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

Plan better to prevent recurring outbreaks

Better preparedness to keep measles, dengue in check is key

This year has been an unprecedented test of resilience for the country's healthcare system. The double whammy of measles and dengue outbreaks has once again exposed our persistent inability to learn from past events and trends, anticipate foreseeable crises and prepare for them adequately. Time and again, our hospitals get overwhelmed during a disease outbreak because preventable gaps are not addressed on time, costing us precious lives.

There has been a fresh spike in both dengue and measles cases, hospitalisations, and deaths this month, which is happening despite a three-month dengue control drive and an intensified measles catch-up vaccination campaign launched by the government in September. The dengue death toll has already reached 400, with more than 1,28,000 patients hospitalised around the country so far this year. Doctors say dengue severity is more common than in previous years: patients are arriving at hospitals while already suffering from shock, with complications affecting the liver, kidneys and heart. Delayed diagnosis, hospitalisation and treatment are major contributing factors here.

Meanwhile, a recent study of measles vaccination, led by the state-run Institute of Epidemiology, Disease Control and Research (IEDCR), has found that 27.5 percent of children receiving the jabs this year have not developed antibodies. Children aged 9 to 14 months are particularly affected. The findings do not, by themselves, establish why immunity failed to develop. As public health expert Dr Mushtuq Husain argues in his analysis, every stage—from vaccine production and storage to transportation and administration—must be scientifically examined, alongside children's nutritional status and gaps in routine immunisation.

The writing on the wall is clear: emergency drives cannot substitute for a functioning public health system.

However, this ineffectiveness is only one side of the story; immunisation gaps, depleted vaccine stocks in 2025, delays in catch-up campaigns, and serious staffing shortages—as found by a joint independent review—have led to where we stand today, with more than 1,200 measles-related deaths till date. A similar pattern is evident in dengue control. Public health experts have criticised the lack of year-round mosquito surveillance, targeted elimination of breeding sites, and properly trained field workers. Now, while the country struggles with this dual health crisis, an independent committee of national and international experts has sounded another alarm: a deteriorating immunisation system could make way for deadly outbreaks of diphtheria, whooping cough and polio. Are our health policymakers listening?

The writing on the wall is clear: emergency drives cannot substitute for a functioning public health system. To achieve continuous protection from deadly but preventable diseases, the government must ensure uninterrupted vaccine supplies, accurate child-level immunisation records, stronger surveillance and routine research to see if the jabs are doing their intended job, and adequate staffing at the community and upazila-level health facilities so that treatment is not concentrated in the tertiary ones. It must also strengthen dengue testing, referral systems and clinical management, while making disease prevention a year-round priority. Without constant vigilance and preparedness, every outbreak will become another emergency, reminding us what foresight could have prevented.

Don't let Khulna's security crisis deepen

Police must stop criminal networks, flow of firearms

We are deeply concerned by the rising crimes in Khulna, including shootings and killings that are taking place in broad daylight. In criminal rivalries, robberies and extortion, guns are being used with alarming frequency, leaving residents increasingly fearful for their safety. Between January and October 26 this year, 71 people were killed in the district, including 23 in incidents involving firearms, according to reports. On October 27 alone, at least three people were shot and injured in separate incidents.

According to a report by Prothom Alo, nine gangs have repeatedly been linked to these recent crimes, with rival groups fighting for control of drug trafficking, extortion and other illicit businesses. Their activities extend across the jurisdictions of several police stations, while smaller armed groups are also active in different upazilas. Drug-related disputes have been a major cause of violence. Police suspect that the killings of Tawhidul Islam and Khushi Akter on October 22 were linked to such disputes. The growing availability of illegal firearms is another major concern. Although police have recovered many weapons in recent months, an estimated 300 illegal firearms remain in circulation in Khulna city. Some of the weapons reportedly enter the country through border routes, underscoring the urgent need for a more effective strategy to trace illegal arms and disrupt their supply chains.

In recent times, all sorts of crimes have surged across the country, not just in Khulna. Weak and ineffective policing is one of the reasons behind this situation. More than two years after the July uprising, a reliable policing system remains elusive. And despite changes to their uniforms, police reforms remain largely confined to paper. The force still seems paralysed by fear and uncertainty, with field-level officers hesitant to arrest influential people. A recent instruction barring Khulna police personnel from moving alone at night raises further concerns about the risks they face while carrying out their duties. How can police effectively fight armed criminal networks if they cannot move freely and are influenced by politically powerful individuals?

We urge the government to treat Khulna's worsening security situation with urgency. Police should identify and dismantle the networks behind the violent crimes and intensify operations against illegal firearms and drug trafficking. Investigations into killings and shootings must be thorough, while repeat offenders must not be allowed to exploit the weaknesses in the justice system. At the same time, political affiliation must not provide protection to those involved in crime.

We cannot wait two years to manage our energy demand



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■ **M NIAZ ASADULLAH**

Finance Minister Amir Khasru Mahmud Chowdhury recently acknowledged that Bangladesh needs at least two years to stabilise its energy sector and the wider economy. The admission is sobering, but also useful. It raises a question that deserves more attention: if adequate supply cannot be restored soon, how will the country manage with scarce energy during the next two years?

The government does have plans for new wells, production-sharing contracts (PSCs), solar generation, LNG terminals, and an energy hub near Khulna. Japan's $317 million Emergency Support Loan, highlighted during Prime Minister Tarique Rahman's Tokyo visit, is also relevant as it supports economic and energy reforms, not a specific power plant. But these initiatives will be helpful in the medium term at best. Wells, terminals, pipelines, and renewable projects require time, capital, and capable institutions. Until they deliver, the government must decide who receives scarce energy, at what price, and with which level of reliability.

As things stand, Bangladesh is not short of installed power plants. A recent Panam Institute policy note estimates the country's grid capacity at about 28,900 MW, against a record generation of only 17,200 MW. Its message is that the system is short of gas and money, not power plants. The same note reports that domestic gas production has been falling since 2016-17, while imports rose from contributing 47.7 percent to 62.5 percent of primary energy between 2020-21 and 2024-25.

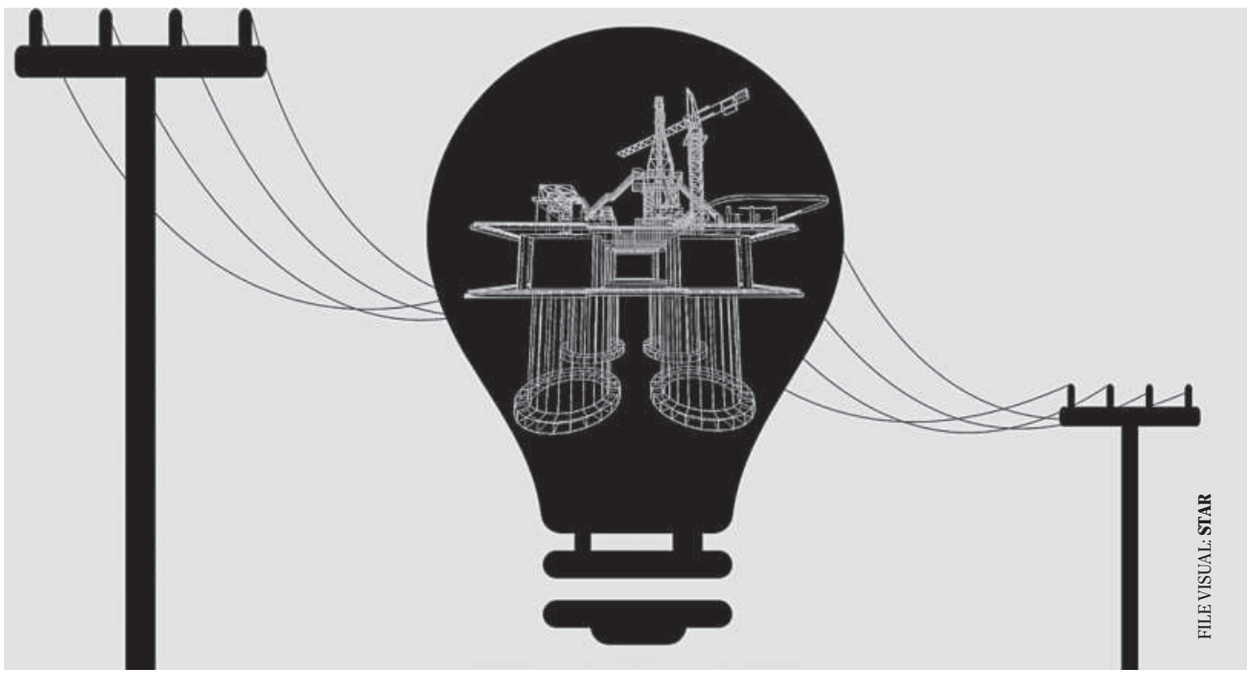
My recent conversation with a leading industrialist in the energy business pushed me beyond this familiar supply-side diagnosis. His argument was that the deeper problem lies in industrial policy. For decades, extraordinarily cheap domestic gas influenced where firms invested, what they produced, and how much they focused on energy efficiency. Bangladesh did not pursue textbook import-substituting industrialisation throughout the 1980s and 1990s; those decades also brought trade liberalisation and the rise of export-oriented garments. But policies protected and promoted domestic processing industries such as steel re-rolling, fertiliser, ceramics, glass, cement, and textiles while gas and electricity remained priced below their full economic cost.

That model could appear successful while domestic gas was plentiful, but it is harder to justify when the marginal unit is imported LNG. An industry that saves one dollar of imports but requires more than a dollar of imported fuel, foreign exchange, and public subsidy is not genuinely saving foreign exchange. It is merely replacing one import bill with another, while part of the cost is concealed in the accounts of Petrobangla, the Bangladesh Power Development Board, and in the national budget.

This does not make steel, ceramics, or glass inherently undesirable. They create jobs and supply essential inputs. The relevant question is whether a new project or major expansion can compete when charged the full, long-run cost of reliable energy. Existing workers and capital cannot be moved without serious disruption. New investment, however, should not receive an open-ended entitlement to subsidised energy.

Khan's warning that politicians and their business associates helped create today's gas crisis. He pointed to unnecessary generation capacity, promises of industrial gas connections when gas was unavailable, and connections awarded through corruption. My argument is complementary but broader: even without an illegal transaction, a policy regime can create the wrong industrial structure when it socialises energy costs while privatising the returns.

Additionally, Professor Anu Muhammad's recent diagnosis in this newspaper emphasises imported-energy dependence, weak national capability, and the political interests surrounding large projects. Here, a comparison with Malaysia is especially instructive. Malaysia built Petronas into a capable national institution rather than treating lack of domestic capacity as a permanent excuse. Bangladesh must likewise strengthen Bapex and Petrobangla while using foreign firms for capital and specialised knowledge under transparent contracts. But stronger supply



FILE VISUAL: STAR

The allocation problem is already substantial. Industries directly consume about 19 percent of Bangladesh's gas, while captive power generation inside factories accounts for another 17 percent—together more than one-third of supply, according to the Panam Institute policy note. However, the rules governing how shortages are distributed among grid power, industrial processes, captive generation, fertiliser production, and households remain unclear to the public. In practice, allocation is determined by pressure fluctuations, unplanned outages, administrative discretion, and political access. This is industrial policy by default, rather than by design.

This is where I partly agree with former energy adviser Muhammad Fouzul Kabir

institutions still need a disciplined demand policy.

For the next two years, grid management must therefore become an explicit part of industrial policy. The government should publish and enforce clear rules for rationing gas and electricity during shortages; introduce predictable time-of-use tariffs for large consumers; replace arbitrary interruptions with scheduled curtailments; and set public reliability standards for industrial zones. Efficient exporters should be able to plan production rather than discover their effective energy allocation through the duration of an outage. Major sectors should also be assessed for energy intensity, value added, employment, and net foreign-exchange contribution. Any subsidy that remains should be transparently accounted for in the budget, carry a time limit, and be justified by measurable economic benefits.

Over the longer term, new energy-intensive production should cluster near ports, fuel storage, regasification facilities, renewable resources, and common utilities. "Off the national grid" should not mean thousands of unregulated diesel generators, but rather serviced industrial-energy zones using dedicated generation, cogeneration, direct contracts, or transparently priced grid connections. The most energy-intensive stages may sometimes be better located in energy-abundant economies such as Malaysia, while fabrication, distribution, and higher-value activities remain in Bangladesh. Temporary duty relief for heavy fuel oil may ease an emergency, but it should be time-bound and tied to efficiency and emissions standards rather than becoming another permanent subsidy.

The costs of this model are now becoming harder to avoid. Cheap domestic gas helped generate profits and keep input costs low, but it also weakened incentives to explore, conserve, and invest in efficient machinery. The same business leaders who benefitted from that model for decades now find themselves grappling with unreliable supplies and the high cost of imported LNG.

The finance minister's two-year timetable should be treated as more than a forecast; it should be viewed as a deadline for replacing implicit rationing with transparent demand management.

Bangladesh must accelerate exploration, renewable energy, and import infrastructure while also deciding which uses of scarce energy generate enough social and economic value to justify their cost. Otherwise, the country will continue allocating energy through outages, influence, and inherited privilege.

Dhaka needs traffic discipline, not just new transport initiatives



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The public policy response to Dhaka's traffic has increasingly retreated into short-term fixes rather than addressing the structural breakdown of order. Recent government initiatives continually fail not from a lack of intent, but because they treat symptoms through isolated interventions while ignoring basic road discipline.

In the post-liberation 1970s, lighter traffic allowed administrators to treat discipline as a secondary concern. As the population grew, this leniency calcified into institutional callousness. Today, navigating choke points like Farmgate, Shahbagh, or Mirpur 10 reveals a brutal reality: our roads operate on the survival of the fittest. To fix this, we must stop deploying hardware without ensuring operational software.

For decades, regulatory authorities have responded to Dhaka's traffic crisis with high-profile directives that routinely stall or vanish within months. These interventions are usually designed in isolation. Frontline stakeholders, such as transport syndicates, drivers, police, and commuters, are rarely consulted. Handed down as top-down mandates without ground-level consensus, these policies inspire no public ownership, making it so that compliance vanishes the moment direct supervision wanes.

Consider the recent rollout of 400 electric buses. Dropping high-tech hardware onto unregulated streets does nothing to fix the underlying chaos. In an ecosystem where diesel-run buses operate without fitness certificates while drivers are forced to aggressively race for fares, expensive e-buses simply join a chaotic system. Similarly, isolated initiatives like the BRTC's pink bus service or AI-powered traffic control cameras fail when they collide with ground-level realities: unlinked vehicle databases, unstandardised plates, and intersections managed by manual gestures.

To make any public transport investment stick, existing directives must be retrofitted with an operational foundation of strict traffic discipline. The most effective way to fix this environment—without waiting decades for new infrastructure—would be to restore traffic predictability.

We have lived with chaotic road conditions for so long that we struggle to grasp the scale of the loss incurred by these conditions—millions of unproductive hours, excess fuel burned, and severe economic drain. The single most effective way to fix this environment without waiting decades for new infrastructure is restoring street predictability by forcing a cultural shift. This means transitioning from aggressive, offensive manoeuvring of vehicles to an environment of neutral, defensive driving. When drivers and pedestrians are reassured that everyone else is also bound by enforced lane limits and signal queues, the need to aggressively cut off the vehicle ahead will disappear.

Currently, pedestrians navigate streets with the same risky, offensive manoeuvres as vehicles—darting across active lanes or standing in the middle of moving traffic to force vehicles to stop. When predictable vehicle trajectories are enforced, pedestrians will no longer feel forced to take these aggressive gambles and, crucially, will realise that the risk is simply not worth it.

Predictability isn't an abstract ideal; it is built on specific, enforceable rules that target the most destructive driving habits. On Dhaka's urban streets, four violations are particularly debilitating: intersection gridlocking, reckless lane shifting and tailgating, haphazard bus stops, and mixing fast and slow vehicles.

If we conceptually isolate these violations, traffic flow theory provides a clear picture of the capacity we are currently throwing away. Traffic flow theory indicates that addressing all four major violations simultaneously could cut overall delays by 50 percent to 70 percent, effectively doubling road capacity without adding any new roads. However, to prevent corruption and ensure consistency, enforcement cannot rely on discretionary manual police ticketing. It requires the immediate deployment of CCTV and automatic number-plate recognition (ANPR) cameras.

Bogotá's late-1990s TransMilenio transformation offers a blueprint for Dhaka's struggling Bus Route Rationalisation (BRR). Before reform, the Colombian capital's streets were choked by something identical to Dhaka's aggressive target-based racing. Bogotá succeeded by consolidating fragmented operators into regulated franchises, replacing cash targets with fixed contracts, and enforcing strict docking discipline. Transit speeds reportedly doubled and fatal collisions dropped by over 70 percent.

Similarly, Kigali in Rwanda, achieved remarkable traffic order without massive infrastructure overhauls. By deploying automated camera networks linked to digital registers and mandating speed limiters, Kigali eliminated human discretion and enforced zero-tolerance for reckless lane shifting.

Ultimately, road discipline is not a luxury reserved for wealthy nations. When micro-enforcement is automated and impartial, driver behaviour transforms rapidly, unlocking capacity at a fraction of the cost of building new roads. More than 50 years of worsening traffic conditions cannot be solved by sporadic hardware drives. To convert modular directives into lasting urban assets, policymakers must commit to a three-step baseline. First, paint and strictly enforce clear yellow-box junctions and lane boundaries. Second, deploy automated camera networks linked to digital fines to remove human discretion from enforcement. Third, consolidate bus operations to standardise driver compensation, shifting from aggressive passenger-commission models to fixed-salary contracts.

When city authorities clear intersections, eliminate lane-shifting shockwaves, isolate bus stops, and segregate slow traffic, the benefits compound. Ultimately, traffic rules are not arbitrary restrictions made to be addressed by fines. They are a collective contract that saves time, preserves economic capital, and protects human lives on our roads.

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