

## Keeping cattle markets clean a must during Eid

Wet hay ideal for breeding Aedes mosquitoes

WHAT we are hearing from entomologists in the city is that hay, when wet, provides suitable conditions for the Aedes mosquito to lay its eggs. If there is consistent rain, then hay, a staple food for cattle, which have begun to arrive in their thousands for Eid-ul-Adha, could potentially pose a new level of threat for the expansion of the dengue outbreak. So what is to be done? Experts believe that if the cattle grounds can be kept clean by actively seeking out breeding grounds of the Aedes mosquito, the city can be made safe.

That is easier said than done. The lacklustre performance of Dhaka's two city corporations in tackling the dengue outbreak leaves a lot to be desired. As with every Eid-ul-Adha, we have officially designated cattle markets and unofficial ones. To what extent our city authorities have prepared for the formation of mobile teams, to tour the city's markets that will be hosting the sacrificial animals, remains the million-dollar question. But there is also the question of the dissemination of information among cattle traders and sellers who will be bringing their animals to the markets: have we really thought out the consequences of inaction here?

Today, the city hospitals and hospitals outside the city are barely coping with the existing outbreak of dengue. And if what experts are fearing turn out to be true—that is, there is incessant rain and fresh water puddles form everywhere and the hay that feeds these animals cannot be kept dry—who will take responsibility for a fresh outbreak of the dengue? And how will hospitals cope with the fresh wave of dengue-affected patients? We hope the news has reached our city fathers and precautionary measures have been taken, like making sure these markets have proper drainage system. But as per media reports, many of them do not. People need to be made aware of covering their bodies when they visit the markets, but again, where is the public awareness campaign? Without greater awareness, this is yet another public health hazard waiting to happen.

## No government project without feasibility study

Planning ministry needs to play more proactive and decisive role

IN a report on the annual development programme (ADP), prepared by the planning ministry and shared in a review meeting by the minister, we find that most ministries prepare projects without proper feasibility and technical design. That would explain why a large number of projects undertaken by various departments and ministries every year fail to see proper, in-time implementation, as well as the constant revisions to projects and their delayed implementation. It is beyond our understanding how this has been allowed to go on year after year, especially since historical data shows us that ADP implementation has been the Achilles heel for successive governments.

Thanks to the planning ministry's report, issues causing these delays have been identified, particularly, frequent revision of project design, incorporating new components, lengthy land acquisition, and so on—all contributing to delay in project completion and driving up costs. We are in agreement with the ministry that government bodies will have to rethink the way they design projects from inception so that many of these hiccups can be avoided. There is no point in revising a project under the national budget more than twice because it loses its value and the benefits it was supposed to bring to the people are lost as years are added to project completion.

Monitoring and evaluation, which is an essential component of any project, has sadly been missing in our case. But now that its absence has been identified as a major stumbling block, we hope the planning ministry will stick to its idea of real-time monitoring of the most crucial projects that are in the pipeline, because delays in implementing poorly designed projects are tying down precious resources of the government. And many ministries fail to get allocation because of the scarcity of resources, despite having the capacity to implement them.

# Alarming plastic pollution in the Bay of Bengal



MM MAJEDUL ISLAM

PLASTICS play a vital role in our daily life. However, plastic debris in the marine environment has serious negative impacts on marine resources, fisheries as well as on the use of coastal

areas for tourism. It is also a threat to our precious Blue Economy.

Globally, one million plastic bottles are purchased every minute. Around 8 million metric tons of plastics go into the oceans every year. Over 46,000 pieces of plastics are found in one square mile of ocean. The global production and consumption of plastics have continued to rise and it is estimated that by 2050, there will be more plastics than fishes in the world's oceans.

The Bay of Bengal is rich in marine resources and produces 6 million tons of fish that correspond to nearly 4 percent of the total global catch. It is an important source of animal protein for nearly 400 million people in this region. But the Bay is heavily littered with plastics and huge amounts of plastic waste are found on the shorelines, on the seabed, and suspended in the water column. The corals of St. Martin Island are almost dead, littered with marine debris, plastic packages, and food wrap discarded by hundreds of tourists daily. The Bay of Bengal and the South China Sea are the new plastic hotspots in Asia. Every year about 2 lakh tons of plastics enter the Bay of Bengal from Bangladesh. According to the Earth Day Network of USA (2018), Bangladesh is the 10th most plastic polluting countries in the world. Population pressure, poor waste management practices and shipbreaking are primarily responsible for that. Every year, 60-65 ships are broken in Chattogram and Khulna.

Plastics can have a direct impact on animals, both through entanglement and ingestion that cause starvation or suffocation of wildlife. It also affects biota through leakage of harmful chemicals often contained in plastics or attached to them. Perhaps what is most disturbing is the fact that plastic has been found inside fish and large mammals in different parts of the world. For instance, a dead whale found in Thailand had 80 plastic bags in its stomach. Fishes of the Pacific coast are estimated to consume over 2,200 tons of plastic in a year. The disintegrated plastic debris can potentially be ingested by the humans when they eat seafood, resulting



A view of Bay of Bengal from Sandwip, Chattogram.

PHOTO: HOSSAIN TAREQUE/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

in a number of fatal diseases including cancer. It is of the utmost importance to minimise plastic pollution.

Microplastics, which are tiny pieces of plastic or fibres smaller than 5 mm, are even a more dangerous form of marine debris/litter. About 80 percent of marine litter is microplastics. Face wash, toothpaste, scrubs and anti-ageing creams contain thousands of microplastics per product. A single shower can result in 100,000 plastic particles entering the ocean. Microplastics (also known as microbeads) are too small to be retained by the filters used at sewage treatment plants. Fish and shellfish ingest microplastics. Hence the saying, "what goes in the sea goes in you."

The problem lies in the way plastics are consumed and the way consumers use plastics. We have a tendency to use plastic materials which are less durable and less valuable. Our single-use or throw-away culture is deteriorating the problem. Lack of coordination among different ministries, divisions, NGOs and the private sector, the absence of a dedicated agency to harness the potential of Blue Economy, and having no system in place to make consumers and industries responsible for the final deposition of plastics, among others, are major barriers to reducing plastics and fisheries waste from the Bay.

The topic of excessive plastic use and its dumping into the marine environment

has already been on international, regional and national agendas for several years. Prevention of Marine Pollution by Dumping of Wastes, 1972, and Prevention of Pollution from Ships, 1988, are two notable international conventions. At the national level, Marine Pollution Ordinance 1989 and Bangladesh Environment Protection Act 1995 are dealing with marine pollution. Besides, according to SDG 14.1, by 2025, countries have to prevent and significantly reduce marine pollution of all kinds including marine debris or litter. Sadly, in spite of all the agreements and action plans, plastic is still entering the world's oceans in huge amounts every year, both in the form of microplastics and much larger debris.

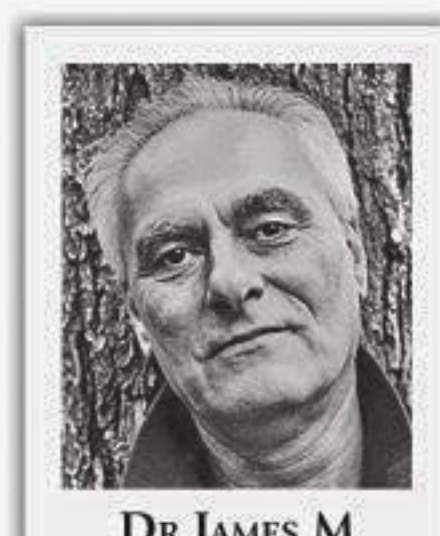
The question then is, why are we failing to control plastic pollution? Who should take the responsibility for that? Should national governments take the lead? Should NGOs, industry or the public play the major role? The answer is, all actors have to play an equal role. Governments hold a key to a very important part of the solution as they can make decisions on bans, tariffs, taxes, etc. Governments can put taxes on single-use plastic items. Financial incentives to buy more environmentally-friendly fishing nets and/or some kind of deposit-refund system can also be very effective in tackling plastic waste. Governments can also ban microplastics in consumer

goods. That said, a preventative approach will be more helpful than, say, focusing only on imposing rules and regulations. Raising awareness amongst the consumers and educate the people can be the key to reducing microplastics pollution from the Bay.

The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) is an appropriate regional organisation which should take the lead to control plastic pollution. The BIMSTEC member-countries can address this problem both individually and collectively. At the regional level, Bay of Bengal littoral states should take measures to collect plastic litter from waterfronts, promote recycling and encourage use of biodegradable packaging. For instance, in Bangladesh, since 2013, under the Fighting Marine Debris project, divers and volunteers have been engaged in removal of marine debris off the Saint Martin's Island. In February 2016, the divers removed 1,048 objects. The "Buy Back Program" in the Republic of Korea is another good example. Since 2009, they have collected above 31,000 tons of debris from sea from at least 80 collection sites. We need more initiatives like this from all the stakeholders to save our marine ecosystem.

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# Security architecture in the Gulf: Troubled prospects



DR JAMES M DORSEY

RUSSIA, backed by China, hoping to exploit mounting doubts in the Gulf about the reliability of the United States as the region's sole security guarantor, is proposing a radical overhaul of

the security architecture in an area that is home to massive oil and gas reserves and some of the world's most strategic waterways.

Chinese backing for Russia's proposed collective security concept, which would replace the Gulf's US defence umbrella and position Russia as a power broker alongside the United States, comes amid heightened tension as a result of tit-for-tat tanker seizures and a beefed-up US and British military presence in Gulf waters.

Iranian revolutionary guards recently seized an alleged Iraqi tanker in the Gulf of Hormuz. Iran said the vessel was smuggling oil to an unidentified Arab country. The taking of the Iraqi ship followed last month's Iranian seizure of the British-flagged tanker Stena Impero. The seizure was in response to the impounding off Gibraltar of an Iranian tanker suspected of breaching EU sanctions against Syria.

The Russian proposal entails creation of a "counter-terrorism coalition (of) all stakeholders" that would be the motor for resolution of conflicts across the region and promote mutual security guarantees. It would involve the removal of the "permanent deployment of troops of extra-regional states in the territories of states of the Gulf," a reference to US, British and French forces and bases.

The proposal called for a "universal and comprehensive" security system that would take into account "the interests of all regional and other parties involved, in all spheres of security, including its military, economic and energy dimensions."

The coalition, to include the Gulf states, Russia, China, the US, the European Union and India as well as other stakeholders—a likely reference to Iran—would be launched at an international conference on security and

cooperation in the Gulf.

It was not clear, however, how feuding Gulf states like Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Iran would be persuaded to sit at one table. The proposal suggested that Russia's advantage was that it maintained good relations with all parties. Chinese backing of the Russian proposal takes on added significance with some analysts suggesting that the United States, no longer dependent on Gulf oil imports, is gradually reducing its commitment despite a temporary spike in the number of US troops dispatched to

by making overtures to China, Russia, Iran, and Turkey," said Steven A Cooke, a scholar at the New York-based Council on Foreign Relations.

Recent tanker statistics suggest that Saudi Arabia is sending an ever-larger portion of its crude to China. On a visit to Beijing last month, UAE Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed and Chinese President Xi Jinping elevated their two countries' relationship to that of a strategic partnership.

Perceptions of a reduced US commitment may make the Russian

minister to accept the kingdom's dictate, and Saudi and UAE projection of military force and commercial clout in the Horn of Africa.

A recent meeting between UAE and Emirati maritime security officials, the first in six years, as well as a partial UAE withdrawal from Yemen could, however, signal an emerging, more constructive approach.

If adopted, the Russian proposal could, however, suck China and Russia, despite having been able so far to maintain close ties to all sides of regional divides, into the Middle East's multiple conflicts, particularly the Saudi-Iranian rivalry. A multilateral approach could also bring latent Chinese-Russian differences to the fore.

Dubbing the Russian-Chinese alliance "Dragonbear," geo-strategist Velina Tchakarova cautions that it is "neither an alliance nor a marriage of convenience, but rather a temporary asymmetric relationship, in which China is predominantly the agenda-maker, while Russia is mostly the agenda-taker." Their rapprochement operates, in her words, on "the maxim 'Keep your friends close and your enemies closer.' A status-quo relationship would remain acceptable and be further developed so long as China's rise is not a direct threat to Russia's strategic interests of self-determination and security along its peripheries," including the Middle East.

The question is less whether and more when Russia starts perceiving Chinese interests as a threat to its own. One divergence could be energy given that Russia is one of the world's major oil suppliers while China is its top importer. By the same token, China may in the long run not want to be dependent on Russia for both its imports and the arrangements that would secure them.

Said Russia and Eurasia scholar Paul Stronski referring to the sustainability of the Russian-Chinese alliance: "With China now recognising it may need to strengthen its security posture... it is unclear how long that stability will last."

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COURTESY: JAMES M DORSEY

the region as a result of the tension with Iran.

They suggest that the US response to Iranian racking up of tension has been primarily theatrics and hand-wringing despite the Trump administration's bellicose rhetoric. Warnings of "severe consequences" have proven to be little more than verbal threats.

"The United States is leaving the Persian Gulf. Not this year or next, but there is no doubt that the United States is on its way out... Leaders in Riyadh, Abu Dhabi, Doha, Manama, and Muscat understand what is happening... and have been hedging against an American departure in a variety of ways, including

proposal of a multilateral approach more attractive in the short term. However, longer-term banking on a continued Russian-Chinese alliance could be tricky. The alliance could prove to be opportunistic rather than strategic. That could force Gulf states to accelerate taking charge of their own security. So far, greater Gulf assertiveness has proven to be a mixed bag.

Fuelled by uncertainty about US reliability, perceived regional Iranian expansionism, and persistent popular discontent across the Middle East and North Africa, produced the debilitating Saudi-UAE intervention in Yemen, a failed Saudi effort to force Lebanon's prime

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### Living costs in Dhaka unbearably high

There is no question that it is becoming increasingly costlier to live in Dhaka. House rent, food prices, and travel expenses are alarmingly high, and they are only soaring by the day. However, of all factors that contribute to our living costs, it's the house rent that eats up a lion's share of people's monthly income. As a result of skyrocketing house rent, people have no choice but to squeeze their expenditures on other things such as food, clothing and entertainment.

Laws that could help control house rent prices and protect tenants' rights do exist, but as with almost all laws in place, they are not implemented. And it seems that none of our political leaders are remotely worried about this. Such trends have hit the poorer sections of society the hardest—slum dwellers pay more rent per square foot than those who live in the affluent areas.

When you factor in the prevalence of corruption, which enables a certain section of society to accumulate more wealth and therefore spend more, it is no wonder that prices of commodities and services are soaring that only the elites can afford—leaving the rest of us in the lurch. The government keeps talking about "pro-poor" growth and development but such rhetoric has no bearing in reality.

Rashidul Azad, by email