

## Diabetes turning into a killer epidemic

Its contribution to mortality and morbidity is one of the largest in the world

It is quite alarming that one in every 10 persons in the world now lives with diabetes, as revealed by the International Diabetes Federation (IDF). More than 500 million people have been affected by it, but unfortunately, almost half of them are reportedly undiagnosed. In case of Bangladesh, the IDF had estimated last year that 13.1 million people were living with diabetes, and projected the number to be almost double by 2025. This is extremely concerning, as diabetes is one of the four major types of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) that make the largest contribution to morbidity and mortality worldwide.

Naturally, the explosion of diabetes has been putting health systems under increasing pressure, preventing people who have contracted the disease and those who are at risk from getting the care and education they need. This, in turn, is increasing the number of diabetic patients – forming a deadly cycle. Needless to say, Bangladesh is also in the same boat, and with the number of diabetic patients expected to double in only three years, its healthcare system will continue to suffer.

Therefore, while it is essential for the government to increase the number of doctors, nurses, and other staff to deal with the increased number of patients – and to equip them with better tools to provide proper care – ultimately, it might prove to be a losing battle unless preventive measures are immediately taken.

With that in mind, along with the fact that diabetes is linked with other non-communicable diseases, we urge the authorities to comply with the Diabetic Association of Bangladesh's call to urgently adopt a national plan of action to tackle diabetes, for which a cure is yet to be discovered. Central to that is building awareness among people that diabetes is increasing due to rapid urbanisation, changes in lifestyle and food habit, and lack of physical labour. Additionally, people should know that it is a life threatening disease that may have a prolonged negative impact on the patient and family, as well as on the economy in general. Therefore, every individual should consciously make better lifestyle decisions, eat healthier food – and refrain from unhealthy ones – as well as take up regular exercise.

There is one positive development in this regard, however. Bangladeshi researchers have come up with a test to identify people likely to develop type-2 diabetes in the future, making prevention all the more possible. Currently, the Directorate General of Drug Administration (DGDA) is reviewing the approval application for the kit, and we hope the government gives special emphasis towards its proper development.

Investing in the project could save countless lives, which could indeed prove to be priceless. Such a breakthrough in predicting the probability of someone contracting diabetes could not only change the fate of thousands of individuals and families in our own country, but also millions around the world. Therefore, the public and private sectors should join hands to ensure this project succeeds without any hiccups, and to increase our overall diabetes preparedness.

## A disaster on the horizon

Why is no heed being paid to the alarming rise in hearing loss?

One of the most common features of urban centres in modern-day Bangladesh is sound pollution. It's a problem we begin and end our (active) day with, yet hardly anyone seems to care or know how much of an effect it is having on our life and health. A recent survey, conducted by the Bangladesh University of Health Sciences (BUHS), has now revealed a shocking picture: one in four percent – or 25 percent – of those involved in various road-bound professions are suffering from hearing problems, and the problem of seven percent is so severe that they need hearing aids.

That means, if you are regularly exposed to the cacophony of horns, sirens and loudspeakers in one of the five city corporations where this study was conducted – Dhaka North, Dhaka South, Rajshahi, Cumilla, and Sylhet – you are probably already affected to some degree. In these areas, the survey says, noise from road traffic ranges from 84 to 99 decibels, which is much higher than the acceptable limit of 60 decibels. This is not to undermine the risks in other urban areas. The survey also revealed profession-specific data, which is quite illuminating.

For example, among the most affected groups are rickshaw drivers (about 42 percent), followed by traffic police (about 31 percent), auto-rickshaw drivers (about 24 percent), retail/store workers (about 24 percent), bus staff (about 16 percent), car drivers (about 15 percent), and motorcyclists (12.5 percent). On average, they were found to work for 11 hours, six days a week, on roads. Since the survey was on those who must be on or around roads as part of their profession, the risk for ordinary commuters and passers-by wasn't covered. But it's likely to be dangerous as well, depending on their level and duration of exposure to noise.

It's no wonder that those in Dhaka and Rajshahi are particularly at risk, with the first ranked as the noisiest – and the second as the fourth noisiest – city in the world in a report of the UNEP released in March. Clearly, the situation has reached a level where we can no longer ignore the threat that sound pollution poses, not just in these cities but across the country. Unfortunately, as things stand, we seem to be headed in the opposite direction. Across roads and highways, the idea that it is possible to drive without using horn frequently seems to be foreign to most drivers and vehicle owners. This must change.

We urge the relevant authorities – including the city corporations, the traffic police, and the Department of Environment – to take the alarming rate of hearing loss with the seriousness that it deserves. Professional associations and authorities must also come forward to educate and prevent sound polluters. Relevant rules and regulations related to noise must be implemented. Only a coordinated effort together with cooperation from drivers/owners can avert a looming disaster.

# EDITORIAL

## In the silos of bureaucrats, public interests are a trifle



OF MAGIC & MADNESS

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To the uninitiated, the public interaction between our prime minister, chief executive of the state, and state officials may seem curious at times. There appear to be two different wavelengths at which they function – one issuing edict after edict about what should or should not be done, and the other setting example after example of flagrant disregard for said edicts. Imagine being a boss and being disobeyed when you ask something of your team. Now imagine this at a state level. How that state still functions is a grim yet fascinating study in what one may call "perfect chaos."

The PM is naturally expected to share her thoughts on important issues from time to time. In her speeches, she also leaves instructions for state officials who are then expected to follow up on them. The public nature of these statements is significant, because it is meant to boost the confidence of citizens that their interests are being protected, but also to impress on public officials the seriousness of their job – something that an internal memo cannot do.

But every now and then, we come across cases where not only are such express instructions violated, sometimes frequently, but also, more bizarrely, such violations seem to be acceptable, putting a question mark on the whole exercise as well as the state of institutional discipline in public service.

Take, for instance, the issue of food production. In recent months, the PM has repeatedly stressed on cultivating every "inch of land" to tackle the growing threat of a food crisis. One would have thought that this message was more for offices and institutions dealing with agricultural land than ordinary farmers, who are doing it anyway for their own livelihood. But as a recent case shows, the message wasn't well received. Reportedly, the Mongla Port Authority is going ahead with a plan to dump sand dredged from a river on 300 acres of arable land in Banisanta union of Khulna, despite having alternatives options. In addition to harming the quality of soil, activists fear this could lead to the displacement of at least 5,000 farmers. Such instances of degrading or repurposing arable land are quite common.

Or think of the often unnecessary overseas training trips by government officials amid our shrinking foreign exchange reserves – despite a ban on



such tours. In a virtual address recently, the PM, for the umpteenth time, urged everyone to exercise austerity. But then, government officials, for the umpteenth time, showed that they were above such instructions. Reportedly, a group of seven bureaucratic heavyweights are set to visit Germany for such a "training exercise." In the past months, we have repeatedly come across news of such trips, mostly by soon-to-retire or senior officials who have no way of using their costly training for the benefit of relevant projects. As an editorial by this daily memorably said, foreign trips are "no gifts to be doled out" to officials. Yet, this continues to happen.

The call for austerity, one might assume, doesn't extend to government departments and project authorities that continue to squander public money through corruption, mismanagement, and wasteful spending. One may recall that, not long ago, the PM gave instructions on categorising public projects so that less important ones would be put on hold, which was hardly followed. Her repeated insistence on timely execution of projects was met with frustrating results.

The PM, mindful of the duties of public servants, also directed them to devote themselves to the welfare of

citizens. "All of you [public servants] are getting salaries and perks from the money paid by the common people as taxes. So, you have to work for their welfare and in their interest," she said. That, sadly, remains unheeded. Instead, crime and corruption allegations against officials across the administrative spectrum abound. Hardly, if ever, do we see action

violations took place.

It is not without reason that politicians, of both ruling and opposition camps, deride the influence of bureaucrats. While the first sees their growing influence in the decision-making process, the latter sees their corrupt influence in how it is treated. In an ideal world, both would be speaking in the same language, and

VISUAL: BIPLOB CHAKROBORTY

both would be right.

The question is: why is this display of "disobedience" still tolerated? This will require a separate op-ed. For now, let's just say that bureaucracy, when it comes to negotiating with power, has proven to be quite flexible. The only place where it held onto its age-old excuse for inaction and rigidity is its interaction with ordinary citizens, as the gruelling experience of service seekers in all sectors makes it abundantly clear. State officials appear to consider themselves a class apart. Or "a different class of people" – as the attorney general recently told the apex court, while defending public servants' right to exemption from arrests without permission. They feel entitled to benefits and exemptions that make them "more equal" among citizens.

Of course, public officials are not a homogenous group, nor is it our intention to blackwash them in general. Like any professional group, they are a mixed bag. But what citizens – harassed or deprived every day by those behind our largely unaccountable public institutions – get from the latter's interaction with power is a peek into their own insignificance. In the bureaucratic silos and SOP-enabled corridors, public interests are anything but a priority.

## Eight billion people, one humanity



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The world's population will reach the eight billion mark today – a testament to scientific breakthroughs and improvements in nutrition, public health and sanitation. But as our human family grows larger, it is also growing more divided.

Billions of people are struggling; hundreds of millions are facing hunger and even famine. Record numbers are on the move seeking opportunities and relief from debt and hardship, wars and climate disasters.

Unless we bridge the yawning chasm between the global haves and have-nots, we are setting ourselves up for an eight-billion-strong world filled with tensions and mistrust, crisis and conflict.

The facts speak for themselves. A handful of billionaires control as much wealth as the poorest half of the world. The top one percent globally pocket one-fifth of the world's income, while people in the richest countries can expect to live up to 30 years longer than those in the poorest. As the world has grown richer and healthier in recent decades, these inequalities have grown too.

On top of these long-term trends, the accelerating climate crisis and

the unequal recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic are turbocharging inequalities. We are heading straight for climate catastrophe, while emissions and temperatures continue to rise. Floods, storms and droughts are devastating countries that contributed almost nothing to global heating.

The war in Ukraine is adding to ongoing food, energy and finance crises, hitting developing economies hardest. These inequalities take their greatest toll on women and girls, and on marginalised groups that already suffer discrimination.

Many countries in the Global South face huge debts, increasing poverty and hunger, and the growing impacts of the climate crisis. They have little chance of investing in a sustainable recovery from the pandemic, the transition to renewable energy, or education and training for the digital age.

Anger and resentment against developed countries are reaching breaking points.

Toxic divisions and lack of trust are causing delays and deadlock on a host of issues, from nuclear disarmament to terrorism to global health. We must curb these damaging trends, repair

relationships and find joint solutions to our common challenges.

The first step is acknowledging that this runaway inequality is a choice, and one that developed countries have the responsibility to reverse – starting this month at the UN climate conference in Egypt and the G20 summit in Bali.

I hope COP27 will see a historic Climate Solidarity Pact under which developed and emerging economies unite around a common strategy and combine their capacities and resources for the benefit of humankind. Wealthier countries must provide key emerging economies with financial and technical support to transition away from fossil fuels. That is our only hope of meeting our climate goals.

I also urge leaders at COP27 to agree on a roadmap and institutional framework to compensate countries in the Global South for climate-related loss and damage that is already causing enormous suffering.

The G20 summit in Bali will be an opportunity to address the plight of developing countries. I have urged G20 economies to adopt a stimulus package that will provide governments of the Global South with investments and liquidity, and address debt relief and restructuring.

As we push for action on these medium-term measures, we are working non-stop with all stakeholders to ease the global food crisis.

The Black Sea Grain Initiative is an essential part of those efforts. It has helped to stabilise markets and bring food prices down. Every fraction of a percent has the potential to ease

hunger and save lives.

We are also working to ensure Russian fertilisers can flow into global markets, which have been severely disrupted by the war. Fertiliser prices are up to three times higher than before the pandemic. Rice, the most widely consumed staple in the world, is the crop that will suffer most.

Removing the remaining obstacles to the exports of Russian fertilisers is an essential step towards global food security.

But among all these serious challenges, there is some good news.

Our eight-billion-strong world could yield enormous opportunities for some of the poorest countries, where population growth is highest.

Relatively small investments in healthcare, education, gender equality and sustainable economic development could create a virtuous circle of development and growth, transforming economies and lives.

Within a few decades, today's poorest countries could become engines of sustainable, green growth and prosperity across entire regions.

I never bet against human ingenuity, and I have enormous faith in human solidarity. In these difficult times, we would do well to remember the words of one of humanity's wisest observers, Mahatma Gandhi: "The world has enough for everyone's need – but not everyone's greed."

This month's big global meetups must be an opportunity to start bridging divides and restoring trust, based on the equal rights and freedoms of every single member of humanity's eight-billion-strong family.