

Ramp up anti-dengue supplies

Hospitals must be better equipped to treat incoming patients

It is disheartening to see how a long-predicted surge in dengue cases has been overwhelming not just hospitals but also medical equipment and supplies, especially ICU and HDU beds, leaving patients literally gasping for air and shuttling between multiple medical facilities in desperation. The picture emerging out of the hospitals in Dhaka and other districts is quite reminiscent of the heyday of Covid-19, when patients were forced to navigate a similar medical dystopia. Even though the number of ICU beds has increased since then, it is not nearly enough to handle an emergency.

Take, for example, the case of Rafia, a 14-year-old girl battling dengue. As per a report by this daily, despite needing critical care, the lack of vacant ICU beds forced her family to shuttle her between multiple hospitals. Left with no other option, she was finally put in a regular ward at the Shaheed Suhrawardy Medical College Hospital, but not before the duty doctor took an undertaking from her mother that basically absolves the hospital of any responsibility in case something tragic happens. Her name is now on a list where 15 other patients are also waiting for ICU admission, highlighting the stark reality facing so many patients – especially those from underprivileged backgrounds – who must contend with suboptimal treatment in the absence of proper facilities.

According to the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS), there are around 1,323 ICU beds and 886 HDU beds in different government hospitals. Even combined with those of the private hospitals, their total number is still far from sufficient. As well as the crisis of ICU/HDU beds, there is also a shortage of essential supplies like saline. Essential Drugs, the state-owned pharmaceutical company, is currently rationing injectable saline to public hospitals to manage the high demand. Unfortunately, it remains the only designated supplier of saline for the 1,100 or so public hospitals, and despite a ten-fold rise in demand, it is not expected to begin saline production in its Gopalganj plant until January next year. Although the six private companies it procures saline from have been recently asked to double their daily production, the lack of preparedness and swift action from the health authorities has been compromising patient care, resulting in needless deaths and suffering. This is most unfortunate.

This year's dengue numbers have already broken all previous records. As of August 10, at least 364 patients have died of the mosquito-borne fever in 2023. Of them, 113 died in the first ten days of this month alone. Most of the deaths were recorded in Dhaka hospitals, but more patients are being hospitalised outside Dhaka, which suggests a countrywide, epidemic-level crisis. What this requires is a comprehensive response by properly equipping all hospitals, among other things. The government must do this urgently so that patients get the treatment they deserve.

We need to invest more in R&D

Without it, our economic growth will lose momentum

It is disappointing that despite the country's laudable economic growth in recent decades, our approach to research and development (R&D) has been quite questionable. As a report by this daily points out, both the private and public sectors in Bangladesh have historically lacked innovation. Our goal of becoming a developed nation in less than two decades is admirable, yes, but one cannot help but wonder if our current growth will be sustainable if it continues to rely heavily on garment exports and the earnings of mostly unskilled migrant workers – the two mainstays of our economy.

The R&D allocation for the current fiscal year is Tk 100 crore, which equals a meagre 0.3 percent of our GDP. The scenario is not much better in the private sector either. One would assume that a mixed market economy would drive innovation. Instead, universities spend a minuscule amount of their annual budgets on research, while private firms, when adopting new technologies, often opt for foreign sources rather than cultivating in-house research and innovation. In the long run, such a trend is bound to hinder progress for the country as a whole.

There is no doubt that Bangladesh has been trying to ride out a protracted economic crisis in the wake of the pandemic. But it would be nonsensical not to keep an eye on the future and invest in research and development across all sectors. Besides encouraging academic research and technological innovation, focusing heavily on sector-specific R&D will also be beneficial. For instance, in terms of boosting remittance, it is crucial to upskill our aspiring migrant workforce. Recent data has revealed that nearly half of all workers going abroad between 1976 and 2019 were less skilled or unskilled. In fact, as per data from the Bureau of Manpower Employment and Training, 73.65 percent of migrating workers in 2021 were unskilled. As a result, Bangladesh is receiving a lot less in remittance than other comparable countries that are exporting skilled labour.

Therefore, it is crucial for the authorities (both private and public) to look beyond immediate gains and challenges and try to transform our economy which will benefit us all in the long run. In order for Bangladesh to conduct large-scale research and development activities, and to fulfil the objectives of SDG 9 – which are to build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialisation, and foster innovation – we need to dedicate more of our budget to R&D and let it guide our policies. Otherwise, our progress as a nation will be stalled.

We don't want more people in jail for their posts on the internet



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SAAD HAMMADI

As someone who has actively campaigned against the many abuses that the Digital Security Act (DSA) has instrumentalised since its introduction, I would have been pleased had the law or at least the most problematic sections been repealed, but we are nowhere close to it. Instead, the DSA is being renamed to Cyber Security Act (CSA) with some cosmetic changes and hefty fines.

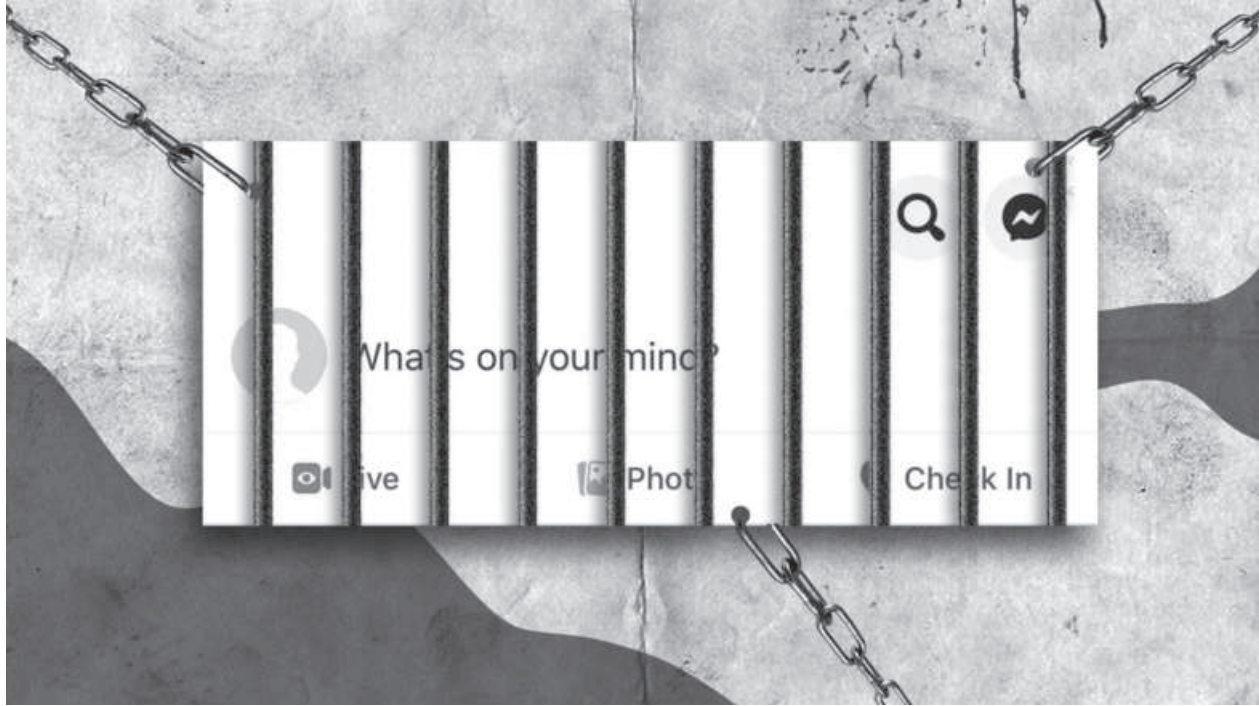
Law Minister Anisul Huq's press briefing highlighted that most penal actions or the jail terms are being replaced with fines, and he suggested that the failure of paying the fines could amount to three to six months' imprisonment. Upon a quick review of the draft of the CSA, I found to my dismay that most of the problematic penal actions of the DSA are retained in the CSA.

For example, the penalty for Section 21 of DSA, which stipulates a 10-year imprisonment for using "propaganda" against Bangladesh's Liberation War, the first president of the country, the national anthem, and the national flag, will be reduced to seven years. The penalty for Section 25, which stipulates a three year imprisonment for transmitting "offensive, false or threatening" information, will be reduced to two years.

Reducing jail terms from 10 years to seven years or from three years to two years does not change the nature of the law. The use of criminal punishment in the CSA for what may constitute a legitimate form of expression has the same concerns as the DSA on this day.

In fact, the prison data that I obtained in July 2021 under the Right to Information Act indicates that most prisoners of the DSA (185 to be precise) were targeted under Section 25, followed by Section 31 (data causing "enmity, hatred and hostility"; 163 prisoners), Section 29 ("defamation"; 162 prisoners), Section 28 ("hurting religious sentiment"; 40 prisoners) and Section 21 ("propaganda"; 13 prisoners).

This is only so far as the data indicates. What about the human



VISUAL: SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR

rights violations induced by indefinite pre-trial detention and sessions of hearing? Renowned photographer Shahidul Alam, who was charged under the now non-existent section 57 of the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Act for his criticism of the government in a televised interview in August 2018, still attends court every month. A jail term of 14 years still hangs over his head if convicted in the obsolete law. What's the legitimacy of a trial under a non-existent law?

No one should forget the price writer Mushtaq Ahmed had to pay with his life for sharing his criticism of the government on a Facebook post. He died in custody of the state authorities after being detained for 10 months. His colleague, who was detained on the same charges but released on bail shortly after Mushtaq's death, said that they both were tortured in custody of a state security agency.

The High Court on August 8 ordered a stay of proceedings in the DSA case against environmental activist Shahnewaz Chowdhury, who raised his concerns about a coal-fired power plant in his neighbourhood in Banshkhal, Chattogram. Had the government not weaponised the ICT Act and the DSA, Mushtaq would not have had to lose his life for his words, Shahnewaz Chowdhury and Shahidul Alam would not have had to spend time in jail for their words. But the government does not seem to have any remorse.

Except for defamation, the government has retained the penal actions against all the sections of the DSA discussed above. In case of defamation, the government has proposed an increment of the fine from Tk 10 lakh to Tk 25 lakh. At this rate, fines from DSA might become an alternative source of the national revenue.

that clearly demonstrate the personal harm.

A political party mindful of public interest would aim to do away with harmful pieces of legislation and place human rights at the heart of its campaign. In line with those actions, the government would make sure that the next piece of legislation is transparently reviewed by a wide range of stakeholders, including members of the media and civil society. Only after those reviews are publicly discussed and incorporated should a law be sent to parliament for approval.

The government should do away with the criminal punishment for expressions entirely, and make cybersecurity specific to criminal offences such as child pornography, stealing of protected personal data, and financial crimes. We don't want to see more people being jailed for their posts on the internet.

The interim solution for Pakistan



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ZAHID HUSSAIN

It is yet another episode of "from power to prison," a tragicomedy long played on Pakistan's political stage. The plot is predictable: yet another former prime minister bites the dust. The sentencing and disqualification of Imran Khan was foretold, as it had been in the case of other former prime ministers. He, too, has been charged with corruption like his predecessors.

It is irrelevant whether one is guilty or not; the "monster" has to be culled. It all seems to be going according to script. The plan is to keep Khan out of the electoral race. The recent court verdict may have served the objective, but the project of dismantling the PTI is not over yet. Khan's imprisonment does not seem to have affected his popular support base. The game is far from over. In fact, it has just begun. It is now going to be a long-drawn political and legal battle between the two antagonists.

All this has made it increasingly uncertain whether elections will be held within the stipulated time frame even as the National Assembly is dissolved and a caretaker administration takes charge. The last-minute decision to hold elections on the basis of the latest population count has already delayed polling beyond the 90 days as mandated by the constitution. There is a fear that the delay could exceed the few months needed by the Election Commission to complete the delimitation exercise. A prolonged and empowered caretaker administration backed by the security establishment seems to be very much on the cards, putting democratic

transition on hold.

A series of legislation pushed through parliament in unprecedented haste just a few days before the dissolution of the National Assembly has reinforced suspicions. Most alarming is the passage of the amendments to the Official Secrets Act bill, which provides sweeping powers to the security agencies, thus undermining civil rights. Although some of the provisions were slightly diluted after strong protest in the Senate, its overall lethality has not been blunted.

Such unchecked powers for security agencies will further strengthen the extra-democratic forces. It seems to be part of the plan to silence the opposition. What the ruling coalition fails to understand is that it could also be used against them. It will certainly come back to haunt the current ruling parties. The shadow of the security establishment has already grown longer, raising concerns about the country staying on the democratic path.

We may be moving towards permanent hybrid rule, with the civilians playing second fiddle. There are already signs of the security establishment's creeping domination, with the security leadership's increasing role in several civilian fields, including running the economy. The ruling coalition has virtually abdicated civilian authority.

What has been happening is a sad commentary on the country's retreating democratic process, however weak it may have been in

the first place. The last 16 months is a testimony to the backward march. The PTI, which is now in the eye of the storm, is equally, if not more, to be blamed for wrecking the system with its destructive narrative.

Instead of taking the parliamentary path, the former prime minister took a confrontationist approach, seeking to bring down the entire edifice. His populist rhetoric and the public's disenchantment with the PDM government may have won him unprecedented support among the people, but his recklessness has done huge damage to the democratic process. He simultaneously took on his political rivals and erstwhile patrons in the security establishment. He is now paying the cost of his thoughtless populist politics. Though his popular base seems to have remained intact, the party is in disarray, with the departure of several leaders under pressure.

However, there is no sign of Khan losing support, despite the restrictions on his statements being printed or telecast. In fact, his popularity graph seems to have climbed after his imprisonment. Despite state repression and efforts to dismantle the party, the PTI is still capable of giving a tough fight to the PML-N in the electoral battleground of Punjab even in relatively free polls. Perhaps it is the fear of being swept away that has brought the PDM closer to the security establishment and that has seen the emergence of a new hybrid arrangement with another civilian partner. There is complete convergence between the two on eliminating the PTI challenge. In the process, it is democratic space that seems to be shrinking.

With the PDM government's departure around the corner, all eyes are on the composition of the caretaker administration. With the PTI, the main opposition party, out of the consultation process, it has

been left to the coalition partners and a token leader of the opposition to nominate the interim prime minister – of course, with input from the security establishment. That would make the credentials of the interim government as a non-partisan body questionable.

With the likelihood of prolonged interim rule, there is very much a possibility of an empowered technocratic setup being installed to run the administration during perhaps the most challenging time in our recent history. Such an arrangement would mean virtual military rule. Can such non-representative technocratic-cum-military rule stabilise the politically volatile situation? Of course not. Ruthless use of state power to suppress the opposition will only make things worse. It would then become extremely hard for anyone to control the situation.

It is a dangerous scenario that confronts a country already in the midst of a dire economic crisis and rising terrorism. Sidelining a popular leader and making and breaking political parties won't stabilise the situation. Unfortunately, our political leadership has never learnt any lesson – not even from their own history. The politics of confrontation and revenge has already led to shrinking democratic space. Delaying elections is not the solution. It is the responsibility of both the government and opposition to bring down the temperature in order to create a conducive atmosphere for free and fair elections. Regrettably, it doesn't seem to be happening. The time for political reconciliation appears to be over. One can only hope that sanity prevails.

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