countries of Asia, Africa, or even Europe. Part of the myth concerns the use of human sacrifice for some desired outcome. If we want to ask, "why has this resurfaced in Bangladesh now", anthropological literature may give us a head-start in that investigation. For example: different occult practices, such as witchcraft, remerged in South Africa after the apartheid led to killings of suspected witches. In this context, scholars propose that the answer to the question: "why now?", must be found in the existing socio-economic conditions that relate to the globalised, capitalist economy. Even though some may claim that conspiracies were at the heart of the rumours and mob attacks, it is perplexing to see thousands of people believing in them and participating in the attacks.

To explain why people are believing in "rumours" during a time of rapid economic development, we must analyse the current historical "situation" that has generated a mixed feeling of possibility



and powerlessness, modern desires and vast despairs, as well as cohorts of jobless youth. These have been the corollaries of "development" and "accumulation of wealth" by only a few—as evident by the fact that the youth unemployment rate has risen significantly in the last 20 years. According to the "Asia-Pacific Employment and Social Outlook 2018" of the ILO, youth (age 15-24 years) unemployment increased from 6.32 percent in 2000 to 12.8 percent in 2017. Dr Fahmida Khatun in a 2018 article mentioned that the youth of the country have not benefited from Bangladesh's economic growth. Furthermore, a large proportion of the total youth population (29.8 percent) is neither in education, nor in employment or training (NEET). In fiscal year 2018, the GDP growth rate stood at 7.86 percent, however, most of the jobs created remained in the informal or unorganised sector resulting in 28 percent unemployment rate among the youth who received secondary level education. Data suggests that young people in Bangladesh do not have the right skill set for the emergent economy. Consequently, the gap created by the unemployability of our youth is bridged by hiring skilled workers from our neighbouring countries. The result of this social phenomena has been multi-dimensional—increased stress,

depression, and feeling of futility among the youth, which result in them falling for rumours and forming a mob mentality.

There are two distinct features to be noticed in the circulated videos of the mob killing mentioned above: firstly, hundreds of people are spontaneously participating, and secondly, those who are beating the suspect are taking pride in committing the heinous act. This shows that most of the people believed the rumour and perceived their action as a way to achieving social justice. Why is this happening? I suggest that forming violent mobs give the youth an opportunity to exercise some agency—as they otherwise feel left behind while the country is "developing" and a few are getting richer economically. Despair among the population makes them vulnerable to believing in rumours, as they have already seen the "rich" always benefitting at their expense. The mob provides a potent opportunity to find their worth, which they otherwise feel they are being stripped of at this current socio-economic juncture. Participation in the mob exemplifies their desire to take control of the social situation against the futility that has grown over the years of promised but unmet development. Moreover, the tendency to take selfies while the mob beating takes place also demonstrates their desire of being part of something that works towards some form

of social justice.

Young people not only took part in the mob activities that were based on the rumour of "human sacrifice", they have participated in similar situations when miscreants have been caught by the people, and also during emergencies such as the fire incidences in Banani and Old Dhaka recently. The essence of the argument: the paranoia about human sacrifice for bridge construction (as such "development") amidst the huge progress in almost all the socio-economic development indicators signifies an occult modernity in Bangladesh. The belief in the occult does not imply a retreat into the past/ traditions, rather it is an expression of discontent with modernity, the neoliberal state of affairs, and dealing with its paradoxes, i.e. hope and hopelessness in different avenues. Therefore, rumours spread and mobs form, and many accept these as "normal", remaining reluctant to intervene—a reality incompatible with the law of the country. Therefore, stricter law enforcement alone will not be able to tackle this issue. The fragments of mob killings echo the futile existence of the youth, wherein pessimism runs up against the promises made by capitalism.

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Climate change: UAE and Russia eye geopolitical and commercial mileage



JAMES M DORSEY

CLIMATE change, much like war, could prove to be a geopolitical and commercial gold mine. At least, that is the take of DP World, Dubai's global port operator, and Russia's sovereign

wealth fund. DP World is partnering with the fund, the Russian Direct Investment Fund (RDIF) to create an all-year round maritime sea route from Europe to Asia through the Arctic.

"Time is money in business and the route could cut travel time substantially more than traditional trade arteries for cargo owners in the Far East wanting to connect with Europe, coupled with benefits to the Russian economy," DP World chairman and CEO Sultan Ahmed bin Sulayem told the Arab News.

In partnering with DP World, RFID brings to the table Rosatom, Russia's atomic energy agency, which operates nuclear-powered ships that could ply the route, and Norilsk Nickel, a mining and commodities company.

Dubai and Russia are betting that climate change, which has dramatically shrunk the Arctic ice sheet in the past two decades, has made possible what eluded Europeans for centuries: ensuring that the Northeast Passage linking the Northern Atlantic with the Pacific is accessible all year round even if rail remains faster than carrying cargo by ship.

The commercial and geopolitical implications of all year-round passage are significant.

Beyond challenging the status of the Suez Canal as the foremost link between the Atlantic and the Pacific, the Arctic route would grant Russia the one thing it has so far failed to achieve in its partnership with China: a key role in the transportation linkages between Europe and Asia that the People's Republic is seeking to create with massive investment in its Belt and Road initiative.

That role would be bolstered by the fact that the Arctic route would cut the maritime journey from Northeast Asia from somewhere between 34 and 45 days

through the Suez Canal to 23 days via the Northeast Passage.

"Because of global warming, there are some things happening that open some opportunities. Russia has this frozen coast all of the seasons. Now it's opening up and it's possible to navigate for nine months. When you have special ships, you can actually have 12 months navigation," RFID CEO Kirill Dmitriev told the Saudi paper.

The partnership with Dubai gives a

Russian capital and a Volga-Kazakhstan road stalled.

Frustrated with the lack of Chinese interest, state-run Russian Railways is itself investing heavily and reaching out to Japan to significantly increase freight traffic on the almost 9,300-kilometre-long trans-Siberian route.

The rail company aims to increase by a factor of 100 the number of containers transported from Japan to Europe from 3,000 last year to 300,000 and tonnage

Upgrading the Trans-Siberian Railway would significantly bolster Russia's geography as a key bridge in the emergence of Eurasia, the gradual integration of Europe and Asia that ultimately would erase the seemingly artificial division of one landmass into two continents.

It would also significantly facilitate linking the railway to the Belt and Road by making it financially feasible.

That is less far-fetched with China Railway International Group lending Russia USD 6.2 billion for the construction of a 790-kilometre long Moscow-Kazan high speed rail line, envisioned as the first phase of a link between the Russian capital and Beijing that would cut travel between the two cities to two days.

To secure the loan, Russia agreed to use Chinese technology and construction equipment.

Russia has also expressed interest in linking its Trans-Siberian Railway to the Chinese-controlled Pakistani port of Gwadar, a Belt and Road crown jewel.

Russia is betting that the combination of the Northeast Passage and upgraded Trans-Siberian rail links would make its positioning as a transit hub significantly more attractive.

That is true even though the Northeast Passage is too shallow for giant box ships that traverse the Suez Canal and lacks the kind of ports capable of accommodating those vessels. The passage is likely to see primarily smaller container ships.

One way or the other, DP World, expecting to operate ports that Russia plans to build along an Arctic route, would emerge a winner by expanding its global footprint. "We were always missing Russia. Russia is a link," DP World's Mr Sulayem said.

Said Russian shipping giant Sovcomflot CEO Sergey Frank: "Trade is growing and there is space for everybody. If the cargo originates in the south part of China, it will go through the Suez. If it originates in Northern China, the NSR (Northern Sea Route) will be seriously considered. Cargo will always find the fastest way to move."

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A train moves along a bridge of the Trans-Siberian Railway over the Yenisei river near an automobile bridge in the Siberian city of Krasnoyarsk, Russia, May 16, 2016. PHOTO: REUTERS

new lease on life to Russian aspirations to become a key node in Belt and Road linkages after Russia failed to persuade China Railway Eryuan Engineering Group (CREEC) to invest in converting the Trans-Siberian Railway into a high-speed link that would connect St Petersburg with the Far East.

CREEC last year definitively dashed Russian hopes, declaring that the "the high-speed rail through Russia will never pay off."

In a further setback, China simultaneously opted for an east-west road link through Kazakhstan after efforts to complete a Moscow-St Petersburg highway as well as a ring road around the

by 50 percent from less than 90 million to 180 million, according to Russian Railways first Vice President Alexander Misharin.

Mr Misharin told Nikkei that the investment, including USD 745 million last year, involves laying double tracks, linking the railroad to seaports and automating the system.

Mr Misharin was hoping to cooperate with Japan Railways Group to create a door-to-door cargo transportation system between Japan and Europe that would reduce transportation time to at most 19 days. He said the Russian rail company was looking at building logistics centres with Japanese trading firm Sojitz.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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More initiatives are needed in the IT sector

Bangladesh has made major strides in laying the groundwork for a diverse and successful outsourcing market. The IT services industry within Bangladesh has been growing—serving international clients and domestic clients in banking and telecom sectors. According to a report published in 2018 by LankaBangla, the industry now employs over 300,000 people, and is exporting services to European, North American and East Asian clients. The emerging outsourcing players already have strong credentials, having earned more than USD 700 million in 2017, and is set to meet the USD 1 billion export target by 2019. The local freelancing community is also appearing consistently in top freelance sites like Upwork, Freelancer.com, vWorker and others.

The government should focus more on equipping the labour force with top-notch IT skills, and encourage the academic establishments to introduce courses related to IT in primary and secondary level education curriculums. Employees who cannot pursue higher studies or who drop out can then earn adequately if they develop proper skills in this sector.

The main strength of the Bangladeshi IT sector is its young, motivated and educated workforce that can be trained to fit any IT roles. The government needs to take a holistic approach towards promoting the IT industry.

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