

A perfect storm is brewing

The dengue menace is an artificial crisis caused by state authorities

There is no doubt that the ongoing dengue menace – which has reached almost all of Bangladesh barring four districts – was formed through a perfect storm of poor surveillance, insufficient mosquito-control measures, unplanned urbanisation with unchecked construction, bureaucratic botch-ups, and absence of a central policy or command to tackle it, despite the disease being around for over two decades now. Yes, lack of public awareness and the presence of multiple serotypes – a distinct variation within a species of virus – this year are also to blame, but those are more effects than causes. This makes the dengue menace a manufactured crisis, courtesy of relevant state authorities.

So far this year, the number of reported cases has reached 41,481 while a total of 162 deaths were recorded, which is only 17 less than the reported death toll in 2019 – the deadliest year in the history of dengue in Bangladesh. We are yet to pass the peak, with 21,932 cases and 86 deaths recorded in October alone, making it the worst month in terms of dengue infections. Experts have predicted that the rate of daily infections may not come down before mid-November. This means more infections and deaths, and possibly a new annual record, before the year comes to end.

It is hard to accept such tragedies knowing that proper preparation could have prevented them (mostly). After the massive suffering that had followed the outbreak of Covid-19 in Bangladesh, it was argued that our health system wasn't prepared to handle such a threat. True, but the manner in which we handled subsequent phases of the pandemic or subsequent disease outbreaks – of cholera, dengue, and even typhoid, to some extent – shows it still is not. Familiar problems continue to persist. Over the last several months, there have been reports on hospitals struggling with the load of incoming patients, bed blocking, lack of early detection and proper testing, lack of awareness-raising campaigns, and the overall environment of chaos, mismanagement and lack of coordination among relevant authorities – health ministry, Local Government Division, city corporations, etc.

Why should these issues still exist even after a "successful response" to the pandemic, as the government claims? Entomologists tell us that had the city corporations launched drives to identify and destroy Aedes breeding hotspots early in the year, the dengue threat would have been largely neutralised. There have been multiple complaints about their inadequate measures and lack of effectiveness. The government still doesn't have a central, regularly updated database of dengue infections, no integrated vector control policy to control the Aedes population, and no central command to coordinate activities by all relevant departments. What few measures are taken are hardly followed up on, or coordinated centrally, to maximise their impact.

This has to stop. We urge the government to take the dengue threat seriously, and direct maximum efforts to preventing it. After over 20 years of experience of handling this disease, there can be no excuse for not having a reliable, well-equipped and centrally guided system in place. Even one death caused by its failure is one too many.

Is Dhaka Wasa beyond accountability?

How can Wasa MD appoint people ignoring its organogram?

So, here we are again, trying to process the news of another irregularity involving the controversial Dhaka Wasa MD, who appointed people close to him in the state-run organisation violating rules and regulations, and wondering how many more irregularities will it take for the state to make him or the agency accountable. In the past 13 years, after Taqsem A Khan was appointed its MD in 2009, many complaints were made against Dhaka Wasa for actions and decisions that go against the people's interests. Supplying contaminated water to residents, increasing water tariff 15 times in 13 years, allowing unnecessary foreign trips for its officials, including its MD, undertaking ineffective projects worth crores of taka in the name of improving its services, polluting the Buriganga River with untreated waste disposed through its sewage lines – the list of its irregularities and failures is seemingly endless.

A report on its latest misdeed says that the Wasa MD appointed two individuals close to him by creating two top positions, violating the Dhaka Wasa Act 1996 and Dhaka Wasa Service Rule 2010. After their retirement from the organisation in 2016, both of them were variously reappointed as consultants, advisers, directors and deputy managing directors. Reportedly, whenever the MD goes abroad, one of them is made the acting MD. Even through the Local Government Division (LGD) – Wasa's supervising authority – recently asked it to cancel the appointments and stop paying them salaries and allowances, nothing has been done in this regard.

Should we be surprised? No, especially when such allegations were also raised against Taqsem himself. Reportedly, he has been appointed and reappointed as Wasa MD for six consecutive terms in violation of Wasa's rules and regulations. The Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) even termed his appointment or repeated reappointments as "questionable", and called for a neutral audit of his performance.

It's really alarming that a vital state agency like Dhaka Wasa has gone beyond any kind of accountability. Despite the fact that it has totally failed to improve the quality of water it provides to citizens – for example, earlier this year, the city saw a major cholera outbreak because of leaks in Wasa pipelines – the agency could not be made to answer for its failures. A TIB study also found that 62 percent of people seeking water and sewer connections from Wasa reported facing harassment and irregularities. Sadly, nothing visible was done to address these issues either.

Since the Anti-Corruption Commission has now started an enquiry into various financial anomalies of Wasa and the two high-ups appointed by Taqsem have already been questioned, we hope it will send a strong signal to its MD. Also, recently, the Supreme Court upheld a High Court order that sought a report on the salaries, allowances, and other facilities provided to Taqsem over his entire tenure. We hope all these initiatives, if followed up properly, will help to hold Dhaka Wasa finally accountable.

How should we address our core labour market challenges?



Dr Selim Raihan is Professor, Department of Economics, University of Dhaka, Bangladesh, and Executive Director, South Asian Network on Economic Modeling (SANEM). Email: selim.raihan@gmail.com

SELM RAIHAN

In the recent decade, despite high economic growth, job creation has slowed down. This is especially in the manufacturing and services sectors, where it remains a big challenge due to increased automation. The high degree of informal employment in Bangladesh, where its share in total employment remains well above 85 percent, is an immense challenge to ensuring decent jobs.

The female labour force participation rate, over the past decade, has remained stagnant at around 35 percent. And despite the demographic dividend, the share of youth who are not in education, economic activities and training is high, and the youth unemployment rate is excessive. The labour market is characterised by a vicious cycle of low pay, low skill and low productivity.

Quality health and education services are essential for labour productivity, but Bangladesh falls behind other countries in providing universal access to these services, with extremely low public spending on health and education relative to GDP. Poor working conditions, high rates of rural-urban migration with a significant concentration of migrant labour in urban informal services sectors, skill mismatches in the labour market, and the outward migration of a sizeable proportion of low-skilled labour are other significant employment challenges.

Five sets of policies and strategies could address these labour market challenges.

First, the government should promote pro-employment policies that provide adequate jobs for an expanding workforce. Macroeconomic, sectoral and labour policies should be used together for resolving macroeconomic imbalances, targeting sectors that can sustain employment in the long run as well as benefit marginalised groups, and introducing labour market regulations that ensure human capital development and labour conditions that meet the ILO's Decent Work Agenda.

Second, long-term investments in job creation should be promoted by creating an environment that supports a robust private sector. For this, the government should enhance legal and financial institutions. Infrastructure

improvement and increased interconnectivity will cut business costs, while efforts to combat corruption may boost investor confidence. Efforts for the formalisation of business enterprises need to be backed up by policies that promote worker's rights, private sector development, and social cohesion. Government should engage closely with banks to find ways to offer financial services to micro, small and



FILE PHOTO: AFP

Over the past decade, the female labour force participation rate has remained stagnant at around 35 percent.

medium-sized enterprises and informal businesses that cannot access financing as they are not registered.

Third, short-term training should be used to assist informal workers in developing market-relevant skills. Entrepreneurship, financial literacy and managerial skills could all be beneficial; however, realistic economic opportunities for micro-enterprises and self-employment must first be identified. Youth and women's inequalities must be addressed. Unemployment among youth,

country's education and training systems are aligned with the needs of the future economy.

Next, strengthening labour market institutions and leveraging data for better job matching will be critical. There is no trade-off between worker protection and economic growth when it comes to labour market reforms, which should be managed through dialogue between employers, employees and the government, with the aim of safeguarding workers without sacrificing growth. Any efforts to loosen labour market restrictions

schemes. Improving the quality and accreditation of education will enable migrants to take advantage of their skills while working abroad. A basic legal framework should be defined to broaden the scope of migration programmes. This system should make visas, seasonal jobs and qualification recognition easier. In the long run, Bangladesh can benefit from migration not only through remittances, but through transfers of skills and knowledge, and networks that can lead to entrepreneurship and new markets.

The stakes could not be higher for Imran Khan, the establishment and Pakistan



Uzair M Younus is the director of the Pakistan Initiative at the Atlantic Council's South Asia Center and host of the podcast Pakistanonomy.

UZAIR M YOUNUS

"Chaos isn't a pit. Chaos is a ladder," says Littlefinger, in the global hit television series Game of Thrones. In his conversation with Lord Varys, the Master of Whisperers who is also known as the Spider, Littlefinger concludes by saying, "Many who try to climb it fail and never get to try again."

Chaos is unfolding in the Islamic Republic of Pakistan. It has been for many years.

In fact, some may argue that chaos has been a constant since Pakistan's birth, starting with the assassination of the country's first prime minister, Liaquat Ali Khan. The chaos has engulfed many, including the likes of the first prime minister himself, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, Ziaul Haq, and most recently, Benazir Bhutto.

Imran Khan, the authoritarian populist who has found a way to channel the rage of millions of citizens, is the most recent leader trying to climb the ladder of chaos.

And he nearly failed.

Thursday's assassination attempt on the former prime minister, who has been on the campaign trail since his ousting in the country's first-ever vote of no confidence in Parliament, is only going to stoke more mayhem.

With sharp lines already drawn not just across the political spectrum, but much of society, the stakes could not have been higher. What has been the most serious threat to national cohesion since 1971, something that this author has been warning about since the vote of no confidence, has only become more dangerous.

Khan has survived, for now, and will live to fight another day. This brush with death will only reinforce Khan's belief that he is on this earth for a purpose – to vanquish the corrupt mafias that have drained his beloved country of all the potential and riches that it has to offer.

A born-again Muslim, Khan is fundamentally guided by this mission, which he sees as a fight between good and evil. Anyone and everyone who is opposed to this mission is on the side of evil. This belief will only be reinforced by this second brush with death (Imran sustained serious injuries while climbing a stage at a rally in Lahore in 2013).

But this chaos is not only being stoked by Khan. In fact, he is a creation of the powers that have harnessed chaos for decades. And it is just an ironic twist of fate that the bearers of the powers have created a being that

is more powerful than them, at least for the time being.

And it is for this reason that this most recent escalation is so serious. For both Khan and his creators realise that to make one or the other fail, the ladder of chaos must be made that much more dangerous, such that only one of them survives.

Meanwhile, those politically

So long as Pakistan's elites believe that chaos is a ladder that they climb and stay atop, the continuous cycle of instability will continue. What will change, however, is the standard of living of current and future generations. And these standards will go anywhere but up.

opposed to Khan are yearning for his former benefactors to bring him down – and staring at irrelevance should this plan fail. They cannot, at least for the foreseeable future, compete with Khan. They have no ability, no capacity, and no narrative with which to weaken their mortal enemy.

Many will argue that this is not true. After all, they would say, Khan is only seeking the support of his former benefactors to bring about the revolution that he is seeking. But these folks miss the clear signal that was delivered in that unprecedented press conference: the current leadership of the army, which has decided to remain apolitical, is going to be around for at least the next 15 years.

This means that the only way for Khan to achieve his goals is to force his former allies and benefactors to bend the knee in submission. And if Pakistan's history is any guide, forcing the country's powerful military establishment to bend the knee in submission, that too to a civilian, is easier said than done.

And so, the raging storms that have engulfed the Islamic Republic are only going to get worse in the coming days and months. As a result, a society that has been pummeled by sky-high inflation, unprecedented floods, a stagnant economy, and malnutrition, is only going to be further devastated. Citizens and their well-being are not even an afterthought in this cynical Game of Thrones and with every passing day, they will be worse off.

Pakistan's external allies, particularly the ones on whose charity the country barely makes ends meet, will be watching with disdain. They have had delegation upon delegation of elites come to their doors, seeking a bailout. For these external benefactors, it is simply bad strategy to shore up the country's economy, for they do not know who will and who will not survive.

So long as Pakistan's elites believe that chaos is a ladder that they climb and stay atop, the continuous cycle of instability will continue. What will change, however, is the standard of living of current and future generations. And these standards will go anywhere but up.

This article was first published in Dawn, an Asia News Network partner of The Daily Star.