

## Deadliest dengue year demands accountability

We cannot afford a repetition of such deplorable dengue management

Historically, we tend to see fewer dengue cases in the month of December. But this year, when we have seen all sorts of records in relation to the viral disease get shattered, even that little bit of respite seems out of reach. Shockingly, in only the first 15 days of this month, 6,722 new dengue cases and 54 deaths have been reported. In comparison, in the entirety of December last year, 27 dengue patients had died and 5,024 were hospitalised.

With the most recent deaths and cases, the total number of casualties from dengue this year rose to 1,678 and the number of cases to 318,803. Prior to this year, the deadliest dengue year was 2019 when 101,354 people were infected and 179 people had died. Despite the number of cases this year already tripling the previous record, and the number of deaths being 10 times higher, we have seen the authorities repeatedly claim no wrongdoing. But the numbers speak for themselves.

Health experts and others have also pointed to failure on part of the authorities, across various sectors of the government, that have led to this disaster. One point in particular that have unified experts is the lack of a vector management policy, which has been in the works since the deadly year of 2019, but is yet to see the light of day. In the absence of such a policy, data-driven decision-making to control dengue remains impossible. Additionally, it becomes easier—as we have seen—for different government bodies to pass the blame onto each other, all the while it is the people who continue to suffer and die needlessly.

It should be clear to anyone that corruption and a lack of governance and coordination among relevant government agencies have hampered dengue management in the country. And the lack of urgency shown by the relevant authorities to address the matter or hold anyone accountable is frightening, particularly in relation to the questions it raises regarding what lies ahead for us as the climate continues to shift in a direction that only aids the breeding of Aedes mosquitoes. To prevent a repeat of this year's disastrous response, the authorities must hold those who were responsible for the numerous failures in tackling the disease to account. Moreover, it should take urgent measures to ensure that the disease does not spread further and that healthcare facilities are up to the mark to provide adequate treatment to those already affected.

## Stand with women entrepreneurs

With proper support from the government, they can go a long way

It is very exciting to see how women from various districts of the country are taking initiatives to be economically solvent using their entrepreneurial skills. Over the past decade, an increasing number of women have broken the social barriers and successfully started their own businesses. In the process, they have also engaged hundreds of other women in their areas with these endeavours. One such example was set by a group of women in Narsingdi who, according to a report in this daily, have achieved economic independence by selling handicrafts, Jamdani sarees, *Nakshi Kanthas*, yarn, jute products, food and various other daily necessities, mostly on social media platforms.

Reportedly, many of these women entrepreneurs started their businesses during the Covid-19 pandemic when their families had to face financial struggles due to the shutdown of economic activities. One such entrepreneur is Sabrina Akter, who created a Facebook group to launch her business during the pandemic. The group named "Narsingdi Jela Nari Uddyoktader Mela" has now become a shared platform of 60 businesses with around 53,000 members. Sabrina now earns an average of Tk 40,000 per month from her handicraft business, while others are also earning as per their expectations. In recent years, we have seen many such commendable initiatives from women entrepreneurs across the country. We have seen how hundreds of women in Pabna have become economically solvent by launching small businesses.

Now the question is: how can we help these businesswomen sustain their enterprises through these challenging economic times? While the social barriers for women to become entrepreneurs have become somewhat relaxed, they are still held back by economic constraints; many women are still financially dependent on their families to run their businesses. Therefore, the government, banks as well as social organisations must come forward to assist these aspiring businesswomen with funds and other support. Small steps such as allocating a designated place where they can sell their products, and linking them up with potential buyers from the cities can actually go a long way and make more women take up such endeavours.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### VIP movement and our traffic

Every day that I am on the road in Dhaka, I dread the possibility of getting stuck at an intersection, thanks to VIP movement. I have lost count of how many times I have been stuck on the road—sometimes even for an hour—so some VIP could move freely. With Dhaka's traffic already moving at a snail's pace, such movements make commutes even more agonising for ordinary commuters. Ideally, no citizen should face such a situation; people don't in other countries. But for some reason, we have conceded to this reality. I urge the authorities to think about the people and find an alternative solutions. Under no circumstances should this be the norm.

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# The facade of a competitive election

### THE STREET VIEW

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Since 1991, Bangladesh has witnessed robust, genuine general elections till 2008, with the exception of the one in February 1996 which was overseen by the ruling government and boycotted by the main opposition of the time. Regardless of the veracity of those elections (1991, June 1996, 2001 and 2008), the losing parties labelled them as “unfair,” claiming “minor irregularities,” “blatant rigging,” “election engineering,” “ballot stuffing” or “voting at night.” We also witnessed how 153 lawmakers were elected uncontested in the 2014 election, while in 2018, there were widespread allegations of ballot stuffing on the eve of the actual polls.

So, the nature of the impending election gives us a moment to ponder the present political scenario. The ruling Awami League is desperately trying to showcase the polls as inclusive and competitive—one that will lead to high voter turnout, although the main political opposition BNP and some left-wing and right-wing parties are boycotting the polls.

As the ruling party's main challenge is to make the election look inclusive, it has adopted a strategy of allowing and encouraging those within its ranks to run as “independent” candidates. But before the ruling party chief endorsed their “independence,” these aspirants were known as “rebel” candidates, who run against candidates of their own party after having been spurned in the race for nomination.

These independents have now become a major concern for ruling party nominees. According to news reports, intra-party fights are now likely, meaning that the contest will mainly be limited to AL nominees and AL independents. However, whoever wins, it is basically a victory for the ruling party. The election will look competitive as both candidates will try to reach out to the voters, possibly leading to higher voter turnout, although how fierce the intra-party feud will be is yet to be seen. There will also be no walkover this time, meaning no string of candidates being elected unchallenged—like what happened in 2014.

Obviously, it is a good move to make the election competitive, but this one



This whole election seems like a friendly charity match, in which it doesn't matter who wins. FILE PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON

may prove to be costly depending on how it plays out in the future.

Meanwhile, the ruling party's alliance partners seem more concerned. They held a series of meetings with AL to negotiate a settlement on the number of seats that might be conceded to them. According to reports, this is likely to be only seven—down from 16 in 2018—with Jatiya Party (Monju) getting one, and two leftist parties getting three each. All the alliance partners said they wanted to contest the election with the AL symbol like they did in the past.

This time, the ruling party announced candidates for 298 seats. So, it has to withdraw some of its candidates from the seats where its alliance partners will run. But this is not enough for the coalition partners. They want no independent candidate from the ruling party, which essentially means they want to be elected unchallenged. They want assurance of victory in the

constituencies. But AL has said there will be independents. It is surely a rare incident in Bangladesh politics when the opposition party is in discussion with the ruling party over election strategy. Jatiya Party saw itself broken into factions over election, and its manner of negotiations points to its utter lack of confidence in winning a competitive election.

So when the political situation is largely like this, the whole affair seems like a friendly charity match, in which it doesn't matter who wins. After all, it will either be AL's nominee or loyalist, or an “opposition” endorsed by AL itself. This proves that Awami League has become so strong that other parties exist merely on paper. Basically, those parties have degenerated into political clubs without any ideology, and the polls are merely a cosmetic exercise to exhibit—by dint of their presence on the ballot—that they do indeed exist. Their only intention is to land in parliament with the blessings and generosity of the ruling party.

different labels to term previous elections, as stated before, this time it's different. Rights advocate Sultana Kamal has rightly stated that the election has become a staged performance. We know the opposition parties have been terming the election staged, but when it comes from a noted civil society member who is uncompromising on issues of liberation and human rights, that gives it more credence.

The most crucial point is that, previously, these questions were raised after the elections ended, but this time, they are being raised even before it is held. The way AL is managing contesting parties and the strategies it has adopted to make the election inclusive and competitive, this election is surely a cosmetic one through which the government will be able to claim that everything was perfect, at least, through the clinical lens of legitimacy. But it would fall desperately short in terms of the spirit and purpose of elections.

# A new curriculum can't fix core flaws in education

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Education is a fundamental right, yet it is a luxury for many. In its 2017 report, Unesco mentioned that among those fortunate to have access to education, more than 617 million children and adolescents in the world do not have minimum proficiency levels in reading and mathematics. Bangladesh is no exception.

We know the Bangladesh government is investing tremendous efforts to improve the education quality. As part of these efforts, the curriculum has been revised and a new one is being rolled out in classes 6 and 7. However, there are lots of debates and discussions regarding this revised curriculum, which the government is clarifying by saying that it wants to prepare smart citizens while focusing on activity-based teaching through group work, presentation and skills development.

Objectively, if the following basic problems are not addressed, especially by creating an enabling environment in school for both teachers and students, high quality education and preparing smart citizens for a Smart Bangladesh will be difficult to achieve.

The National Student Assessment (NSA) 2023 by the primary education directorate and Unicef, surveying 25,752 students of Class 3 and 28,752 students of Class 5, finds that over 60

**Students were auto-promoted to higher classes during the Covid shutdown. These students did not study during Covid, and having no exam system now in Class 6 and 7 has made them flippant about learning. Guardians are also not able to assess the knowledge as there are no exam copies to see. These gaps will carry over to the upper classes, as schools are more focused on finishing the syllabus, not their learning.**

percent of Class 3 students and 70 percent of Class 5 students don't have the proficiency in maths appropriate for their grades. Even though Bangla is the mother tongue, the survey found that 51 percent of Class 3 students and 50 percent of Class 5 students lack grade-level competence.

Long-standing problems have been aggravated due to Covid. A situation analysis on the education sector in Asia during the pandemic, prepared

by Unicef and Unesco, states that the education of 37 million children in Bangladesh was disrupted due to school closures and worrying gaps in basic literacy and numeracy skills exacerbated, which existed before the pandemic began and is continuing now.

Students were auto promoted to higher classes during the Covid shutdown. Even though the books are self explanatory and teachers are trained, there is no uniformity in implementation. These students did not study during Covid, and having no exam system now in Class 6 and 7 has

made them flippant about learning. Guardians are also not able to assess the knowledge of their children, as there are no exam copies to see. These gaps will carry over to the upper classes, as schools are more focused on finishing the syllabus, not their learning.

The ultimate goal of education is to help an individual contribute to society. It is the process through which an individual obtains basic knowledge

and learns social norms, and how to differentiate between right from wrong. However, children learn all these not only from formal education, but also informally from their homes, society, electronic or print media, and elders. Research has revealed that children and adolescents are likely to follow or copy what they see and hear, a kind of contagion described as “copycat” or “imitator” effect. Continuing exposure to social ills can lead to negative behaviours in some children. All these have adverse effects and consequences for their future.

It is now mandatory to focus on sustainable solutions and not work in haste—not to revise the curriculum for the sake of revision or teach for the sake of teaching. We have to fill in the gaps created by Covid-19 first. We must ensure that children go to the classrooms, assess the extent of their learning loss, provide them with the relevant support to recover what they have missed, and give scope to interact with their teachers directly and share their opinion. Additionally, we must consult with students, parents and teachers of Classes 6 and 7 on the revised curriculum and take their opinions into account.

Nelson Mandela once said that education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world. If that is so, let's use this weapon together to accentuate the sustainable solutions to change ourselves and behave accordingly, to change our society and the world for the better.