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Government should heed the UN’s concerns

Review DSA, address growing inequality and violence against women

THE UN has expressed its concerns over shrinking civic space, growing inequality and violence against women in Bangladesh. During a recently held discussion at the Foreign Service Academy, UN Resident Coordinator Mia Seppo mentioned how the pandemic had led to growing inequality and violence against women not only in Bangladesh, but across the world, and said that action on both national and global levels was needed to address these issues. Most importantly, she called on the government to make the Digital Security Act (DSA) compliant with international human rights standards.

Undoubtedly, the shrinking of civic space is a major concern in the country right now. Freedom of expression and opinion is under severe threat as people’s voices are being suppressed using laws such as the DSA. Cases of enforced disappearances have created fear among the citizens. Poverty has increased in society, while violence against women and children have become major issues of concern.

It is time for the government to seriously reconsider dropping some of the more controversial provisions of the DSA that have repeatedly been used against the citizens. The Editors’ Council and the TIB called for review of this law several times in the past. As the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) has looked into the DSA and made some recommendations, we now hope that the law ministry will take steps to implement them. Needless to say, the DSA should be made compliant with the international standards. If Bangladesh wants to work as a functioning democracy, it needs to get rid of such repressive laws and work to protect civic space. We also need to ratify the convention on enforced disappearances, which the UN advised us to do.

Moreover, as Bangladesh is going to graduate from the LDC status, it should now focus more on eliminating inequality from society. There are several steps that the government can take in this regard, such as expanding its social safety net programmes and addressing corruption—which ultimately leads to increased poverty and inequality. At the same time, the government should make sincere efforts to stop violence against women and children in the country, which is also a major barrier to the country’s development.

An excellent decision by JS watchdog

The government project on an ECA in Cox’s Bazar must be scrapped

WE wholeheartedly support a parliamentary body’s decision to strongly oppose the public administration ministry’s plan to build a civil service academy in Cox’s Bazar on 700 acres of land that has been declared as a protected forest and ecologically critical area (ECA). According to the chairman of the parliamentary watchdog, it would be unacceptable for a government department to take the reserved forest land at a time when the government is trying to reclaim forest land that has been grabbed by different individuals and organisations. We, too, have previously mentioned in this column how this would set a dangerous precedent, and could open doors for private entities to follow suit.

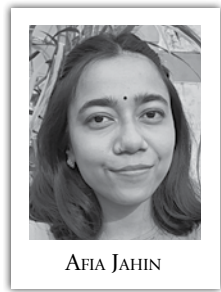
In 2018, the Cox’s Bazar district administration sought clearance from the Department of Environment (DoE) for the construction of the Bangabandhu Academy of Public Administration on the 700 acres of land adjacent to the Cox’s Bazar-Teknaf Marine Drive. According to some sources, the name of Bangabandhu was used in the proposed name so that the project could jump through bureaucratic hoops with ease. As distasteful as that move was, it seemed to have worked somewhat, as the DoE cleared the project.

Nevertheless, according to the parliamentary watchdog, the respective government department and the Prime Minister’s Office were not properly informed about the type of land that the public administration ministry wanted to use. Otherwise, the construction of the training centre would never have been approved. Having been informed that the land has 100 acres of orchards created through social afforestation under the afforestation project in the coastal areas to address the adverse effects of climate change—and it’s a hilly area that is a habitat to different species of flora and fauna—the parliamentary standing committee has recommended that the government take steps to stop the project and relocate it to somewhere else.

It is clear that the environment and ecology of the area would be severely damaged if the project is set up there. Given that the area is already under serious pressure from the influx of the Rohingya, which has resulted in the razing of some 6,000 acres of forestland in southern Cox’s Bazar, further destruction of forest areas is not something we can afford. Therefore, we second the parliamentary body’s call to the DoE to withdraw its clearance for the project. We also ask the land ministry to reclaim the plot from the public administration ministry. The move to set up the training centre on the ECA is unconstitutional, and we hope that it is stopped and that no such initiatives are pursued in the future.

Are we headed towards another dengue crisis?

The experience of 2019 outbreak should have been enough for the authorities to prepare better this year



AFIA JAHIN

AGAINST all odds (read: the non-existent movement restrictions and the maintenance of health safety guidelines almost becoming a practice-as-you-please thing), it seems the rate of Covid-19 infections in Bangladesh is finally going down, and hopefully nearing the “safe” and much-desired mark of five percent or less. This is, without a doubt, a welcome development, given the phased reopening of schools and, soon, of universities. Lest we rest easy, though, the seasonal dengue menace has been making itself known in the country for the last few months.

15,701, with 5,345 people diagnosed this month alone.

Dengue has caused 59 deaths in the country so far this year, according to the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS). While most of the cases of infections have been reported in Dhaka, dengue—as any other virus—has started spreading outwards. For instance, of the 307 cases reported between September 14 and 15, about 20.52 percent were cases reported outside the capital. This is significant when we consider the fact that, of all the dengue cases this year until September 15, only around 10.79 percent were detected outside Dhaka.

However, the question now is not how we can combat this dengue surge, but why we did not anticipate this situation in the first place. Did the 2020 outbreak of Covid-19 pandemic wash away all the memories of the horrid dengue crisis that

the DGHS. While the monsoon months typically see bouts of dengue infections anyway, the current dengue situation could also have been handled better, with preparations based on the experts’ observation that dengue outbreaks seem to be worse every other year.

So, what can we learn from the errors made in 2019 in order to save our citizens, and our already exhausted healthcare system, from the burden of another dengue epidemic?

One of the major ways in which city corporations attempt to kill Aedes mosquitoes (carriers of the dengue virus) and prevent their breeding is by fogging—that is, the spraying of mosquito repellents in public spaces using fogging machines. However, in 2019, a study by the International Centre for Diarrhoeal Disease Research, Bangladesh (icddr;b) found that the insecticides sprayed by

would have given the authorities enough time to buck up and use insecticides containing malathion and deltamethrin instead of permethrin, as recommended by the researchers. Or to start their dengue awareness campaign earlier on. But it was not until July 15, 2019 that the Dhaka North City Corporation (DNCC) held a meeting and decided to look into the effectiveness of its adulticides. Alas, the dengue epidemic of 2019 still happened.

When it comes to diseases like dengue, authorities such as the city corporations tend to put a lot of emphasis on the citizens’ own responsibility to save themselves from being infected. But there comes a point where it stops being awareness-building and starts becoming blame-shifting. No doubt, the public must take up preventive measures, such as wearing clothes that cover most of their bodies, spraying insecticides in their own homes, and get rid of stagnant water so Aedes larvae don’t get the chance to breed there. But it cannot be denied that the majority of places where mosquitoes can breed freely and undisturbed are public spaces, making them the responsibility of the authorities.

Conducting mobile drives and imposing fines on people whose private properties have been found to have Aedes larvae are all well and good. But equal vigilance is required to encourage people to keep their homes clean and to raise awareness about how dangerous the dengue virus—specifically the serotype-3 variant—can be. Additionally, bulking up our healthcare sector to deal with the increasing number of dengue patients, amid the still-dangerous Covid-19 situation, is also crucial. Back in July, when the Covid-19 numbers were at their worst, two of the dengue wards of Shaheed Suhrawardy Medical College Hospital in Dhaka had to be re-assigned to accommodate coronavirus patients.

It is important to remember, no matter what the disease, that prevention is more desirable—and certainly a more intelligent option—than cure. Viruses will likely never disappear and will only mutate and exist among us as different, more dangerous variants. While dengue is seasonal, it is not as discriminative as Covid-19, in that it can infect people of all ages—including children. We must all work together—the state and the people, to the best of our respective abilities—in order to prevent a situation as bad as what we experienced in 2019, in this year and in the coming ones.

Afia Jahin is a member of the editorial team at *The Daily Star*.



FILE PHOTO: STAR

The emergence of dengue outbreak has put even more burden on an already overwhelmed healthcare system in Bangladesh.

In fact, the beginning of the “dengue season” this year can be traced back to May, when 43 people were reported to be infected by the virus. By the end of July, the number of dengue cases climbed to 2,098 in the country. As of the morning of September 19, this number stood at

the country suffered in 2019?

Two years ago, the worst dengue outbreak in Bangladesh since 2000 left 101,354 sick with the dangerous serotype-3 variant of the virus—the same one is at work in 2021 as well— and caused at least 179 deaths, according to

the city corporations in Dhaka had no effect on adult mosquitoes, as they became resistant to one of the major chemical components of the insecticides: permethrin. This study was presented by the icddr;b to both the city corporations in May 2019. One would presume this

PROJECT ■ SYNDICATE

Will the BRICS ever grow up?



JIM O'NEILL

When is that influence going to show up? Given today’s global challenges and the enormous issues facing the BRICS (which subsequently became a real-world entity and was expanded in 2010 to include South Africa), the bloc’s ongoing failure to develop substantive policies through its annual summitry has become increasingly glaring.

This November will mark the 20th anniversary of the BRIC acronym, which I first used in a 2001 Goldman Sachs paper titled “Building Better Global Economic BRICs.” At that time, I offered four scenarios for how each country could develop over the next decade, and made the case for why global governance needed to become more representative and include these four rising powers.

That paper was followed by a series of others, starting in 2003, which showed how China’s economy could become as large as the US economy (in nominal dollar terms) by 2040; how India could surpass Japan to become the third-largest economy soon thereafter; and how the BRIC economies together could grow larger than the G6 (the G7 minus Canada).

But the bloc’s economic trajectory since 2001 has been a mixed bag. While the first decade was a roaring success for all four countries, with each surpassing all four scenarios that I had originally outlined, the second decade was less kind to Brazil and Russia, whose respective shares of global GDP have now fallen back to where they were 20 years ago.

If it weren’t for China—and India, to some degree—there wouldn’t be much of a BRIC story to tell. Yet, notwithstanding the difficulties the BRICs have faced, China’s growth alone is on track to lift the technical aggregate of all four economies

to match the size of the G6.

In terms of global governance, the only notable shift over the past two decades has been the rise of the G20 since it took centre stage in response to the 2008 global financial crisis. Representing the world’s 20 largest economies, the organisation seemed immensely powerful at the time, and it managed to implement policies of potentially lasting importance. But since then, it has generally been

of the attention this year has been on security and terrorism. After all, recent developments in Afghanistan will have serious, direct implications for Russia, India, and China. But this singular focus is disappointing, because it highlights the group’s limited joint ambitions.

Modi would seem to agree, saying: “We need to ensure that the BRICS are more productive in the next 15 years.” Beyond creating the BRICS Development Bank,



The overall accomplishment of BRICS since it was formed 20 years ago has hardly been noteworthy.

FILE PHOTO: REUTERS

a disappointment, saying much but achieving very little.

For their part, the BRICS held their first annual meeting as a political club in 2009, in Russia (the first to include South Africa took place in China in 2011). And this year, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi hosted the BRICS leaders—virtually—for their 13th summit. Every leader made bold statements about what they had supposedly achieved together, and all discussed avenues for future cooperation. Yet, they have accomplished very little; lofty statements are usually accompanied by only scant policy moves.

Nothing in the bloc’s latest joint declaration suggests that anything has changed. Perhaps, not surprisingly, most

now known as the New Development Bank, it is difficult to see what the group has done other than holding meetings annually.

Following the bloc’s rather dismal second decade, there are many things that BRICS leaders could do collectively to help revive the kind of economic gains made in the first decade, all of which would be good for the rest of the world as well. In doing so, they could create a much stronger impression of their usefulness alongside the G20, strengthening the case for more substantive reforms to global governance.

For starters, the BRICS need to strengthen trade between themselves. China and India could both gain

enormously from a more open and ambitious trading relationship, which would redound to the benefit of the rest of the region, the other BRICS members, and the world. In fact, more India-China trade alone would visibly boost global trade.

Moreover, while the BRICS have little in common other than having large populations, they also share a significant exposure to infectious diseases. The Review on Antimicrobial Resistance that I led in 2014-16 showed that all of the BRICS were worryingly vulnerable to drug-resistant tuberculosis. And as Covid-19 has shown, most have healthcare systems that are poorly equipped to deal with pandemics. Unless they treat global infectious diseases more seriously, they will never be able to reach their economic potential.

Since the fall of 2020, I have had the privilege of serving on the World Health Organization’s independent Pan-European Commission on Health and Sustainable Development, which is chaired by former Italian Prime Minister Mario Monti. One crucial proposal from our initial call to action this past spring, now outlined in detail in our final report, is to establish a Global Health and Finance Board under the auspices of the G20. The reasoning is simple: unless we place global health challenges at the heart of regular economic and financial dialogues, we will remain ill-prepared for them. And as the pandemic has shown, global health challenges are also economic and political challenges.

This proposal already has the support of several key governments—notably those of the United Kingdom, the United States, France, Italy, and the European Union. Yet, for reasons I fail to understand, the BRICS, especially China, seem to be opposed to it. Such resistance makes no sense and will have dire consequences for the rest of the world. It gives me and other long-time champions even more reason to doubt the group’s collective potential.

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