

## Governance gaps fuelling dengue

Authorities must focus on preventing a deadlier outbreak

It is deeply concerning that experts are warning of a potential deadly dengue outbreak due to irregular anti-mosquito campaigns, caused by a shortage of local government representatives. Following the fall of the Awami League government, there has been significant upheaval among local government officials as noted previously by this daily. The interim government removed 12 city corporation mayors, 330 municipality mayors and administrators, and nearly all zilla and upazila parishad chairmen. Although administrators were appointed to assume the mayors' responsibilities, the resulting void has clearly not been adequately addressed.

For instance, 80 percent of councillors in the Dhaka North City Corporation and 75 percent in Dhaka South City Corporation are still absent from their duties, according to officials. As mentioned earlier in this column, their absence is causing significant problems in the delivery of several public services. Since councillors and other local administrators also play a vital role in the deployment and implementation of dengue control measures, these efforts have become even more sporadic at best.

Our dengue control measures have never been adequate to begin with. However, amidst the various issues the interim government is dealing with, the issue of dengue control seems to be falling further by the wayside. And a major contributing factor is the leadership void within city corporations and municipalities, which must be resolved immediately.

This year, 92 people have already lost their lives to dengue, while at least 14,804 people have reportedly contracted the disease. Of these, 28 deaths and 8,505 cases were detected outside Dhaka. According to one expert, these numbers may rise significantly in the coming days due to the rain, which is creating puddles of clear water for Aedes mosquitoes to breed. As such, authorities urgently need to identify dengue hotspots and take action to prevent further cases. Moreover, surveillance, which is key to controlling Aedes mosquitoes, has been lacking even in major cities. This must be ramped up to detect active clusters and breeding sites of Aedes mosquitoes and eliminate them.

Another major concern this year has been the high case fatality rate—defined as the proportion of people diagnosed with a certain disease who end up dying from it—related to dengue. This year, the rate has increased to 0.61 percent from 0.5 percent last year. In Sri Lanka, as of July, the case fatality rate for dengue was only 0.04 percent, primarily due to the country's systematic methods and modern health management. In the long term, the interim government should consider examining what Sri Lanka is doing right and what Bangladesh is doing wrong to improve our dengue control measures and related health management, in order to prevent such a high loss of lives from the disease.

## Hope for our rivers

Environment adviser's words must be turned into action

We are heartened by the resolute stance of Syeda Rizwana Hasan, the interim government's environment adviser, to take action against businesses that continue to pollute our rivers. The adviser has realistically stated that, given the limited time available, the interim government will begin by clearing one river in each division of the country. She has particularly emphasised holding polluting businesses accountable, especially those that are not operating their effluent treatment plants (ETPs) despite having them.

We think that involving the community, especially the local youth, in this process can make a significant difference. Authorising organisations already working on river conservation will ensure greater stakeholder participation. Installing metres to monitor whether ETPs are operational would encourage businesses to be more diligent in their environmental responsibilities.

In the past, despite the High Court giving clear directives to the government to evict river encroachers, little has been done to free them. It is not just rivers but other water bodies that have either been grabbed or polluted by indiscriminate household garbage and industrial waste. This daily has published endless reports, editorials and opinion pieces on river grabbing and river pollution, but to no avail.

What is worse is that, despite lists of river grabbers and polluters being compiled, the former government had not taken action. In many cases, the culprits have been government bodies that have encroached upon river land and built structures, while others have also exploited their connections to the political elite for the same end. For instance, the Buriganga has been rendered nearly lifeless due to relentless pollution from industrial waste, plastic waste, medical waste and sewage.

Although tanneries of Hazaribagh have been transferred to Savar in a bid to reduce pollution in the Buriganga, many continue to pollute another river, the Dhaleswari, by dumping untreated industrial wastewater. This is because the Central Effluent Treatment Plant (CETP) is not functioning properly, and nothing has been done so far to address this issue. The interim government, therefore, has a challenging task ahead with limited time. Empowering the National River Conservation Commission, which has been weakened due to political interference, could be a first step. Additionally, it must also ensure that ETPs in all polluting industries are properly installed and being operated.

### TALK CHECK

“India is the only country in the world that has given the message of ‘Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam’. India has always advocated for peace and it will always. But today given the geopolitical situation, I told the army that to maintain peace in India and the world, we should always be ready for war. I said so that India's peace is not disturbed under any circumstances.

Defense Minister of India, Rajnath Singh, on September 6, 2024, in response to his own statement that the Indian Armed Forces should be ready for war.

# Recast our security agenda

### STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING

Brig Gen Shahedul Anam Khan, *ndc, psc (ret'd)* is a former associate editor of The Daily Star.

SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN



It is difficult to recall a time in our brief history when the nation's security has been in greater peril than it is now. It is also difficult to recall if the country has been subjected to such multi-faceted threats by the deeds and misdeeds of an administration.

It is, therefore, essential that the current regime makes the country's security issue the top priority and addresses our security concerns with urgency. Risks and threats have not subsided. Newer plans are being hatched on foreign soil to negate the results of the people's victory over an autocrat.

We must reflect on why we faced a situation that could have been more cataclysmic than what it turned out to be, especially given the limbo the country was in for nearly 72 hours, with a very distinct possibility of external aggression under the pretext of humanitarian intervention or invoking the principle of pre-emption—i.e. addressing a security threat to the aggressor country before it actualised—following the abominable example set by George Bush Jr and his Western cohorts in Iraq in 2001.

Looking back at key moments in our history, we performed admirably as a nation in 1971, but the fruits were frittered away by callow political leadership and greed. The events of 1975 were perhaps the consequences of the regime's performance of the previous four years. While the change did pose the country with the prospects of external aggression, this was stymied by the policies undertaken by the succeeding regime. The nine years of military and pseudo-democratic rule was another inflection point, so was 1/11. However, none of these events caused the country such great harm, and subjected it to such great threats, in all aspects of its life, to such great extent, as the time from 2009 to August 5, 2024, when the Awami League remained in power. The country's existence was put at risk because of the policies, internal and external, of the AL government.

We must seriously reflect on why the student uprisings, aptly called the “Monsoon Revolution” by a security analyst, occurred. Otherwise, we risk the repetition of the event with the prospect of irreparable harm to the country's interest, as has happened in this case.



If the world were to believe the Indian propagandists and media, one would think that Bangladesh has been taken over by extremists and the country is heading towards Talibanisation.

VISUAL: ALIZA RAHMAN

A new agenda must focus on assessing the risks we face, identifying the most damaged sectors, and devising measures to not only mitigate the harm but also facilitate recovery and ensure such events are not repeated. The response must be both in the short as well as long-term, external as well as internal.

But before delving into the details of what we feel the agenda should cover or the threats it should address, I would like to suggest some immediate actions and ask a few questions which have occupied our thoughts since the last 30 days, since those are linked deeply with the security of our state.

First, the administration should launch a diplomatic and media counteroffensive to offset the hostile propaganda, invectives, false narratives and scurrilous attacks against Bangladesh launched by the Indian media, particularly that segment of it that has brazenly supported Modi's Hindutva policy, and supported its anti-minority (read anti-Muslim) campaign.

The Indian media's smear campaign began immediately after

must counter the “minority” card that India has always played when it found a non-plant regime in charge in Bangladesh. They played the same game again post-August 5, but failed miserably. Nevertheless, the media campaign has gone on unabated—possibly choreographed by their intelligence agencies, since the narratives being dished out to the Indian public is nauseatingly similar. If the world were to believe the Indian propagandists and media and, in some cases, what ill-informed retired military security analysts are spewing out, one would think that Bangladesh has been taken over by extremists and the country is heading towards Talibanisation.

It is our duty to warn the government that the former autocrat is actively conspiring from her safe abode in New Delhi to destabilise Bangladesh. Analysts suggest that Indian intelligence agencies will pursue in the short term a strategy to drive a wedge between Bangladesh's interim government and various political parties by playing up pro-American

report cannot be dismissed. Many more questions would follow if there were a shade of truth in it—foremost of which would be the culpability of those who allowed it—since that would be an act of treason and sedition.

It would also be pertinent to ask the disposal and whereabouts of more than 600 former AL politicians, bureaucrats and beneficiaries of the past regime who sought sanctuaries in various cantonments. Out of 17 crore Bangladeshis, why did only these 600 have to seek military protection, if they were not suffering from a burden of guilt? We understand that several of these people have found their way out of the country, among them many were directly responsible for the killing of nearly 1,000 people, mostly young men. How has this been allowed to happen?

A new security agenda must begin with the prosecution of those responsible for these killings. However, justice will not be served if those directly responsible are still at large. Thus, those who have allowed the killers to escape cannot risk being seen as complicit in the killings.

# A journey from protests to prison to pardon

What should be our takeaway from this?



Iqra I. Qamari is a writer and a project development consultant. She can be reached at iqra.kashmir53@gmail.com

IQRA I QAMARI

In UAE's gleaming districts of skyscrapers and luxury hotels, the voices of Bangladeshi migrant workers are rarely heard. They toil away for home in the unfavourable conditions of the Gulf labour market thousands of miles away, while their rights are undermined and their legal and professional grievances go unnoticed.

Yet, on July 19, their voices were raised in streets across Abu Dhabi, Ajman, and other areas in Dubai. They marched peacefully in solidarity with the students' uprising. As international protests erupted around the world within the Bangladeshi diaspora, the migrant workers, often termed as remittance “warriors,” had just wanted to exercise their fundamental rights as well, with no intention of inciting unrest in the UAE.

What followed, however, were swift arrests made by the UAE authorities. Taken into custody with immediate effect, they faced an iron-fisted legal system where dissent is met with zero tolerance. Human Rights Watch expressed concerns about the trial's pace, questioning if due process was followed. “Protests and demonstrations are fully prohibited under the country's penal code, which violates both the UAE's Constitution and international

human rights standards, such as the Arab Charter on Human Rights to which the UAE is a party,” which means, while the legal system followed the rules, the incident underscores the difficulties that foreign workers experience in such Kafkaesque circumstances.

The workers faced an uncertain future, caught in legal limbo, until Dr Yunus's key phone conversation, combined with extensive legal efforts, was followed by an unprecedented pardon.

Not to take away from the collective wave of joy and relief upon the news of all 57 of these individuals being granted clemency, but a lot of uncomfortable realisations have also arisen in tandem. It is difficult to forget the then Awami League government's distasteful negligence and even inflammatory activities alongside UAE's harshness with the sentencing. When the workers were incarcerated, one may have dared to expect the Bangladeshi diplomatic corps to step in. After all, isn't the safety of Bangladeshi citizens abroad a top priority for these missions?

But let alone that, little to no diplomatic intervention was made by the former government to even ensure that the accused get a fighting chance to prove themselves innocent.

For instance, BM Jamal Hossain, the Consul General to the UAE, had commented right after the arrests, that no sympathy was to be shown to the detained. The collective inaction of the foreign ministry and the Bangladesh Embassy in Abu Dhabi also had aggravated the situation, leaving the workers with no legal representation in a foreign country.

Despite the pardon, the entire incident underscores the crucial need for stronger diplomatic ties and improved migrant labour rights. To avoid similar tragedies in the future, Bangladesh must reassess its interactions with its migrant workers and the foreign countries they go to work in. A more responsive communication set-up, early legal involvement, and comprehensive awareness campaigns regarding foreign laws may have helped to alleviate the situation and protect workers' rights from the beginning.

It will not come as a surprise to anyone if these 57 individuals, like many migrant workers, were unaware of UAE's strict legal framework aimed at controlling public conduct. The decision to join in on the protest was solely driven by patriotic emotions. In this regard, the interim government, besides playing to its diplomatic strengths, especially with Dr Yunus in the driving seat, can call for the placement of thorough pre-departure orientation sessions and continuous legal education campaigns for preparing our workers with the necessary knowledge in order to avoid or handle such legal complexities.

As we reflect on all of these layers, we also need to keep asking questions such as: What legal safeguard measures are in place for Bangladeshi workers overseas so that they can protect themselves in

difficult legal environments? Had it not been for the international reputation of Dr Yunus, what other security did these workers have against the whims of the host country?

The public perception of the situation so far has been that of a well-placed strategic move, but this can also age well as a grand humanitarian gesture. Going forward, Bangladesh can firmly address the systematic issues its migrant workers have to deal with in terms of labour rights in the UAE. Additionally, the UAE can be negotiated into some degree of willingness to address the issues plaguing Bangladeshi migrants' well-being. Or else, this will merely go down in history interpreted as a symbolic gesture rather than an actual change both countries could have committed to. More so, the act of clemency can be the beginning of a much-needed revisit of the two countries' labour agreements.

Right now, as we anticipate the homecoming of these remittance warriors, we also must acknowledge that there is much work to be done. At this point, concerted efforts have to be directed towards making sure that these workers are treated with the utmost respect when they return to Bangladesh. They should be received at home as patriots who tried to protect the rights of the students back home, despite being in a foreign country, not just as deportees.

But a grand welcome alone will not suffice as the closure to their story. They will have to be provided with the right opportunities and substantive reforms so that they can rebuild their life, with dignity and safe integration into society.