

How to rank mayors of an unliveable Dhaka?

We need a radical reimagining of city planning and management

The two Dhaka mayors may be patting themselves on the back for doing a good job of maintaining the capital city during their four-year tenure, but the statistics—say nothing of city dwellers' individual experiences—tell a different story. Over the period, Dhaka has consistently found itself among the top 10 least liveable cities in the Global Liveability Index. Its air, too, frequently makes it to the top of the global list of cities with the worst air. Its traffic jams are so deadly that, on average, city dwellers spend a whopping 276 hours a year wasting away their productive lives, earning the capital the not-so-prestigious title of the slowest city in the world. When it rains, Dhaka drowns, and during heatwaves, Dhaka burns. How should one rank the mayors of a city which consistently tops the list for all the wrong reasons?

Whatever ambitious promises that the two mayors made in their election manifestos have remained unrealised for the most part, and along with it, people's dreams of an accessible, safe and healthy city. For instance, both the mayors had pledged to rid Dhaka of mosquitoes, but the city has only become deadlier with each passing year. Despite spending Tk 500 crore over mosquito control, dengue claimed more than a record-breaking 900 lives alone in the city last year, and experts are already predicting that the outbreak this year will be even worse. Our repeated calls for a coordinated and scientific approach for dengue control by engaging entomologists and other experts have fallen by the clogged drain, with the same tried-and-failed methods being implemented half-heartedly by the city corporations to contain an escalating crisis year after year.

And it's not just dengue. Take any perennial problem of Dhaka—traffic, waterlogging, air quality, sound pollution, walkability—and we seem stuck in an endless loop of failed promises on the end of policymakers and frustration on the end of the public. Look at any public amenity, and we are confronted with mismanagement, inefficiencies, and a lack of collaboration and foresight of the authorities, to say nothing of corruption at every stage of the process. Meanwhile, our open spaces, canals and natural reservoirs are disappearing at alarming speeds, being replaced with buildings and structures constructed flouting basic fire and building safety rules.

While we credit the city mayors for taking some notable initiatives over the past four years, such as DNCC's waste management or DSCC's reclamation of occupied rivers, what we need are not ad hoc solutions but a radical reimagining of city planning and management. Dhaka's current state is far too alarming for the mayors to be happy about their "many" achievements over the past four years. It's time they inhabited the same Dhaka as we do—one where even the most basic of human needs, such as breathing, is a fight for survival.

Make people aware of 109 hotline

Adequate resources should be ensured to run this vital service

We are disappointed to learn that, even after 12 years of operation, the national helpline for women and children who are victims of violence is not serving its intended purpose. The hotline, which can be accessed through the short code 109, was launched in 2012 to provide appropriate support and resources to the victims of domestic violence, child marriage, child abuse, sexual violence, physical assault, dowry, etc. But an analysis of call records has revealed that the 109 hotline is limited to mostly providing information.

Between January 1 and April 16 this year, the helpline received 2,68,430 calls, more than 95 percent of which were related to seeking information on topics such as how to handle violent situations, dowry or alimony, divorce proceedings, reconciling relations, etc. Only five percent callers sought specific services, and of those, only two percent requested legal assistance and one percent sought police intervention. A similar pattern was observed in 2023 and 2022 as well.

While we appreciate that people can rely on this platform to access important information, we are also concerned that perhaps there is a lack of public awareness regarding its true capacity. The national helpline, which is accessible round the clock, is equipped to provide guidance to the victims regarding legal provisions and actions, and to connect them to other platforms operated by government agencies and NGOs. Yet, such a small segment of the callers ask for specific services. This is concerning because violence against women and children have certainly not declined. According to an Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK) report, between January and March this year, 114 women were raped, 137 women were subjected to domestic violence, and 325 children were abused, among others. The ASK executive director was quoted as saying that, as data suggests, incidents of violence against women and children are on an alarming rise.

This means the authorities need to put more effort into publicising the usefulness of this hotline, because it is providing vital support to victims of violence. We urge the government to bolster this crucial platform with adequate resources so that more victims of violence can get the help they need through it.

New Message

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Implications of recent central bank policy measures



MACRO MIRROR

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FAHMIDA KHATUN

The Bangladesh Bank (BB) announced some important monetary policy measures on May 8, 2024, in an attempt to rein in inflation and improve the declining foreign exchange reserve of the country. Indeed, this decision has been taken by the central bank prior to the release of the third tranche from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) under its ongoing support of \$4.7 billion to Bangladesh. The IMF had suggested market-based interest and exchange rates earlier, but the central bank shied away from adopting those measures until the situation eventually aggravated.

As a last resort, the BB has hiked the policy rate by 50 basis points to bring it to 8.5 percent. In January 2024, the policy rate was increased from 7.75 percent to 8 percent. This decision gives a signal to the market about the upcoming interest rate hike in the commercial banks. In its Monetary Policy Statement for July-December 2023, the BB introduced the reference lending rate, namely Six-month Moving Average Rate of Treasury bills (SMART), to determine the lending rates. Banks and non-bank financial institutions (NBFIs) used to have a margin applied to this rate by three percent and up to five percent, respectively. With the announcement of a policy rate hike and the abolition of the SMART mechanism, lending rates will now be determined by commercial banks. The lending rate will depend on the efficiency, liquidity situation, market demand, competitiveness, and bank-customer relationship. Naturally, efficient banks will be in an advantageous situation due to their reputation and can offer a more competitive rate than the weaker ones.

The interest rate cap imposed in April 2020 by the BB for both lending and deposit, at nine percent and six percent, respectively, has been unsuccessful in containing inflation. Money became too cheap as the inflation rate far exceeded these low lending rates. This illogical cap was also discriminatory since depositors

became net losers by keeping their money in banks with the inflation rate above nine percent. This harmful interest rate cap should have been eliminated and a pragmatic monetary policy should have been in place much earlier to address the ongoing inflationary challenge.

The other monetary policy measure—introduction of Crawling Peg Mid-Rate (CPMR) and setting the exchange rate at Tk 117 for \$1—aims to stabilise the value of the taka against the US dollar. The crawling peg gives the banks the freedom to buy



FILE VISUAL: SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR

and sell US dollars at their own rates within a certain corridor. The BB has attempted to set the CPMR at a point which reflects the market rate, this is, of course, not fixed, and adjustments may be needed in the future to reflect actual market rate. During the last two years or so, the taka has depreciated by more than 29 percent. Now with this crawling peg rate, the taka has depreciated by over six percent in one go. The Bangladeshi taka has long been overvalued against US dollar to keep import costs low. However, the Real Effective Exchange Rate (REER) was much higher than what was fixed by the central bank. As the exporters

relative to other countries. That is why a flexible market-based exchange rate is important so that exports and remittances remain attractive while the reliance on unnecessary imports decline. Of course, we are yet to see a market-based exchange rate. The CPMR is probably a prelude to it. Meanwhile, the market has to mature.

The new exchange rate will have an implication for government expenditures as well. Earlier, even if the private importers were buying US dollars at a higher rate, the government was importing oil, fertiliser and a few other commodities at Tk 110 per US dollar. Now, the

government expenditure on imports will rise. High import costs could further increase inflationary pressure. Increase in government expenditure will also increase budget deficit which could lead to more bank borrowing by the government. In recent months, the government has been borrowing heavily from the banking sector. This has put pressure on domestic debt.

The new monetary policy will have varied implications for the economy. That is why the BB has to continue to review the situation and adjust interest rates and other policies accordingly. For positive outcomes, these measures also require coordination with each other, and special care needs to be taken over implementation.

Due to lack of coordinated and coherent measures, inflation continues to rise, notwithstanding the abolition of the interest rate cap since July 2023. On the other hand, fiscal policy has not been commensurate with a contractionary monetary policy since the government could not control spending successfully. Last year, the government borrowed from the BB and fuelled inflation further instead of containing it. This year the government is borrowing from commercial banks. Though there is not much demand from the private sector now and thus the possibility of crowding out is low, the interest payment liability of the government for these loans is increasing. As it is, the external debt service liability of the government has been piling up and the government is servicing some of these loans by borrowing from other external sources.

Of course, no single policy can satisfy everyone. The new exchange rate is expected to provide some predictability. But the crawling peg rate is set to have a knock-on effect on the cost of business for the private sector. The private sector has also been apprehensive of increased cost of doing business due to high interest rates. Then again, cost of doing business also depends on many factors such as good governance, quality of public service delivery, efficient infrastructure, technological adoption, and skilled human resources. Without making improvement on these, businesses cannot be competitive. Therefore, the interconnectedness of policies and their implications must be recognised and worked on. Policy consistency is critical, so is the timely adoption and proper implementation of appropriate policies.

Time to strengthen the fight against dengue



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TAMANNA KHAN

Earlier this month, the sound of thunder and lightning with torrential rain brought much relief from the month-long heatwave of April. But my joy was cut short by the high-pitched buzz of a mosquito. It was a reminder that dengue season was around the corner. According to a recent report in this daily, experts are predicting a worse dengue situation this year compared to last year.

Such a prediction is concerning as Bangladesh already witnessed a record number of dengue-related deaths and hospitalisations last year. According to data from the Directorate General of Health Services, more than 1,700 people, including 170 children, died from the vector-borne disease last year with hospitalisations surpassing three lakh across the country.

The number of dengue-related deaths in the first four months of this year is almost double of what it was during the same period last year. Additionally, the disease, which is mostly prevalent in urban and semi-urban areas because of the widespread presence of stagnant water bodies—which are the favourite breeding grounds of Aedes mosquitoes—appears to have made its way to the villages too. A few years ago, experts warned about a certain type of Aedes (Aedes albopictus), which lay eggs on the edges of forested or vegetated

areas, besides containers with stagnant water. They suspected an association between those Aedes mosquitoes and the increasing number of cases in rural areas. This is a development that adds to the level of concern.

Although plenty of rest, liquid intake and painkillers can be used to treat mild dengue, severe cases that may include breathing difficulty, persistent vomiting or bleeding through gums require hospitalisation. Patients with such symptoms often need intravenous fluid, constant medical monitoring, and even blood transfusion. Unlike the cities, healthcare facilities in villages are often not well-equipped or even well-staffed, rendering them incapable of treating dengue patients. If an endemic breaks out in the villages, people will have little choice but to move to the already overwhelmed hospitals in the cities for treatment. Last year's situation had pushed the city hospitals to their limits with cases mostly from urban centres and surrounding areas. One can imagine what the situation will be if dengue spreads in the villages at the same rate as it occurs in urban areas.

Although last week's report in this daily quoted the director of Communicable Disease Control Programme at the DGHS saying that they had instructed upazila level doctors not to refer patients to the

capital unless necessary, the question remains as to whether our upazila-level healthcare facilities are equipped to treat serious patients. Rather than ad hoc instructions, a clear guideline for our healthcare system to tackle severe outbreaks should be implemented. But are we preparing any such strategy at the national level?

Dengue has been affecting public

Dengue has been affecting public health in Bangladesh for decades, yet we do not have an effective national prevention strategy in place. Unscientific methods have often been floated as solutions to control the vector. Besides, there is no coordination between different institutions that are responsible for prevention and control of dengue.

health in Bangladesh for decades, yet we do not have an effective national prevention strategy in place. Unscientific methods have often been floated as solutions to control the vector. Besides, there is no coordination between different institutions that are responsible for prevention and control of dengue. Multiple experts at various times have called for implementation of measures successful in cities of neighbouring countries with weather patterns similar to Dhaka. There is no reason to believe that those suggestions have

been taken into account.

Even the job of creating awareness among people to keep possible Aedes breeding grounds clean does not appear to happen year-round. It is hard to find a road, street or electric pole without a political poster praising some leader or congratulating them for something. More lives could perhaps have been saved had those posters displayed preventative methods for dengue instead. Not just posters, broadcasting infomercials on dengue prevention in mass media should not be limited to just when the disease claims lives in dozens. More efforts should be given to continue raising awareness throughout the year in a coordinated way. Additionally, city corporations and municipal offices themselves should take stock of their buildings, equipment, and assets and set examples by making sure that those do not become mosquito breeding grounds.

Lastly, the government should take up funding research projects on dengue and Aedes mosquitoes, and not shy away from publishing the findings or implementing recommendations by experts from diverse sectors. It may be a little late to start doing what the authorities have stalled for so long, but it is not too late. Each and every life lost from dengue is preventable, at least it should be in the 21st century. Besides, Bangladesh has succeeded in eradicating several diseases in the past. Why not dengue? Why should we open the newspaper and are faced with a news report predicting a deadlier scenario, not a hopeful one?

Imagine reading a report that mentions experts forecasting a declining trend of the disease because of effective measures taken by the authorities in a coordinated way. Is that an impossible dream?