

A major public health crisis

Treat dengue outbreak as an epidemic

THE dengue epidemic in the country has gripped everyone by fear. According to the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS), a record 1,845 patients outside Dhaka were diagnosed with the viral disease on July 30. This year saw a record number of dengue patients, and dengue has already spread to 61 out of the 64 districts. Government data has confirmed at least 15,369 dengue cases since the beginning of this year; of these, 9,683 patients were diagnosed in the month of July alone. The death toll has reached 41, although as per a report in this daily yesterday, the official count stands at 8.

One of the key reasons why the situation got to this point is our total disregard for cleanliness. A survey conducted by the communicable diseases wing of the DGHS in Dhaka's two city corporations in March revealed that water in places such as plastic drums, buckets, and open tanks in under-construction buildings served as breeding grounds for the Aedes mosquito. While factors such as intermittent rain are beyond our control, keeping the city clean is not. One wonders why pretexts are put forward one after the other whenever a crisis occurs, even though it is taxpayers' money that is being allocated to both the DNCC and DSCC. So what is the excuse behind garbage strewn on roadsides and general filth in public places? Where are the services that people are paying for?

Now, we have in our hands a major public health crisis which may get worse as Eid approaches. Hundreds of thousands of travellers will be going back home, possibly spreading the viral disease even further. To make things worse, the city corporations still haven't been able to acquire effective insecticides, which only points to a lack of proactiveness and foresight, despite the fact that dengue is an age-old issue.

Dengue outbreak is now a nationwide problem. All relevant government bodies, including the DGHS, must be mobilised to tackle this epidemic. Breeding grounds of mosquitoes must be destroyed, hospitals equipped, effective insecticides imported, and awareness has to be spread about the precautionary measures people must take if diagnosed with dengue.

Municipalities in a shambles

Indiscipline on all fronts

A government committee has found a general lack in discipline when it comes to the hiring of employees by the country's municipalities. It has also found irregularities in spending. The fact that many municipalities were created without following basic rules has compounded the problem further and the net result is that in 260 municipalities we have more than 35,000 employees who have not received salaries for up to seven years. In fact, at least half the municipalities do not even qualify to be municipalities as per the criteria set by the Local Government (Municipality) Act, 2009. Political expediency motivated their formation because people needed jobs and now the government is in a fix.

The committee led by an additional secretary of Local Government Division (LGD) has found that municipalities have failed to increase their income required to meet the new government pay scale announced in 2015 and that has led to a net deficit of Tk 31 crore for municipalities. The ad-hoc manner in which people have been hired and put on the payroll in many of these bodies brings up the question of graft and while accusations are being traded, thousands of employees and staff members are suffering the consequences of no pay year after year.

We covered this issue a few months ago and now that a government committee has found anomalies in a large number of the municipalities, it should come up with a concrete plan of action on how to rationalise their number. True that such a move will be unpopular, but illegalities of the past have to be rectified in the present and it cannot be put off any longer. Some emergency funds need to be released and if need be, excess employees need to be laid off with a golden handshake arrangement and the revised number of municipalities have to be structured and staffed in a manner that will not require State bailout every year.

After You, Mr VIP



BADIUZZAMAN BAY

LIKE all things bad and ugly in Bangladesh, the latest offensive against our sanity is playing out in a wearily predictable fashion. First, a schoolboy dies while waiting in an ambulance after it got stuck for three hours on a ferry put on hold by a joint secretary of the government, a VIP no less. Then comes the chorus of public outrage. Soon a probe committee is formed, and compensations are sought. And now there are doubts if the probe committee would be able to perform its task and if the said VIP would be held accountable for his injudicious decision. Outrageous development, indignation, probe, rinse and repeat—nothing has happened so far to challenge this familiar pattern that follows nearly every crisis in Bangladesh.

But the bigger issue here is not the lack of accountability that perpetuates this crisis cycle, but our VIP culture, a colonial legacy that puts certain people ahead of the rest of the population and accords them undue privileges. It's reminiscent of the now-defunct system of apartheid in South Africa, which institutionalised racial segregation and sought its legitimacy by promoting the perceived importance of a certain class for their nation. The tragedy of the schoolboy, however, has come as a jolting reminder of the dangerous consequences of such practices. As Dr Iftekharuzzaman, executive director of Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB), put it: the tragedy demonstrates what happens when you accord special privileges to a certain group at the expense of ordinary citizens. "It's unconstitutional, completely illegal, and discriminatory," he said. Also note the High Court observation that government officials are merely servants of the republic, and not very important persons (VIPs).

But perhaps it's no surprise that such a culture should exist, even thrive, in Bangladesh where deification is the norm and discrimination is permitted for parochial self-interests. The country has witnessed the simultaneous growth and

decline in living standards of those who are at the top of the food chain and those who are at the bottom of it. During the last 25 years in Dhaka, household rent has gone up by a staggering 400 percent, while the prices of essentials saw a 200 percent increase. The household income of most citizens didn't rise concurrently, however. Meanwhile, the rich got richer, accumulating more wealth and power than ever before. How do you reconcile these contrasting pictures? How do you get your head around the irony in the disenfranchisement of the masses by a system that also "celebrates" their empowerment through democracy and democratic elections? The VIP culture is but a symbol of this glaring contrast.



Perhaps it's no surprise that a VIP culture should exist, even thrive, in Bangladesh where deification is the norm and discrimination is permitted for parochial self-interests.

In Bangladesh, the term VIP is not recognised officially but there is a "warrant of precedence", comprised of 25 articles, which lays down the order in terms of the ranks of important officials/individuals belonging to the executive, legislative and judicial organs of the state, as well as members of the foreign diplomatic corps. The warrant or order is generally used for the purpose of the invitation of dignitaries to important state functions including their seating arrangements. They are also provided with other benefits including police protection, accommodation, cars, etc. While such arrangements are primarily based on practical considerations, it is the unfair

imminent.

Interestingly, in India, the BJP government has recently launched a countrywide review of the status of many VIPs. According to a report, the security status of some 130 VIPs has been reviewed so far, and security details for some well-known public figures, including Rashtriya Janata Dal President and former Bihar Chief Minister Lalu Prasad Yadab and Samajwadi Party President Akhilesh Yadav, were removed. In Nepal, early in March, there was a spontaneous protest against the VIP culture when traffic was brought to a halt to make way for the movement of Nepal's President Bidhya Devi Bhandari.

Does it mean we, as a society, are okay with this regressive system? Does it mean that we're comfortable with the continued use of ear-piercing hydraulic horns by the ministers, VIPs and police personnel, or their flagrant disregard for other traffic rules? The growing rumbblings on social media and in the streets suggest otherwise. While the special treatment given to the VVIPs (president and prime minister) and state guests on the roads is reasonable, the same cannot be said about the many VIPs that exist today.

The VIP culture has to go, because it belongs in the colonial era.

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Modi government thwarts Rajya Sabha resistance



PALLAB BHATTACHARYA

PRIME Minister Narendra Modi's government scored significant legislative, political and ideological victories in getting the opposition-dominated Rajya Sabha nod to two key bills in the space of about four days. On both the occasions, it brought to fore ruling Bharatiya Janata Party's political management skill and highlighted the persisting disunity and drift in the opposition camp post-parliamentary elections. In pushing one bill criminalising the instant triple talaq bill and another amending the Right to Information, the BJP demonstrated its success in enlisting the support of a clutch of key regional parties which are neither with the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance, nor with the opposition non-United Progressive Alliance, and busted the aura of invincibility of the opposition parties in the upper House where the bill against triple talaq was thwarted twice during Modi government's first five-year tenure from 2014. Both the bills were passed by the Lok Sabha where the BJP alone has a commanding majority. The real political drama had unfolded in the Rajya Sabha, where the opposition has numerical superiority.

The most important achievement of the Modi government was the smooth passage of the bill against the practice of instant triple talaq known as The Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Marriage) Bill which makes talaq-e-biddat void and criminalises it as a bailable cognisable offence with a punishment of up to three years in jail for the husband. The parliamentary stamp of approval for the bill came close to two years after the Supreme Court had struck down the instant triple talaq as un-Islamic, arbitrary and not an integral part of religious practice.

The bill against instant triple talaq has important political and ideological ramifications. The bill's passage in the Rajya Sabha was facilitated by walk-outs and absence of several lawmakers belonging to opposition parties and key regional parties which are not aligned to either BJP-led National Democratic Alliance or to the Congress-headed United Progressive Alliance.

Even though Janata Dal (U), a key BJP ally in Bihar, opposed the bill and staged a walkout, its absence in the voting on the bill and similar acts by opposition and alliance-neutral parties helped the bill's passage by bringing down the negative

votes. The voting in favour of the bill by lawmakers of the Biju Janata Dal, which is not part of NDA or UPA, was an additional positive gain for the BJP. Even four Congress lawmakers and opposition Nationalist Congress Party Chief Sharad Pawar and his close aide Praful Patel were absent from the Rajya Sabha. There were absentees from AIADMK, Telangana Rashtra Samiti, Bahujan Samaj Party, Rashtriya Janata Dal, Telugu Desam Party and YSR Congress Party. This is a far cry from the past when all other opposition parties had joined hands with the Congress to resist the bill for more than two years. The political signal from absence voting by parties even from states like Uttar Pradesh (BSP and Samajwadi Party), Bihar (Janata Dal-U) and

RTI Amendment Bill 2019 in the Rajya Sabha with just voice vote and without a division vote, came after the anticipated test of parliamentary strength fizzled out with the opposition staging a walk-out after the head-count clearly favoured the BJP and its allies.

What was disconcerting for the Congress on the RTI Amendment Bill was that their disunity was on show even after a meeting of opposition parties convened by Sonia Gandhi the previous day, decided on a common floor strategy. The four lawmakers of BSP were absent in the Rajya Sabha when the opposition motion to refer the bill to the select committee was put to vote, while the four members of NCP did not join the debate. According to sources in the Congress, four

None of the major opposition parties, after having faced the rout in parliamentary elections, wanted to be seen as opposing a law aimed at strengthening national security, a plank used by the BJP in this year's elections.



Union minister Ravi Shankar Prasad addressing the Rajya Sabha while tabling the triple talaq bill.

PHOTO: PTI

Telangana (TRS), which have a sizable Muslim population, indicates they are not wary of helping the BJP government.

On the ideological front, the bill against instant triple talaq moves the BJP a step closer to its larger quest for a uniform civil code against the Muslim personal law. Modi had invested considerable political capital in the campaign against instant triple talaq ever since he became prime minister in May 2014 by repeatedly projecting it as an issue of gender justice in view of the sufferings by Muslim women. Modi's critics, of course, say it is also a way of polarising Muslim voters.

No less important was the other victory on the RTI Amendment Bill in the Rajya Sabha on July 22, when the saffron party managed to secure the support of non-NDA and non-UPA parties, to put together a majority to ensure defeat of the opposition-sponsored motion to send the Amendment bill to a parliamentary select committee to change the Right to Information Act. The final passage of the

of its lawmakers also did not take part in the voting.

For the Congress Party, amendments in the RTI Act is galling as the transparency law was enacted in 2005, a year after the party-led UPA had come to power and was a showpiece project of UPA Chairperson Sonia Gandhi. The amendments drew strident criticism from Sonia who accused the government of "totally subverting" the transparency law.

The amendments to the RTI Act abolish granting to information commissioners the status equivalent to the chief election commissioner and Supreme Court judges, and also empowers the government to fix the salaries and tenures of the information commissioners.

The disarray in the opposition also came out on July 17 when the Modi government succeeded in securing opposition votes in the Lok Sabha, when All India Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen (AIMIM) lawmaker Asaduddin Owaisi insisted on a division vote on a bill aimed

at giving more powers to the anti-terror body, National Investigation Agency (NIA), including to probe terror attacks on Indians and Indian assets abroad.

Owaisi's move surprised the entire opposition which had been critical of the NIA Amendment bill. Usually, a government with clear majority does not seek a division vote on a bill moved by it and prefers voice vote. But Owaisi demanded division vote even though the Bill would have been approved by voice vote given the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance's far superior parliamentary arithmetic. Quickly seizing an opportunity to send a political statement, Home Minister Amit Shah accepted Owaisi's demand and said the country should know who supported and who opposed the anti-terror measure. Only six lawmakers belonging to the AIMIM and the Left voted against it and the rest all voted in its favour.

None of the major opposition parties, after having faced the rout in parliamentary elections, wanted to be seen as opposing a law aimed at strengthening national security, a plank which was used to the full by the BJP in its landslide victory in this year's national elections. The opinion in the Congress was split on the issue of supporting the bill, as a section felt such a move would send a wrong signal to the minority community given its concerns over the NIA Act, and might harm the party in a state like Kerala, now ruled by the Left Democratic Front led by the CPI(M), where it is trying to regain power in fresh assembly polls. But the view that ultimately prevailed in the Congress is that the NIA Act was after all the brainchild of the party-led government headed by Manmohan Singh in 2008 and should not be seen as resisting the amendments to give it more teeth to the law.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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The fragile state of the stock market

On July 24, the DSEX, the benchmark index of the Dhaka Stock Exchange, took the biggest single day leap since January 8, this year. To make the situation more complicated, investment from financial institutions—suffering from liquidity crises—is soaring. The present effort by the Bangladesh Bank to verbally seek non-banks who have the capacity to invest in the market, and Bangladesh Securities and Exchange Commission (BSEC) to ask the DSE to order all investors to physically place stocks—for due authorisation—came far too late to result in a sustainable reversal of investors' confidence. "As per its information, 19 lenders have the scope to Tk 2,000 crore in the market," was stated in *The Daily Star's* report. But how long can this amount support the market? Unless investors' confidence is restored, the fate of the capital market will always remain uncertain.

Experts have suggested that long term policy support should be incorporated in budget documents for businesses to stabilise the stock market. The BSEC chairman has recently written to the National Board of Revenue (NBR) that the "development of the bond market is essential for the much-expected expansion of the stock market." All that aside, the main focus for the BSEC should be to enforce regulations and fix the current loopholes.

Luthfe Ali, by email