

# Threat of dengue outbreak is ominous

Go all out to control the spread

WITH more and more breeding grounds of the mosquito variety *Aedes aegypti*—responsible for causing dengue infection—being identified, an outbreak seems only a matter of time. Reportedly, Dhaka remains at the top among other towns and cities where the dreaded disease has struck already. And this mega city has the history of seeing the maximum number of patients in the past two decades.

We learnt from a sample survey conducted in the southern part of Dhaka that Aedes mosquito larvae were found at 69 under-construction structures, including high-rises, on the first day of a three-day pre-monsoon drive in areas under Dhaka South City Corporation (DSCC). The survey further revealed that the density of Aedes mosquito larvae in a given area this year is higher than that found in 2020 and 2021.

These findings are a wake-up call, because the full monsoon season, when the infection rate is likely to increase, is only days away. Against such a gloomy background, we wonder what will happen to the large urban population if proper measures are not put in place right away. A large number of the floating population in Dhaka spend nights on the pavements or on foot overbridges without mosquito nets. These people remain most vulnerable to dengue as they sleep in the open, huddled together.

Responding to the pre-monsoon survey data, the country's health experts have sounded the alarm bell, predicting a higher number of dengue patients this season, and accordingly they have suggested immediate destruction of the breeding grounds across the metropolis. In this regard, the health authorities (DGHS) have urged the owners of residential and commercial buildings to remain vigilant against the breeding of Aedes mosquitoes on their premises, including the rooftops and underground water reservoirs.

The dengue situation in Bangladesh has been emerging as a serious public health problem in terms of morbidity and mortality. Commonly, most of the cases occur during the monsoon period (May-August), but infections have also been recorded in post-monsoon months (September-December). The pre-monsoon case load in 2015-2017 was reported to be more than seven times higher compared to the previous 14 years.

We are hopeful that the continued awareness campaigns by the two city corporations through the media, using larvae-killing chemicals on a regular basis, and imposing fines on careless land owners would help in reducing the breeding rate to a great extent. It needs no emphasising that the greatest protection from vector borne diseases like dengue, chikungunya, zika and malaria comes from taking timely preventive measures, such as keeping premises clean and dry as well as using mosquito curtains.

# Dwindling forex reserves worrying

Steps should've been taken much earlier to ensure reserves remained steady

IT'S good to know that the government has finally taken some measures to safeguard our foreign currency reserves, which have come down to less than USD 42 billion. The government has put its employees' foreign tours on hold, and has also deferred the development projects that require a lot of imports. The central bank has also toughened its rules for importing luxury and non-essential items such as sports utility vehicles, washing machines, air conditioners and refrigerators. We hope the decisions, though late, will be enough to ensure that the country's foreign currency reserves don't decline further.

Throughout last year, our forex reserves stayed at a healthy level—enough to cover six to eight months' imports, as exports surged and remittance started to come in once the pandemic was somewhat brought under control. But the situation took a turn for the worse with Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February. A drop in remittance growth and increasing import bills have badly affected our forex reserves. While the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) prescribe a reserve buffer of six months' import bills, our current forex reserves can cover only five months' bills.

Our dollar reserves have been dwindling since January, and economists have been warning the government about this—but to no avail. Why did it take so long for us to react when our neighbour Nepal imposed a ban on luxury and non-essential imports last month, when its import cover was for seven months?

In January this year, when the government made plans to use our forex reserves to install a USD 370.96 million power transmission line from Payra seaport, the IMF warned that “ad-hoc use of forex reserves could undermine fiscal discipline by exposing the public sector to large contingent liabilities and fiscal risks.” The government, however, refused to acknowledge any risks.

Now that the government and the central bank have come up with some good measures, we hope that they will yield the desired results and help keep our forex reserves steady. Restricting the foreign trips of government officials is particularly a good idea, as it could save a lot of foreign currency. Reportedly, Tk 2,500 crore was saved in the past two years as the government had put all foreign trips by its ministries and divisions on hold during the pandemic. It should now focus on implementing the decisions it has taken, as implementation has always been a big challenge for it.

# A two-stroke thrombosis



BLOWIN' IN THE WIND

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ONE marker for the oft-chanted prophecy of Bangladesh as the Asian Tiger can be explained through the rise and rise of motorcycles. The city scene is fast becoming like any other Southeast Asian city-hive where the swarms of buzzing motorcycles thrive. Thanks to ride-sharing services, you can cry out, “O Bhai, send (*pathao*) me a ride, or I will grab a Grab,” to reach your destination in an uber-cool style to beat the proverbial gridlock. Thanks to eased financial schemes, more and more people can afford to have motorcycles as their preferred mode of transportation.

Motorbikes are inarguably the fastest way to commute, especially in the busy streets of Dhaka, where the “bee”-sy drivers can dart in and out of traffic jams. They tack and veer to cut across cars and buses. They climb onto footpaths and plunge into potholes; they act like ilish *machh* to go against the stream in one-way streets. They gang up on cars waiting at stop signs as they consider traffic signals a public nuisance. This herd behaviour is the same in other developing countries, too, where the small, inexpensive motorcycles and scooters have become an alternative mode of public transportation.

This was pretty evident when thousands of bikers hit the highways in Bangladesh in an unprecedented move during this Eid break. Once Eid was over, we woke up to the horrendous news of at least 145 people killed in 164 accidents involving motorbikes. Motorcycles were involved in 44.08 percent of the accidents and 34.85 percent of the deaths that occurred over the Eid holidays.

Why would so many bikers risk long journeys on highways? Motorbikes do give a false sense of liberty. More and more people wanted to break away from the monopoly of bus owners and the hassles of getting train tickets. The same concept of liberty prevails in the way a growing number of people are embracing motorbikes as their first choice of transport. But this has been helped by certain government policies and the financial schemes of motorcycle vendors. While motorcycle sales are closely connected to economic stability, the down payment facilities offered by merchant banks have contributed to the rise in the sales of motorcycles. The app-based ride-sharing policy promises employment, too.

According to Statista.com, revenue from Bangladesh's motorcycle market is



▲ **Motorcycles were involved in 44.08 percent of the accidents and 34.85 percent of the deaths that occurred over the Eid holidays across Bangladesh.**

FILE PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

of which 99,810 were in Dhaka, according to Ceicdata.com.

In the first two months of 2022, as per Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA) website, 3,123 private passenger cars were sold against 84,583 motorcycles. The phenomenal growth of motorcycles is reminiscent of the introduction of Ford automobiles a century ago. What happened to America in the space of a generation is now happening in the developing world in Asia and parts of Africa. The wheels are on the move.

Interestingly, one of the major manufacturers of motorcycles, China, is progressively phasing out its production. As a country located on the higher rung of social growth, it knows the downsides of the two-wheelers. Traffic congestion and carbon emission are cited as two major causes. However, the squeeze in the domestic market does not tally with their export figures of motorcycles. The sales figures mentioned above show how we are subscribing to a transport system which is not without vulnerabilities.

Our Asian cousins know that motorcycles are deadly, and in one estimate they are even deadlier than HIV/AIDS or tuberculosis in Asia.

In Bangkok, there is a voluntary/special ambulance service called the “body collectors,” whose job is to patrol night streets to collect bodies of accident victims—mostly pedestrians hit by bikers

highway deaths, with the highest numbers in Southeast Asia.”

The motorcycle-related casualty rate in wealthy countries such as the US, however, is around 12-20 percent. The minimal casualty rate in the US suggests that many of these accidents could have been avoided if there was a strict imposition of traffic rules. Corruption greases the wheels that roam the streets. Bikers are not willing to obtain licences, wear helmets or follow rules as they know that they can take advantage of the already corrupt system. Many of these bikers are street smart enough to buy their way out of the system. The common view across the region is that police are there to steal your money.

There is a complete disregard for traffic signs. Once again, the situation is not unique in Bangladesh. A recent study in Cambodia shows that 70 percent of motorists don't know the meaning of a STOP sign. Our situation is likely to be worse as the only sign that works in the country is the police baton.

The growing number of motorcycles is a sign of economic progress, but it is also a sign of progressive degeneration of our overall social health. Bikers rule the roads with their adrenaline rushes, their road rage, and their newfound freedom. Conversely, the growing number of casualties suggests that they exist in a vulnerable system that is waiting for a two-stroke thrombosis.

# Time to focus on women's sexual health and rights



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BANGLADESH has made significant progress in the last two decades in improving the lives of women and girls. Maternal mortality rates are decreasing, fertility rates are decreasing, and gender parity in school enrollment is increasing. Women's participation in the labour force is 34.5 percent which is the third-highest among South Asian countries. Bangladesh is ranked 65th globally and first in South Asia in terms of Gender Gap Index 2021, with a score of 0.719. Although Bangladesh performs extraordinarily well in the political empowerment dimension of this index, there are still significant gender disparities in several dimensions.

Bangladeshi women and girls confront challenges in every aspect of their lives, including access to healthcare, economic opportunities, political engagement, financial access, and decision-making ability. Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) is a set of essential human rights that women are often deprived of. This includes the right to life, right to be free from torture, right to health, right to privacy, right to education, and the prohibition of discrimination. The key issues of SRHR for women in Bangladesh include child marriages, adolescent fertility, unintended pregnancies, and gender-based violence.

According to the Violence Against Women (VAW) Survey of 2015, almost two-thirds of ever-married women have encountered one or more types of domestic violence—physical, sexual, economic, emotional acts of violence, and controlling behavior—from their husband

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at least once in their lifetime. More than a quarter of the women also experienced physical violence from someone other than their husband (non-partner), while adolescents experienced the greatest rates of non-partner physical violence, at 30.9 percent, in their lifetime. Adolescent girls do not receive proper knowledge on their sexual rights, which makes them prone to violence. The importance of sexual education is undeniable at this stage of life, regardless of gender.

Child marriage is a violation of SRHR as it seizes a young adolescent's physical and psychological freedom. Bangladesh has the highest rate of child marriage in South Asia and is also among the top ten countries in the world. Around 51 percent of young girls and women were married before their 18th birthday. It is not easy to reduce this rate because it is supported by national law. Although The Child Marriage Restraint Act 2017 sets the minimum legal age of marriage for women at 18, it can be lowered to 16 through the Child Marriage Rule under “special circumstances,” which includes cases when a girl elopes with a man and refuses to return, or becomes pregnant before marriage. There are 38 million married girls under the age of 18 in the country, with 13 million married before the age of 15. Ending child marriage by 2030, as set out in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), will necessitate a massive push.

The latest Bangladesh Demographic and Health Survey reported that 36.2 percent of women aged 15–49 years cannot make their own informed decisions regarding sexual relations, contraceptive use, and reproductive healthcare. This is reflected in the fact that the adolescent birth rate has increased from 75 in 2015 to 83 in 2019, per 1,000 women, according to BBS. Contraceptive prevalence rate is 62 percent in Bangladesh, with 52 percent women using any modern methods of contraception. Only seven percent of men use condoms for birth control. The

moderately unsafe birth control pill is the most widely used contraceptive method, and most family planning methods are meant for use by women. This burden is not helped by the fact that women often lack access to a variety of contraceptive methods. This is not in line with the CEDAW, which says to eliminate discrimination against women in healthcare, including family planning methods, of which Bangladesh is a signatory.

A single comprehensive policy or strategy for ensuring SRHR is absent in Bangladesh. However, various laws and strategies address several components of SRHR in a fragmented manner. The Adolescent Reproductive Health Strategy empowers women and adolescents via decision-making skills and sexuality education in the school curriculum. Some other laws, such as the Dowry Prohibition Act 1980, Acid Crime Prevention Act 2002, and Acid Control Act 2002, work together to prohibit violence against women. However, these laws are dated and might not be able to meet all the needs of women in the country's present context.

Proper implementation of laws is also a major challenge for ensuring SRHR for women. Although the Child Marriage Restraint Act 2017 necessitates the production of legal documents like birth certificate, national identity (NID) card, SSC/JSC/Primary certificate, or passport to prove the bride's age, it cannot stop a child marriage as documents can be falsified and illegal marriage (without registration) may also occur.

Because of patriarchal conceptions of women's duties within the family, women are frequently valued based on their capacity to reproduce. Ensuring sexual and reproductive health and rights is a daunting task in Bangladesh where open discussion on sexual health is a taboo. Thus, a context-specific awareness programme is needed, that can foster positive sexual and reproductive health practices and address norms leading to negative outcomes.