

The rabies crisis demands a science-based response, not panic



Marzana Tasnim
is a member of the Editorial team at The Daily Star.

MARZANA TASNIM

Bangladesh seems to be lurching from one public health crisis to another. First came the measles outbreak, which has claimed some 488 lives since March 15, with the crisis being attributed to potential mishandling of an immunisation programme by the interim government. However, another vaccine-related crisis has also been unfolding with an alarming speed: rabies.

Both rabies and animal bite cases have been rising for months now. The Infectious Diseases Hospital has recorded some 25 human deaths from rabies until mid-May this year, compared to a total number of annual deaths of 42 in 2023, rising to 58 in 2024 and 59 in 2025, although the actual number could be higher. Given that rabies is endemic in the country and the degree of fear, misinformation, and panic it evokes, the increasing number of cases is particularly worrying and discouraging too, given Bangladesh’s aspiration to be free of rabies by 2030.

To understand the reason behind this crisis, one must circle back to the government. As we already know, the interim government’s suspension of the country’s five-year health sector programme and its operational plan disrupted vaccine procurement under the Expanded Programme on Immunization (EPI), triggering shortages that began with measles vaccines. But it also affected the supply and distribution of rabies vaccines. Vaccines once available free of charge under EPI have been disrupted for a year, with shortages becoming evident across districts. To address the crisis, around nine lakh doses of rabies vaccines are currently being procured, according to sources at the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS).

But as promising as the news may sound, nine lakh vaccine doses are grossly insufficient for the number of dogs in the country, which continues to be quite a mystery. In Dhaka city, there is an estimated dog population of around 73,000, according to a joint survey conducted by FAO and Obhoyranno in 2022. However, the Dhaka South City Corporation (DSCC) claims the actual number of dogs under its jurisdiction to be around 76,000. Dhaka North City Corporation (DNCC),



VISUAL: ALIZA RAHMAN

meanwhile, says there are over 70,000 dogs within its jurisdiction. This confusion extends to the rest of the country as well. There was an estimated number of about 16 lakh street dogs in the country in 2019, but there has been no update since.

Without a reliable estimate of the street dog population in the country, it is nearly impossible to chart a sound course of action. In this regard, we can learn from Goa in India, where there has been no rabies deaths in humans since 2017. Goa did not undertake a grand, one-off dog survey. Instead, the authorities estimated the dog population through a comprehensive vaccination programme. Each dog was marked post-inoculation with safe paint and

St Martin’s Island in Bangladesh last year. So, it is both possible and imperative that we establish a centralised, technology-based dog population and vaccination database, without which rabies control efforts might always be undermined.

In Bangladesh, dogs and humans often share a complicated relationship invoking fear and anxiety. And given that dogs account for the majority of rabies cases in the country, the fear may as well be justified, although other animals including cats, jackals, and mongooses are also sometimes responsible for the spread of the disease.

However, not every animal bite results in rabies, and most rabid dogs’ first instinct is not to bite. Rabies does not immediately

show up as aggression. Instead, it includes anxiety, irritability, restlessness, withdrawal, difficulty swallowing, and excessive drooling. A comprehensive guideline and awareness campaign could bridge the current information gap and help rein in public fear. In Goa, children are taught how to keep themselves safe from potentially dangerous dogs, and how to coexist in a mutually respectful and understanding relationship

with their canine neighbours. Bangladesh should consider adopting a similar approach, taking public education on rabies and human-dog coexistence more seriously.

The importance of abstaining from a fear-fuelled reactionary approach cannot be overstated. Rabies has historically been associated with fear as, once clinical symptoms begin to appear, it is fatal in nearly 100 percent of cases. This fear often acts as a double-edged sword, making people aggressive towards the animals perceived to be responsible, often resulting in rash decisions such as culling, poisoning, and relocating dogs. And scared and hunted animals tend to act out too, which in turn fuels even more fear.

There is also a culture of unscientific interventions where city corporations relocate vaccinated, sterilised, and community-embedded dogs from their territories. In August 2020, DSCC declared a programme to relocate some 30,000 street dogs to a landfill, clearly defying the Animal Welfare Act, 2019. Earlier this year, the DSCC authorities removed nine dogs from Dhaka University despite the animals posing no public health risk and being cared for by the local community. Removing resident dogs does not keep an area permanently free of dogs. Vacant territories are eventually occupied by unfamiliar dogs who are often more wary, defensive and suspicious, increasing conflict instead of reducing it.

Instead of allowing fear or prejudice to dictate public health policies, we need proper actions and accountability. Institutional failure often exacerbates the rabies problem. To control it fully, at least 70 percent of dogs in a given area need to be vaccinated and given yearly booster shots to maintain immunity against the disease. Sometimes, even when the relevant authorities provide an initial dose of rabies vaccine, they rarely follow up with booster shots. As there is no centrally enforceable dog population management initiative, vaccinated dogs often get mixed with unvaccinated ones. The lack of a central database to track vaccination and sterilisation progress creates further confusion while also allowing the authorities to evade accountability.

The media also routinely fails to provide critical coverage of those responsible. A significant degree of dog bite coverage focuses on sensational, often misleading, headlines, rather than highlighting the structural failures underlying the crisis. When reporting focuses on fear-driven speciesist narratives, it keeps us caged in panic and prejudice. Changing how we tell these stories is also instrumental to winning this battle against rabies.

The ongoing rabies crisis is not a war between humans and dogs; we are on the same side fighting a fatal but preventable disease. The right thing, both scientifically and morally, to do here would be to treat this issue with an evidence-based approach rooted in compassion and the willingness to coexist with a species that has been by our side since the beginning of civilisation. To respond with fear and prejudice to these remarkably intelligent, emotionally complex, and deeply adaptive animals would be to forget not only what science tells us, but also the long and shared history that binds our two species together.

The other side of the Eid-ul-Azha economy



Selim Jahan
is former director of the Human Development Report
Office under the United Nations Development Programme
(UNDP).

SELIM JAHAN

Eid-ul-Azha is, without a doubt, a festival of joy. It is also at the centre of a wide range of economic activities, i.e. the demand and supply of sacrificial animals, various rituals associated with the sacrifice itself, a seasonal leather market driven by the animal hides produced, Eid shopping, etc. However, in the excitement of the festivities, we often forget the true spirit of Eid-ul-Azha and become blind to the various social inequalities that become more apparent during this festival.

The core aspect of the Eid-ul-Azha economy involves the trading of sacrificial cattle, which represent an economic supply chain. Part of this supply comes from beyond the borders, involving import-based activities. There have been many cases of cattle being smuggled into the country through illegal routes.

As a result, black markets and smuggling networks have emerged around Eid cattle trade. However, local livestock producers remain the major source of sacrificial cattle. Behind this supply lies investment and year-round care. For example, rural women often buy calves at low prices—sometimes with their own savings, sometimes through loans. Then, they raise the animals, feeding and nurturing them. When the animals grow big enough, they are sold at higher prices. This individual-level process plays a significant role in strengthening the rural economy and improving the welfare of many families. Some NGOs run similar programmes in the country.

This year, more than 3,600 cattle markets will be set up across the country for Eid-ul-

Azha. The demand for sacrificial animals is expected to be a little over one crore, and local producers are able to meet this demand, per the government data. In recent years, online cattle markets have also gained momentum as a growing number of young entrepreneurs are engaged in livestock farming and selling animals online, bypassing physical markets. However, whereas taxes are imposed on physical markets, generating revenue for the government, online cattle markets are exempted from this.

Wage-based economic activities expand during this festival. Transportation of cattle is a major activity, creating temporary jobs. Demand for butchers, too, rises during Eid—both professional full-time butchers and temporary seasonal workers. Then there is the cattle hide trade. Eid-ul-Azha generates a massive amount of raw animal hides that boost Bangladesh’s leather export to a great extent. In FY2025, the export earnings of the leather industry—second largest export-oriented sector in the country—stood at \$1.14 billion. However, raw hide export has not picked up the momentum as expected. The government lifted the complete restriction on raw hide export in 2020 and allowed limited export on a case-by-case basis. Yet, much of the

export potential is lost due to inexperienced handling, poor preservation, and lack of quality control. A significant amount of hides get damaged during the collection process. If more emphasis was put on ensuring proper preparation and preservation of raw hides, the country could earn a lot more foreign currency from exports.

For most people, Eid-ul-Azha is heralded as the occasion for sacrifice, but in some cases, it also becomes an occasion for excesses, competition, and demonstration. The celebration of this Eid is not always levelled, and there are rituals that are quite often indicative of social inequalities that exist in society.

Let’s take the core aspect of this Eid into consideration. A major expense is the purchase of sacrificial animals. The saddest part is that many people, without understanding the true spiritual meaning of sacrifice, engage in an unhealthy competition to buy expensive animals. This drives an inflation of prices in the cattle markets before Eid. In a display of opulence, conversations on whose sacrificial animal is better and more expensive can be heard in neighbourhoods and communities. This affects everyone, including those unable to afford expensive cattle.

During Eid-ul-Azha, poor communities often depend on the generosity of well-off households for sacrificial meat. For many underprivileged families, this is the only time of the year they get to eat meat. But obtaining that meat itself is a struggle. From early morning, crowds of poor people gather in front of households, observing the ritual. During meat distribution, pushing, fighting, and chaos often break out, and sometimes people get injured. This is a horrifying image of inequality. And collecting meat is not enough; many people cannot afford the condiments required to cook the meat either. This, too, is a naked side of inequality.

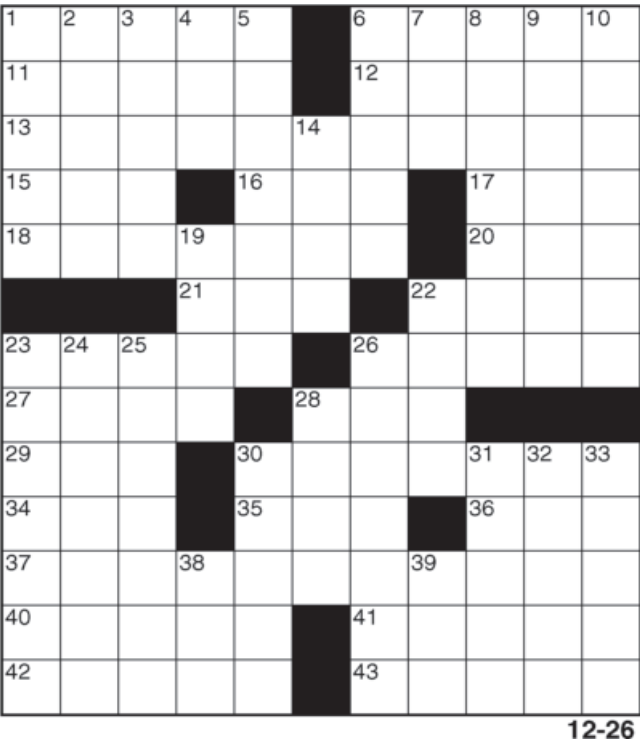
While Eid-ul-Azha is a festival of harmony, unity, and giving, within the present realities of our society and our socioeconomic structure, we cannot deny that the rituals and activities we perform during this occasion contain some seeds of social disparity. To uphold the true spirit of this festival, should we not do away with the excesses and make the celebration more humane and inclusive? We may not be able to eliminate all these inequalities, but can we not at least do away with unsavoury expressions of opulence by practising sensibility and awareness?

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BY THOMAS JOSEPH

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