

Alarming rise in dengue cases

Why were expert suggestions to contain the disease ignored?

WE are alarmed to learn that dengue cases are fast spreading across the country, making it a major public health concern amidst a still-unsubdued pandemic. According to a report by *Prothom Alo*, dengue cases have been detected in as many as 50 districts this year, Dhaka being the worst affected among them, followed by Cox’s Bazar. According to data from the Health Directorate, more than 12,000 patients have so far been admitted to different hospitals for treatment. Among them, 45 have died. These numbers, however, do not reflect the actual dengue situation in the country as patients who were not admitted to hospitals have not been included in the list. Health experts fear that the actual numbers could be several times higher than the reported figures.

The question is, why couldn’t the government yet take any effective measure to contain the spread of dengue despite it being a public health concern for more than two decades now? As the infection rate increased over the past few years, along with a rising death toll, it was expected that the government would take it seriously and put into place medium- and long-term plans to contain it. But despite its fatal effects year after year, the government’s approach indicated no sense of urgency: it neither carried out regular anti-mosquito drives, nor conducted robust surveillance or awareness-raising programmes. Most importantly, it didn’t implement the experts’ advice to contain the spread.

Reportedly, in 2017 and 2019, two World Health Organization experts came to Bangladesh to direct the health ministry in this regard. One of them was a pathologist who formulated a research-based mid-term plan on how to control and prevent dengue and Chikungunya viruses in the country. He advised forming a rapid response team and also asked at least 12 ministries to join hands with the health ministry. Although the plan was supposed to be implemented by 2019, nothing has been done as of now.

So, this year, Aedes mosquito larvae have been found in 12 percent of the houses in the capital, according to a recent survey by the health directorate. Reportedly, the directorate conducts three mosquito surveys annually – pre-monsoon, monsoon-time and post-monsoon. We wonder what is even the point of doing these surveys if appropriate action based on their findings is not taken.

The government must realise the gravity and accumulated cost of a prolonged dengue situation and take immediate action to contain its spread. It must implement the suggestions made by the WHO experts and local specialists. The government should also direct all hospitals and health complexes to remain prepared to provide necessary treatment to incoming dengue patients and monitor that they comply with all directives. Equally importantly, it should regularly conduct mosquito repellent drives as well as awareness programmes across the country. There is no reason to downplay the danger that dengue poses to public health.

Stop hiding behind technicalities

Govt must act on rising allegations of enforced disappearances

WE wholeheartedly agree with the call of the UN Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances that the Bangladesh government needs to shed its lax approach to allegations of enforced disappearances at the hands of security agencies in the country. Five new cases of enforced disappearances were reported to the UN working group in the last one year, taking the number of cases being investigated by the UN to 81. Meanwhile, according to various human rights organisations, at least 522 people became victims of enforced disappearances between 2009 and 2018 in Bangladesh. But the response of the government so far has been totally unsatisfactory, to say the least.

Just this Monday, the information minister said that claims of enforced disappearances are part of a conspiracy by “anti-government” groups apparently working against the interests of the country. There is no shortage of excuses to bin such allegations. Sometimes it is through counter-accusations against rights groups. Sometimes it is through suspicious claims of “voluntary” disappearances. Oftentimes, it is through total denial of knowledge. But how long will the government obstruct justice in the face of mounting evidence as well as rising calls for investigations and accountability of the security agencies?

The just-retired UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, during her recent four-day visit to Bangladesh, also expressed concern regarding the continued allegations of enforced disappearances. She offered her office’s help in devising a mechanism of international standards to investigate the allegations. But the government’s continued denial is causing any hope for justice or the return of victims to fade away. What is more concerning is its lack of willingness to even investigate claims of enforced disappearances, which is the least it could do. What does it fear will come out if such investigations are carried out? Why hide behind technicalities every time an accusation is raised?

The focus, however, must not shift from the victims and the struggle of their families. In the past, according to reports by this daily, many families alleged that they were being harassed by the police and coerced into signing pre-written statements “admitting” that they had deliberately misled the authorities by concealing information about their “missing” relatives. This is alarming not only because it could signal the complicity of law enforcement agencies in the cases themselves, but also because it shows that they are doing the very opposite of what they should be doing: protecting citizens.

We demand that the government urgently undertakes an impartial, independent and transparent investigation into all allegations of enforced disappearances. The UN human rights council, in its ongoing 51st regular session, reiterated its offer of help in building an independent system of investigation, which the government should have no reason to ignore. The families of all the disappeared deserve better. The government must do everything possible to alleviate their suffering.

TENSIONS AT BANGLADESH-MYANMAR BORDER

We must make all diplomatic efforts to avoid direct conflict



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THE tension that we are seeing now at the Bangladesh-Myanmar border is nothing new. We have a history of trouble along the 271km border between the two countries – both land and maritime. For instance, in 1978, there was a border skirmish with the Myanmar military that called for mobilisation and deployment of Bangladeshi troops at the border. We nearly had a maritime conflict in 2008 as well, when Myanmar deployed its naval ships to put a Korean drilling rig in our exclusive economic zone close to St Martin’s Island.

The current problem, however, started mainly with the influx of Rohingyas who fled Myanmar in 2017. Since then, we have been housing a large population of Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh, and facing a number of issues that are involved with housing such a large number of people. We need to settle these issues with Myanmar because we want to repatriate the refugees. The problem that we are observing now along the border starts primarily with the presence of ARSA and the Arakan Army in Myanmar’s Rakhine state, who have been battling the Myanmar army for some time. ARSA is, however, not a strong force, unlike the Arakan Army, which has ethnic-independent aspirations in the Rakhine province and have been battling the Tatmadaw for some time now. The Arakan Army is the military wing of the United League of Arakan, which was formed in 2009. Over the last couple of years, it has grown in strength. They now have the support of the Rakhine population in large parts of the province. The Tatmadaw is worried that if the Arakan Army continues to gain strength, they may lose control in this part of the country. Hence, the current operations against it.

But the way they are violating international norms while conducting such operations is unacceptable to Bangladesh. There were several incidents earlier this month where their shells landed within Bangladeshi territory, and their helicopters and aircrafts violated our airspace and flew inside Bangladesh.

On September 16, their shells again landed in no man’s land on the



The tension at the Bangladesh-Myanmar border right now must be resolved peacefully and diplomatically.

FILE PHOTO: AFP

Bangladesh side, which killed one person and injured five others. This is a gross violation of all international norms and neighbourly relationships and of our sovereign space. It is something Bangladesh cannot accept.

Bangladesh called the Myanmar ambassador four times over the last few weeks and gave strong notes of protest. As we can see, they have not had any practical impact, because they have continued to violate our border and air space. What is worrying is that there is a chance that the conflict that is going on between the separatist forces within the Rakhine province and the Tatmadaw may spill over into Bangladesh.

There is also the possibility of the current conflict escalating into a bigger one. That is why we must try and put a stop to it now. Unfortunately, we do not have any confidence-building measures (CBM) between the two countries. Therefore, we are unable to

enter Bangladesh in their desperate attempt to flee the conflict zones. That possibility remains quite high.

So, what should Bangladesh do now? First of all, the current tension that we have along the Bangladesh-Myanmar border must be resolved peacefully and diplomatically. There must never be a thought that we can solve the problem militarily or through conflict. But then, only diplomatic moves are not enough. It has to be backed up by deterrents, because deterrents are what gives a biting power to diplomatic moves. I’m afraid that we are not exhibiting deterrents in the right manner to Myanmar, which is why it is not taking our protests seriously and continuing with the activities at the border that we are seeing now. Some international experts have also argued that military balances have probably tilted towards the Myanmar side, which has made it difficult for us to show the adequate

Asian Nations’ (Asean) ambassadors, and they will talk to other places and other capitals. But I remember that during the Rohingya influx of 2017, Bangladesh was diplomatically taken on a backfoot; that should not happen this time. What we should do is alert international actors well in advance that this is happening on our border.

More importantly, we should talk to the countries that back Myanmar. Myanmar’s strength comes from three major sources of power: India, Russia, and China. We should talk to them so that they talk to Myanmar or the Tatmadaw, so that these actions are stopped immediately. And if nothing happens, we should take it to the UN Security Council and place our case there. But we must make all the efforts diplomatically, so that the problem does not escalate to the level of a conflict, and that it is resolved peacefully.

WORLD CAR-FREE DAY

Burn less fuel, build better cities



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DEBRA EFROYMSON

AS my readers know, Bangladesh (as with most of the world) is experiencing a fuel crisis. That crisis has led to power cuts and the decision to purchase oil from Russia, despite the atrocities Russia is inflicting on Ukraine. But purchasing oil from Russia is only a temporary solution to an ongoing crisis that is about more than the price or quantity of oil. The real issue is not how to source or subsidise fuel, but how to learn to lead quality lives while burning vastly less of it.

Now, Dhaka residents may disagree about many things, but there’s one thing we can agree on: traffic is a nightmare. A fairly short trip that would require half an hour by bicycle can take well over an hour by car. Our lives are dominated by our need to move around and the difficulty and expense of doing so.

And it’s not just the time (and money) we waste in traffic. It’s the death toll on our roads, the mourning of those dead or seriously injured in road crashes. It’s the pollution: the filthy air we breathe, the noise that keeps us awake at night and disturbs our study and work during the day. It’s the lack of affordable housing

for people, while we continue to build housing for our cars. It’s all the children who cannot safely walk or cycle to school, the adults whose daily work commute is a nightmare, the lack of public amenities like parks, because we feel it’s more important to have parking space for our cars than parks for our people. It’s all the money we spend on road infrastructure, and on buying and maintaining or hiring a car or a motorbike as individuals.

And of course the most pressing issue of our times: the climate crisis. We can’t make our cities cooler by planting more trees, because there’s no space and budget for it. We can’t mitigate urban flooding, because there’s no space for canals, no interest in tearing up asphalt to allow the water to seep into the soil rather than flood us out. And the use of our cars and other motorised vehicles contributes to greenhouse gases, worsening the very problem that we can’t manage to mitigate.

Meanwhile, when we do address these issues, the solutions are always too small to make any real impact or are even counterproductive. Tinkering with the price of fuel. Mandating seat belts and motorcycle helmets,

which can reduce the harm from road crashes but don’t protect pedestrians or cyclists. Cleaner fuels and more efficient engines, which can at best reduce pollution, not eliminate it. (In fact, by encouraging more driving, they can actually worsen pollution.) Building new roads and widening the existing ones are expensive and only

It is difficult to admit to a mistake, especially as big a one as the belief that cars will make our lives dramatically better without wreaking significant damage. But now that we have gained sufficient experience, it is time to admit that creating a car-based transport system was in fact a mistake. Assuming that we cannot survive without high fuel consumption was a mistake.

invite more traffic.

Rather than a bunch of partial solutions that fail to improve our urban lives in any dramatic way, why not find the courage to make life in our cities dramatically better, while reducing all these pressing problems? Every year on September 22, people

around the world celebrate World Car-Free Day. World Car-Free Day is an annual reminder of the folly of creating car-based transport systems, and of the many advantages that would accrue if we lessened our dependence on fuel, cars and motorbikes, and instead created vastly better conditions for walking, cycling, and public transport.

It is difficult to admit to a mistake, especially as big a one as the belief that cars will make our lives dramatically better without wreaking significant damage. But now that we have gained sufficient experience, it is time to admit that creating a car-based transport system was in fact a mistake. Assuming that we cannot survive without high fuel consumption was a mistake.

Imagine for a moment our city without cars, but with high-quality public transport, people zipping by on bicycles, others on foot. Imagine what you would hear, see, and smell. Contrast it with our existing city. Join us in celebrating World Car-Free Day today and in working to ensure that the life we imagine one day a year could be our life every day: a healthier, happier life that would be good for us, our children, our future generations and our planet. Where our creativity, intelligence, and resources could be used to solve pressing problems, rather than in figuring out how to keep us supplied with the plentiful cheap oil that is fuelling the climate crisis and all the other transport-related problems that are killing us.