

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

A fully equipped ICU lying unused!

Jamalpur hospital shows how catastrophically mismanaged our health sector is

Words cannot describe the sheer imprudence of having an intensive care unit (ICU) fully equipped with modern equipment only to have it sit idly for years, depriving critical patients of vital care. This is the story of Jamalpur General Hospital, where the ICU has remained locked since its inauguration eight years ago. From life support ventilators to monitoring facilities, the ICU has all the necessary life-saving equipment. But according to a report, all of that has been left to rot away in a display of utter negligence and disregard for public health. With patients being denied the use of the ICU, many are having to travel all the way to Mymensingh or Dhaka for the treatment that should have been readily available in Jamalpur.

Patients who require ICU treatment are already in a somewhat critical condition. For them to be forced to travel long distances when there is already an equipped ICU near them is criminal. What is most absurd is that, according to a member of the hospital's management committee, the ICU has remained inoperative due to a shortage of manpower, indecision and mismanagement. But how can anyone accept that justification for eight years, especially when lives of patients are at stake? This is, unfortunately, just an example of how catastrophically mismanaged our health sector is.

One may recall that the prime minister, three years ago, had ordered setting up an ICU in every district hospital. But as this newspaper reported recently, a Tk 512 crore project following her instruction, which was supposed to have delivered 10-bed ICUs in 43 district hospitals and 10 medical college hospitals by now, has seen very little progress so far. Project authorities are now seeking a deadline extension as well as an additional Tk 301 crore for completing the project!

If there was ever a time when we were truly going to appreciate the importance of hospitals having proper ICUs, one would have hoped that it would be the peak and post-Covid periods. The fact that even then our authorities have cared so little about setting up life-saving ICUs, despite all the support needed to do so being at their fingertips, is shocking. It really displays a different level of apathy altogether.

Aside from various other issues with our health sector, what this demonstrates is the quality and sincerity of people in charge of our healthcare system. Healthcare is an essential service, which means those making decisions in this sector must truly care for the health and lives of patients. This is clearly one place where we have failed to get the right people in. Nevertheless, we hope that those responsible for the shambles at the Jamalpur hospital will be held responsible, and the ICU now lying unused will be operationalised without delay. At the same, the project authorities that failed to get the ICUs in district hospitals running must also be held accountable. It is time to consider a complete overhaul of our healthcare system, where establishing accountability will be the number one priority.

Beware of plastic pollution

It has reached a stage where only drastic action can reverse the trend

A report published by this daily on Sunday has, once again, showed just how widespread plastic pollution has become. At the Kulaura municipality in Moulvibazar, even a bit of rain is enough to flood the roads. This is because of the indiscriminate disposal of waste – including polythene, plastic packets, bottles, and cork sheets – into the town's drains. We have seen this scenario play out across the country, with the disposed waste often causing drainage systems to clog up, leaving little room for the excess water brought in by rain. Sometimes, the drains are cleaned up, but excavated wastes often end up back in because of the lack of proper waste management.

Given the state that it has reached, plastic pollution in the country demands urgent attention. In the absence of a proper disposal system, people often leave their waste anywhere they find vacant. Most, however, fail to realise how it contributes to clogging the drains, and how waste, in turn, lands in connecting rivers and other water bodies. This is not just harmful for the environment; when plastic enters the human body (in the form of microplastics), it can have all sorts of health consequences.

Unfortunately, the problem seems to be getting worse day by day. According to a World Bank estimate, between 2005 and 2020, Bangladesh's annual per capita plastic consumption in urban areas tripled. Moreover, experts have found that of all the plastic wastes produced in the country in 2019, only 36 percent was recycled. The rest has been left to cause a havoc on the environment and every living thing in it. One cannot help but wonder whether Bangladesh has at all achieved anything from its "historic" ban on polythene and plastic bags in 2002. To this day, it remains an example of worthless legislation minus enforcement.

How pervasive plastic pollution has become can be understood from a joint study that revealed that at least 17 species of fish and three species of shellfish from rivers flowing through the Sundarbans were contaminated with microplastics. Plastic is definitely causing severe harm to the environment and the marine life. As such, the environment, forest and climate change ministry's March 27 announcement of banning single-use plastic across 6,500 square kilometres of the Sundarbans is a welcome one. But enforcement can again be an issue, so the authorities must ensure that such restrictions are placed everywhere and enforced without fail.

While the role of industries in accelerating the pollution of our environment is undeniable, it is also crucial that individual citizens are made aware of the danger of irresponsible waste disposal. We urge the authorities to conduct mass awareness programmes in this regard and ensure that there are adequate waste disposal points available in all city neighbourhoods. Without drastic changes in how we, individually and institutionally, treat plastic waste now, things will get worse in the coming days.

Is the US really happy with our election plan?



Kamal Ahmed is an independent journalist. His Twitter handle is @ahmedkcal

KAMAL AHMED

It was probably the most challenging diplomatic assignment any diplomat could have wished for. Foreign Minister AK Abdul Momen's meeting with US Secretary of State Anthony J Blinken on April 10 was understandably a delicate one, not least for the unusually harsh public criticism of the US by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina that had preceded it, but also for convincing his host that Bangladesh can deliver a free and fair election.

The apparent silence on the part of Washington, DC about the allegations that the US is "trying to eliminate democracy" in Bangladesh, and "can overthrow the government of any country", suggests that they didn't have the same impact as those made by Pakistan's Imran Khan. On March 31, 2022, the US rejected claims made by Imran Khan, Pakistan's then prime minister, that the Biden administration was trying to oust him when he was about to lose his majority in parliament. No wonder, in response to a question from the media, our foreign ministry spokesperson Shehli Sabrin was confident enough to say that the remarks by the prime minister and her ICT Adviser Sajeeb Wazed Joy would have no impact on the bilateral relations between Dhaka and Washington.

Following the expulsions of two Tennessee lawmakers, two days before the Blinken-Momen meeting, Sajeeb Wazed on his Facebook page questioned the fairness of US democracy, and said that "the US State Department is nothing but a bunch of hypocrites."

The opening statements by both the foreign policy chiefs were broadcast live on the State Department's YouTube channel, which made it easier for us to understand the tone of the talks. In a very short opening statement, Secretary Blinken said, "We're looking – the world is looking – to Bangladesh for its next elections, to make sure that they set a strong example for free and fair elections for the region and for the world." Our foreign minister's response was all about thanking them for their partnership and appreciation to President Biden for using the words "Joy Bangla" in his letter to Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina on Independence Day. But what transpired at the talks seems hard to decode as the



Bangladesh Foreign Minister AK Abdul Momen meets US Secretary of State Antony J Blinken at the State Department in Washington, DC on April 10, 2023.

SOURCE: US STATE DEPARTMENT

narratives given by Secretary Blinken and Foreign Minister Momen are not an exact match.

Though bilateral conversations usually cover a wider range of issues of mutual interests, this particular meeting apparently had a special focus on Bangladesh's upcoming parliamentary elections. Claiming that the US didn't want a caretaker government, Momen told journalists in Sylhet on April 14 that "we told them what we have done for a fair election. We have prepared a voter list with photos, made transparent ballot boxes, and formed a strong Election Commission. They are happy with that."

Regarding the Digital Security Act (DSA), he said in some cases the law had not been used properly. "But all the countries of the world have such laws, even the US has tougher laws. We will rectify any deviations. They [US] are satisfied with that. They do not want repeal of the law, but want its misuse stopped," he added.

The US narrative, however, is quite blunt. First, there was a tweet by Secretary Blinken, in which he said, "I underscored that free and fair elections and respect for human rights, media, and civil society are critical as we

seek to deepen US Bangladeshi ties." It shows neither signs of happiness over the electoral arrangement in Bangladesh, nor any satisfaction about the assurances given on ending the misuse of the DSA.

The second statement made by the principal deputy spokesperson Vedant Patel after a few hours was even more straightforward. In his readout, he

vocal about human rights, workers' rights, press freedom, and rule of law.

Looking back at their previous meeting, you won't see the election issue featured so prominently, despite the fact that the US considered the 2018 elections as "not free or fair," and observed that it "undermined faith in the electoral process." That meeting, too, was a difficult one, owing to the

said that the secretary "reiterated our commitment to promoting inclusive economic growth, free and fair elections, human and labor rights, and freedom of expression in Bangladesh. Additionally, Secretary Blinken expressed concerns about violence against and intimidation of the media and civil society, including under the Digital Security Act. He underscored that free and fair elections and respect for human rights in Bangladesh are critical as we seek to deepen our bilateral relationship." At a separate media briefing, Vedant Patel even termed the DSA "one of the world's most draconian laws for journalists."

It is true that the US and several other Western nations have been increasingly putting emphasis on holding credible elections in countries like ours for quite some time. But it has rarely featured in such detail at this level. It is even rarer that a felicitations message on the anniversary of independence from the US president will have a reminder of the deep value of free and fair elections. This extra emphasis on free and fair elections on the part of the US is something fairly new; so far it has been consistently

sanctions imposed on the country's elite force Rapid Action Battalion (Rab), which rattled the Bangladesh government. On that occasion, besides expressing gratitude to Bangladesh for hosting the Rohingya, Secretary Blinken told his guest that he wanted "to discuss the work we're doing together bilaterally in the region and indeed even globally."

This willingness to work together in the region and globally was seen by many as an explicit recognition of Bangladesh's strategic importance. It was thought to be quite significant in Washington's pursuit of an open Indo-Pacific and to counter China's growing influence. It is, therefore, intriguing as to why there was no public commitment this time for "working together in the region and globally."

The foreign minister's remark on Sunday that he had sought cooperation from Washington to ensure participation of all political parties in the upcoming general elections is quite revealing. It reminds one of his previous request to the US to help bring the BNP to the elections. Doesn't it appear to be something closer to seeking their mediation?

Bolster healthcare with better data connectivity



ABM Uddin is a healthcare consultant for the Florida Agency for Health Care Administration. Views expressed in this article are the author's own.

ABM UDDIN

The ability to harness the power of data exchange among healthcare providers can change the face of public health in Bangladesh. But it is easier said than done. Professionals in our healthcare systems often say that we have achieved an ideal level of health data connectivity. That is an erroneous assumption. The ability to share data laboriously among a few platforms falls short of true data interoperability.

In an ideal state of health information exchange, Bangladesh should have three levels of data connectivity: district or local, division or regional, and state or national. Beyond that, we should have a single network, like the Trusted Exchange Framework and Common Agreement (Tefca) in the US, for a uniform platform to support business, technical, and regulatory aspects of transporting data across the country in a more meaningful and cohesive manner.

The local health data connectivity networks will link care providers so that when patients transition between care facilities, the care teams can extract their clinical records from connected facilities across the district. These facilities typically cannot afford the heavy infrastructure and hefty costs to join national platforms. Technology vendors can facilitate basic

data-sharing services at low costs for such entities, providing them with a lifeline for local data-sharing.

Regional health information exchange organisations will integrate local platforms in the division under one umbrella, and provide a gateway to national networks. Integration with regional health data-sharing organisations is greatly useful when patients seek care at a facility outside their usual settings – the district. Regional networks will have richer data than local platforms, owing to all the patient data from connected hospitals across districts under their aegis.

The national health information networks will be on top of the tier delivering the most comprehensive data repository on patients, as they will provide linkages to all local and regional health information platforms, and other national networks. These networks offer a seamless and connected experience of care and the best practice for data dissemination. More importantly, national platforms offer flexibility in meeting diverse business, technical, and regulatory needs around health data transmission.

Once the three-tiered goals are accomplished, healthcare communities must work to build one

umbrella that will link all data-sharing mechanisms at local, regional, and national levels. The system will provide governance and policies to create further coherence and coordination in sharing data nationally. Consider US' Tefca, designed to offer a "universal floor" to share data via the most robust national networks. These platforms must pass rigorous data safety, security, and interoperability measures. The initiative breaks down silos.

To build the federated data infrastructure mapped out above, interprofessional and intersectoral consensus building and shared decision-making are critical. Three actors must be involved in this process: the government, the technology companies, and the health systems.

The government has the ultimate authority and duty to do the heavy lifting to uplift health care. They must also regulate and support small providers to integrate with health information exchange initiatives. Health data transaction relies on internet connectivity. Unfortunately, many areas, especially rural communities, are unable to afford the costs. Moreover, not all physicians' offices have office space or trained employees to use technology. The government must incentivise these geographically and economically disadvantaged providers by funding high-speed internet and providing necessary resources.

Communication technology companies must step in to improve health care for the greater good, alongside promoting their business. Once healthcare systems see the benefits of technology, they will

heavily invest in it, creating more opportunities for the companies. Increased utilisation of health information exchange can set the stage for a massive diffusion of technology. Ideally, the companies will create enough revenue to be able to even offer free connectivity services for small practices, whether or not the government can fund them.

Health systems should be at the front and centre of data connectivity because they must provide the best patient outcomes, and without data, they can offer only substandard care. Data sharing among care providers not only helps support the best patient experience but also saves lives. With high patient satisfaction, health systems create more revenue opportunities for themselves as well.

In an ideal state, national data exchange can do miracles to find missing persons and support uninterrupted healthcare during disasters, when patients are displaced. During emergencies, patients often have to leave behind their medication and prescriptions, and their routine care providers are simply unable to operate. In those times, patients seek care outside their normal settings. At a connected facility or emergency shelter, the technology will enable clinicians to investigate patients' medical records, without starting over with examination and treatment. It will also create alerts letting care providers know where their patients have been treated, and help connect them to their loved ones.

We are clearly far from the ideal future state. Claiming that the country has achieved true data interoperability is misleading at best.