



The vector-control strategy in Bangladesh still resorts mostly to fogging, which is proven to be practically ineffective in the long term. PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

DENGUE CRISIS

No alternative to a long-term plan



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The tragic scale of this year’s dengue outbreak is a cumulative result of global atrocities against climate; our national failure in healthcare, city, and social behaviour management and policy structures; and the overall abysmal response to the situation. A multitude of studies predict that dengue, the fastest-spreading tropical disease according to WHO, and other arboviral diseases will increase multifold in the near future, and that we need to systematically restructure our society and institutions as soon as possible if we want to tackle these growing public health threats.

Dengue is emerging as a greater global threat than ever before, with a more than eightfold increase in yearly reported cases worldwide since 2000. Asia and South America are both experiencing one of the worst instances of dengue outbreaks on record, and Bangladesh is witnessing its worst numbers this year – with 466 lives lost and 97,860 reported cases as of August 19. Our healthcare system is already overwhelmed, and if the trend continues, it may crumble in the coming months.

Our authorities cannot evade responsibility for these dreadful figures. Despite repeated warnings, unnerving predictions, and pleas for measures to mitigate the threat, from both local and global experts and organisations, our healthcare and disease-prevention efforts failed to show sincerity and effectiveness. In West Bengal, which shares many of our geological and sociological factors, authorities have been quite successful in controlling the Aedes mosquito population by implementing a year-long vector surveillance strategy, WHO guidelines, and a sustained implementation structure.

Twenty-three years have passed since Bangladesh’s first dengue cases, and we are yet to form a national vector-control policy, an integrated vector and virus surveillance system, or any coordinated dengue outbreak mitigation guidelines. The vector-control strategy here still resorts mostly to fogging, which is proven to be practically ineffective in the long term, according to multiple studies. Even then, we are failing miserably as reports show that many of the personnel assigned lack knowledge of the effective dosage or procedure of fogging, let alone WHO guidelines.

In 2018, the International Centre for Diarrhoeal Disease Research, Bangladesh (icddr,b) found that mosquitoes here have developed strong resistance to traditional insecticides. But Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) says that at least one major government official ordered for the findings to not be published to the media because it was during an election year. Plus, many other officials labelled the scale of dengue threat that year as *gujob* (hearsay or rumours). The following

year, Bangladesh faced its worst dengue outbreak up until that time. Experts now warn that this misuse of fogging is creating a shift in vector characteristics, and mosquitoes are adapting to breed in not just clear water in small containers, but also in water canals, lakes, floodwater, etc.

Over the years, Dhaka has become a perfect breeding ground for mosquitoes, with plenty of unregulated high-rises, government-owned backyards, construction sites, discarded tires, drums, and plastic waste just lying around, and clusters of people living in damp, concrete messes which sunlight can barely touch. The capital’s two city corporations barely pose a threat to these tiny insects. They don’t monitor or properly implement their own or global guidelines and aren’t proactive in using newer vector-control tools. Three years have passed since the city corporations were authorised to reclaim and maintain the canals. Yet, in most places, the canals remain as garbage-filled swamps.

A study published in the International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health finds a correlation between Dhaka’s increasing temperature and growing numbers of Aedes mosquitoes, which is, in turn, the result of receding water bodies and increasing unplanned urbanisation. The result: over half the reported dengue cases and deaths are recorded in Dhaka. In July, when fatalities were breaking all previous records, the DNCC mayor went on a 17-day overseas tour, without leaving any promising guidelines to curb the situation.

It’s true that dengue is a global problem, with WHO warning it to be a “pandemic threat” back in January this year and pointing towards climate change as one of the leading factors for the worsening situation. But we can’t just wait for a global response for an effective mitigation solution. We have to realise that we are one of the frontier countries fighting this global threat, along with other climate change-related phenomena. We cannot afford to consider it as just another monsoon incident and wait for situation to get worse every year before beginning to actually take worthwhile actions.

First and foremost, we need a comprehensive, long term policy for addressing dengue and other wetaher-based diseases. We need a strategy for how to prevent outbreaks and a clear guideline on how to mitigate severity if major outbreaks do occur. We need coordinated efforts from city corporations, the medical and pharmaceutical sectors, tech industries, relevant ministries, law enforcement, urban planners, research institutions, engineers, academia, and all other stakeholders concerned.

We must consider dengue

prevention and overall public health as an essential investment priority, not just a reactive expense. A 2021 study found that the aggregate total economic expenditure of patients (including treatment costs and productivity losses) only in Dhaka city that year was more than Tk 130 crore. In addition, every dengue outbreak forces the government to incur mammoth expenses and relocate supplies for mitigation efforts.

A well-maintained environment and a soundly structured healthcare system are necessities for tackling dengue outbreaks. We should allocate a larger share of the national budget to public health (which was surprisingly reduced this year) and ensure proper implementation. Bangladesh has to emerge as a frontline dengue-prevention strategist, regional and global collaboration advocate, and a voice for including tropical diseases as an element for climate-change compensation from the “developed” world.

We need to implement new-age tools, both to operate a thorough, widespread, and continuous surveillance system and also for vector control. Our cities need to be rigorously fixed and aligned to minimise vector habitation. We must also develop an urban design guideline incorporating dengue and other arboviral disease-controlling pointers, and be strict in implementation.

It’s time we broaden our focus beyond the big cities and to the vast rural and hill regions. The condition of social awareness, medical support, testing facilities, surveillance operations, and overall investment outside the cities is still grossly inadequate. This forces patients from all over the country to flock towards big cities, which overwhelms the hospitals there and increases the possibility of a wider spread of infection. Currently, the Institute of Epidemiology, Disease Control and Research is operating from just one office in Dhaka. We need its operation to be more robust and cover the entire country.

As a society, we have to accept that the changing weather patterns and that the increased risk of tropical diseases is our new reality. We need to make a habit of not disposing of garbage all over the streets, between buildings, in the water bodies. Eradicating vector habitations, as a practice, has to be embedded in our culture. And the authorities have to provide proper support, with comprehensive waste management systems and city maintenance guidelines. Community-based awareness and clean-up groups can be formed to encourage more social engagement.

There’s no case of sustained dengue eradication in the world yet. Dengue has only been successfully prevented through vector control in just three instances over history by Pan American Sanitary Board, Cuba, and Singapore from mid- to late-20th century. But all these successful cases were a result of extensive national-level coordinated efforts by the respective governments. Our government must therefore act with absolute urgency, sincerity, and transparency – or else the blight of dengue will not spare us anytime soon.

Saudi Arabia and Israel put a high US price tag on diplomatic relations



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It’s not just Saudi Arabia that puts a high US price on diplomatic relations with Israel. So does Israel.

A confidante of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, strategic affairs minister Ron Dermer, is in Washington this week for talks with senior officials, including US President Joe Biden’s national security advisor, Jake Sullivan.

In a phone call last month, Netanyahu told Biden that he wanted a security treaty with the United States focused on deterring Iran as part of normalising relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia.

US and Israeli officials may not want to admit it, but there is little doubt that the Israeli demand

Gulf state ships and exclude attacks on Saudi and Emirati oil and other infrastructure.

An informal agreement between the United States and Iran, involving a prisoner swap and a release of frozen Iranian funds, could lead to Iran refraining from attacking US shipping.

The deal does not signal a possible return to the 2015 international agreement that curbed Iran’s nuclear programme, even though Iran has reportedly slowed the pace at which it accumulates near-weapons-grade enriched uranium and diluted some of its stockpiles.

However, Netanyahu has made clear that nothing short of the complete termination of Iran’s

– and also dangerous, because if you don’t see results you will think that de-escalation is in vain or has no results.”

He likened Saudi-Iran relations to Europe’s relations with Russia. Europe has “diplomatic relations with Russia, but you’re at war with Russia,” the official said.

The official conceded that prospects for economic cooperation with Iran remained limited without reviving the Iranian nuclear deal because of US sanctions.

Phrased differently, Saudi-Iran relations depend as much on policies crafted in Riyadh and Tehran as on policies pursued in Washington.

All this casts a different light on Netanyahu’s demand for an Iran-focused security agreement with the United States. Netanyahu has made establishing diplomatic relations with Saudi Arabia a crown jewel of his foreign policy. To achieve that, Israel has acquiesced in Saudi Arabia enriching uranium for research purposes as part of a US-Saudi deal.



Saudi Arabia demands security arrangements with the United States, US support for its peaceful nuclear programme, and unfettered access to sophisticated US weaponry. FILE PHOTO: REUTERS

complicates Biden’s already complex efforts to persuade the two Middle Eastern nations to formalise their substantial informal ties.

Saudi Arabia has put a steep price on establishing diplomatic relations that cater to its security and geopolitical interests.

Saudi Arabia demands security arrangements with the United States, US support for its peaceful nuclear programme, and unfettered access to sophisticated US weaponry. Saudi Arabia has also made Israeli moves to resolve its conflict with the Palestinians a pre-condition.

Like Israel, the kingdom wants a formalised security agreement, even if that accord may not target Iran as explicitly as Israel’s request does.

Saudi Arabia will likely be more circumspect following the China-mediated agreement in March to reestablish relations with Iran. Relations ruptured in 2016 when mobs stormed Saudi diplomatic missions in Iran in protest against the execution of a prominent Saudi Shiite cleric.

So far, from Saudi Arabia’s perspective, the agreement has only partially paid off.

To be sure, the agreement, alongside recent rapprochements between other Middle Eastern states, including Egypt, Turkey, Israel, Syria, and the United Arab Emirates, has dialled down regional tensions.

The kingdom and Iran have exchanged ministerial visits, reopened diplomatic missions, spoken about security and economic cooperation, and invited each other’s leaders to visit.

Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian visited Saudi Arabia this week for the first time since diplomatic relations resumed.

Most importantly, as seen in Riyadh, Iranian recent aggressive moves in Gulf waters target US and Israel-related vessels rather than

programme is good enough as far as he is concerned.

“Arrangements that do not dismantle Iran’s nuclear infrastructure do not stop its nuclear programme and will only provide it with funds that will go to terrorist elements sponsored by Iran,” Netanyahu’s office said.

The statement contrasts starkly with a US position articulated in March by Joint Chiefs of Staff chairman Gen Mark Milley, who told Congress the United States would not allow Iran to “have a

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fielded nuclear weapon.” The key word here is “fielded.”

Saudi Arabia and Israel may be closer than meets the eye when it comes to Iran, but they strike different tones. Moreover, Israel is less inclined to deal with the current Iranian regime than Saudi Arabia is.

Addressing a closed meeting in Europe with Middle East experts, a senior Saudi official recently said it was the kingdom’s “hope” to resolve issues with Iran but cautioned that “it is too simple to think in that way

Netanyahu has also indicated he would be willing to gesture to Palestinians if a normalisation deal with Saudi Arabia depended on it. He suggested he would not let ultra-conservative religious and ultranationalist coalition members block an agreement.

It’s not clear that the prime minister could make gestures that would be minimally acceptable to the Saudis and avoid breaking up his coalition, the most hardline in Israeli history.

This month’s appointment of Saudi Arabia’s first ambassador to the Palestinians suggested the gap Netanyahu would have to bridge. Israeli Foreign Minister Eli Cohen did not object to the move but asserted Israel would not permit the opening of diplomatic representations for the Palestinians in Jerusalem. Israel views united Jerusalem as its capital, while the Palestinians see the east of the city, captured by Israel during the 1967 Middle East war, as the capital of a future Palestinian state. As the custodian of Islam’s holiest cities, Makkah and Madinah, Saudi Arabia would be hard-pressed to make concessions on Jerusalem, the faith’s third holiest city.

As a result, the question is what Netanyahu wants to achieve with his demand for an anti-Iran security deal with the United States. Certainly, the deal would ensure Israel’s seat at the table and bolster Israel’s position vis a vis Iran.

Netanyahu may also want to complicate US-Saudi talks about security arrangements in the belief that without a solid agreement with the United States, the kingdom would have a greater interest in formalising relations with Israel sooner than later.

Either way, Israel remains a player with the potential to be disruptive rather than constructive, depending on how Netanyahu defines Israel and his political interests.