

Antibiotics’ ineffectiveness must be dealt with urgently

AMR now prevalent in poultry products

IT was only a few days ago that we voiced our concerns in this column over the misuse and overuse of antibiotics in humans—in regards to a recent study, conducted by the IEDCR, which found that almost all clinically important and widely used antibiotics have lost their effectiveness by more than 50 percent. Now, it appears we are also developing antimicrobial resistance (AMR) through the food we consume. A study by the Bangladesh Livestock Research Institute (BLRI) found three serotypes of salmonella bacteria that were resistant to 17 antibiotics in percentages ranging between 6.7 to 100 percent, in chicken samples collected from 29 wet markets in Dhaka between February and December 2019. In humans, salmonella is one of the four key global causes of diarrheal diseases, according to the WHO.

The issue here is that farmers are not only feeding antibiotics to sick poultry animals but, as another icddr study found, more than half the farmers were found to have administered antibiotics on day-old chicks without reason. Moreover, farmers rationalise their use of antibiotics on healthy chickens, saying that it is to keep illnesses from spreading within the flock. What is most concerning is that farmers use these antibiotics on animals on the recommendations of both veterinarian doctors and feed dealers, the latter of whom are not in any way qualified to prescribe such medicines. Experts say that the increasing ineffectiveness of antibiotics, or AMR, is a major public health threat and will eventually make it impossible to treat many previously treatable bacteria, viruses and parasites. Not only will this increase the number of sick patients and cause deaths—it will also put more pressure on our already burdened healthcare system, to say nothing of how it will adversely impact the economy.

What is necessary now is a collective effort from the government and from the healthcare sector. It is high time to put a stop to the arbitrary use of antibiotics, which is done in major hospitals to smaller clinics, for humans and animals alike. Not only does this ineffectiveness of antibiotics affect health, it also increases costs on multiple fronts. Be it through consumption or other ways such as poor hygiene, AMR can spread across species and affect all. The only way to reduce it now would be to raise awareness among the general public and to strictly monitor the prescription and administration of antibiotics in humans and animals.

Half bus fare for students a welcome decision

Private bus operators should also consider reducing their student fares

WE commend the government for taking the decision to halve the bus fare for students travelling by state-owned BRTC buses. Reportedly, the decision will be effective from December 1. School and college students had been protesting against the high bus fares they were being forced to pay after the new fares came into effect. They gave the government an ultimatum of 48 hours to come to a decision in this regard, or face a new student movement. It is, therefore, great to see that the government has listened to reason and met the students’ demand.

After the government raised the prices of diesel and kerosene by Tk 15 per litre, transport owners went on an indefinite strike to raise bus fares. To meet their demands, Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA) increased the fares for intra-city and inter-district buses by 26.5 and 27 percent respectively. The increased bus and other transport fares came as a shock to mid- and low-income groups who already had their backs against the wall, struggling to cope with the pandemic effects and soaring prices of daily essentials even before increased fares added to their children’s educational expenses. Therefore, it was really important that the government listen to the students’ grievances. In fact, there has been an unwritten rule of half bus fare for students from even before our independence. But only a few BRTC bus drivers complied with this rule, while the majority of private transport owners moved away from this.

But since a majority of the buses on our roads are operated by private owners, it is important that they halve their fares in the students’ interests as well. A discounted bus fare for students will not prevent them from making profit, since they are already making hefty profits by boarding more passengers than there are seats, and charging standing passengers the same fare as those occupying the seats. So instead of waiting for directives from the government, the private bus owners should consider their social responsibilities and reduce student fares willingly.

School and college students were protesting with two demands: half bus fare and safety in public transport. While the government took a judicious decision to reduce the bus fare by half, no particular measures were promised to ensure the students’—particularly the girls’—safety on public transport. The fact that the conductor of a private bus service threatened to rape a female student for wanting to pay half bus fare is concerning and calls for strict action from the authorities.

‘Bloodstained’ UP elections and the CEC’s alternative truth



KAMAL AHMED

VIDEO footage and reports have been emerging daily on both traditional and social media exposing how violent and intimidating our elections have become. It has been going on throughout the country and in all the phases of local government elections—mostly union parishads (UPs) but in a few municipalities too. Death counts from these acts of violence are between 39 and 50, depending on official and unofficial statistics. The Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) Khan Mohammad Nurul Huda, however, said “the elections were not violent and there were only a few incidents of violence”, whereas his fellow Commissioner Mahbub Talukder termed it as “bloodstained”.

A closer scrutiny of the facts shows that during the first two phases of UP elections, at least 200 chairmen were elected uncontested, which is suggestive of intimidation by candidates favoured by local administration in order to force likely contenders to quit the race. Such administrative favours, though unlawful and undesired, are quite rampant due to the pressures applied by the ruling party’s local leadership, which in most cases involve MPs. Hence, we have seen the High Court’s intervention and follow-up queries to ensure a few MPs leave their constituencies during this period. Several videos have gone viral, showing members of the ruling party asking voters that they

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would have to show their votes before putting them in the ballot box. Post-result recovery of ballots—more than enough to overturn the outcome in Tangail and Cox’s Bazar—were published in the media, but the aggrieved parties were simply told to go to election tribunals. The third phase of UP polling, scheduled for today, is unlikely to be any different.

The unfortunate loss of lives during these elections meant that, on an average, at least one person had to die for every 25 UPs. Had the CEC and his fellow commissioners had some decency, they would have apologised to the families of each of these victims and initiated appropriate legal actions against the perpetrators. Instead, the CEC has engaged himself in putting out alternative narratives, devoid of facts. The current Election Commission’s records in poll management and conduct—with the

battle between the local MP and upazila chairman or party executives. In a number of places, leaders of the student or youth wings are running against main party functionaries.

The reason for such desperation among factions is to get a share of the pie—cuts from development projects and government allocations for social support. Quite a few newspapers have reported that the number of so-called rebels from the ruling party account for more than one-third of the elected chairmen. In most of these places, election officials belonging to civil administration favour the strongest due to the power equation. Until and unless the Election Commission assumes its constitutional obligations honestly and sincerely, they will not be able to make the administration act with neutrality and according to law.

Primarily, the responsibility of the



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PHOTO: STAR

exception of one commissioner, Mahbub Talukder—are similar to the preceding EC led by Kazi Rakibuddin Ahmed. Those similarities are not only in their failures to make elections participatory, competitive and fair, but in callous behaviours too, including disregard for human lives.

These are quite a few symptoms of the total collapse of the electoral system and its supervisory institution. Unfortunately, many among us are more concerned about symptoms instead of the cause of the ailment. Some people have called for doing away with contests based on party nominations, as if the EC is not at fault. But, ground reports show that most of these contests are between various factions of the ruling party. In some places, it’s a

bloodshed and electoral farces lies with the EC. Despite having all necessary constitutional authority and power to hold free, fair and participatory elections, they have not delivered a single election in their nearly exhausted five-year term which people deemed credible. Mahbub Talukder’s comment that UP “elections are now in ICU (Intensive Care Unit) and democracy is on life support as its side effect” is equally true for all the elections and by-elections held under the current EC and its immediate predecessor. It was aptly put by the chief of Shujan (Sushashoner Jannyo Nagorik), Badiul Alam Majumder, when he said at least people in our country had one day of democracy every five years when as a kingmaker they could vote, but

16 DAYS OF ACTIVISM AGAINST GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

Informal labour markets must be safer for girls and women

JENEFA JABBAR and TASMIYAH T RAHMAN

DURING the pandemic, UNICEF reported on how an additional 10 million more girls were pushed into the risk of child marriage. In Bangladesh, at least 11,000 school children were married off by their families between March 17, 2020, and September 12 this year, according to data gathered by *The Daily Star* from different districts. Child marriage is internationally recognised in law as a form of gender-based violence—it puts children at increased risk of sexual, physical, and psychological violence and related

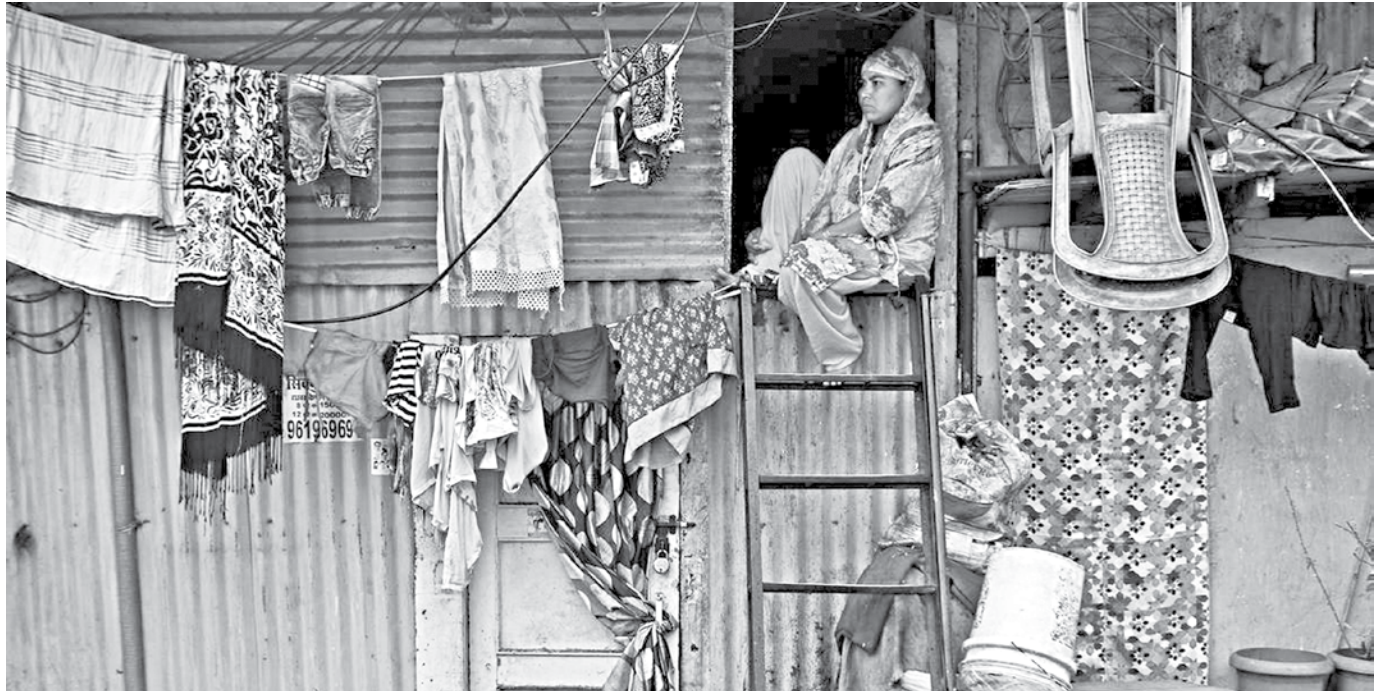
percent reduction in child marriage, especially if they start the training as early as 14 years and join informal workforces at 15. Parents from poor families see employed daughters as less of a burden and allow them to remain at home, as they are earning members of the family.

However, major challenges remain for many young girls in Bangladesh who are trying to enter into labour markets and establish their independence, yet face high risks of violence. The following story of Joanna (not her real name) will perhaps shed light on this reality.

Joanna’s mother left her and three of her siblings with their maternal

would not be taken seriously. However, when Joanna was raped multiple times, she stopped going to the shop and informed her friend in confidence, who was volunteering for an NGO.

When her friend went and spoke to her family, the aunt, along with both her parents, wanted this matter to remain a secret. No one encouraged her to speak up. However, her friend insisted she protest against the crime, and Joanna eventually agreed to go to the police. She was taken to a One Stop Crisis Centre and it was proven that she was raped. Her employer was arrested by the police and she was sent to a government shelter home under the



Local markets and the employment environment have to be safe spaces for women and girls.

PHOTO: REUTERS

outcomes throughout their lives. Girls pushed into child marriages are even less likely to ever earn an income and have any of the tools necessary to escape from any violent situations they are trapped in, especially since there is definitely a positive correlation between child marriage and school dropouts.

One good pathway to alternative learning is technical vocational training, where girls can remain in labour markets. According to research conducted by the BRAC Institute of Governance and Development, this can result in a 62

aunt to work in the Middle East. Her father remarried and refused take any responsibility for his children. Joanna dropped out when she was in Class 5, and was helping around at home. She was told to join a workshop where she would learn how to sew so that she could also start earning for the family at the age of 15. At first, Joanna’s employer was good to her. But soon enough, he realised that her parents were not around. He understood her vulnerability and lured her into staying longer hours. One day, he raped her, thinking that this incident

Department of Social Service (DSS). While there, she told an NGO worker that she no longer wants to go back to her home and community, since she knew she would be blamed and socially excluded.

Joanna’s father, who was missing from her life for many years, suddenly came back after the case was filed. The perpetrator’s family reached out to him and offered money to dismiss the case. He went to the DSS and asked for his daughter’s custody, which he was entitled to claim. However, he could not dismiss the case, since criminal cases cannot be

that too was lost due to the failure of the EC.

Apart from the Election Commission, it is the government that shares the blame for causing so much harm to the electoral mechanism. Since scrapping the 13th amendment and abolishing the system of caretaker government, the ruling party Awami League has been gradually shifting towards authoritarianism. Dissent and criticism are no longer tolerated and politicisation of state institutions, including the civil administration, has made the functioning of a viable opposition almost impossible. As a result, whoever holds any ambition for a public office and political power and influence has little choice other than joining the Awami League. It explains why elections nowadays are an intra-party contest and frequently turn deadly. Creating and maintaining a peaceful electoral environment thus no longer remains a priority for the administration.

Historical data shows the worst record of electoral violence was in the UP elections of 2016, when a total of 145 lives were lost. But, the second worst record goes back to 1988 under the military rule of General Ershad, when 80 people were killed in union parishad elections. It, therefore, could be argued that violence in elections of the lowest tier of local government is more likely to be linked with lack of, or, weaker democracy; and not whether the contest was on the basis of party nominations and symbols.

The first UP elections after Awami League’s return to power, held in 2011, was managed by the Election Commission led by Shamsul Huda, when the opposition was much stronger despite the fact that their representation in parliament was much diminished. Those elections too were very competitive and unfortunately saw 10 lives lost, but no one questioned the integrity of the electoral process and the role of the commission.

In the past, violence in elections was largely meant to stifle political competition, but now it also disenfranchises the electorate. And, it is the result of the Election Commission’s failure to stand up to the hegemonic pressure from the party in power. Without the restoration of the honour and integrity of this constitutional body, these farcical theatrics are simply a waste of national resources.

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withdrawn, but he did stop Joanna from attending the hearing. He changed his phone number and shifted to a new place to avoid the case.

This is often the case for thousands of girls in Bangladesh. A holistic approach needs to be taken if the government wants more girls to grow up to become educated and join the labour force, like in competing countries such as Cambodia and Vietnam. As over 85 percent of people in Bangladesh work in the informal sector, labour market participation for vulnerable girls like Joanna usually starts in the informal markets. But if these informal labour markets remain hostile, girls will not have a shot at working and making their own choices at all. As such, local markets and the employment environment have to be safe spaces for women and girls, maintaining basic workplace rights and ensuring protection.

A wider support services network can be achieved if joint efforts by the government and local civil society organisations and NGOs are made for ensuring witness protection services and shelter facilities to survivors and their families, who play significant roles in court cases. Often, witnesses and survivors are intimidated and threatened, which results in cases being dropped or influenced. Rigorous psychosocial support needs to be provided to these survivors, continuous legal counseling must be ensured, and the government needs to control out-of-court mediations that are very common in Bangladesh, especially in rural areas. To do this, local government bodies and community leaders need to be sensitised. Government initiatives need to be taken to expedite court proceedings, as long and tedious court hearings only delay access to justice.

Lastly, not only girls but men and boys also have to be sensitised to understand that if women in households become economically solvent, then that is beneficial for their family income. The Joannas of Bangladesh need an environment of support and justice, not hostility, in communities and markets, in order to improve their lives and increase labour market participation.

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