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Abuse of power by the police

The officials involved must be held to account

We are alarmed by the report of a businessman being picked up from his home in Dhaka allegedly by two police officers in the middle of the night and forced to sign cheques of Tk 1.25 crore. Reportedly, the man was taken to a police station where he was beaten up and locked inside a room until morning before being forced to sign the cheques. The incident came to light when the victim submitted written complaints to the inspector general of police and the DMP commissioner.

Apparently, all this happened because the victim had a money-related dispute with the Deputy Commissioner of Ramna division, Dhaka Metropolitan Police (DMP). When *The Daily Star* contacted the two police officers, who reportedly picked him up, and the DC of Ramna, who lent him money to run a business, and asked them about the alleged harassment, all three of them denied the allegations.

From what have been reported in the newspapers, we understand that the DC, Ramna, himself was involved in an unlawful business and has abused his power for personal benefits. Whatever might have happened between the businessman and the said DC, they should have dealt with it differently, because such money-related disputes fall under civil offence and police have nothing to do with these incidents. Moreover, picking someone up without an arrest warrant, beating him up and forcing him to sign cheques are also illegal.

Since the DMP has been investigating the case, we hope that they would be able to do it without any influence from any quarters. Also, reportedly, such abuse of power by the police is on the rise across the country. Thus, there needs to be a mechanism through which citizens can file complaints about this kind of harassment. Such incidents, if left unchecked, will only deepen the mistrust between the police and the public.

So many books, so little time

Let the light of books reach every dark corner

As the monthlong Ekushey Boi Mela on the hallowed grounds of Bangla Academy and Suhrawardy Udyan enters its third week, we are left with a mixed feeling. Slowly but surely, we are nearing the end of a month that we all look forward to the rest of the year. But the massive enthusiasm that the fair has been greeted with is something of a revelation, too: that despite all the bad news that keep coming to our shores and the very real threats to our societal values and customs, people still love books. They are coming in droves, dressed in festive attire, browsing around the stalls and leaving the ground with bags full of books. What better way to reaffirm one's faith in the transformative power of books than this? People's enthusiasm has been most aptly captured by an image published by *The Daily Star* recently, in which a young flower-seller is seen beside a stall decked with beautifully illustrated storybooks. The image strikes one as a potent symbol of a reader in the making. Despite his visible struggle in life which made him sell flowers for a living at such an early age, this boy seemed totally immersed in reading.

Such pictures make us hopeful. The fair will be over in 10 days, but hopefully its impact will last long. Hopefully, as we have more people taking an interest in reading and learning, we will have a nation that we can be truly proud of. The Bangla Academy the organiser of the fair, deserve our thanks for such a well-planned event. Those in charge of providing security also deserve kudos. We hear that another book fair is being held in Chattogram to celebrate the spirit of the Language Movement. The more, the merrier. Together, these events can not only breathe new life into the moribund publishing industry of our country, but also can help us become more enlightened individuals.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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DMP's awareness programme is a good initiative

As a working woman, I can comprehend the amount of caution we need to maintain when stepping out of our homes. Cases of rape in our country has continued to ruin the lives of countless people and the situation only seems to get worse with time. Much has been reported and suggested in detail by this daily, but we are yet to feel safe in our own city. At a time like this, I am glad that Dhaka Metropolitan Police (DMP) has decided to do something about it.

In the last month, 150 rape cases were filed in Dhaka alone. DMP recently took the initiative to identify high-risk areas in the capital in order to increase surveillance and initiate an awareness programme to help put an end to such a heinous crime. While it is reassuring to know that such steps are being taken now, it remains restricted only to the capital. I would like to see such security measures being taken nationwide so that women in every city, town and village can live in peace.

Tahera Zaman, Dhaka

Lost decades in Rohingya camps

MALIHA KHAN

LONG before August 2017, there were Rohingya refugees who lived in camps in Cox's Bazar, who had left Myanmar decades ago.

Arman, now in his mid-20s, was born and raised in these camps. His parents were among those who fled Myanmar in the early 1990s, and were recognised as refugees by the Bangladesh government and United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). These "registered" Rohingya refugees, numbering around 35,000 continue to live in the camps, nearly 30 years on. Their children tend to be almost entirely socially integrated—speaking Bangla fluently (in addition to their native Rohingya). Bangladesh is the only home they have ever known.

Worldwide, protracted refugee situations show that nearly two-thirds of refugees are displaced for longer than five years and on average, can be displaced for up to 20 years (UNHCR, 2015).

As a child, Arman studied in the school inside Kutupalong refugee camp; non-formal schooling is provided until grade eight in the registered camps. Some parents also faked papers to get their children enrolled in local schools for their continued education.

Arman managed to continue his education up to the HSC level, after getting admitted to a local college. But he was tragically outed as a Rohingya by his classmates and was unable to sit for his two remaining HSC exams in the 2014-2015 academic year. Until then, he had told no one at his school or college where he lived or who he was.

Arman's was an unfortunate case. His classmates who remained unidentified were able to sit for all their examinations and complete their hard-earned schooling in a country where they are denied access to formal education.

Bangladeshi schools and local authorities had largely turned a blind but benevolent eye to this practice. This, however, has changed more recently. In 2019, local authorities and law enforcement tracked and expelled Rohingya students in local schools and colleges.

Such measures came into being following the largest ever influx of Rohingyas into Bangladesh starting in August 2017. The newer refugees have been displaced for more than two years now, with formal attempts to voluntarily repatriate having already failed twice. Deals between Bangladesh and Myanmar have fallen through and the international community's effort to mediate have ended in indecisiveness at the Security Council. Belated attempts at justice by international courts are currently underway.

The refugees demand recognition as "Rohingya", citizenship, return to their own homes and villages, and justice for the atrocities committed, before their return home—reasonable yet unlikely conditions for Myanmar to meet. These new arrivals, who constitute the majority of the refugees, have no legal status—they are labelled "forcibly displaced Myanmar nationals" by the Bangladeshi government.

Till then, they are here to stay like those before them.

Both Bangladesh and Myanmar had earlier banned their curricula being taught in the camps; in the "unregistered" camps, refugee children only have access to primary schooling, up to grade five, in "learning centres" set up by Unicef and its partners.

"This education has no value since it's not formalised," said Arman, echoing refugees, especially parents, in the camps. Parents instead send their children to madrasahs set up in the camps or to private tutors, refugees themselves with some education from home, who quietly teach the children the Myanmar curriculum.

Worldwide, in countries hosting long-term refugees, some provide access to local formal education, targeting long-term integration. Others provide education following the curriculum of the refugees' country of origin, in view of their eventual return home.

On January 28, the Bangladesh government finally went for the latter strategy—announcing that the Myanmar curriculum will now be taught to children and skills training will be provided to those over 14 years of age.

Since his aborted schooling, Arman has been working as field staff and interpreter for various NGOs who hire Rohingyas as "volunteers" in the camps, paying them a daily stipend. Outside the camps, many Rohingyas work informally—doing manual day labour in



Rohingya refugees gather at a market inside a refugee camp in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, March 7, 2019.

PHOTO: REUTERS

the fields or in construction, or working in local homes and restaurants.

WHAT CHANGED IN 2017?

Things are different now. Prior to late 2017, Arman and other registered refugees could more or less move about freely, albeit using their refugee ID. "We had to present it at the check-posts and were let through," he said.

After the influx, starting in August, these refugees who so far had not encountered so many police and army personnel in and around their camps, are now used to the sight.

More worrying, however, is the barbed wire currently encircling the camp. In September 2019, the home minister announced that barbed wire fences would be installed around the camps "to maintain law and order in the camps and ensure safety and security."

Since the new arrivals have come, other small freedoms enjoyed by the

registered refugees have also vanished. The fear of not being able to go to the market for essentials, which Arman says will inevitably happen as the bazar falls outside the wire fence at Arman's camp. Children who manage to persist in local schools and colleges will be unable to continue their education.

Even before these new restrictions, says Arman, this wasn't a life at all. "My life of 29 years has been spent in a jail—refugee life is like an open jail. We have only ever seen the camps."

"For the last 30 odd years, we have been under the rule of a magistrate—we have not had any significant conflicts with locals and have been living alongside them peacefully," said Arman. "We do not now need to have our hands and feet tied. To be encircled now, means to cripple us."

This encirclement is the latest in a series of restrictive measures enforced in the camps. Recently, the government also cut off access to high-speed internet in the camps. The cellular network in the area is notoriously poor and slow during certain times of the day and at times, cut off entirely—during which period,

many mobile phones were confiscated, alleged refugees. The authorities say these measures are necessary for battling crime, drug smuggling, and militancy among the Rohingya.

REPATRIATION—WHAT DO THE REFUGEES WANT?

"We don't want repatriation because those of us who were born or grew up here, cannot place any trust in the Myanmar government. We have seen them repeatedly giving the Bangladeshi government its word and then going back on it. When it can cheat another government, then what can they do to us—the public?"

"At one time, we were forced to return—this could happen again," said Arman.

There is precedent. Forcible return is not new to these refugees—Arman's parents were caught up in the refugees' struggles against the government and

UNHCR in the early 1990s and 2000s. His parents spoke of refugees being intimidated; others forced back to Burma on buses; many families were separated.

Jeff Crisp, a scholar at the University of Oxford and Chatham House, has argued against premature repatriation and a trend of unsafe returns in the case of the Rohingya and others in protracted refugee situations. In an article for the Overseas Development Institute's Humanitarian Practice Network, he highlights the history of forced earlier returns both the Bangladesh government and UNHCR were complicit in—following the influxes of 1978 and 1991, bilateral agreements were signed between Bangladesh and Myanmar for the return of the refugees. This included the use of intimidation, military force, and withholding food and other aid—leading to high levels of malnutrition and death rates in the camps—which were attributed to epidemics. UNHCR official estimates say up to 10,000 refugees died in this time.

This is what Arman fears. "Especially when we are closed off, no one will be

able to see what's happening. It is little known that there are registered refugees, from 1991 and 1992. We don't see anyone speaking on our behalf."

Arman and his family enjoy official refugee status, but in the camps where almost a million others are in legal limbo, what does this now mean? Earlier, there were talks and plans of their integration here or resettlement elsewhere. These aren't talked about anymore.

"If we are not given citizenship rights, we should at least be given access to education, healthcare, and movement, which we have had for the past 30 years," he said. "We want to be able to start a small business, and be able to stay in touch with family and relatives abroad," continued Arman.

Perhaps all they want is some agency in a life of endless limbo.

Maliha Khan is a subeditor at *The Daily Star*.

How Bangladesh is outperforming India



KARAN THAPAR

FRANKLY, I blame Henry Kissinger.

Way back in the 1970s, he called Bangladesh "an international basket case". At the time, no doubt, it was. Television images of the

frequent devastating floods it suffered confirmed this characterisation. So the description stuck.

Today, Bangladesh is a different country. The world may be slow in changing its opinion—although I am not so sure of that—but we in India have no right to be trapped in the 1970s. Yet, that's precisely what the junior home minister revealed last weekend.

"Half of Bangladesh will be empty (vacant) if India offers citizenship to them," said minister of state for home, G Kishan Reddy. "Half of Bangladeshis will come over to India if citizenship is promised." Apart from the fact that he was un diplomatic and offensive, Reddy also revealed that he's ignorant of the true state of Bangladesh. Worse, he doesn't know that, in comparison to India, Bangladesh is performing far better on many, if not most of the indices that determine quality of life.

First, Bangladesh is growing at a rate that we in India can only envy and hope to achieve two or three years down the

road. Whilst we slip below 5 percent, Bangladesh is racing ahead at 8 percent.

Second, while Nirmala Sitharaman desperately strives to attract investment leaving China by offering 15 percent rates of corporate tax, Bangladesh is one of the two countries where it's actually going. Consequently, high streets in London and New York are brimming with clothes made in Bangladesh, but very few produced in Ludhiana

for males and females in Bangladesh is 71 and 74 respectively. In India, the corresponding figure is 67 and 70. When you break down this big picture, the difference becomes even more striking.

First, take children. Neonatal mortality in India is 22.73 per 1,000 live births; it is 17.12 in Bangladesh. Infant mortality is 29.94 in India versus 25.14 in Bangladesh. Our under-five

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and Tirupur. No wonder Bangladesh's merchandise exports grew in double digits in fiscal 2019; India's sharply fell.

However, economic performance is only one part of the growing difference that separates India from Bangladesh. The other is more telling. To put it bluntly, life in Bangladesh appears a lot more attractive than in India.

Just look at the facts. Life expectancy

mortality is 38.69; theirs is 30.16.

Now, come to women. In Bangladesh, 71 percent of women above the age of 15 are literate, while 66 percent are so in India. In Bangladesh, female labour participation is 30 percent and rising; ours is 23 percent and has fallen by 8 percent in the last decade.

Finally, the ratio of high school enrolment for boys and girls—a

measure that indicates how the future is developing—is 0.94 in India but 1.14 in Bangladesh. Not only are things better on the other side of the border; they're going to get better still. We're falling behind.

So when AK Abdul Momen, Bangladesh's foreign minister, says, "Some Indian nationals are entering Bangladesh illegally for economic reasons", he may well be right. People migrate to improve their lives, and life in Bangladesh seems decidedly better. If you're an Indian Muslim in danger of lynching because you trade in meat, accused of love-jihad because you've fallen in love with a Hindu, or in fear of losing your citizenship, you could easily be tempted to cross over to the other side.

At the moment, there can't be too many inclined to journey in the opposite direction. The statistics I have quoted suggest that it's more attractive to be a termite in Bangladesh than a legal citizen in India.

One last point: Someone should tell Reddy that if the United States of America promises citizenship, half of India will cross over. Actually, it will be far more. And, by the way, the fact that America's doors are presently shut isn't stopping us.

Karan Thapar is the author of *Devil's Advocate: The Untold Story*.

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