

Fallout from Cyclone Sitrang

Bangladesh now has a lot to do

Before descending into a depression and weakening, cyclone Sitrang claimed the lives of at least 11 people in seven districts of Bangladesh. We are deeply saddened by their tragic deaths, but we would like to commend the authorities for evacuating most of the people that were in harm’s way, and avoiding even greater loss of lives. At the same time, we would like to remind the authorities, different aid groups, and people in general, that the biggest challenges are still ahead of us.

Besides claiming lives, Sitrang caused immense damage across Bangladesh. According to a report by this newspaper, coastal districts of the country have been experiencing disruptions to road and power links. And it is being suspected that the cyclone has caused heavy damage to houses and crops – and agricultural experts had warned prior to the cyclone descending that the damage caused to crops could lead to significant food insecurities for Bangladesh given the current global circumstances. The authorities need to evaluate the extent of the damage, and take appropriate measures to mitigate the damage and ensure our food security.

Moreover, providing immediate relief and rehabilitation to those who have been affected should right now be the government’s number one priority. It is important to be aware of any potential waterborne disease that may arise after the floods brought about by the cyclone. The government and aid agencies should stockpile and start distributing necessary medicines to the affected people.

Reportedly, even though the authorities had suspended the operations of all types of water transports, at least 13 trawlers had capsized in the Bay of Bengal late at night. It needs to be investigated how that occurred, and preparations should be made to ensure that no such incidents happen again in future.

In 2020, Cyclone Amphan, only the second “super cyclone” ever recorded over the Bay of Bengal, killed more than 100 people in Bangladesh and India, and affected millions. Last year, Cyclone Yaas battered India’s east coast, and this year, Bangladesh just got hit by Cyclone Sitrang. With COP 27 right around the corner, Bangladeshi representatives should make a strong case to the international community at the climate summit to provide necessary funding for Bangladesh to mitigate against such damage.

Aside from appealing for funds, the government needs to recognise that it needs to move away from destructive development projects that are wreaking havoc on the environment, and putting communities at increasing risks. At the same time, it needs to ensure proper utilisation of existing funds for climate change related projects, as it is becoming increasingly clear that Bangladesh right now is at the mercy of natural disasters that are occurring more frequently as a result of climate change.

Inflation and immorality rising hand-in-hand?

Govt must do more to stop consumers’ purchasing power erosion

The latest key food item to stray further out of the reach of citizens is sugar. Reportedly, the price of sugar has jumped to Tk 100-110 per kg, up from Tk 90-95 per kg a couple of weeks ago in the retail markets. This is in stark contrast to the new rates set by the government, according to which loose sugar should cost Tk 90 per kg and packaged sugar should be sold at Tk 95 per kg in the retail market. Supply of sugar has also decreased as importers face many complications when opening letters of credit (LC) with banks. The overall reason being cited behind this steep rise in sugar prices is higher manufacturing costs. Production of sugar has been facing disruption recently due to an insufficient supply of gas to manufacturing facilities.

But sugar prices were already too cornered given the hiked price of the US dollar against the Bangladeshi taka, which made importing crude sugar much more expensive. This was not helped by the globally increased energy prices. To put the crisis further into perspective, of Bangladesh’s 25 lakh tonnes annual demand for sugar, at least 24 lakh tonnes are imported as domestic mills are only able to produce about one lakh tonnes. But given that the price of sugar stands at USD .40 per kg globally, as per World Bank data from October 4, why exactly is there this big of a discrepancy between that and Bangladeshi prices?

Yes, manufacturers and traders are facing a range of problems when it comes to importing and producing sugar at the least costs and on time. But recent drives by the Directorate of National Consumers Right Protection have presented an unsavoury side of the story as well. While the directorate’s report reveals that there is no shortage of unrefined sugar, mill owners, dealers and wholesalers have found a way of making undue profits as they sell the item at more than the price fixed by the government as the price is not mentioned in supply order receipts. Many retailers were also found to be tampering with the prices printed on packaged sugar, or even unpacking it to sell loose at higher prices.

There is no denying that factors such as the gas crisis and complication regarding the opening of LCs with banks are contributing to higher sugar prices and must be dealt with properly. But the immorality of producers and sellers must be checked with equal urgency if we are to avoid further erosion of consumers’ already-weak purchasing power.

What we need now is rigorous and dedicated market inventions from the government, perhaps beyond just fining traders who are overpricing goods or tampering with the quantity they sell to consumers. This goes for the markets of all essential food items. It is crucial that the government work hard to reduce the effects of the ongoing global energy crisis on manufacturers, and ensure that imports of food are made easier on all counts. But the immorality of some food sellers during this time of increasing food inflation is especially hard to digest, and must not be tolerated.

Why are we letting dengue get the better of us?



A CLOSER LOOK

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Dengue cases are on the rise again, with fatalities recorded almost on a daily basis. As of yesterday evening, more than 32,000 individuals have had to resort to hospitalisation to seek medical care for dengue this year. More than 100 people have died – 51 deaths being registered in the first 19 days of October. In the 24 hours preceding yesterday morning, at least 750 dengue patients were hospitalised, according to the health directorate.

The cacophony surrounding the dengue outbreak this year – media reports, TV commentaries, expert suggestions, remarks from city and health authorities – is like a déjà vu. All the soundbites, comments and excuses are nothing that were not said last year, the year before, and the year before that. This current scenario, in fact, reminds one of Nietzsche’s concept of the cycle of the eternal return: living the same worries, anguish, pain, helplessness over and over again, with no respite in sight.

Unfortunately, the authorities’ lackadaisical approach has also remained unchanged over the years, which is why we have witnessed three major outbreaks of dengue in a span of only four years: 2019 (more than 100,000 cases and 179 deaths), 2021 (more than 28,429 cases and 105 deaths), 2022 (more than 32,000 cases and at least 118 deaths as of October 25).

But the question is: why this apathetic attitude by the authorities? Why could they not pay heed to the warnings, which made headlines since at least March this year, of a possible major outbreak of the mosquito-borne disease? Why did the authorities not take any learning from the experiences of 2019 and 2021? If they did, where is the reflection of those learnings? Why did the authorities not take effective preventive measures to contain the outbreak this year? Despite the repeated havoc that dengue wreaks on our lives, why are we still so lack-back and mediocre in our approach to fight this menace?

In a column last year, I wrote about the need for an integrated vector management mechanism to combat dengue. By this, I mean yearlong programmes – consisting of both



More than 32,000 people have been hospitalised for dengue in Bangladesh so far this year.

FILE PHOTO: REUTERS

preventive and curative measures – with the participation of all stakeholders across the country, including local communities, to prevent the spread of mosquito-borne diseases.

A vector control policy has been in the discussions for some years now. So why are the authorities not able to formulate and implement this much-needed policy? What is stopping them?

Lack of a national plan or strategy to control dengue in Bangladesh has once again come to the fore as a result of the rapid spread of the disease in the last few months. Concern over this has been shared by public health expert Dr Be-Nazir Ahmed, who said dengue or Aedes mosquitoes cannot be brought under control without the formation and implementation of a national plan or strategy, as cited in a recent *Prothom Alo* report.

At this point, one might be pardoned for asking: what happened to the mid-term plan to contain Aedes mosquito-borne diseases that had been shared

of Wolbachia, a natural bacteria present in almost 60 percent of insects, including in certain breeds of mosquito, as a mechanism to contain Aedes mosquitos. The release of Wolbachia-infected mosquitoes can reduce the ability of Aedes mosquitoes to spread not only dengue, but also Zika, chikungunya and yellow fever. Research by the World Mosquito Programme also asserts the effectiveness of Wolbachia in curbing the spread of mosquito-borne viruses. Despite these suggestions, why only recently – in September this year – did the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS) say they would introduce this bacteria? What took them so long to reach this decision? It has been a month since the announcement. Has Wolbachia been introduced yet? Or are we waiting for the situation to worsen further?

What is even more worrisome is that, although dengue has expanded its footprint across the country,

to handle this crisis? This is an issue that needs to be looked into seriously by the health authorities, since the hospitals in Dhaka are struggling to accommodate and treat the increasing number of patients.

Although the DGHS has suggested that we may see a drop in dengue cases in November, given the erratic pattern of this viral disease – which has in recent years taken the form of an endemic – dengue will always lurk in the shadows, unless we take all-out measures to contain it.

It is high time the authorities reflected on their failures that are causing people to suffer so much, and took concerted actions to stop it. An integrated national plan or strategy, a robust vector management policy, and introduction of Wolbachia have become the need of the hour to contain dengue. The authorities must not waste any more time in shrugging off their lethargy and get down to work to fight this off.

Time to include people with disabilities in local government



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Approximately 10 percent of Bangladesh’s population, according to the World Health Organization (WHO), have disabilities as a result of natural catastrophes, traffic accidents, violence, hunger, a lack of immunisation and/or birth defects. They are a vulnerable and undervalued section of our society due to negative perceptions. Disability is viewed as a curse, especially in rural areas. The Rights and Protection of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2013 was passed in parliament as the evidence of the government’s dedication to protecting the rights of people with disabilities.

People with disabilities are now, for the first time in the country, covered by health insurance, allowing them to receive low-cost medical care. The “Bangabandhu Suraksha Bima for Persons with Disabilities” policy would initially be available to those with autism, Down syndrome, intellectual disability, and cerebral palsy. To make life safer for those with autism, the present administration is also working to provide permanent homes and employment.

Numerous national and international organisations have been actively promoting the rights of people with disabilities, holding roundtables

and engaging in advocacy activities with the media, as a supplement to government efforts. It is obvious that over the past few decades, citizen engagement has been extensively utilised in talks about development. It has been acknowledged that meaningful engagement of all individuals, regardless of gender, religion, or disability, is critically necessary for progress.

At the union parishad level, 13 standing committees are known to exist. Unfortunately, people with disabilities are not heard at these committee meetings or other venues where local government authorities make decisions (for example; standing committees, ward meetings, project implementation committees, community policing committees and open budget discussions). The Union disaster Management Committee does not provide people with disabilities with the opportunity to learn about the disaster management programmes that are planned and carried out.

To ensure that they can participate in disaster management in a meaningful way, it must be reformatted from bottom-up. Additionally, social awareness initiatives to support the needs of those with disabilities

during crisis management must be developed. With the support of the local government, we must ensure that disaster management is inclusive and mainstreamed at every phase – from alert to recovery. All union parishad standing committees must include and give voice to people with disabilities when making decisions. The standing committee will raise

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awareness by educating relevant upazila-level offices in order to ensure that people with disabilities, particularly women and the elderly, have access to social security programmes and schemes that tackle poverty. Access to government support, including for proper training,

counselling, financial support, and interim care, should be made easier for them.

The ineffectiveness of the disability rights and protection committees at the upazila, district, and national levels results in the improper implementation of the rights of people with disabilities. Nobody should be excused from their regular responsibilities due to a budgetary shortfall. Other ministries and departments, especially local government agencies, should step up for the welfare of the disabled in addition to the Ministry of Social Welfare.

In order to mainstream people with disabilities for sustainable development, the Ministry of Social Welfare must expand its coordination function by enlisting union parishads. Committees should check to see if they are operating effectively; if not, they should determine why and alert the appropriate authorities, and the required funding, manpower, and logistical assistance should be provided.

According to the law, national committees should be given more power. In order to determine the precise number of people with disabilities living at the union level and determine their requirements, the union parishad may, if necessary, form a small unit for them. Union parishads should work to make sure that they have access to public services, information, and the legal system. Local governments can encourage confidence among people with disabilities and create a sense of community among them by offering equal opportunities and respect.