

Dhaka Wasa must answer for cholera outbreak

Why has it failed to fix breaches in its supply lines?

IT'S alarming to know that the cholera outbreak in Dhaka has already overwhelmed many hospitals, particularly the one run by the International Centre for Diarrhoeal Disease Research, Bangladesh (icddr,b). The 350-bed hospital is struggling to tackle the rising number of diarrhoea patients and has had to set up tents on its premises to accommodate them. According to our report, since March 13, over a thousand patients have been visiting the hospital every day. On March 26, the number was approximately 1,200, while it was just 600 around the same time last year. While diarrhoea and cholera flare-ups are normal during this time of the year, it is the staggering number of patients that is worrying us.

Our reporters have visited many affected areas in the city and found breaches in Dhaka Wasa's supply system to be the main reason behind the outbreak. In many areas, residents are getting contaminated water through taps—often the water is greenish-brown or yellowish and smelly, which suggests cross-contamination with sewage lines. Cross-contamination may have happened due to leaks and breaches in the supply lines, or while replacing old, derelict pipes with new ones. In other water-starved areas, illegal hose pipes are used to get water directly from pumps. These pipes are often full of holes through which all kinds of germs mix with the water. This is most unacceptable.

Among the areas hit by the outbreak, Dakshinkhan and Jatrabari are the worst-affected. In 2019, water samples from Jatrabari were tested by the local government and rural development ministry, which detected the presence of both coliform and heterotrophic bacteria. Vibrio cholerae, which is causing cholera among the patients at present, is a type of the latter. We don't know what steps Wasa took to address the issue, neither the status of its project to replace old, dilapidated pipes—which are apparently causing the contamination now. Clearly, not enough has been done.

The question is, isn't it Wasa's responsibility to ensure safe water for all the residents? Why do people still have to buy drinking water or spend money to purify it? A study by the Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) in 2019 found that 91 percent of Dhaka's population had to boil water to drink it and, in the process, burn gas worth Tk 332 crore a year. The extent of Wasa's failure is really inconceivable.

About the current cholera outbreak, we think Wasa must shoulder the responsibility instead of trying to deny it. It must look into its supply lines and fix the breaches as soon as possible. Otherwise, the outbreak might totally go out of control soon.

A good example of plastic recycling

With proper support, the recycling industry can flourish

IT is heartening to see ordinary people in the country's northern region taking it upon themselves to turn hazardous waste, such as discarded PET bottles and disposable syringes, back into raw materials for other products through recycling. The dumping of plastic waste into waterbodies and rivers has long been a menace for Bangladesh. And with rapid urbanisation, the problem has been getting worse.

According to a 2020 World Bank study, Bangladesh's plastic consumption in urban areas tripled over a span of 15 years. Of the 977,000 tons of plastic consumed in 2020, only 31 percent were recycled, according to the report. The other 69 percent ended up in landfills, rivers and canals, as well as drains and unserved areas. This unmanaged plastic waste can seriously pollute the environment and have far-reaching consequences on human health. Despite Bangladesh becoming the first country in the world to ban plastic shopping bags in 2002, due to a lack of enforcement by the authorities, the plastic problem has continued unabated. And not only has the government failed to enforce the ban as well as comply with a 2020 High Court directive to ban single-use plastic in coastal areas and all hotels and motels across the country, but it has also been incapable of managing all the plastic that is produced and used.

Amid such a crisis, it is the ordinary people in areas such as Rangpur and Dinajpur regions who are leading the way. Not only are these recycling hubs doing a fantastic job of recycling plastic waste, but through their successful operation, they have also managed to provide locals working at these factories with decent livelihoods. According to a report in this newspaper, nearly 1,000 plastic recycling factories have opened up across eight districts in the region. This has allowed people, starting from ragpickers to the factory workers, to earn some money—daily or monthly—while contributing to cleaning up the environment.

This is a wonderful example of how creative the people in our country are, and it is they who hold the key to creating an environmentally clean and prosperous Bangladesh through their hard work and innovativeness. However, it is also a matter of fact that recycling needs to take place on a much broader scale. Therefore, we call on the government to incentivise entrepreneurs and businesses who are involved in recycling through policy or financial supports, so that Bangladesh can quickly overcome the challenge of plastic pollution while creating employment for people at the same time.

EDITORIAL

Pre-election promises, post-election disappointments

Lack of free elections is what ties the two together



THE OVERTON WINDOW

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ACCORDING to a recent report, due to the insistence of lawmakers, the government is going to repair religious establishments and build new bridges across the country at a cost of Tk 5,132 crore. Under two separate projects, 17,321 mosques, temples and pagodas will be renovated, while bridges will be constructed in 35 districts of the eight divisions. The timing of this is most interesting, as it comes with the next parliamentary elections barely a year and a half away.

There is nothing wrong with the government renovating public places of worship—even though given the number of problems that we currently have, particularly the crisis of skyrocketing prices of essentials amidst rising poverty, it could be argued that the people would be better served with the government focusing these resources elsewhere, and leaving the renovation job to the devotees. Equally, there is nothing abnormal about the government trying to win people's hearts by announcing such feel good projects with the elections nearing—it happens nearly everywhere in the world.

The issue is with how efficiently the government utilises these public resources and how well it delivers on its promises. It is perhaps here that the main worry starts.

Before the 2009 elections, the current ruling party promised that people would be able to buy rice at Tk 10 per kg—a promise that never materialised. The question is, why promise something that cannot be delivered?

Similarly, before the last general elections, this newspaper reported how people in the char areas of Lalmonirhat felt abandoned because of broken electoral promises about their development as announced over the decades. According to 100-year-old Afsar Ali, "When election comes, agents of political parties and MPs come with a list of promises and seek votes but all of it vanishes as soon as the results are out." According to another resident of the area, before the 2014 elections, the supporters of one MP promised them "electricity and dyke in the river but nothing has been done till date [even though four years had passed]."

Before the 2018 general elections, with many significant promises from previous election campaigns still remaining on paper, the ruling Awami League came out with a number of fresh and ambitious

promises. Among them was following a policy of zero tolerance for corruption, forming a stronger electoral system through reforms, alleviating poverty, creating employment, ensuring a service-oriented and accountable administration, and putting more focus on infrastructure development. Pointing to the protest for safer roads that was still fresh in our minds at that time, the prime minister

report, Bangladesh has one of the highest road construction costs in the world, even though the quality of these roads was really bad. According to Sarwar Jahan, a professor of urban and regional planning at Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (Buet), a major issue here is the involvement of politicians with many construction firms. People are extremely reluctant to hold these firms accountable



ILLUSTRATION:
TEENI AND TUNI

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herself vowed to bring discipline in Dhaka's transport sector by introducing "modern bus services to curb indiscipline in Dhaka's mass transport service." Sadly, looking at the state of Dhaka's roads today, one may find it hard to believe that such a promise was ever made.

Politicians breaking electoral promises is an age-old problem. However, the way that problem is supposed to be countered is through voters holding their elected representatives accountable. It is the fear of being voted out that primarily keeps public representatives honest. But to expect that they'd deliver on their words out of the goodness of their hearts is at best naïve, and history testifies to that.

It is here that we've failed. Because our elections are mostly not free and fair, and thus deny people their right to vote out public representatives who made false promises, the problem of politicians not delivering on their words continues to plague us. And the cost of this—besides depriving people of their most basic democratic right to choose their own representatives—is proving to be more and more enormous by the day.

Over the years, the endless number of government projects that have seen their cost and deadlines revised is simply ridiculous. If we look at just the road sector, according to a 2017 World Bank

as they are backed by individuals having significant political clout.

And who can blame them? If politicians could be held accountable—through fair elections—then these firms could be held accountable too, which would then have the incentive to finish projects on time, stay within the cost estimates and provide high-quality work (as they might otherwise fear losing future government contracts). But that is not the case. As a result, most development projects finish much later than originally scheduled, while their costs double, triple or even quadruple.

The amount of public money that continues to get wasted could truly transform this country. But the truth is, it is the tendency of politicians to be corrupt, apathetical, and lacking in vision and wisdom that is holding us back. The only way to reverse this is to regain our right to freely vote for whoever we want to represent us. That, however, is easier said than done.

In the meanwhile, it is the responsibility of the independent media to continue highlighting the broken promises of political parties and their members. The public should also strongly voice their disapproval of such a state of things, and clamour for the restoration of their rights and for the wastage of their hard-earned money to stop.

Is Ukraine collateral damage for the US?



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IN 1985, at the height of the Cold War, Hollywood produced a movie called "Rocky IV", a typical good-American-bad-Russian story. It revolves around a boxing battle between Ivan Drago, a six-foot-four, 261-pound fighter from the erstwhile Soviet Union, and Rocky Balboa, an American boxer. Drago is a killing machine, trained with high-tech equipment and regular doses of anabolic steroids. Rocky, on the other hand, is a humane person, trains in deep snow over mountainous terrains utilising antiquated farm equipment.

Although Rocky is no match for Drago in physical strength, he eventually wins through sheer grit. That was the time of the Cold War. The Washington-led North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and Moscow-led Warsaw Treaty faced off each other, fuelled proxy wars, toppled governments, and tortured political activists all over the world. Both treaties or forces claimed to be defence arrangements.

In 1989, the Soviet Union collapsed, leaving the USA as the sole superpower. The Warsaw Treaty followed suit, and NATO had no one to defend itself against. In his 1992 book, "The End of History and the Last Man," American political scientist Francis Fukuyama wrote that humanity had reached the endpoint of ideological evolution and the universalisation of Western liberal democracy as the ultimate form of human government. Many thought that NATO's reason for being was

over, and it would soon become irrelevant, especially because it was formed with the Soviet Union as its stated enemy.

But NATO not only continued to exist, but also expanded eastward towards Russian borders despite its commitment not to do so. Washington actively carried on with its aggressive, interventionist approach including establishing military bases in far-off countries. The US military needed to strike the first blow by deploying armed force at a distance, as Professor David Vine at the American University in Washington, DC states in his book "The United States of War". War is ingrained in Washington's foreign policy, and by granting NATO membership to Eastern European countries, it has crafted Putin into invading Ukraine—a godsend for the USA as it can now repair its pride damaged in Afghanistan. Those who criticised Joe Biden for the haphazard retreat there now realise that his eyes were on Ukraine, the next theatre of the global war.

The Ukraine saga has made Washington the global conscience, a role poles apart from the previous one it notoriously earned in Iraq, Syria, Libya, and many other countries. But there are more rewards that its corporate elites are going to reap.

Huge amounts of capital have left the Chinese and European markets since Russia's Ukraine invasion. Many foreign investors have recently sold off their Chinese government bond holdings. USD 23.4 billion in stock funds has left Western Europe soon after the invasion. Meanwhile, investors have put USD 40.5 billion into US stock funds over recent weeks, according to *The Wall Street Journal*.

Crude oil price reached USD 139 a barrel at one point—the highest level for almost 14 years—while wholesale gas prices for next-day delivery more than doubled. That will nicely feed into the corporate profit of

the global oil giants.

Then, there is the lucrative European hydrocarbon market which Russia has long benefitted from. In 2021, Europe bought about 81 percent of all Russian exports. The sanctions imposed after Ukraine invasion will put a big dent in it. By contrast, for the USA, which is producing gas at a record level but doesn't have buyers, Europe is a potential customer that can pay premium prices once the Russian supply stops. The European Union has already signed a deal with the USA for purchasing Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) that will significantly reduce its dependence on Russian supply.

Europe will also turn to the USA for advanced defence equipment. The most notable is Germany, which for years played down the role of its military in foreign policy. It has already raised its defence spending by 100 billion euros and plans to spend over 2 percent of GDP on this sector. The Ukraine situation has created a sense of insecurity that will only increase Europe's defence spending, benefitting the American military-industrial complex.

Looking at the global scenario, China is the third player in this conflict, albeit still a silent one, anxiously watching the developments. It has refused to condemn Russia for the Ukraine invasion and is critical of NATO's eastward expansion. Beijing can't miss that NATO is closing in on China's western borders and the Central Asian region. It is already wary of the recently formed Quad and the trilateral security pact between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the USA (AUKUS), as both strengthen American military presence in the Asia-Pacific region.

Washington's Afghan adventure, partly motivated by its intention to control the Eurasian heartland, ended in a dismal failure. Biden is now on a more ambitious mission that includes encircling both Russia and China. Ukraine is just collateral damage in this geopolitical game.