

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

Enforce strict measures to curb Covid spread

Increase testing, widen vaccination coverage

THE Covid-19 situation in Bangladesh has turned quite bad over the past several weeks, with the rates of infections and deaths rising almost on a daily basis. In the 24 hours till 8am on January 31, 2022, there were 31 deaths and 13,501 fresh cases. The actual figures, as per the health minister himself, are much higher since the number of people getting tested is still quite low. Clearly, a lack of efforts from the government to contain the spread of the disease, coupled with people's unwillingness to follow health safety guidelines, have brought us to this situation.

Reportedly, the bed occupancy rate at our hospitals has already increased. According to the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS), while the Intensive Care Unit (ICU) bed occupancy rate has doubled to 24 percent from January 1, the occupancy rate in the High Dependency Unit (HDU) has increased to 27 percent from 10 percent during the same period. Therefore, if we fail to take proper measures to curb the transmission rate right now, our hospitals will soon be overwhelmed with patients.

We must say that the initiatives taken by the government have not been adequate, and in some cases, not well-thought-out either. Although it imposed some 11 directives—including wearing masks in public places, limiting mass gatherings, and banning all big social events—at the beginning of January, very little has been done to enforce the restrictions. There were also contradictory measures: while the government asked people to avoid mass gatherings, it allowed the Dhaka International Trade Fair to continue, and kept all shopping malls and tourist destinations open. Schools were summarily closed, but all public events and gatherings continued as usual. Thus, it is evident that the government, just like the common people, didn't take the Omicron variant as seriously as it should have—perhaps because of its supposedly milder symptoms. The lack of farsightedness shown in this regard is quite shocking.

But given the fast rise in Covid infections of late, we have no other alternative but to strictly enforce all the restrictions imposed by the government, and prepare our healthcare facilities for the worst. Wearing masks and maintaining social distancing should be mandatory for everyone going outside. Experts also suggested banning any type of gatherings, including local elections. Moreover, in order to know the real scenario, the number of tests must be increased, which will help us prepare and plan better. The authorities may also consider making home test kits available to the public. But most importantly, the government should widen and expedite its vaccination campaign to protect more people from danger. All eligible individuals must be vaccinated as soon as possible.

Are drug traders unstoppable?

Govt should make greater effort to check proliferation of drugs

IT'S a matter of great concern that many drug traders of Brahmanbaria, who surrendered to police in 2017, have reportedly gone back on their oath of leaving the illegal narcotics business. According to a report by this daily, several hundred drug traders surrendered to police at the time and pledged to return to normal life, but in the absence of proper monitoring and rehabilitative measures by the authorities, many went back to the alleys selling liquor, phensedyl, yaba and other drugs. Locals fear that this will further contribute to the proliferation of harmful substances, unless the traders are apprehended and put behind bars.

Reportedly, drug peddling in the bordering district has increased alarmingly, drawing more and more young people into the world of addiction and self-destruction. To stem the rot, the home ministry, as part of the government's so-called "war on drugs," had prepared a list of 1,151 drug traders in 2017. Top officials then said the government would try to ensure a better life for those who surrendered, and rehabilitate them, if necessary, along with the promises of "lesser punishment." Subsequently, 330 drug dealers surrendered to the police with the promise that they would not sell drugs anymore.

Our correspondent talked to an accused dealer who said it was difficult to leave the business in the absence of better livelihood options and support from the authorities. This partly explains why many of the drug traders who had surrendered, or were captured, have later gone back to their old profession. According to the local law enforcement sources, some unscrupulous people along with former drug dealers have created a strong network of drug trade, which makes it difficult for the police to penetrate. It's good to know that police are considering other strategies to bust the network. But effective measures are urgently needed, given how the narcotic business is mushrooming all over the country. For example, as per police data, 35,269 yaba pills were recovered in 2017. The number rose to 58,672 pills in 2018 and 61,553 in 2019. Although Covid-19 limited the activities in the last two years, 44,575 yaba pills were still recovered in 2020.

Therefore, a centralised policy, and better collaboration and follow-up, will be needed to address the situation. Substance abuse is a grave social problem worldwide. It leads to loss of money, family break-up, health complications, and even death. The best options for combating drug abuse are creating greater awareness in the communities, supervision at school and family levels, as well as sincerer efforts from the higher authorities. We urge the government to learn from its failed mission involving the drug traders in Brahmanbaria, and do the needful to rectify it.

The CEC's pre-poll slumber and the question of ballot stuffing



Kamal Ahmed is an independent journalist and writes from the UK. His Twitter handle is @ahmedkal

KAMAL AHMED

CAN anyone remember such degradation of a constitutional body like what our Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) KM Nurul Huda has done? His defence of the indefensible failure in fulfilling his constitutional duties was not only filled with untruths and misrepresentation of facts, but was also, to some extent, distasteful. His attempt to discredit and humiliate fellow commissioner Mahubb Talukdar by describing him as "a person infected with disease" is quite shocking (*Business Insider*, January 27, 2022). Someone's medical expenses cannot be an issue of contention, unless there is specific proof of fraud. Besides, simple decency requires seeking permission from the person concerned before revealing their personal information, including ailment.

The CEC's responses to the main allegation against the Election Commission about ballot box stuffing the night before the 11th parliamentary elections on December 30, 2018 after four years clearly manifest an attempt to rewrite history. His explanation that he didn't see it, and therefore "cannot say anything conclusive based on the allegations," appeared to be contradicting himself, because it was none other than the CEC who told election officials within 10 weeks of that infamous "polling in the night" that "the EC was planning to use electronic voting machines (EVMs) to make sure that ballot boxes could not be stuffed on the night before an election." His arguments in justifying the introduction of EVMs in upazila elections were based on the fact that he did realise what had happened and how he had failed us all.

When he told the media that "You didn't even see it [ballot stuffing the night before voting]," perhaps he forgot that it was the media—BBC, in particular—that showed the world the footage of stuffed boxes well before the voting began on December 30, 2018. His attempt to apportion blame on political parties for not taking the issue to the court is a childish argument to cover his failure.

The CEC might have forgotten that while he kept his eyes shut, the rest of the world witnessed the mass disenfranchising of hundreds of thousands of Bangladeshis.

Seeking legal redress from a court is a retroactive move. But what about the prevention of irregularities and violations, especially when the Representation of the People Order, 1972 clearly empowers the commission to stop vote-casting at any polling station or an entire constituency at any stage of the election if it finds the process compromised?

It has been over four years since that night, so the CEC might have forgotten that while he kept his eyes shut, the rest of the world witnessed the mass disenfranchising of hundreds of thousands of Bangladeshis. Perhaps, he needs a little reminder about how the world reacted to such a farcical exercise. His refusal to allow foreign observers to monitor the polling now gives credence to such suspicion that his intention all along was to hide his partisan behaviour and inability to conduct an acceptable election. Can he deny that most of the Western nations condemned the violence and widespread irregularities in the 2018 elections, and called for a transparent investigation into all allegations of impropriety? The European Union termed the electoral campaign and the vote as "tainted." The US, expressing concern about "credible reports of harassment, intimidation, and violence in the pre-election period," noted that "election-day irregularities prevented some people from voting, which undermined faith in the electoral process."

The United Nations and a good number of international organisations also made similar observations, but their calls for independent and transparent investigations into the alleged irregularities were blatantly ignored. The Human Rights Watch and the Transparency International have documented many of these irregularities. A survey by the Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) found that stamping of ballots took place on the night before the 2018 election at more than one centre in 33 constituencies out of the 50 surveyed.

The CEC also cast some unwarranted aspersions on the Shamsul Huda

Commission when he said, "There is a difference between holding elections under a partisan government and a military-backed government. There will be criticism of any election held under a political environment." Here again, he was wrong as every military force is supposed to support the government of the day. Besides, we had at least four elections that have won recognition at home and abroad. The differences now, however, are the absence of a political consensus and a lack of sincerity and integrity on the part of the commission led by CEC Nurul Huda.

His partisan acts started well before his taking of oath of office on February 15, 2017, when several newspapers published photographs showing him as CEC-designate taking floral wreaths from the local leaders of the ruling Awami League and distributing sweets. That explains why he surrendered his authority during the parliamentary elections to a partisan administration, instead of making them work for him. The harm he has caused to our electoral institution is unlikely to be recovered anytime soon.

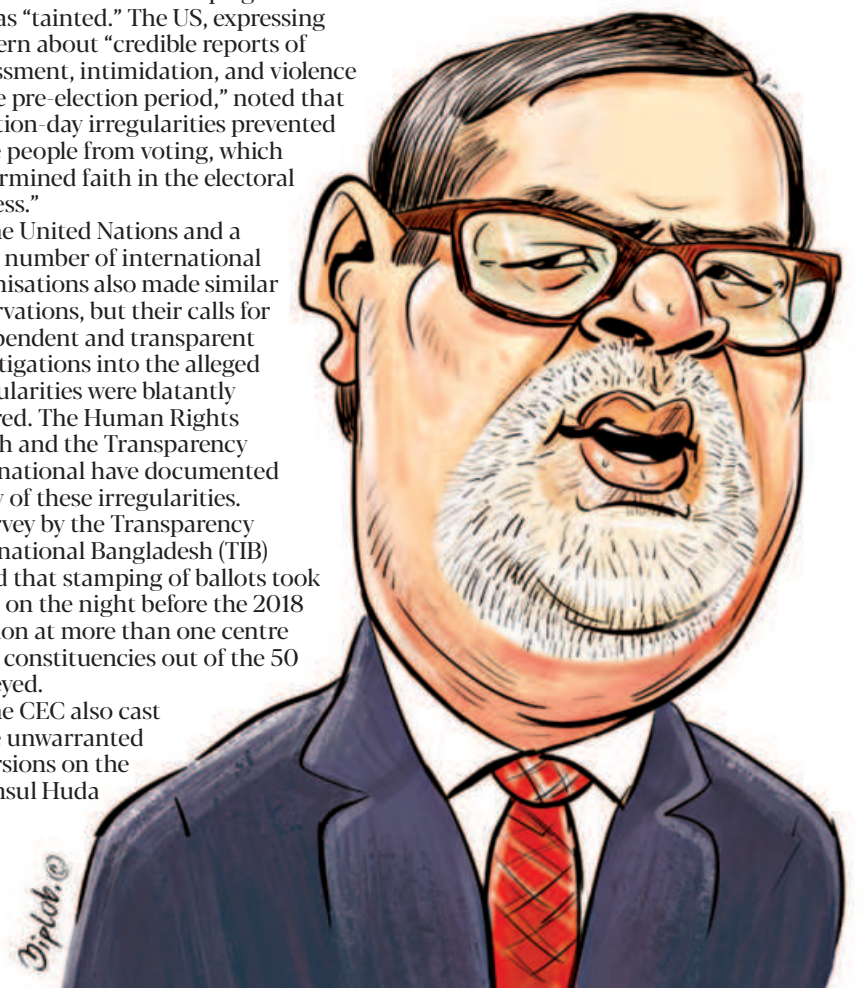


ILLUSTRATION: BIPLOB CHAKROBORTY

Let nature inspire our development drive



Dr Haseeb Md Irfanullah is an independent consultant working on environment, climate change, and research systems. His Twitter handle is @hmrfanullah

HASEEB MD IRFANULLAH

IF we want to address our development and societal challenges with the help of nature, we have three options. While nature-based solutions (NbS) have been discussed in this column extensively, let's talk about two other options: nature-driven solutions and nature-inspired solutions.

When we protect, restore, create or sustainably manage different ecosystems (such as wetlands, rivers, or forests), we practise NbS, which simultaneously gives us human and biodiversity benefits. If the premises and surrounding area of a power plant such as, say, Payra 1320MW Thermal Power Plant, are made green by planting various local tree species and by encouraging agroforestry, it will not only increase local biodiversity, but also keep the local temperature cooler, reduce energy consumption, and improve the physical and mental health of the people in the neighbourhood. In that vein, the proposed 137-sq-km Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Shilpa Nagar (BSMSN) on the border of Chattogram and Feni districts along the Sandwip Channel could be a game-changer for economic zone design, if it is developed by preserving and expanding the mangrove belt along the northern bank of the channel.

Similarly, if we keep a waterbody inside an export processing zone (EPZ) and allow different fish and aquatic species to take shelter there, and instead of binding its edges with concrete and bricks, we create slopes on its banks so that different aquatic plants can flourish, we would be practising NbS.

When we use natural forces to solve our problems, we employ nature-driven solutions. Solar home system (SHS) is one of the most widely used renewable energy options in Bangladesh. An estimated 20 million people were brought under

the SHS during 2003-2018. Solar mini-grids are also piloted in several places of Bangladesh, while Teknaf hosts the largest solar power plant of the country, adding 20MW to the national grid. In the agriculture sector, the coverage of solar irrigation pumps is expanding rapidly. In early 2020, Bangladesh engaged an Australian company to install 1,140 solar-powered desalination units in 16 districts to ensure safe drinking water supply to 30,000 people.

In contrast to these, the Karnaphuli Hydropower Station may not be called a nature-driven solution, since it first stores water behind a dam and then releases it to produce electricity. Gravitational flow system to supply water through a pipe network, however, could be a nature-

pollutes them heavily. A few years back, the international NGO Practical Action piloted an innovation called "artificial aquifer tube well." Beside a polluted pond, a 30-foot-deep well was excavated and filled with several layers of gravel and sand, mimicking the aquifers we see in nature. Pond water was channelled to reach the top of the artificial aquifer, which purified the polluted water overnight, and stored the clean water at the bottom of the aquifer—hence, a nature-inspired solution to water insecurity. The locals pumped out the clean water with a hand pump placed in the middle of the artificial aquifer, as is done with shallow tube wells all over Bangladesh.

Now, our large power, industrial and economic establishments can lead the way by incorporating the above three nature-related options in one place. Let's imagine an industrial park or an economic zone or a power plant standing by the Rupsha River. Its bank can be protected by a layer of swamp trees, its premises landscaped with green (local trees and agroforestry) and blue (water bodies, kept natural) patches, supporting biodiversity and the physical and mental health of its workers and inhabitants. It could use nature-driven options to get its energy, to desalinate water, and to treat its waste.

As they embrace nature, the authorities of such large-scale establishments also need to keep in mind some guidelines and standards. For example, IUCN's Global Standard for Nature-Based Solutions can guide us on what can be called NbS and what cannot. But we need to simplify such guiding instruments, too, as their wording may not always be appealing or useful to the authorities in question.

Our big economic, industrial, and power-generation establishments offer significant employment opportunities in their respective localities. They could further support green jobs by embracing nature-based, nature-driven and nature-inspired solutions. This way, they can contribute to the just and equitable transition of our labour market as we gradually shift from a fossil fuel-dependent economy to a renewable energy-guided one.



Solar home system (SHS) is one of the most widely used nature-driven renewable energy options in Bangladesh, having changed the lives of about 20 million people during 2003-2018.

PHOTO: REUTERS

driven solution, as it uses gravity.

Nature has been inspiring us since time immemorial—be it in our art, literature, or architecture. When we take inspiration from nature to face our societal challenges, we are said to create nature-inspired solutions. A prime example of this would be the dome-shaped 30 St Mary Axe building in London, whose ventilation system was inspired by a 25cm-long vase-like sponge animal called Venus' flower basket, found in the depths of the Pacific Ocean.

Coastal areas of Bangladesh suffer from the lack of drinking water. They do have freshwater ponds, but over-extraction