

# Fight against dengue marred by irregularities

## The DNCC must answer for their decisions

In January, figures from the DGHS showed that the year 2022 had seen the highest dengue death toll of 281 lives in Bangladesh, with experts warning that without proper precautions, the situation could become deadlier in 2023. It is now clear that their warnings fell on deaf ears. At the time of writing this editorial, 453 people have lost their lives to dengue – an incredible 58 percent increase from last year's total – and the death toll is only expected to increase further.

At a time of such unprecedented crisis, it is inconceivable that, instead of showing due diligence in their responsibility to protect citizens, the authorities concerned should allow irregularities and oversight to exacerbate the situation. Yet, that is exactly what has been found – that the Dhaka North City Corporation (DNCC) gave the job of importing the much-hyped BTI pesticide to a company that does not actually have the importing licence to follow through. It has now been reported that the company in question, Marshal Agrovet Chemical Industries Ltd, falsely claimed that the BTI was imported from Singapore, and there are suspicions of it being counterfeit.

Delving further into the matter has exposed a number of irregularities, and experts suggest that several laws, including the Pesticide Act of 2018, have been breached by the city authorities and Marshal Agrovet. None of the companies that participated in the tender process had the proper licence, but the DNCC went ahead with it anyway, and one official even sent a questionable letter asking for a special licence before it was officially possible to know if the bidders had fulfilled this criteria or not.

These circumstances are highly suspect, to say the least, but from the mayor's comments, it seems like the blame is to be squarely shouldered by Marshal Agrovet. And while the company must be held accountable, the city authorities cannot be allowed to dodge the questionable role they have played in the whole process.

In June, a pre-monsoon Aedes survey by WHO found that the density of mosquitoes and the number of potential hotspots in Dhaka is at the highest level in the past five years. This information was given to both the city corporations in early July, but now we find that one of the major steps taken to deal with the situation possibly made no difference, and cases surged regardless. Does this seem like a mistake that can simply be glossed over, as more and more people lose their lives to dengue?

# Is no data safe with our govt?

## Focus on cybersecurity, rather than crackdown on dissent

We are deeply concerned by the regularity with which cyberattacks seem to be crippling many organisations in the country. Just over the past few months, we have witnessed a handful of serious incidents wherein sensitive data of citizens and organisations (both private and government-run) have been compromised. In the latest iteration, websites of at least 25 institutions were allegedly hacked by a group of Indian cyberattackers on August 15. What is more concerning is that the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS) and the Investment Corporation of Bangladesh (ICB) were among the 25 victims. The exposed data ranges from information about thousands of investors and investment applicants, to the addresses and bank account numbers of people investing in government mutual funds. It is unacceptable that the cybersecurity for such sensitive data should be this lax.

One thing that exemplifies the authorities' lack of priority when it comes to ensuring cybersecurity is the focus of the Digital Security Act, 2018 (DSA), which has been repackaged and proposed as the Cyber Security Act (CSA), 2023. For a law with that name, we would have liked to see it actually stamping down on the increasing threats to the data security of countless public and private organisations. Instead, as before, the focus of the proposed law remains on punishing dissent and gagging freedom of the press.

Meanwhile, cybersecurity threats to sensitive data keep increasing every day. Between June 20 and August 1 alone, our e-Government Computer Incident Response Team (BGD e-Gov CIRT) recorded at least five such attacks (or alleged attacks) on multiple government organisations. Of particular concern among these was hackers claiming to have compromised the security of the state-owned investment company, ICB, and gaining access to the data of over 100,000 investors and investment applicants. No one can forget the 2016 breach into the central bank, when hackers used the SWIFT system to steal \$101 million of Bangladesh Bank's funds from the Federal Reserve Bank of New York. It is alarming that this incident seems to have taught our authorities very little.

We hope that the incidents of the past couple of months will nudge the authorities to focus where focus is due: thoughtful investments in strengthening cybersecurity across the board. The BGD e-Gov CIRT itself has urged all organisations within Bangladesh to take precautionary measures to safeguard their infrastructures, providing specific recommendations such as implementing 24/7 network and user activity monitoring, deploying firewalls to filter out malicious requests, and maintaining regular backups of website content and databases. We urge the relevant authorities to pay heed to these recommendations and protect citizens from ever-evolving cyberthreats.

# ‘I blame misgovernance and mismanagement for high inflation’

Dr MM Akash, professor at the Department of Economics in Dhaka University, discusses the ongoing challenges in Bangladesh's financial sector in an exclusive interview with Naimul Alam Alvi of The Daily Star.

*Bangladesh is now experiencing another bout of price hike of essential items, and our average inflation is still over nine percent (as of July 2023). Why do you think this is happening?*

The ongoing inflation in Bangladesh has two sources: external and internal. If prices of the products that we import increase, our economy will naturally experience inflation. But let's look at eggs – they're not a product we import. Why are they getting costlier, then? We need to look into internal factors – the condition of supply-demand in the domestic market and the role of syndicates.

Producers as well as the Ministry of Fisheries and Livestock say there is no considerable issue in the supply and demand of eggs. So what explains the current state of the market? There could be two possible reasons behind

**There are allegations that local importers of products like edible oil, wheat and sugar control a large share of the market. So, they have the power to disrupt the supply and create a controlled crisis in the market, and make profits by selling the products at premium prices.**

this issue: there is a monopoly or some sort of syndicate at play, and/or there are too many middlemen in the supply chain.

Even for imported products like edible oil, wheat and sugar, besides our primary source India halting their export, there are allegations that local importers of these products control a large share of the market. So, they have the power to disrupt the supply and create a controlled crisis in the market, and make profits by selling the products at premium prices. Our Commerce Minister Tipu Munshi also voiced similar concerns, suggesting that he knows some of the wholesalers that control imports. So, why is the government not being able to force them to release these hoarded



Prof MM Akash

FILE PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

supplies? I blame misgovernance and mismanagement as the primary reasons behind our heightened inflation.

*According to Bangladesh Bank, the taka depreciated 13.3 percent against the US dollar in 2022. The depreciation rate does not seem to slow down this year either. What are your thoughts on this?*

The taka's depreciation against the dollar is also fuelled by mismanagement on our part. We are failing to contain hundi or prevent money laundering. Currently, our national account deficit is increasing because of two reasons: one is obviously increased import bills, and the other is foreign credit loan interest. Our export earning is currently not sufficient to balance out these expenditures. So, we are forced to dip into our foreign exchange reserves.

On top of that, new money has been injected into the economy as of late. Our budget is in deficit, and the government is failing to collect taxes. So, they are asking the Bangladesh Bank for loans. And the Bangladesh Bank has essentially printed additional money – with no production against it – to compensate for that. As this extra money enters the domestic market circulation, it's fuelling the price hikes.

*Our banking sector's total risky loans amounted to Tk 377,922 crore at the end of last year, per media reports. How much does this*

*affect our economy and inflation?*

The problem is that banks are giving away too many loans, and a large portion of those loans is issued to big companies, which are practically holding the banks hostage. If these big borrowers don't pay back, and the banks sue them, they can just drag the cases. Getting property confiscation orders doesn't help the banks much either, because the money doesn't return but the banks get burdened with properties that practically have no sales or productive value, and those big borrowers will just leave those properties documented under the banks. It's kind of a mutual hostage situation between the banks and big borrowers. The two parties don't try to bother each other. On top of that, there are possible political factors at play: how much political influence a big borrower has impacts how much it will be bothered. Amid all this, the loans remain unpaid. The Bangladesh Bank is supposed to have a certain amount of reserve against these loans. Instead, we see that to "manage" the situation, it allows loan rescheduling, which in turn makes the big borrowers eligible for more loans.

All this loaned money is not being used productively. That's why they are not being able to repay the banks, right? It can happen in two ways: one, they are not being used efficiently, and whatever they are producing is not selling much; or two, they are not used for the stated reason at all, and instead are used for activities that the

borrowers cannot document. This illegally used money becomes black money, and to turn it white, they launder them overseas.

So, a large amount of money is wasted unproductively, and because of repeated bad loans, there is an extra supply of money in the market, which further increases inflation.

*While announcing this year's national budget, our finance minister said the annual average inflation was expected to drop to around six percent. Have you seen any effective policy changes or actions to support this aim?*

That was basically a pious wish. They don't have adequate preparation to contain inflation. The government needs to have one-third of the supply share in stock to have enough control over the market. If the price of any product shoots up, the government can have an open market sale to control it, and if the price depreciates, the government can buy the product in bulk and raise the market price accordingly. For instance, the government could buy paddy at a procurement price, and sell rice in the open market, and with the one-third supply share they should have, they could balance out the price throughout the supply chain.

*What about the extremely vulnerable and low-income groups? How can the government help them?*

The government should prioritise ensuring access to food and essential needs for the most vulnerable groups, without taking any payment from them. India, under their right to food policy, has adopted such a strategy to provide food for their most vulnerable groups against minimal prices. If our government ensured a large share of stored supply in their control, as I've mentioned already, they could've organised open market sales at low prices, and also provide essential commodities for the vulnerable.

The government is providing ration support for some sectors, considering them essential priority groups, such as those in defence, law enforcement, and government administrations. This should not be the priority order. Even from a purely economic perspective, it makes more sense to prioritise ration for the garment workers, and the whole labour force first.

# Thoughts upon spotting a red dot



SHAMSAD MORTUZA

**BLOWIN' IN THE WIND**

Dr Shamsad Mortuza is a professor of English at Dhaka University.

We checked into a fancy hotel in Kunming, China, following a hectic tour of Shanghai. After three days of non-stop meetings, sightseeing and overeating, the body gave in. The executive suite failed to impress me as I dragged myself to bed, hoping to get some rest before the next bout of overindulgence. Our generous sponsors ensured that we had the best possible experience of a country that has experienced exponential development in recent decades.

I was leading a group of Dhaka University delegates who met with their Chinese counterparts to discuss prospective avenues for scholarly and intellectual collaboration. Our host, the Shanghai Institutes for International Studies, arranged a seminar in which we both presented and heard on key issues related to Bangladesh-China relations. After the seminar, we had the opportunity to experience the heritage of the city curated in its museum and the vision to grow into a futuristic metropolis evident in its transformed area of Pudong. On one end, we viewed the Bronze Age artefacts, and on the other, a 6D presentation of the futuristic and humane city envisioned by urban planners. We had the privilege of observing the supermoon over the Yangtze River from the rotating

restaurant atop the iconic Oriental Pearl Tower, as well as the changing hues of the skyscrapers that adorned the renowned Shanghai skyline.

Leaving Shanghai for Kunming promised a change in the weather. We anticipated milder weather and a greener environment. The star-studded hotel guaranteed that the feeling of exuberance persisted. As I stood before the bathroom mirror, I noticed a red laser spot. I instinctively turned around to look for a sniper. No one there. I chuckled and inspected the mirror. Earlier, in the cloud-hugging glass towers of Shanghai, I had imagined Tom Cruise performing his *Mission Impossible* jump. Seriously, what could this red dot mean? Is it a spy cam? Should I use a torch to determine if it is a double mirror? It appeared to be an ordinary reflector.

Tired as I was, I went to bed pondering a possible invasion of privacy. The culture of hypervigilance in a Big Brother world added to my fear. The feeling of being watched triggered a sense of paranoia and anxiety. I thought of its legal and ethical aspects. Then again, in the name of security, we have allowed ourselves to be both willing and unwilling subjects of scrutiny everywhere in the world. I thought of the psychological damage done by this idea of intrusion into

private space. While grooming in the morning, a small sticker at the mirror's end caught my eye: "This mirror is a TV." I raced for the remote to test the claim. The screen displayed successive channels in Chinese. I stopped at CNN, the only English-language channel available, and continued my morning rituals.

During my academic presentation at the seminar, I mentioned trust

**I could not believe that the red dot of a TV in sleep mode could generate such profound thoughts. If the red dot symbolised technology, my presence nearby symbolised the physical space I occupied. Am I a Person of Interest? Is it the same for my country, too?**

deficits as a barrier to people-to-people connectivity. I gave examples of how the overland transport connectivity from Kolkata to Kunming got stalled because the involved parties could not fully trust one another. Trust is the foundation for any meaningful communication, collaboration and cooperation. Without trust, we remain suspicious of one another's motives and intentions, causing friction and tension. We become risk-averse when we overanalyse the potential outcomes. At a national level, this can

not only impede growth and progress, but can also escalate conflicts.

I could not believe that the red dot of a TV in sleep mode could generate such profound thoughts. If the red dot symbolised technology, my presence nearby symbolised the physical space I occupied. Am I a Person of Interest (Oops, Netflix again)? Is it the same for my country, too?

On a global map, Bangladesh has always existed as a dot. However, many actors are finding this dot curiously strategic. We are the eighth most populous country in the world. If our people can be trusted with their efficiency and integrity, we can become one of the world's foremost providers of labour. With increased purchasing capacity, we can become one of the world's largest markets. Both the Global North and Global South are aware of this fact. In addition, we are strategically located by the Bay, which is important for maintaining the supply chain of superpowers both for trade during times of peace and ammunition supply during times of conflict. Foreign actors stage issues so they can manipulate public opinion on behalf of a reliable local actor. Our national election has therefore garnered so much traction.

But we must prioritise our national interests and keep investing in our human capital in order to maintain our strategic prominence in the future. We must invest in technology and innovation in order to earn the respect of our international partners. The world is indeed big enough for all of us to grow and prosper together. Once you read the sign on the wall, you know that the red dot is a TV – your window to the world! Open the window, the breeze will blow, and you can breathe in ease.