

Rapid urbanisation and a rise in infectious diseases

A call for reorientation of city planning



INCOME growth leads to increased urbanisation, which due to higher concentration of the population in smaller geographical areas can cause higher rates of infectious diseases. Bangladesh is no exception to this phenomena.

Urbanisation means higher concentration and connectedness of people which helps infections spread faster. About 56 percent of the world's total population live in urban areas. In Bangladesh, about 38 percent of the people live in urban areas. More than 60 percent of the urban population live in only four metropolitan cities which are Dhaka, Chattogram, Rajshahi and Khulna. The urban population of Bangladesh is projected to reach 50 percent of the total population by 2035.

So far, urbanisation issues have primarily focused on economic and migration aspects but in recent years, there has been an increasing interest by academics and professionals on the question of greater urban concentration and the emerging health and disease related challenges. Several epidemics in recent times including the current Covid-19 pandemic have caused serious disruptions to people's lives and livelihoods across the world. The mega-cities have witnessed the main concentration of these diseases in most countries to begin with—which then ended up spreading to medium sized and sometimes smaller cities as well.

The spread of infectious diseases is often facilitated by international travel and trade. The Ebola outbreak in 2014 spread very fast in the densely populated African cities across several countries. Increased air travel connecting large cities caused the spread of the virus from one country to another and was primarily concentrated in the largest

cities. Several viruses like dengue, malaria, chikun-gunya, influenza, measles and tuberculosis, and coronaviruses like SARS, MERS and Covid-19 spread fast from one city to another through international travel and trade. Therefore, there is a need for greater thinking in the management of fast-spreading epidemics when designing urban centres and urban health policies and programmes.

Infectious diseases can spread in a variety of ways. Some infectious diseases also

cooperation among countries, UN bodies, mainly WHO, and vaccine producers. However, instead of fighting these diseases head-on, it is better to prepare and prevent them before they reach a pandemic level.

In Bangladesh, due to its smaller geographical area with unplanned growth of cities and higher density of urban population, urban residents face greater health risks from infectious diseases. Between 2000 and 2020, income growth has increased the demand

demand for urban housing which resulted in higher concentration of people in cities. The high demand for cheap labour led to rural-urban migration and the mushrooming of slums in cities which have poor water, sanitation and other hygienic facilities that help prevent and contain disease outbreaks. Children and women in slums suffer from infectious diseases like chickenpox, cholera, common cold, hepatitis A and B, malaria, measles, meningitis, pneumonia, smallpox and tuberculosis.

In Bangladesh, public health management in the cities is not as good as it should be. The health system does not take into account the changing demographic, socio-economic and poverty aspect. Health interventions should re-evaluate the risks of infectious diseases in view of the increased density of the population in cities, especially in the slums. More than one-fourth of the population of Dhaka live in slums. Health policymakers should be aware that this type of unhealthy living environment can result in the spread of infectious diseases as well as be a source of transporting these diseases to other cities within the country and beyond. This same argument is true for other countries from where people travel to our cities by air, land and sea.

There is however, a severe lack of data that affects our understanding when it comes to the challenges of the city-to-city transmission process. International collaboration is required to generate improved information on the vulnerability of urban dwellers which will help mitigate the risk of disease spreading in a globalised world. The urban public health system should have good preparedness and capability to respond to threats of infectious diseases. These include a range of measures such as stronger disease surveillance, information dissemination, training of health workers and citywide health coverage capacity for disease prevention and treatment. Delay in diagnosis, isolation and treatment causes speedy transmission of

viral diseases to a bigger population.

There is a burgeoning interest today on the relationship between urbanisation and disease pattern characterised by a lifestyle dominated by the consumption of unhealthy food, air-conditioned living, greater mobility and interaction of the people, compact office and work-spaces, high-rise markets, multi-storied educational institutions and hospitals, combined with inadequate open spaces, lakes and parks. We now know that the spread of infectious diseases are caused by behavioural norms among others, and thus the urban planners are now recommending that human concentration should be minimised for a healthy urban living. The population should be spread out which basically means low-height residential living with all the necessary amenities required in an urban area such as schools, play grounds, health and recreational facilities. The new concept of healthy urbanisation which is calling for revisiting the notion of urbanisation we previously conceptualised, refers to an urban space that seamlessly merges with the surrounding rural areas to create a low-density suburban environment. The new concept requires that the industrial zones be located outside the city in the suburban areas so that millions of workers do not need to travel all the way to and from the city centre on a daily basis, increasing the chances of infectious diseases spreading.

It is very difficult to practice infectious disease control measures in the densely populated urban areas in accordance with the health regulations. Infectious diseases spread fast in overcrowded, unsanitary environments, and the continuous conversion of wet lands, deforestation, filling of rivers, canals and low lands are exacerbating the situation. Future city development plans have to seriously take into consideration the health needs of the population, with greater focus on the issue of infectious diseases.

Dr Nawshad Ahmed, an ex-UN official, is an economist and urban planner.



This aerial view of the Korail slum shows how difficult it would be to practice social distancing in such a congested area.

PHOTO: STAR

spread in more than one way. The more common ways are: direct contact with an infected person, animal, or their discharges; direct contact with a contaminated object, contaminated food and water; and disease-carrying insects. These infectious diseases, due to their primary concentration in urban areas in several countries at a time, become a global concern requiring regional and international

for imported goods, and international trade has increased more than seven times in the country. Passenger travel has increased manifold during this period. In addition to air travel, maritime trade which carries both manufactured products and transports people, plants and animals, are believed to spread diseases across continents as well. Income growth also caused rapid rise in

PROJECT SYNDICATE

A US-Russia deal on Afghanistan?



DURING their June 16 Geneva summit, Russian President Vladimir Putin reportedly offered US President Joe Biden the use of Russian military bases in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan in order to coordinate actions vis-à-vis Afghanistan. The Kremlin's motives, of course, are not altruistic. Russia wants to

prevent the United States from building its own bases in the region. But Putin's offer is tempting, and Biden may well find a way to accept it.

Central Asia, a region nearly the size of the European Union nestled between Russia and China, is thus back in international headlines—again because of bad news, and again in connection with the violence and instability in Afghanistan. Biden's decision to withdraw the remaining US troops from the country will bring to an end a 20-year war that has cost America nearly USD 2.3 trillion and failed to achieve any of its goals. And analysts now warn that the ongoing Taliban offensive could lead to full-scale civil war, a surge in drug trafficking, massive migration, and the spread of Islamic fundamentalism to neighbouring countries.

The results of the US-led war were disastrous. According to official figures, 2,312 US military personnel have been killed, and 20,666 wounded, in Afghanistan since 2001. And more than 3,800 US private-security contractors have lost their lives.

But the Afghan people have suffered the most. According to the Costs of War project at Brown University, the conflict has killed at least 47,245 civilians and 66,000 to 69,000 Afghan troops. It has contributed to the total of 2.7 million Afghans forced to flee the country over the past four decades, mainly to Pakistan, Iran, and Europe, and it has left more than 3.5 million of Afghanistan's 40 million people internally displaced.

With the US troop withdrawal almost complete,

the Biden administration says it will continue to support the Afghan government from a distance in order to help contain the Taliban and other Islamist militant groups. But, in order to maintain a regional foothold, the US needs bases to house troops, drones, fighter jets, and artillery.

Among Afghanistan's neighbours, neither Iran nor China will allow US bases on their territory under any circumstances. Pakistan has also resolutely rejected the idea. But America has previously had large airbases in some of Afghanistan's Central Asian neighbours

minister during the final year of the US presence at Manas.) The basing arrangements agreed with Russia's strategic allies in Central Asia were made possible by a personal agreement between Putin and former US President George W Bush. Now, Putin is extending a similar offer to Biden.

The US has few if any alternatives. Russian public opinion strongly opposes US plans to regain a foothold in Central Asia, and the Kremlin has reportedly warned the Central Asian countries that the US is more interested in containing Russia, China, and Iran than

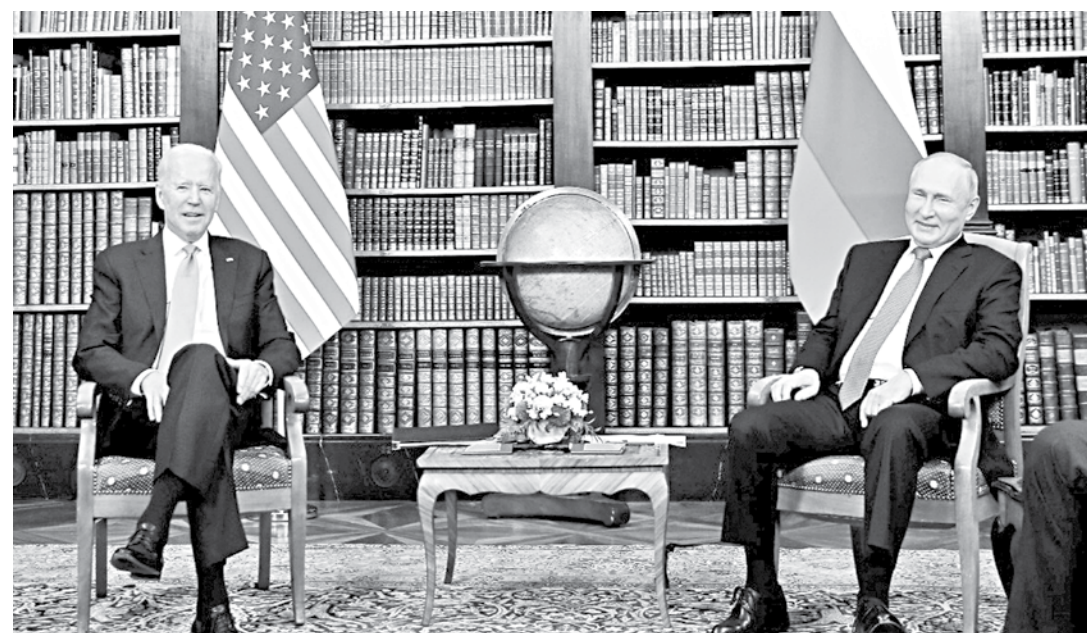
promised that the group would not cross the borders of Central Asian states, would fight other radical Islamist groups, and would forbid drug production in Afghanistan.

At the same time, three Central Asian countries—Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan—are likely to refuse the Biden administration's request that they temporarily host up to 10,000 at-risk Afghans who previously collaborated with US forces. Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan's recent statement about the US-led invasion's adverse effects on his country, which hosts 2.7 million Afghan refugees, has impressed other Central Asian leaders. As Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov stated bluntly in mid-June, "None of our allies [in Central Asia] have announced their intention to expose their territories and populations to such a risk."

Everyone knows that only Putin can resolve the current impasse, and at the Geneva summit he made the first move. While the US and Russia had previously agreed on other issues without a presidential meeting, the situation in Afghanistan apparently required a face-to-face discussion. Biden, too, may well have realised that the Kremlin now holds the key to the continued US presence in Afghanistan.

All of the other issues on the summit's agenda—cyber espionage, Ukraine, Iran, and Syria—were predictable and yielded no visible breakthroughs. The Biden administration must now decide whether to cooperate with Russia and its allies in Afghanistan. Putin's proposal may give America the chance to save face and shore up its shaky international reputation following its hasty withdrawal. Most important, the US and Russia must aim to ensure a future free of conflict and chaos for Afghanistan's long-suffering people.

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Russian President Vladimir Putin and US President Joe Biden attend a meeting at Villa La Grange in Geneva, Switzerland on June 16, 2021.

PHOTO: REUTERS

to the north—from 2001 to 2014 at Manas International Airport in Kyrgyzstan, and from 2001 to 2005 at the Karshi-Khanabad air base in Uzbekistan. (I was Kyrgyzstan's deputy prime

in maintaining control over the situation in Afghanistan. Russia further strengthened its position during recent talks in Moscow with high-ranking Taliban representatives, who

Biden's decision to withdraw the remaining US troops from the country will bring to an end a 20-year war that has cost America nearly USD 2.3 trillion and failed to achieve any of its goals.

QUOTABLE Quote

TILDA SWINTON
Scottish actress (born November 5, 1960)

There is something insane about a lack of doubt. Doubt—to me, anyway—is what makes you human, and without doubt, even the righteous lose their grip, not only on reality but also on their humanity.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Message target
- 5 Turkish title
- 9 Essays
- 11 Big pipes
- 13 Monopoly buy
- 14 Response to "Danke"
- 15 Ump's call
- 16 Helped in a heist
- 18 Learned sort
- 20 O, sometimes
- 21 Bittern's cousin
- 22 Muppet prawn
- 23 Toast spread
- 24 "What was that?"
- 25 Milky stone
- 27 Uninspired
- 29 Ocean off Cal.
- 30 Flooded

DOWN

- 1 Friend of D'Artagnan
- 2 Catcher's position
- 3 Win big
- 4 Wide shoe letters
- 5 Fossil resin
- 6 Clip
- 7 Leave, so to speak
- 8 Pay to play
- 10 Ski event
- 12 Marshy grass
- 17 Outlaw
- 19 Spoken
- 22 Platter (Polynesian menu choice)
- 24 "Without Me" singer
- 25 Speculate
- 26 Discussion groups
- 27 Dog's doc
- 28 Downfall
- 30 One who apportions
- 31 Forbidden acts
- 33 Wine valley
- 37 Ruby of film

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BEETLE BAILEY

SEE, WREN? THIS IS YOU WHEN YOU WERE A BABY.

AND THIS IS YOU NOW.

THE DIFFERENCES WILL BE MORE STARTLING WHEN YOU GET TO BE MY AGE.

BABY BLUES

LT. FUZZ MUST BE FEELING AWFULLY LONELY.

WHY DO YOU SAY THAT?

I HEARD HIS IMAGINARY FRIEND UNFRIENDED HIM.

YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

L I A M A S S E S
A D L I B S L A N T O
B A L S A T O N T O
O H O S P O T T E R
R O T T E R A R E
D I N E R O A D
F E N A I F
A C T P O T T E R
B L O T T E R A L E
L A T E R T A B L E S
E R A S E O B O E S
D E L T S C O N E

BY MORT WALKER

BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT