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FOUNDER EDITOR
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Slackened ‘lockdown’ for Eid does not bode well

Are we prepared for the inevitable spike?

IT was a Catch-22 situation for the government and no doubt the decisionmakers are in a quandary at this moment. With Eid ul Azha about a week away, the government took the decision to ease the “lockdown”, if one can call the present state a lockdown at all (considering the number of people and cars on the streets, especially in Dhaka city), in the assumption that people will go home for Eid no matter what. The decision to do so overrode the health directorate’s grim warnings just a day before, regarding the deteriorating Covid situation. We cannot help but wonder why warnings by health experts have not been heeded and decisions taken accordingly.

The government has also decided to run private transport, trains and launches for the holidays. Again, conditions have been laid down under which the transport services should operate, but how will these conditions be enforced with thousands of travellers? What different measures will be taken from last Eid, during which health guidelines were totally flouted, leading to infection surges? While the railway authorities may be able to enforce the strict safety measures, as we have seen on previous occasions, the same, we fear, cannot be said of the launch owners and operators or private transport service. In the past, not only was the half-capacity rule disregarded, the 60 percent increase in fare was also charged from the public.

While enacting safety measures is the relatively easier aspect, what the administration must prepare seriously for is the consequence of the “eased lockdown”, which in effect will be “no lockdown”, given the state of adherence to the rules that we have witnessed during the present so-called lockdown. More than one lakh people have been infected even during this lockdown, and experts fear that the figure may treble after the end of the period of relaxed lockdown. A two-week “strict lockdown” will be on from July 23 6:00am till August 5 midnight. Unfortunately, the virus, now deadlier than ever, will not wait for festivals and holidays to be over and will find an ideal environment to spread amongst the thousands of people travelling around the country.

Health service and healthcare facilities are under severe duress as it is. The Delta variant has spread to most districts and will continue to spread. The spike portends an ominous future. Unfortunately, there is still a gross lack of awareness among people regarding how deadly and contagious the virus is, which must be addressed with more diligence. There should not be any ambiguity, moreover, regarding the term “lockdown”—a lockdown must always be strict if it is to be effective. Planning should be underway to pull up all resources to absorb the pressure that the system is like to encounter by the end of this month. And it must be done on a war footing.

Take legal action against the contractor

Public money cannot be wasted like this

IT is unacceptable that a contractor of the Local Government Engineering Department (LGED) has disrupted the flow of the Ratnai river in Lalmonirhat’s Aditmari upazila worse following its excavation. The contractor, Mohammad Yunus and Brothers (Pvt) Ltd of Chattogram, claims to have completed the excavation work in December last year, but the LGED says about 25 percent of the work has remained incomplete. The contractor, however, still collected the full payment—Tk 1.81 crore—for the work.

According to local farmers, the project was mired in corruption and in the name of excavation, the contractor even had the audacity to dredge and collect sand and sell it. The Aditmari Upazila Nirbahi Officer alleged that the contractor only dug holes in the riverbed in the name of excavation, which has made things worse by obstructing the flow of the river. This is naturally going to cause farmers and locals all sorts of problems. And agricultural production in the area may suffer as a result.

The Lalmonirhat LGED Executive Engineer claims to have written to the errant company seven times to complete the work, but the contractor never replied. What this demonstrates is a type of over-confidence on part of the contractor that it can simply get away with robbing the public’s money—and without any consequences for not completing its contractual obligation. What we would like to ask is, why was this company given the contract in the first place? Is it because of lobbying and influence? That would explain why the company feels so sure that it won’t have to face any repercussion for what it did to the three-kilometre stretch of the Ratnai river.

Officials have said that they will blacklist the contractor if they do not reply to their request to complete the work by this month’s end; however, we believe that officials should have taken such a step by now. Moreover, the authorities should take legal action against the contracting company, as it is the public’s money that it has taken without delivering on what it was legally obligated to. Unless such actions are taken, more and more contracting companies will feel emboldened to pursue a similar path. And the public’s money will continue to get flushed down the drain on such wasteful projects.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Stop child labour


As the pandemic has greatly impacted the economic condition of poorer families, children have become a source of income. Most of them are forced into labour that can cause significant harm to their health and safety. We should all work together to stop child labour.

Apurba Das, Faujdarhat Cadet College, Chattogram

Dengue: an added worry amidst the pandemic

Integrated vector management mechanism needed

A CLOSER LOOK



TASNEEM TAYEB

DENGUE cases in the country are on the rise again—since June, there has been a surge in the number of dengue patients seeking treatment in various hospitals. As of Monday, 796 people have been diagnosed with the virus so far, with 209 being treated in hospitals across the country, according to data shared by the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS). A dengue-related death has also been reported by the media.

While the magnitude of the situation has not yet evolved to the scale of 2019, when according to official data, 101,354 individuals had been diagnosed with dengue with 179 deaths, the sudden increase in cases over the last few weeks indicate the possibility of dengue taking a dangerous shape in the coming months. This is in the midst of a surge in Covid-19 cases, which creates a whole new set of challenges.

There are various factors that are contributing to the increase in dengue cases. According to entomologist Professor Kabirul Bashar of Jahangirnagar University, there is usually a “zigzag pattern” in the rise and fall of dengue every alternative year. While one year, the number of cases may be very high, the next year the situation might not be as bad. And then the year after that, there might be another spike. We can see a similar pattern between 2019 and 2021. While in 2019 the scenario had been grim, in 2020 the spread of dengue had been significantly low, with 1,193 dengue cases and three deaths, as per DGHS data. In 2021, we are again seeing a sharp increase in dengue cases. In addition, there has been a good amount of rainfall this year, which has facilitated the accumulation of fresh water in various places, across public and private properties, turning them into the perfect breeding grounds for Aedes mosquitoes—the carrier of the dengue virus.

Brigadier General Mohammad Jobaidur Rahman, chief health officer of Dhaka North City Corporation (DNCC), listed the measures DNCC has taken to contain the spread of the disease—spraying larvicide and adulticide, raising public awareness, and cleanliness drives, among others. Mobile courts are also identifying private properties that are enabling the breeding of Aedes larvae and imposing fines. Similar measures

have also been taken by Dhaka South City Corporation (DSCC). They are also working on multiple fronts to contain the breeding and spread of dengue. Both city corporations started these drives in April 2021.

So why, despite these measures, are dengue cases increasing? There could be multiple reasons, including the lack of an integrated approach towards vector management throughout the country. In Dhaka, for example, DNCC is working in its own way to contain the spread of dengue, and so is DSCC. But these efforts are not necessarily synced, at least by design. While both the city corporation bodies are taking steps, they are doing it in their own ways, and the same goes for all the other city corporations across the country. The lack of public engagement

said Professor Kabirul Bashar.

Environmental control ensures that throughout the year, certain environmental parameters are maintained that can control the population growth of these pesky insects, he said. Biological control ensures the elimination of mosquito breeds through natural mechanisms. For instance, copepods—small aquatic creatures—can be used to suppress the growth of the Aedes population. These small predators have been used in various countries to control the spread of Aedes mosquitoes. Similarly, guppy fish can be released in stagnant water bodies to control Culex population growth. Through chemical control (using effective chemicals and pesticides), adulticide and larvicide of mosquitoes are carried out, which

newspaper recently), is in its final stages. A Local Government Division official informed this daily that once the draft is finalised, it will be sent to the ministries of public administration and finance for vetting. But the question is, why is the government wasting so much time to finalise the draft of a policy which should be of high importance for it? Unless of course, dengue is no longer a priority for the government.

The country’s healthcare system is scrambling and often failing—especially during the second and the ongoing extended Covid-19 wave—to support the people in fighting a global pandemic. In the midst of this, the outbreak of another disease would be disastrous for everyone, not least the common people who run the risk of being deprived of medical care due to a lack of adequate healthcare facilities. While why the government has not been able to strengthen its healthcare infrastructure in the last year and a half is a separate debate, why it did not take coordinated measures to prevent the rise of an old enemy—dengue—remains a big question.

Had the government been able to perceive the risk posed by dengue and taken proactive measures to control its spread, even before the season came, perhaps so many people may not have needed to be hospitalised for treatment today. The Vector Control Policy and an integrated vector management mechanism should have been in place by now to address this problem. But perhaps our government is reactive in nature and thus they take sporadic, stop-gap measures in reaction to certain situations. This has happened in the case of Covid-19 and is also happening in the case of dengue management. While 2019 should have been a lesson for the government, clearly it has not been so.

The government must immediately set in place the policy and its implementation mechanisms to salvage the situation. It is already late, but there is still time for a comprehensive and integrated approach involving the concerned ministries, the city corporations across the country, and the citizens of this nation to fight the spread of dengue. Covid-19 is already tearing our healthcare system apart. We must do everything we can to avoid an epidemic amidst a pandemic.



Parents pour water on a child suffering from dengue fever at Mugda Medical College and Hospital during the outbreak in 2019.

PHOTO: STAR/AMRAN HOSSAIN

in containing the disease is another factor that is leading to its spike. While mobile courts are fining private properties, they cannot ensure proactive cooperation from the people through penalties.

However, all this could have been addressed had there been a Vector Control Policy in place, which could have been implemented in sync across the country, and throughout the year, to not only control the breeding of Aedes but also Culex mosquitoes, and other vectors. “There should be an integrated vector management mechanism in place. A vector management policy includes four major components: environmental control, biological control, chemical control, and community involvement,”

both the city corporations are currently doing across Dhaka. Finally, community involvement relates to the proactive collaboration of the common people with the city corporations in fighting the spread of mosquito-borne diseases, which is especially needed to contain the spike of dengue.

This integrated vector management mechanism is missing in our country and as a result, while some measures are being taken by the various city corporations, these are not yielding the best possible results. For the last year and a half, the government has been sitting on a Vector Control Policy—the draft of which, according to LGRD minister Md Tazul Islam (as reported by this

The second main new investment will be in offshore wind energy in the Bay of Bengal using the latest technologies of powerful wind turbines that can float and also withstand high wind speeds during cyclones.

REPRESENTATIONAL IMAGE

Vulnerable countries take the lead in tackling climate change

POLITICS OF CLIMATE CHANGE

SALEEMUL HUQ

LAST week, Bangladesh hosted the climate finance summit called by the nearly 50 vulnerable developing countries that are part of the Climate Vulnerable Forum (CVF), which is chaired by Bangladesh for the current two-year term. The summit was moderated by the former President of the Maldives, Mohamed Nasheed, who is the CVF Ambassador for Ambition, and was opened by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. This summit put forward a resounding call for all countries to take action to tackle the planetary emergency that we are facing. The heads of government from previous chairs of the CVF, the Marshall Islands and Ethiopia, also spoke, as well as UN Secretary-General António Guterres, US Climate Envoy John Kerry, COP26

President-designate Alok Sharma of the UK, and the heads of the World Bank, Asian Development Bank, and other high-level speakers.

The meeting gave a collective call for all countries to fulfill their promises to keep the global temperature below 1.5 degrees Celsius, as well as for the rich countries to fulfill their promise to provide USD 100 billion to developing countries to tackle climate change. The summit meeting was followed by a roundtable of the Finance Ministers of the CVF countries, who call themselves the V20, which came out with the important message that the climate vulnerable developing countries are not just sitting idle and waiting for support, but rather are moving ahead with their own respective Climate Prosperity Plans—which aim for these countries to take the initiative to not just build resilience to face the climate change impacts that they are already facing, but rather to prosper despite these impacts. In fact, the

PM declared that Bangladesh will be the first of the countries to develop its plan, named the Mujib Climate Prosperity Plan (MCPP) after the Father of the Nation. It is aimed at a decade-long effort to ensure game-changing actions on adaptation, as well as energy and capacity building, for Bangladesh to transform its development pathway going forward.

The three main transformational aspects of the MCPP will be to invest in Locally Led Adaptation (LLA) in all the most vulnerable zones of the country and enable the communities themselves to lead in the adaptation activities. Bangladesh is already a recognised world leader in LLA and aims to share its experiential knowledge with other CVF countries going forward. The second main new investment will be in offshore wind energy in the Bay of Bengal using the latest technologies of powerful wind turbines that can float and also withstand high wind speeds during cyclones. This can be a game changer for

providing energy in the country. The third transformational strategy is to invest in our young girls and boys to make them into the climate champions of tomorrow, who can help not just Bangladesh tackle climate change but also go and help other countries as well.

Thus, the MCPP is aiming to transform Bangladesh into a global leader in tackling climate change by 2030. The message from the vulnerable developing countries to the rest of the world is for everyone to do what is needed in the spirit of global solidarity, as the climate emergency is already upon us and every country must do what it can to tackle it if the world is to have any chance at overcoming the problem. The vulnerable developing countries are aiming to lead the world on this pathway to climate prosperity.

Dr Saleemul Huq is Director of the International Centre for Climate Change and Development at the Independent University, Bangladesh.