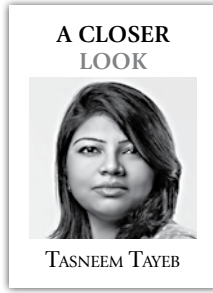


In search of refuge



A CLOSER LOOK

TASNEEM TAYEB

HUNDREDS and thousands of refugees and migrants are preyed upon every year by human traffickers with false promises of a better

future, a home. And with nowhere to go, no roof over their heads, no land to call home, the refugees easily fall for the trap. Sometimes knowingly. For instance, desperate Rohingya families often rely on traffickers to send their daughters to Malaysia, Indonesia and other countries, to get married to suitors through traffickers, paying a hefty sum for the privilege. Despite the uncertainties of the journey and in the intention of these unreliable men, the despairing refugee families have no recourse but to entrust the safety of their daughters with them. A column titled, "Trafficking in Rohingya: Exploiting the desperate", written late last year by me documents in detail the vulnerabilities of the Rohingya refugees to trafficking, especially women and girls, who are often sold into sex slavery.

According to the International Labor Organization (ILO) estimates, human trafficking business generates a profit of around USD 150 billion a year globally. The number of human trafficking victims as per ILO data is around 25 million. And the victims are mostly the poor, the destitute and of course the refugees.

Covid-19, unfortunately, has only made it easier for traffickers to entrap the homeless. The number of refugees in the world, as per UNHCR estimates currently stands at 25.9 million, half of them under the age of 18. A decade ago the number of refugees was 15.2. In the

last 10 years, the number of refugees has increased by 10.2 million people—on average a million a year.

With the fast-spreading pandemic bringing a halt to nations around the world and drastically slowing down economic activities, many refugees—who used to earn their living with menial jobs—have had to take the hit. With the jobs gone, and with their means of living, many are now being forced to seek alternative ways of earning their subsistence.

And the ones who are living inside the controlled refugee camps are also feeling the brunt of this pandemic. For one, with governments stretching their resources to help their citizens in the fight against this global health emergency, the refugees are not often making it to the top of the priority lists.

For instance, the Covid-19 outbreak has pushed the Syrian refugees into further desperation. According to the UNHCR, "The number of vulnerable refugees who lack the basic resources to survive in exile has dramatically surged as a result of the public health emergency. The refugee hosting communities in countries in Syria's neighbourhood experience similar hardships. Many refugees have lost what were already meagre incomes, forcing them to cut down on the most basic needs, including food and medication... Refugee households are taking on additional debt and are not able to pay their rent anymore. Serious protection risks are growing, including risks of child labour, gender-based violence, early marriage and other forms of exploitation."

Driven by poverty, hunger, neglect and helplessness, refugees are resorting to taking desperate measures to better their lives, often relying on the false promises of human traffickers. According to a report by the University of Birmingham, as published by *The Guardian* newspaper, "in some

countries there had been increased targeting by traffickers as well as pressure put on children to enter into marriages."

The situation in the Palestinian camps are also dire. According to a report by Coopération Internationale pour le Développement et la Solidarité (CIDSE), an umbrella organisation for Catholic development agencies from Europe and North America, Gaza's healthcare system is "particularly ill-equipped to handle a Covid-19

million forcibly displaced population—that has increased by 27.5 million in the last 10 years—is more or less the same if not worse. From Ethiopia and Uganda to Jordan and Bangladesh, refugees around the world are now being pushed against the wall by the Covid-19 pandemic.

With the spread of the disease, what has taken a turn for the worse is the risk of human trafficking. INTERPOL suggests that, "COVID-19, and measures being taken by countries

increase." Unfortunately, with borders closed, the traffickers have become more sinister in their handling of the trafficking victims. According to an INTERPOL report, in March this year, 68 male migrants died inside a shipping container loaded on the back of a lorry while crossing into Mozambique from Malawi. The most likely cause of death was asphyxia.

The very recent case of the Rohingya refugees stranded at sea, with the traffickers demanding money from their relatives for their release is known to us all. The refugees had embarked on a desperate journey in search of a better future in a different land. Now they are stuck in the middle of the sea at the mercy of their captors, with nowhere to go. And where would the refugees go, they don't even have a home.

The world today is filled with refugees. Home is what the world owes them—but we have failed miserably at it. Those that are fortunate find refuge in cramped camps and no-man's land. There they live without the rights we have learnt to take for granted—right to a basic livelihood, a life that is not constantly under threat, a place that one can call home, a right to a life with dignity.

Part of the problem is the term "refugee" itself—it obfuscates the sickness with the symptom. But having lost their homes, the very thing that anchors our identity, they have no defence against spurious labels. The vicious geo-politics that have held millions of lives in its merciless sway generation after generation, should not distract us from the plain fact—these men, women and children are not refugees looking for refuge, they are the homeless in search of homes.

In failing to protect the dignity of these rootless communities, we are eroding our own right to it, bit by bit.

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Children sleep on a migrant woman's lap as they wait at the main bus station in Istanbul, Turkey, September 15, 2015. PHOTO: MURAD SEZER/REUTERS

outbreak and cater to the needs of its nearly 2 million inhabitants in view of serious shortage of staff, infrastructure, equipment and medicine crucial for containment and treatment of Covid-19 cases... Mental and psychological effects as well as a risk of increased domestic violence are equally alarming."

Unfortunately, the fate of the 70.8

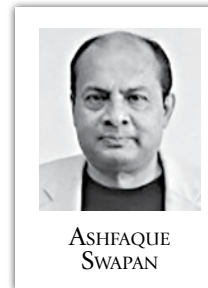
to control its spread, are impacting crime around the world, including migrant smuggling and human trafficking." The agency further added that, "The economic consequences will significantly impact peoples' desire and ability to migrate, as well as the incentive and opportunities for criminals to profit from illegal migration which is also expected to

Crisis not Trump's fault alone

Party, rabid supporters deeply complicit

"Somoza may be a SOB, but he's our SOB."

—Apocryphal remark attributed to US President Franklin D Roosevelt regarding Nicaraguan dictator Anastasio Somoza Garcia



ASHFAQ SWAPAN

SOMETIMES you wonder in bafflement. Is there anything on earth—anything—that will shake up the overwhelming Republican support for US

President Donald Trump?

Thanks to Trump's bungling, the US has the worst outcome—by far—in an economically crippling global pandemic. Mass nationwide protests rage against systemic racism, triggered by a horrific racist police murder.

Trump's delays cost tens of thousands of lives more. Then things got surreal. He suggested injecting disinfectant into patients—a fatal measure—so that it could "do a number" on the virus.

He responded to protesters' anguish with a crass, thuggish statement: "When the looting starts, the shooting starts."

One of the richest, most developed countries in the world has the largest number of Covid-19 deaths and about one fourth of the world's Covid-19 cases. What's more, numbers in the US are going up again.

Ten states saw a record number of new Covid-19 cases this week, and one of them could be the next epicentre of the national health crisis," CNN reported on its website, based on its analysis of data from Johns Hopkins University.

"As coronavirus cases surge in states across the South and West of the United States, health experts in countries with falling case numbers are watching with a growing sense of alarm and disbelief, with many wondering why virus-stricken US states continue to reopen and why the advice of scientists is often ignored," the *Washington Post* reports.

Amidst all this, Trump is focused on a huge public rally in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Public health experts are terrified. This is the first ever rally by a US president where attendees have to sign a waiver releasing the Trump campaign of any liability should they get infected by COVID-19.

How does Trump keep getting away with this?

A big reason is that the Republican rank-and-file remain in complete thrall,

essentially giving him *carte blanche*.

The Republican Party establishment is also knowingly complicit. Republican leaders know how awful Trump is. Some of them have said as much.

Republican leader #1 in July 2015: "He offers a barking carnival act that can be best described as Trumpism: a toxic mix of demagoguery, mean-spiritedness and nonsense that will lead the Republican Party to perdition if pursued."

Republican leader #2 in 2015: "He's a race baiting, xenophobic religious bigot... You know how you make America great again? Tell Donald Trump to go to Hell."

What followed is a sorry supplication to power.

Republican #1, former Texas Governor Rick Perry, went on to serve a stint as Trump's energy secretary.



Republican leaders are scared to take on Trump, whose fury can be the kiss of death in electoral politics. PHOTO: MURAD SEZER/REUTERS

Republican #2, US Senator Lindsey Graham, is an embarrassment today for a man he once wanted to go to hell.

Republican leaders are scared to take on Trump, whose fury can be the kiss of death in electoral politics.

The key to the whole mess is the cult-like support of Trump among Republicans.

Gallup polling reveals that right from his inauguration his support among Republicans has seldom dipped beyond a whopping 85 percent. This year it has been 90 percent most of the time.

Trump supporters made a Faustian bargain. Trump provides conservative judges for evangelicals, obscene tax breaks to plutocrats, and a racist and draconian immigration clampdown for the Republican masses, and his supporters back him blindly. Trump once quipped he could shoot someone on New York City's Fifth Avenue, and his core supporters wouldn't care. Count in the Republican Party, lock, stock, and barrel. They're all part of the Fifth Avenue crowd.

There is a silver lining in all of this. Slowly but surely, the nation as a whole is beginning to recoil. Recent polling shows putative Democratic nominee former US Senator Joe Biden coasting to victory. The electoral college that elects the US president favours Republicans, but Trump is trailing in enough battleground states to make his re-election prospects precarious.

Come November, if Trump loses, it will be a fate that the Republican Party courted. Trump's mendacity, his penchant for appeasing white prejudice, and inciting an ignorant contempt for science and reason are the logical conclusion of what the Republican Party started years, even decades ago. Examples abound.

President George W Bush's phony Iraq War, Vice Presidential candidate Sarah Palin's mixture of slick talk, ignorance and bald-faced lies. Palin once said she knew about Russia because Putin's planes flew near Alaska, and made the completely false accusation that Obamacare "death panels" would put old folks to death. The Republican Party is the only conservative party in the industrialised world that denies climate change.

Let's also give credit—if you can call it that—where it is due. Roger Ailes' Fox News Network was a vital player in this long, sordid descent. Under the ruse of reporting news, the network pushed a conservative agenda with an ugly, frequently dissembling, incendiary edge. Former Fox News producer Joe Muto said they had a catchy term for the network's style, the stories they favoured and the edict they were given from on high. "We used to call it 'Riling up the crazies,'" he says in the documentary *Divide and Conquer: The Story of Roger Ailes*.

Congratulations, Fox News Network. The crazies have been well and truly riled up. Now the inmates are running the asylum.

Come November, there could well be a reckoning. Peddling in xenophobia, an antipathy to science and reason and a virulent tribalism may have paid rich political dividends until now. In the longer run, however, when courting an increasingly diverse, tolerant and humane polity, the Republican Party's shrill, meanspirited political ethos may cost it dearly. What seemed, until now, to be political wizardry, may yet turn out to be a poisoned chalice.

Ashfaq Swapan is a contributing editor for *Silliconeer*, a digital daily for South Asians in the United States.

ON THIS DAY IN HISTORY



JAPANESE DEFENSES DESTROYED ON OKINAWA

June 21, 1945

Japanese resistance on Okinawa was finally crushed this day in 1945, less than three months after US troops had landed there—their last stepping-stone before the assault on Japan's main islands in World War II.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

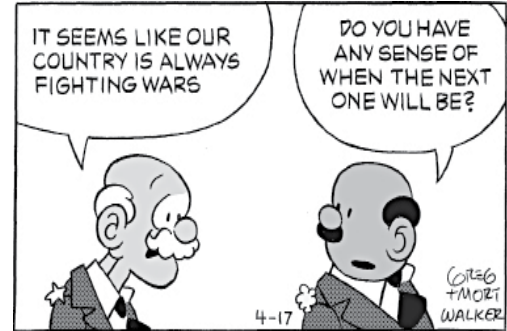
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|----------------------|---------------------|------------------------------|
| ACROSS | 34 Rooster's mate | 8 Seething |
| 1 Ballpark feat | 35 Old horse | 9 Designated a new use for |
| 6 Got wind of | 36 Mauna – | 10 Aridity |
| 11 Tickle | 37 Prince song | 14 Metal sources |
| 12 Western, in slang | 40 Cookout spot | 19 Salon jobs |
| 13 Prince song | 41 High-strung | 22 Farm litter |
| 15 Wisdom bringer | 42 Get some shuteye | 23 Combinations of two songs |
| 16 Noah's boat | 43 Wise ones | 24 Criminal |
| 17 "– appetit!" | | 25 Convention speech |
| 18 Riding needs | DOWN | 26 Gizmos |
| 20 Low number | 1 NFL pioneer | 28 Humdrum |
| 21 "You betcha!" | George | 30 Leading |
| 22 Diner desserts | 2 Last Greek letter | 31 By the side |
| 23 Karaoke needs | 3 Toned down | 32 Unfettered |
| 26 Desolate areas | 4 Slalom | 33 Confiscates |
| 27 Pub pints | maneuver | 38 Men's store buy |
| 28 Massive | 5 Wines and dines | 39 Grazing spot |
| 29 Shrewd | 6 Pawns | |
| 30 Sailor | 7 Corn unit | |



YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS



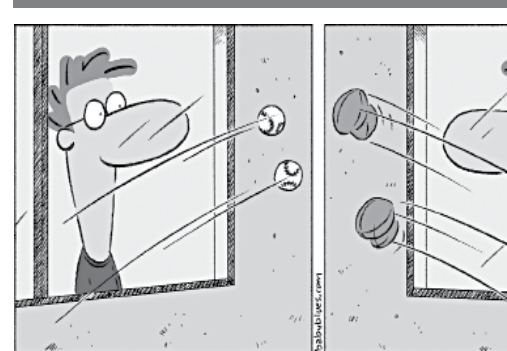
BETLE BAILEY



BY MORT WALKER



BABY BLUES



BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT



WRITE FOR US. SEND US YOUR OPINION PIECES TO dsopinion@gmail.com.