The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR: **LATE S. M. ALI**

No development for the drainage system?

Dhaka residents suffer as rain and waterlogging cause disruptions

Over the last four years, the two city corporations of Dhaka have spent at least Tk 730 crore to resolve its waterlogging problem. But for all that spending, there is still no sign of improvement, as Friday's rains and resultant public sufferings have once again demonstrated. The downpour, which started in the early hours and continued until noon, flooded many streets and homes, causing disruptions across the city. Many areas, especially in DSCC, would remain under water even 12 hours after the rain had stopped. This is notable because the DSCC mayor, in February last year, had promised swift drainage of water—within just 15 minutes—even after heavy monsoon rains. Are we to forget all such promises? How is it that a government frequently reminding us of its development success cannot bring any semblance of development in this particular sector?

According to our report, people who went out on the weekend endured immense sufferings, as they had to wade through knee-to-waist-deep water to reach their destinations. Public transport was scarce, but heavy congestion still ensued in some flooded streets as a number of vehicles broke down. While talking to this daily, some commuters described how they had to switch multiple vehicles to get to their destinations. Meanwhile, rainwater infiltrated underground parking spaces, reservoirs, and ground floors of residential buildings, with many seen trying to pump it out. Many shops were also affected, with stored goods being damaged.

City planners say it is the inadequate drainage system—not the rainfall—that floods our streets. In Dhaka, the Met office recorded 130mm of rainfall in just six hours on Friday. It was a heavy downpour by every measure. But, as an expert at the Bangladesh Institute of Planners (BIP) has said, the city's drainage system cannot clear out water even after a moderate 55-60mm of rainfall, as excess water cannot flow into the rivers or retention ponds because of the clogging of surface drains and connected canals. Crores of taka have been spent to remove waste from these drains and canals and to recover the latter from encroachers. Even the transfer of ownership of canals from Dhaka WASA to the city corporations did not help the situation.

We cannot emphasise enough the urgency of addressing this waterlogging nightmare in Dhaka and elsewhere. The failure of city authorities, despite substantial investments and countless promises made over the years, demands a proper response. We urge the authorities to take comprehensive measures to fix, upgrade, and properly maintain the drainage system, and go hard against those encroaching the canals. Furthermore, unregulated development that leads to the loss of canals and low-lying areas must be halted.

Unused dorms an eyesore for students

The peculiar case of Khulna Polytechnic must be resolved

It is shocking that the four dormitories of Khulna Polytechnic Institute have been lying abandoned for 15 years even as students struggle to find affordable accommodation off campus, as revealed by a report. For women students especially, not being able to stay in dormitories poses security risks as they face harassment on their way to and from campus. It is baffling that when most public educational institutions face overcrowding in their dormitories, this polytechnic institute actually has four that are not occupied and that have been allowed to become dilapidated due to lack of maintenance.

The hostels were closed for security reasons in 2009 when students were protesting the cancellation of an exam and clashed with police. But why the authorities kept them padlocked, with the electricity disconnected, after classes resumed is certainly a mystery. Why did they not reopen them after proper maintenance? If it was a budgetary issue, why did they not send applications to the higher authorities to that effect? And why did the Education Engineering Department, responsible for monitoring such buildings, not do its job?

This is a case of sheer, collective negligence for which all relevant departments must be held accountable. It is unacceptable that an institution as old as this and having such a huge campus would allow its dormitories to rot while the students face a housing crisis. The principal has said that a female dormitory with 500 seats and a 10-storey academic building will be built in place of the four dorms. How long will this take? Moreover, it still doesn't answer why the existing buildings have remained closed for so many years.

We have many government polytechnic institutions that are supposed to be geared towards equipping students with technical skills so that they can work and thrive in relevant fields. But there seems to be a general apathy towards this vital sector, and the state of Khulna dormitories is a case in point. We urge the education ministry to immediately enquire into this matter and take effective steps to ensure proper use of these buildings. The institute's administration also should make sincere efforts to provide students with seats in dormitories and ensure that those do not fall into the grips of political elements.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

1958 Coup in Iraq

On this day in 1958, a coup organised by Abd al-Karim Qasim, a brigadier in the Iraqi Army, led to the end of the Hashemite monarchy. It resulted in the cessation of the Arab Federation of Jordan and Iraq, the assassinations of the King, Crown Prince, and former Prime Minister, and the establishment of Qasim as the new Prime Minister, a post he would hold until 1963.

How the cyberspace is being manipulated

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KALLOL MUSTAFA

Evgeny Morozov, in his book *The Net Delusion: How Not to Liberate The World* (Penguin, 2012), defined "cyber-utopianism" as a naïve idea that the internet favours the oppressed rather than the oppressor. Contrary to the beliefs of the cyber-utopians, Evgeny showed how the internet has become a useful tool for authoritarian governments for propaganda, censorship, and surveillance—the three main pillars of Orwellian authoritarian control.

In the age of internet and digital technology, these three pillars of authoritarianism have become so interconnected that efforts to undermine one pillar might ruin the efforts to do something about the other two. For example, in order to avoid the control of the traditional censorship, if the people flock to social networking sites, they may fall prey to surveillance and propaganda. The more trust users put in social networks, the easier it is to use the networks to promote carefully disguised government messages and boost the propaganda apparatus.
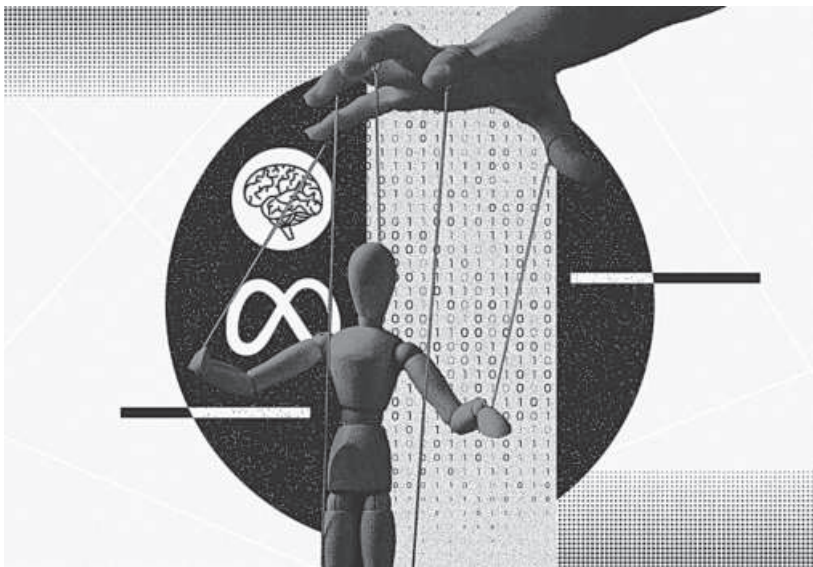
Bangladeshi netizens are not outside this mechanism, which has become evident from the latest Adversarial Threat Report prepared by Meta, the parent company of Facebook. In its first quarterly report of 2024 published in May, Meta has announced the removal of 50 Facebook accounts and 98 pages with 3.4 million followers which are linked to Bangladesh's ruling Awami League, citing violations of its policy against Coordinated Inauthentic Behaviour (CIB).

According to Meta, CIB refers to coordinated efforts to manipulate public debate for a strategic goal, in which fake accounts are central to the operation. In each case, people coordinate with one another and use fake accounts to mislead others about who they are and what they are doing.

In the chapter titled "Bangladesh-based Network" and appendix, Meta's report exposed the fake accounts which posed as fictitious new entities or existing news organisations in Bangladesh. Some pages used the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) in their name and posted anti-BNP content. Many of these pages had a corresponding presence across several platforms, including YouTube, X (formerly Twitter), TikTok, and Telegram, in addition to their own websites.

According to Meta, the network posted primarily in Bengali and also in

VISUAL: **SHAIKH SULTANA JAHAN BADHON**

English about news and current events in Bangladesh, including elections, criticism of the BNP, allegations of BNP's corruption and its role in pre-election violence, as well as supporting commentary about the incumbent government, the ruling party and its role in the technological development of Bangladesh.

Meta found this activity as a result of its internal investigation into spammy inauthentic amplification activity in the region. Although the people behind it attempted to conceal their identity and coordination, Meta's investigation found links to individuals associated with the Awami League and the Centre for Research and Information, a non-profit organisation in Bangladesh associated with Awami League.

In the appendix of the report, Meta also gives a list of websites, X accounts, Telegram and YouTube channels, TikTok accounts, and names of fictitious news outlets which are used to spread misinformation with political purpose. According to Meta, the network worked to a regular shift pattern, posting between 07:00 and 21:00 GMT (1pm to 3am Bangladesh time), with a peak between 13:00 and 18:00 GMT (7pm to 12am Bangladesh time), and notably fewer posts on Fridays.

This is not the first time that government propaganda efforts have been exposed by Meta/Facebook. Earlier in December 2018, Facebook published a report titled "Taking Down Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior in Bangladesh" where it announced removal of nine Facebook pages and six Facebook accounts for engaging in coordinated inauthentic behaviour. Facebook mentioned that after getting a tip from Graphika, a threat intelligence company that it worked with, it discovered that these pages were designed to look like independent news outlets and posted pro-government and anti-opposition content. Facebook directly linked these propaganda activities to individuals associated with the government at that time.

The irony is that on the one hand, the government has enacted cyber security laws in the name of preventing rumours and propaganda, and is asking for support from global technology companies like Facebook, Google, and TikTok to prevent rumours, block user accounts and pages, remove content. On the other hand, the ruling party and its research wing themselves have engaged in organised disinformation campaign against the opposition parties using fake accounts.

According to the latest Google transparency report, the Bangladesh government made 591 content removal requests to Google in the last six months of 2023, of which 310 or 52 percent were related to government criticism and 175 or 30 percent were related to defamation. According to Meta's latest transparency report, from July to December 2023, the Bangladesh government sought information about 2,164 users or accounts. Meta has provided information in 67.81 percent of the cases. In the same period, the government made 3,459 content restriction requests to Meta, of which 2,049 were Facebook posts and 1,357 were Facebook comments.

However, government control over the flow of information is not limited to removing or blocking content. Of course, similar to banning books or newspapers, governments block websites and apps to varying degrees depending on the situation and regime of internet-based communication. But this is not the only way to control the internet. Apart from creating various barriers to the flow of information that is dangerous for the government, there are many other ways to control people's thoughts. Some examples of these mechanisms are keeping people busy with various unimportant issues, publicising government statements or positions as neutral opinions or news, and controlling the content of discussions on social media through hired individuals and organisations, etc.

This type of activities can also be undertaken using traditional media, but by exploiting the various features of the internet and digital technologies, these activities can be implemented on a wider basis much more easily, effectively, and at a lower cost than traditional media.

With new forms of authoritarian and surveillance capitalism developing around the internet and digital technologies, it is important to hold both the government and technology companies accountable to the citizens to ensure privacy and freedom of expression. Just as unaccountable authority is harmful in the real world, it is equally dangerous in the virtual world of the internet—especially when the real and the virtual become one.

A roadmap to effective dengue control

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In the battle against dengue, Bangladesh stands at a critical juncture. As the nation grapples with the possibility of the deadliest outbreak ever witnessed, it's imperative that we mobilise every resource at our disposal to combat this relentless foe.

Dengue began to emerge as a significant public health concern at the turn of the century, but its proliferation seemed to decelerate between 2006 and 2010. This brief period of respite, however, was not to last. With the rapid pace of technological advancement, unrestrained urbanisation, and the swift onset of climate change, the dengue problem has surged with renewed vigour since 2015.

The harrowing statistics paint a grim picture: a staggering 321,179 hospitalised cases in 2023 alone, with a heart-wrenching 1,705 lives lost to this insidious disease. These numbers are not just figures on a page; they represent mothers, fathers, sons, and daughters whose lives have been cut short by a preventable tragedy. Behind each statistic lies a story of anguish and despair, of families torn apart by the merciless grip of dengue.

Children, the most vulnerable among us, bear the brunt of this crisis, with over 113 young lives lost last year alone. Their innocence should shield them from such suffering, yet they are among the hardest hit.

But the true extent of this crisis may be even greater than official figures suggest. Underreporting and inadequate healthcare infrastructure means that the actual burden of dengue is likely far higher than we dare to imagine.

What's more, dengue's relentless march knows no season, with cases now being reported year-round, defying the traditional confines of the monsoon season. From January to April this year, 2,111 people have been hospitalised, with 24 lives tragically cut short.

Amidst the shadows of despair, a glimmer of hope illuminates our path forward—a chance to reverse the tide of dengue's relentless onslaught. As we confront this crisis head-on, we must not only learn from past experiences but also adopt a holistic, year-round approach to dengue prevention and control.

This journey begins with education as we strive to raise awareness within our communities about the perils of dengue and the simple yet impactful measures we can all take. From eradicating breeding grounds to practicing personal protective measures, each individual's contribution is vital in stemming the spread of this epidemic.

We must also bolster our healthcare infrastructure, ensuring equitable access to quality care and life-saving treatments for all. From the villages of rural Bangladesh to the bustling urban hubs, comprehensive healthcare must be within reach for every citizen.

Moreover, we must address the underlying environmental factors that fuel the dengue crisis, such as stagnant water and unplanned urbanisation. By implementing targeted vector control measures and fostering collaboration between governmental bodies and local communities, we can disrupt the breeding cycle of mosquitoes and mitigate the spread of dengue at its source.

Vector control measures in Bangladesh's municipal areas predominantly depend on fogging, which offers short-term relief but lacks long-term effectiveness. A more sustainable approach involves using targeted sugar baits, which have significantly reduced malaria in Zambia.

In rural and suburban regions, introducing predatory fish like guppies (*Poecilia reticulata*) into stagnant water bodies can curb dengue by consuming mosquito larvae. Additionally, fostering an environment conducive to mosquito predators such as frogs and wild lizards can serve as a natural and effective vector control measure. These biological agents can integrate seamlessly into the ecosystem, providing a sustainable solution that enhances existing efforts.

Yet, amidst these efforts, a critical gap persists—a gap between the wealth of scientific knowledge amassed by researchers and its translation into actionable policies by policymakers. This disconnect leaves us vulnerable to the escalating threat of dengue, with projections indicating a worsening infection scenario this year compared to 2023.

To bridge this gap effectively, we must consider innovative solutions, such as the establishment of dedicated agencies or institutional frameworks exclusively dedicated to vector control management programmes. These entities would serve as catalysts for collaboration, fostering dialogue between researchers, policymakers, and other stakeholders to devise evidence-based strategies for combating the dengue epidemic comprehensively.

Examining global models reveals the pivotal role of dedicated agencies in combatting vector-borne diseases. Take, for instance, Europe's European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC). Through collaboration with national health protection bodies, the ECDC's multifaceted approach, spanning surveillance to health communication, showcases the power of a unified front against vector-borne illnesses.

Across the Atlantic, the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) exemplifies specialised divisional prowess through its Division of Vector-Borne Diseases (DVBD), leading the charge in research and prevention efforts against mosquito and tick-borne ailments.

Near home, India's National Center for Vector Borne Diseases Control (NCVBDC) spearheads the National Vector Borne Diseases Control Programme (NVBDCP), employing targeted strategies like indoor residual spraying and insecticide-treated bed nets to combat malaria and dengue.

These international examples underscore the critical need for Bangladesh to establish similar dedicated agencies.

In Bangladesh, the Institute of Epidemiology, Disease Control, and Research (IEDCR) evaluates the overall dengue scenario, while city corporations manage the field-level implementation of vector control strategies. Establishing a dedicated organisation or agency focused on comprehensive surveillance and field-level execution for vector-borne diseases could significantly mitigate the impact during peak seasons. Such an entity would optimise resources and enhance the effectiveness of interventions by working in synergy with existing infrastructures, ensuring a more coordinated and robust response to this pressing public health challenge.