

Let's take the fight to Aedes

After 19 hotspots identified in Dhaka, authorities must ramp up dengue response

IT is heartening to know that the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS) has recently identified 19 Aedes hotspots in Dhaka—areas that are extremely vulnerable to dengue due to the widespread presence of Aedes mosquito, the carrier of the virus. Of them, 10 are in Dhaka North City Corporation (DNCC) and nine in Dhaka South City Corporation (DSCC). The survey, conducted from July 29 to August 7 in 100 areas of 98 wards of the two city corporations, is the first known quantitative risk assessment of this year's dengue season in the capital, where most of the dengue cases have been reported. If followed with quick and coordinated interventions, it will be quite helpful in containing the spread of the virus. It can help narrow down the focus in our fight against an "enemy" which, until recently, was largely ignored because of its significantly more infectious and dangerous counterpart—the coronavirus.

According to the survey, Basabo and Goran are at the top of the list of risky areas in DSCC with 73.3 points on the Breteau Index, whereas in DNCC, Moghbazar and New Eskaton are the riskiest areas with 56.7 points. The Breteau Index reflects the number of containers with Aedes larvae per 100 houses inspected. As well as the 19 hotspots, there are 26 other areas in DNCC and 30 in DSCC that got 20 points, meaning those are at risk as well. There are more insights to be drawn from this survey: in the areas identified as risky, the highest 18.5 percent of Aedes larvae was found on flooded floors, 12.1 percent in plastic drums, 9.4 percent in plastic buckets, 7.5 percent in flower tubs, 6.9 percent in discarded tyres and 3.2 percent in pots.

While there can be still places having escaped the radar of the DGHS team—who visited about 3,000 houses as part of the survey—what we have now should give the authorities of two city corporations ample ammunition to take the fight to dengue, rather than groping in the dark for a solution, passing the buck for failure on to each other, or the public in general, or randomly spraying larvicides/insecticides without a plan or target.

The latest revelations come at a time when the dengue situation shows no signs of abetting. At least 291 dengue patients were hospitalised in 24 hours till Sunday morning. Of them, only 32 are from outside Dhaka. This takes the total number of infected since January 2021 to at least 8,041 people, of whom 5,383 got infected in the last 22 days. Twelve people died last month and 24 in the previous 22 days. The rising trend is a serious cause for concern, coming as it does against a backdrop of still-very-high coronavirus infections, overwhelming the entire healthcare system. We can't handle another major crisis lurking in our backyard. The authorities must ramp up their efforts to tackle the dengue crisis by undertaking an inclusive, well-coordinated response plan, not just in Dhaka but across the country.

Remove all confusion regarding flights to India

Focus on getting them started

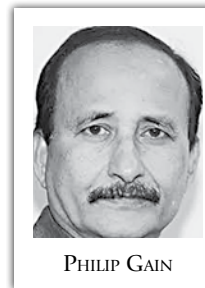
STATEMENTS made by the foreign minister and Biman on August 17 and 22, respectively, have led to another bout of confusion for air passengers wishing to travel to India from Bangladesh and vice versa. On August 17, the foreign minister said that flight operations to India will resume from August 20, but later he said his statement was not definitive, and what he meant to say was that flights between the two countries might resume at that time. However, following his earlier statement, Biman issued a press release saying that flights to Delhi and Kolkata will resume on August 22.

Despite these statements and the issuance of the press release, air travel between the two countries are still to start and, according to a report published by this newspaper on Monday, the Civil Aviation Authority, Bangladesh (CAAB) is yet to receive a response from India about resuming flights after they, on August 4, sent a letter to the Directorate General of Civil Aviation of India, seeking its approval for flight resumption under the air bubble agreement. This means that all the previous statements were issued without the approval of the CAAB. After Biman's announcement, many passengers bought their tickets to India and those currently in India bought their tickets to return home. And these passengers are now stuck in limbo.

It is extremely unprofessional of Biman to have issued such a press release without verifying through official channels whether flights between India and Bangladesh were to resume and when. Just because the foreign minister issued a public statement does not give Biman a legitimate excuse for not following up with the CAAB for approval before going ahead and announcing its flight schedule to the public. This is the second time within a span of two weeks that Biman has placed its passengers in a difficult position. Earlier on August 10, a row between Biman and its online ticket sales partner led to all Biman ticket sales online being suspended. That led to untold sufferings for the public, who had to physically go and collect their tickets, risking themselves unnecessarily during a time of pandemic.

We expect much better from our national flag carrier. Such mismanagement on the part of Biman officials is nothing but humiliating. Biman should immediately offer an apology to all its passengers and, more importantly, try to help them sort out the inconvenience that it has caused. In the meantime, what is also essential for the authorities to do is to remove all confusion regarding the matter and focus on taking the necessary steps to resume flights.

Tea workers routinely ignored during the Covid-19 pandemic



PHILIP GAIN

PABAN Paul, 38, a tea worker of Rampur Tea Garden in Bahubal upazila (Habiganj district), died of Covid-19 on July 6. Rampur Tea Garden is a *furi* (division) of Rashidpur Tea Estate, owned by Finlay Tea Co. Ltd. Paban had fever from June 27. On July 1, he started having difficulties in breathing. The following day, he developed severe breathing problems and was taken to Bahubal Upazila Health Complex. According to Paban's family, the upazila health complex could not treat him. It referred him to Habiganj district hospital. However, the Sheikh Hasina Medical College in Habiganj also failed to treat him. He was then admitted to MAG Osmani Medical College in Sylhet the same day (July 2). He got a bed in the general ward. On July 3, he was moved to ICU.

Paban was treated at ICU up to July 6—his condition turned critical and he died at 3:22 pm. His Covid-19 test sample was collected as soon as he was admitted to Osmani. At 4:30 pm on the day he died, it was confirmed that he was Covid positive. A healthy man without any known underlying conditions, Paban Paul is known to be the first reported casualty of Covid-19 in the tea gardens in Habiganj district.

After Paban's death, his family members got tested for Covid-19 too, but none of them were positive. According to Ajoy Singh (24), a nephew of Paban's who accompanied him to hospitals, he checked with the tea garden dispensary regarding Covid-19 tests, but he was told that he should make his own arrangements. The only immediate step taken by the garden management was to offer firewood for Paban's cremation and the funeral meal on August 5 for the family and a few others. The next thing the management is likely to do is recruit Paban's wife, mostly likely as a tea leaf picker in his place. And period! The company has done its duty to Paban's family.

Is it really so simple?

Nripen Paul, joint general secretary of Bangladesh Cha Sramik Union (BCSU), the only trade union for around 100,000 registered workers in Sylhet and Chattogram divisions, believes tea gardens must do more. According to the Bangladesh Labour Rules 2015, the owner of tea gardens must provide "indoor" and "outdoor" treatment to its workers

and their family members. Purabi Paul, wife of Paban, reports the family spent Tk 85,000 (including a bribe of Tk 30,000 to secure a ICU bed) for his treatment. Will the owner refund, in full or part, the cost of his treatment? "We do not know how to approach the owner for this," says Purabi, who is now the only breadwinner of the four-member family.

Their ordeal demonstrates just how helpless tea workers are when infected with Covid-19. Most tea workers will testify that the management in any tea garden is least interested in carrying out Covid-19 tests of their workers. Why? According to different sources, owners fear that if tests are carried out, many cases

and upazila health complexes."

Covid-19 tests in government facilities may not sound expensive. At a district or upazila health complex booth, it costs Tk 100. But for a tea worker whose daily cash pay is Tk 120, this is expensive. Also, getting these tests requires travel costs and at least a day off work. Then, if one tests positive, the resulting treatment cost can be far too high for a tea worker to bear.

As a result, those in the tea gardens testing on their own and testing positive are having a very hard time. Hari Das (60) of Rajnagar Tea Estate in Rajnagar upazila (Moulvibazar district) is one such worker, who was a registered worker for 10 years and a casual worker for five years

implemented by the government to control the spread of the coronavirus, the tea gardens have continued operations throughout, including during the current wave of Covid-19 and the most recent lockdown. With a week off for Eid, a strict lockdown began on July 23, when all industries, including garments factories, remained closed. However, the tea gardens were the only exception. The Bangladesh Tea Board in a circular classified tea as "foodstuff", and its production and sale was exempted from the lockdown.

During this period, many started to believe that the tea gardens are a safe haven from the coronavirus. They have been proven wrong. There are allegations that tea workers have been willfully exposed to Covid-19, given that tea gardens remained fully operational even though safety equipment for tea workers are miserably short in supply and Covid-19 tests for workers and their families are just inadequate. On the one hand, the owners are reluctant about providing tests, and on the other, the workers have a tendency to hide illness unless the symptoms become too explicit due to a fear of losing their daily wages.

We are yet to get a clear picture of the pandemic in the tea gardens, which remain largely isolated. The fear is that the Delta variant has spread into the communities in labour lines. The tea gardens in Assam, close to Sylhet, became a hotbed for Covid-19 related deaths during the second wave of the virus. According to a report in *Northeast Today*, 105 deaths were reported between April 1 and June 28, 2021 from the tea estates. In the first wave of Covid-19 last year, deaths in the tea gardens of both Assam and Bangladesh were few. However, in the current wave, Covid-19 deaths have dramatically increased.

Against this backdrop, the tea workers and their communities require urgent attention from the state and owners of tea gardens. Massive awareness campaigns, garden level tests for coronavirus, distribution of mask and sanitiser in adequate quantities and proper physical distancing at all stages of tea leaf picking, depositing and processing are some urgent needs in the tea gardens. Tea workers have brought huge profit and comfort to their owners, which includes state agencies that own 17 tea gardens. Now, at this time of crisis, they should treat the tea workers as a priority group for tests and vaccination.

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Tea workers at a collection point during the pandemic.

PHOTO: PHILIP GAIN

of the coronavirus will be detected, and Covid positive workers will have to be sent into quarantine for at least 14 days with pay. They recognise the risks of Covid-19 in the tea gardens, but are unwilling to bear the associated financial costs.

According to Rambhajan Kairi, an executive adviser of BCSU, the management has, on the other hand, shown interest in vaccination, and in helping workers and their families to register for it. However, on the issue of testing for Covid-19 in the tea gardens, the civil surgeon of Sylhet district, Dr Chowdhury Jalal Uddin Murshed, said, "I wanted to initiate testing booths in the tea gardens, but the expert committee in Dhaka advised me not to do so, because there is a risk that Covid-19 will spread when collecting samples. Like others, the tea workers have to come to sample collection booths at district sadar hospital

at the manager's bungalow. His family took him to Moulvibazar Sadar Hospital with breathing problems, and he tested positive on July 7. However, because he is no longer a registered worker, he had to face even greater struggles, since he lost his wages for every day he was absent from work.

His family, already in hardship, reportedly spent Tk 13,000 for his treatment, including on oxygen, which he needed for one night. His son Babul Das (22) shared how difficult it was for the family to meet treatment costs, adding "the management has not contributed anything for my father's treatment." The owners very often do not provide medical expenses even to registered workers—an allegation that is widespread in the tea gardens.

Regardless of the many general holidays and lockdowns that have been

We must urgently prioritise adaptation to address the climate emergency

MIZAN R KHAN and SALEEMUL HUQ

THE recently-published report of Working Group-I of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) is a renewed wakeup call on the urgency of taking action at the global level to address climate change. It has, with more accuracy and confidence, confirmed that at least one degree Celsius of temperature rise compared to pre-industrial level can be attributed to human activities. The recent climate events in North America, Europe and Asia, such as heat stress, wildfires and floods, are ample evidence of runaway climate change.

Against this, what is urgently needed is exponentially enhanced adaptation actions, particularly in the most vulnerable low-income countries. Obviously, COP26 to be held in Glasgow in just three months is expected to negotiate an ambitious programme on adaptation. The July ministerial meeting held in London reached an understanding on putting adaptation on a higher political plane while moving forward. It may be mentioned that for the last few years, framing of adaptation has been expanded by multidisciplinary thinking from the national to global levels, requiring global cooperation and multi-stakeholder engagement. Accordingly, this norm of globalising responsibility for adaptation is recognised in the Paris Agreement, as a "global goal" and a "global challenge" (Articles 7.1 and 7.2).

Although six years have passed since the adoption of the Agreement, not much progress has been made in operationalising the Global Center on Adaptation (GGA), nor is there any concrete roadmap to address this challenge. So, COP26 is expected to establish a clear process of defining the GGA going forward. Some agencies, including the Green Climate Fund, adopted the potential of transformational adaptation as a criteria for approving projects/programmes for funding. The challenge is how to achieve the transformational adaptation under the existing global socioeconomic order.

Transformational adaptation is often contrasted with incremental adaptation, as a continuum, beginning with reactive, coping strategies. The former calls for a system-wide change, a restructuring

of human and ecological systems as an integrated whole, with a focus on sustainability of natural resources and man-made artefacts. This grounds human actions in spaces/places in the natural world and questions the effectiveness of existing systems, social injustices and power imbalances. But incremental adaptation happens within the existing socioeconomic structure, which works with the dominant actors without conflicts with prevailing interests and values. The proponents of this model argue for a slow process to effect change while working within the system, as the national or global dynamics do not support a radical change in the system, which is founded on the neoliberal paradigm that values market justice more than procedural and distributive justice.

Therefore, it can be argued that as a pragmatic approach, incremental

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adaptation can be a vehicle for transformational adaptation (despite being a slow process), but only if it proceeds as part of a well-planned, long term strategy under current and future climate change. However, the process must be dynamic, without being locked into the inertia against change. For this to happen, there must be a few fundamental elements.

The first is locally-led adaptation (LLA). We may recall that the now-defunct Global Commission on Adaptation had suggested embracing the LLA track for all the right reasons. A rich body of evidence already establishes the efficacy of LLA beyond contestation, as adaptation is inherently local or regional, because climate impacts differ spatially, across regions and across socioeconomic groups in any country. So, adaptation actions

must remain bottom-up, with national governments providing for a facilitative policy-institutional framework.

In fact, LLA can be regarded as a shift in adaptation paradigm, meaning a shift in fundamental approaches and assumptions in existing practices. If we really mean it as a paradigm shift, we must ask upfront the questions of Who, What, How, etc. in adaptation policy domain. It may be mentioned that adaptation is viewed often from a "technocratic" perspective, for investment decisions, to build climate-proof resilient infrastructure. But this view does not address power and political dynamics, which is needed for a holistic perspective of adaptation that addresses the underlying causes of vulnerability, such as poverty, marginalisation, structural inequalities, economic, political and social disempowerment, etc. This latter lens is about transformational adaptation. However, available literature shows that even now, overwhelming practices in adaptation are driven not by local actors, but by those living far away from the locales or places increasingly pounded by extreme climate events as part of the new normal. Without a fundamental shift from hitherto centralised approaches to LLA, even incremental adaptation cannot be achieved sustainably.

In this effort, adequate funding for gradual implementation of LLA can make a difference. However, only three percent of the least developed countries' (LDCs) adaptation finance needs are now met with global support. Therefore, the following need to be agreed upon at COP26: First, scaling-up of adaptation funding to 50 percent of climate finance from the current level of only 20 percent globally. This had been pledged more than a decade ago by the developed countries and global funding agencies. Second, as pledged by the LDC Vision 2050, at least 70 percent of climate finance needs to be delivered to local communities, as opposed to the less than 10 percent that is currently reaching them. Third, COP26 must agree on a programme to improve access to adaptation finance, particularly for low-income nations, which includes reducing procedural complexities. Fourth, poor communities must get adaptation funding only on a grant basis, against the increasing trend of loan provision. Fifth, COP26 must agree that the five

percent share of funds generated from market mechanism activities under Article 6 of the Paris Agreement is channeled to the Adaptation Fund. Finally, the expedited direct access modalities (EDA) initiated earlier by the Adaptation Fund and now the Green Climate Fund must scale devolution of funding to sub-national and local community levels so that programmes can be designed and implemented directly by local actors, with resources under their direct control. This internationally-supported funding must be complemented by national and local resources.

The successful implementation of LLA requires a change in capacity building at all levels, focusing particularly on local actors including elected local representatives, local government officials, local entrepreneurs and community leaders. There should also be a focus on building local youth and women leadership. We may recall that earlier, supply-driven, short-term project-based, foreign consultancy-led capacity building under donor-supported Technical Assistance programmes did not work well. So, we must shift towards a demand-driven mode in capacity building. What we really need is a transformative capacity building model for transformational adaptation. This is the collective local agency to initiate social and economic transformation that gradually moves away from unsustainable and disempowering trajectories, towards a new social-ecological trajectory that grounds adaptation actions within the assimilative and regenerative capacities of both man-made and natural capital.

Finally, as experience in adaptation interventions is relatively new, a learning-by-doing approach has to be taken. This is where action research is extremely important, which integrates local/indigenous and scientific knowledge and methods. In this process, big data will not do, as national and global aggregate data mask spatial, socioeconomic and gender differentiation. The use of sub-national and local level data for measuring the process of monitoring, evaluation and learning would be the most appropriate when it comes to locally-led adaptation.

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