

## The Daily Star

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### Do we need more of the same police?

#### Granting Ansar enhanced powers before election raises concerns

The proposed move to expand powers of the Ansar battalion has rightly raised concerns, coming as it does less than three months before a scheduled general election. The proposal was included in the recently introduced Ansar Battalion Bill 2023 in what would be the last session of the 11th parliament. As we know from past experience, the last sessions of a parliament are usually reserved for controversial, scarcely debated bills and provisions – one such law in 2018 was a certain Digital Security Act. As if to keep up with tradition, the government has done it again. Defending the move – which would enable Ansar members to arrest offenders, frisk detainees, and seize goods – the home minister thinks it is necessary to bolster law enforcement efforts during elections.

However, we are not convinced that this is a good enough reason. Despite claims to the contrary, the bill, as currently drafted, seems to grant Ansar the authority to perform tasks identical to those of the police. Ansar turning into a force parallel to the police, rather than being an auxiliary force meant to assist law enforcement agencies, has implications that extend beyond any election period. Overlapping roles and potential conflicts between the two forces – top police officials have already opposed the move – will likely deteriorate security rather than improve it. The fact is, we don't need more of the same police. We need them to be more accountable. If the latest move means having more uniformed men abusing their power to extort, harass or torture – just like errant, politically biased cops – then we are better off without them.

Ansar's cooperative efforts in disaster relief and crisis situations are well-recognised. But arming them with the power to intervene in public life or conduct investigations like the police can cause chaos in the whole law enforcement system. Who will ensure transparency and accountability in the exercise of their newfound powers? Having clearly defined roles and safeguards against abuse of authority is essential to the function of a security entity. Ansar's empowerment is particularly concerning given its potential impact on the approaching election. It raises questions about whether the government intends to use them to handle the increasingly intense opposition movement for its resignation, or for other oppressive purposes.

The possibility of abuse cannot be ruled out, considering the controversial role played by police during past elections. As the proposed bill now undergoes scrutiny by the parliamentary standing committee on home ministry, which has been asked to submit its report to parliament within three working days, we urge the committee to consider all possible implications of the law. The authorities should address the legitimate concerns of various stakeholders, including police and opposition lawmakers, and refrain from indulging those provisions in the Ansar bill.

### Yet another meaningless tragedy

#### Bhairab train crash again raises questions about railway safety

It was supposed to be a time of festivities and reunions amid the holidays, but for many, it turned into one of unimaginable tragedy. On Monday, while the country was observing Nabami, at least 17 people died when a freight train, ignoring the signal light, rammed into a passenger train near the Bhairab Bazar Junction Railway Station. We must ask: how many more ordinary people will have to die in such meaningless tragedies before the authorities do something about it?

Survivors of the Bhairab crash recalled how gruesome the collision was. Reshma Begum, one of the injured, told *Prothom Alo* how her carriage was crammed with passengers. Once the tragedy struck, people fell on top of one another, causing so much pressure that it was hard to even breathe. Some couldn't bear the impact, succumbing to their injuries, while others stayed trapped in the mangled carriages, praying for a miracle. It took some 15 hours to end the rescue operations.

Many dreams were thus shattered. Some of the victims were planning to go abroad, some were looking to get married, while some were waiting to meet their loved ones. Shanti Rani Shil, who was on her way to celebrate Durga Puja in Narsingdi, is now mourning the loss of her husband. Many, like Opu, a teenage passenger, were seen frantically searching for their friends and relatives amid the debris.

After the incident, Bangladesh Railway suspended the freight train's driver, his assistant, and guard following a preliminary investigation. However, will such measures prevent future accidents? Unfortunately, history indicates otherwise. Train accidents, large and small, are anything but rare in our country, and some common threads link them all – negligence, recklessness, dysfunction, and mismanagement. On April 16, a Dhaka-bound passenger train hit a freight train in Cumilla, injuring 30, following an anomaly in the signalling system. In 2019, two intercity trains collided in Brahmanbaria, killing 16 and injuring over 70; the incident happened while changing tracks.

Here's another clear pattern: the crashes happen mostly at junctions or crossings, and while switching tracks. And it is with this information that we can plan to save lives. What the authorities need to do is properly prepare conductors, drivers and assistants for their duty, making sure that there is no room for negligence. Additionally, regular maintenance of switches, signals, and the whole technical system is imperative. With these overarching measures, we can at least hope that our loved ones will not be victims of such avoidable tragedies.

# How did Bangladesh end up with its deadliest dengue outbreak?



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SUMAIYA BINTE SHAMS

How is it that, in our country, those who are in the seats of power readily boast about their success, but we rarely see them acknowledge their failure, much less take responsibility for it? What we do see are attempts at avoiding accountability for the real-life consequences of their lackadaisical attitude. At best, if the matter is highly publicised, a probe is initiated, but rarely with any conclusive findings. In other times, these authorities may embark on puerile blame games, finding fault in everyone but themselves.

This pattern of behaviour – shirking responsibilities, being oblivious to the telltale signs of a crisis, failing to take prompt actions, and then blaming someone else when a crisis occurs – is driven by a confidence (or rather, an arrogance) that is mightier than all our civil rights combined. A confidence that stems from a long-persisting culture of impunity and complete disregard for accountability to the people, whom the authorities are mandated to serve and protect.

Which is why I am not surprised by the rather apathetic approach of our government towards the ongoing dengue outbreak. In fact, there has been no visible urgency among those who are tasked to deal with public health crises. Seeing their blasé attitude, you'd think perhaps there really is nothing to worry about.

But then you see the numbers. The year 2023 has been a year of records when it comes to dengue. With 37 percent of global deaths occurring here, Bangladesh tops the list of most affected countries in the world. We are seeing the highest number of deaths and the highest caseload in the country's history – 1,284 and 258,912, respectively, between January 1 and October 24 – according to the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS). For context, the previous worst dengue year, 2019, saw 164 deaths and 101,354 cases reported. Last year, during a short but intense spell, 281 deaths and 62,382 cases were recorded. In fact, this year's death toll and caseload has far surpassed the numbers of all the previous outbreaks combined (dengue was first detected in Bangladesh in 2000). These are only the cases that have been reported to



Why has the government still not come up with a dengue management plan that works?

PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON

the health directorate – some experts believe the real numbers could be much higher. And there is no sign of the infections letting up yet.

How did we get to this situation? Did no one see it coming?

The experts did, of course, and they warned us well before the crisis unfolded. When dengue infections started to spike earlier this year, health experts expressly warned in May that we were on the verge of an outbreak that could be much worse than anticipated. They also said adequate planning and its timely execution considering all factors – including warmer and wetter summer – was necessary to contain the dengue spread. In July, when dengue deaths and infections spiked alarmingly, there were again warnings that it might be time to prepare for a public health emergency.

Did those warnings make any difference to our government bodies? In July, our health minister said there was no reason yet to declare a public

health emergency. The situation in August – which saw higher deaths and caseloads than all of 2022 – and in September – which surpassed the August numbers – apparently weren't severe enough to garner that acknowledgement either. Meanwhile, dengue continues to rage on in the country, now spreading beyond urban areas, which have typically borne the brunt of outbreaks over the years.

why? With all the data, tools, experts, help from experts both local and foreign at their disposal, why has the government still not come up with a dengue management plan that works? Other countries seem to have cracked the code. Take Kolkata, for example, where the city authorities devised a definitive vector management plan to control dengue (following the 2010 outbreak), which has been successful

Our already fragile healthcare system, especially the facilities in rural areas, are crumbling under the pressure of dengue hospitalisation.

Our government's refusal to announce this year's outbreak as a public health emergency – because they refuse to accept that they failed to contain the viral disease with timely and effective measures, despite several warnings – means that no specialised plan or task force has been put together to handle the crisis. It seems there is no general plan of action either; there are no concerted efforts from the relevant government agencies regarding dengue management. Instead, they keep pointing fingers at each other. The vector management policy, which is supposed to serve as a definite guideline to control the population of Aedes mosquitoes – the carrier of dengue – has yet to be finalised.

It is clear by now that they have learnt nothing from the past few years' experience. And I can't help but ask:

in containing the viral disease in the West Bengal city till date. Surely, we can take a leaf out of their policy book? Is it apathy towards citizens that makes our policymakers indifferent to our well-being, or are they simply not competent enough to do the job?

Bangladesh is seeing not just its own worst dengue spell but the worst outbreak globally, simply because our authorities lacked the foresight to read the signs. If only those in charge of looking after us were proactive – not reactive.

If we were in a country where public officials were accountable to the people, we would be able to sue them for failing to save us from a public health crisis. In such a country, the loss of nearly 1,300 lives – including more than 130 children – to a preventable disease would cause an uproar, and those who failed to do their job with due diligence would apologise and hand in their resignations. Unfortunately, we don't live in a country where people's health is prioritised.

## Towards crisis-resilient urban futures



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Cities have always been dynamic hubs of culture, education, economic growth, and opportunity. Most importantly, they are centres of social interaction, attracting residents and visitors alike. It is no surprise then that Asia and the Pacific has in recent years become predominantly urban as people seek greater opportunities and services in cities of all sizes, from coastal communities in the Pacific to mega-cities such as Bangkok, Hong Kong, and Tokyo, and in smaller towns and emerging urban centres, each with unique characteristics reflecting our region's diversity.

The megatrend of urbanisation, however, has not been free of difficulties, with many of the global crises, including the Covid-19 pandemic, the increasing effects of climate change, biodiversity loss and various forms of pollution, all converging in our cities. These challenges have made more visible the long-standing issues of inequalities, urban poverty, access to affordable housing, and an infrastructure gap.

Our most vulnerable communities often are those most affected. This is clear in our cities, where climate-related disasters disproportionately impact the poor, and women and children are unable to access essential urban services. Meanwhile, a lack of affordable housing hinders

the poor and middle classes alike, and inadequate infrastructure too frequently results in persons with disabilities being left behind. Collectively, these challenges not only harm cities and their residents, but will hinder progress towards the 2030

we must take the necessary steps to address existing urban challenges and plan urbanisation to be inclusive and resilient to future shocks and crises. And we know how to get there. ESCAP, UN-Habitat, and partners have developed a new flagship report, "Crisis Resilient Urban Futures: The Future of Asian & Pacific Cities 2023."

Through analysis of the crises and their effects, the report offers practical guidance across four key thematic areas for inclusive urban policies, partnerships, and innovations.

First, urban and territorial planning remains the foundation of how all cities manage their growth and plan urban services. Having seen how crises can

innovation and new practices for low-carbon and resilient pathways. A resilient city engages all stakeholders, from the most vulnerable communities to civil society and policymakers and from the local to national level, all working to co-develop solutions.

We also live in a more digitally connected world, where urban digital transformations and smart city technologies, if managed effectively, can improve operational efficiencies, bridge the digital divide and ensure access for all. The pandemic underlined the need to include everyone in shaping our digitally transformed future.

Finally, the multiple crises highlighted the urgency to safeguard urban finances. Expanding, diversifying, and increasing municipal revenue should be a key strategy for cities to stimulate local economic recoveries. And as no city can go it alone, robust multi-level governance, supported by transparent public frameworks for intergovernmental transfers, is needed, while more stable policies and incentives can open doors to private sector investment.

Recovery from any shock or crisis takes time and collective action. We must ensure that our urban areas guard against future risks while building safe, sustainable and livable communities and putting us back on track to achieve the 2030 Agenda.

The eighth Asia-Pacific Urban Forum, being held this week (October 23-25) in Suwon, Republic of Korea, is a key platform to share urban solutions and enhance partnerships to address the multitude of challenges. Though the task is formidable, with the right policies, innovations, cooperation, and the engagement of citizens, we can ensure that our region's cities remain vibrant hubs.

**Urban and territorial planning remains the foundation of how all cities manage their growth and plan urban services. Having seen how crises can disrupt these systems, we know that holistic urban planning that prioritises multi-use, compact development, low-carbon transportation and mobility, affordable housing and efficient delivery of services are essential for creating safe, sustainable and liveable cities for all citizens.**

Agenda for Sustainable Development and its goals, many of which intersect in cities.

When cities shuttered during the pandemic, economic activity, tourism, education, and urban services all suffered seemingly irreparable harm. Yet, in the aftermath of the global pandemic, we realise that a sustainable future for Asia and the Pacific runs through our cities, and

disrupt these systems, we know that holistic urban planning that prioritises multi-use, compact development, low-carbon transportation and mobility, affordable housing and efficient delivery of services are essential for creating safe, sustainable and liveable cities for all citizens.

Next, effectively responding to the climate emergency must be a priority, and cities are well positioned to lead