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The pandemic has increased child marriage manifold

Original factors causing it must be removed

CHILD marriage has always been a huge obstacle to development for countries like Bangladesh that has one of the highest prevalence of it. Now with the Covid-19 pandemic, the situation is even worse with more parents, because of increased financial hardship due to income loss, getting their minor girls married. According to a Save the Children global report, an estimated 5,00,000 girls (globally) are at risk of being forced into child marriage with as many as one million expected to become pregnant this year. The report reveals that South Asia will be hardest hit with nearly 200,000 more girls at risk of child marriage in 2020. This is in addition to the previously estimated rates of child marriage that anticipated 12 million girls being forced into marriage this year.

For Bangladesh, the implications are ominous. We have already been burdened with the curse of child marriage—over 50 percent of women who are now in their mid 20s were married off before 18, with 18 percent being below 15. The pandemic has increased this number manifold. So where do we go from here?

As a society and as a country we must acknowledge the devastating effects of child marriage on young girls that ultimately affect the wellbeing of the entire society as well as the development goals of the nation. When children are forced to marry they are forced to drop out of school and deprived of their childhood. They face the trauma of forced sexual relations. They endure the health risks associated with early pregnancies that may lead to premature, stunted babies and even their own deaths. The long-term effects of child marriage include generations of girls and young women being denied education, health, the right to work and earn and the agency to escape domestic violence. It will also mean generations of children being malnourished or stunted with little opportunities for education. If they are girl children, the cycle of deprivation and violence will start all over again.

Against this grim backdrop we now have a pandemic that has intensified all the factors behind child marriage—poverty, lack of security of girls and the mindset that girls are a burden for parents. With more girls dropping out of school child marriages have increased extensively.

In terms of combatting child marriage we have not been very successful even before the pandemic. Now that we are confronted with the numbers we must act fast now. The special provision in the Child Marriage Act that allows child marriage “under special circumstances” must be scrapped. Financial incentives, income-generating opportunities can be given to families so that it is not poverty that pushes them to get their girls married off. Most of all the government and society must work together to ensure security of girls and women so that they are not harassed on the streets, subjected to sexual violence and that they can go to school and pursue their dreams. Child marriage is an abusive practice that must be stopped for good.

No progress in relocating overflowing landfill in Gazipur

When will the city corporation wake up from its slumber?

IT is unfortunate that despite all the health hazards related to waste management, Gazipur City Corporation made no progress in relocating the perilous landfill at Baimail beside Dhaka-Tangail highway for the last eight years. With blatant disregard for their responsibility, the authorities resort to the only excuse they have been using—“We are looking for a piece of land.” Due to its location, waste continues to spill on to the highway, often hampering traffic. And when it rains, the garbage on the slippery road makes it a deathtrap. Despite the repeated attempts by the Roads and Highways Department (RHD), requesting the city corporation authorities to resolve the issue, it remains ineffective. Unfortunately, the Department of Environment (DoE) had to meet a similar fate too as the city corporation did not comply with their repeated notifications.

When it is extremely important to dispose waste in protected landfill areas in order to minimise pollution of surface and ground water, soil and air and keep the environment safe, Gazipur City Corporation has been piling approximately 2,500 tonnes of garbage, including medical waste—it is a major threat to public health as it contains toxic chemicals, radioactive elements and pathological substances which are harmful for the human body—on a daily basis in the unprotected area. It has become a breeding ground for various insects like mosquitos. The residents of the area have been bearing the brunt of the unabated dumping, keeping their doors and windows shut to prevent the stench.

It is befuddling that Gazipur City Corporation has not taken any action for so many years to solve this problem. Why have they not been held accountable for such neglect? It is strange that the mayor declined to comment, asking our correspondent to talk to the waste manager instead. How long will the residents of the area and those commuting on the highway continue to suffer such misery? The city corporation officials must stop shifting the blame to others. They cannot shrug off their responsibility with such apathy towards the environment and public health which is totally unacceptable. The concerned authorities must address the lack of coordination and supervision professionally so that the city corporation complies with the rules and regulations and not drag their responsibilities year after year. Now, with the ongoing pandemic, proper waste management is more urgent than ever.

Disarmament a priority of Bangladesh’s foreign policy



AK ABDUL MOMEN

“WE believe that the security of our people can be ensured not through the accumulation of expensive weapons but through education, ending

segregation, the promotion of democratic values, and the realisation of human faculties by peaceful means.” — Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina at the General Assembly debate on Nuclear Disarmament in New York on September 26, 2013.

Disarmament is a hallmark of Bangladesh’s peace-centric foreign policy. Mandated by our constitutional obligation of seeking general and complete disarmament as well as settling disputes through peaceful means, Bangladesh has always intentionally restrained from arms race and armament. Bangladesh is a leading voice in global disarmament debate and has strongly advocated for the total elimination of nuclear weapons and the creation of a nuclear-weapon free world.

We know the United Nations was created from the ashes of the Second World War. The devastation and human suffering caused by the nuclear bombing shook the world and the collective conscience of humankind. The UN, in its very first resolution, envisioned a world free of nuclear weapons.

Since then, 75 years have passed. In 2020, we are celebrating the 75th anniversary of the UN and its achievements and contribution to the welfare of the people and the planet Earth; and also, global socio-economic progress. Yet, in stark contrast, our present and future generations continue to live under the threat of nuclear catastrophe.

And now, the Covid-19 pandemic has presented before us the long-established truth in a more glaring way, that the stockpiles of weapons fail to save human beings. We are convinced that investment in nuclear weapons can neither ensure nor guarantee our peace and security and thus

represents a colossal wastage of the world’s scarce resources. Rather, it is through the realisation of sustainable development goals that we can establish and sustain peace and stability.

Our Father of the Nation, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, in his historic speech before the United Nations General Assembly in 1974, appealed to spare the world from the scourge of nuclear war. This forms the cornerstone of Bangladesh’s steadfast commitment and adherence to

prime minister’s consecutive terms in office from 2009 to 2020, Bangladesh signed and ratified an array of important disarmament treaties and conventions including the 1907 Hague Convention for Pacific Settlement of International Dispute (Accession, 2011); The Arms Trade Treaty, 2013 (Signature, 2013); Protocol 5 of CWC (accession, 2013); and the all-important Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (Ratification, 2017).

We know that nuclear technology



Representational image.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

nuclear disarmament.

It is a remarkable fact that Bangladesh is a party to all major disarmament treaties. Bangladesh is among the 44 countries and indeed the first South Asian Country that have both signed and ratified the Treaty on Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (CTBT) during Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina’s first term in office (1996-2001). In the same period, Bangladesh also acceded to the other important conventions on disarmament including Convention for the Prohibition of the Development, Production, Stockpiling and Use of Chemical Weapons and on their Destruction (CWC), and Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW) and its Protocol II and IV. During the

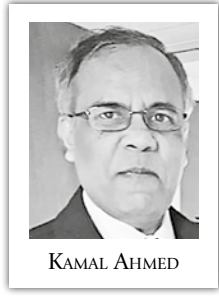
has been recognised as capable of both tremendous benefit and equally unimaginable destruction. Bound by our constitutional obligation to disarmament, Bangladesh rejects the use of nuclear technology for destructive purpose and supports its peaceful application for development and welfare of humankind. To harness the benefit of nuclear technology, Bangladesh is building nuclear power plants for peaceful uses.

On the day of commemoration of the International Day for the Elimination of Nuclear Weapons which was observed on October2, I would like to flag a few points:

First,nuclear weapons themselves are the problems and as the former Secretary-General of UN Ban ki Moon stated

Does supporting election justify exclusion of Rohingyas?

EU-Myanmar Human Rights Dialogue



KAMAL AHMED

THE European Union, barely three weeks before the general election in Myanmar, held a bilateral dialogue on human rights with the regime seeking re-election. Following the

dialogue, a joint statement issued on October 14 by the EU and Myanmar noted that the EU reaffirmed its strong support for Myanmar’s democratic transition, notably in the context of Myanmar’s upcoming general election, as well as for its peace and reconciliation process and inclusive socio-economic development.

In the 393-word statement, however, not once did the term Rohingya appear, which describes the distinct identity of the ethnic minority group that has been the subject of a prolonged persecution in Myanmar since the enactment of the Citizenship law in 1982 that stripped them of their nationality. It is quite shocking as it ignores the fact that the International Court of Justice (ICJ) earlier this year in its interim order affirmed Rohingyas as a distinctive ethnic group of Myanmar and ordered that country to protect the remaining Rohingya population.

The EU’s official press release only said that Myanmar and the EU discussed a wide range of human rights matters, including the situation in Rakhine, Kachin and Shan States, humanitarian access and the situation of Internally Displaced Persons, accountability for alleged human rights violations, fundamental rights and freedoms, economic, labour and social rights, rights of women and human rights cooperation in multilateral fora. According to the EU release, the EU encouraged Myanmar to continue to implement the recommendations of the Advisory Commission on Rakhine State, and took note Myanmar’s efforts in the implementation of its National Strategy for the Closure of Internally Displaced Person (IDP) camps. The Advisory Commission or the Kofi Anan Commission’s recommendations about reconciliation and rebuilding, predates the 2017 Clearance Operation.

It is also quite intriguing that the statement does not mention anything about the long overdue repatriation of more than a million Rohingya refugees living in Bangladesh, among them the majority, over 700,000, had to flee their homeland following a security clearance operation carried out by the Myanmar military. The United Nation’s Human Rights chief likened the clearance

operation with a textbook case of ethnic cleansing. The UN fact-finding mission in 2019 also concluded that killings, rapes and gang rapes, torture, forced displacement and other grave rights violations by the country’s military had prompted some 700,000 Rohingyas to flee to neighbouring Bangladesh in 2017. It said hundreds of thousands of ethnic Rohingya who remain in Myanmar may face a greater threat of genocide than ever, amid government attempts to “erase their identity and remove them from the

agencies in Myanmar had expressed their “sadness” and “shock” over the killing of two boys allegedly used as human shields by security forces in the country’s northern Rakhine province, earlier this month.

Another disturbing development involving the EU is that it has funded an election app in Myanmar that helps incite “racial and religious vilification” in the country by profiling candidates’ ethnicity and beliefs, using derogatory terminology to designate those of Rohingya descent. The mVoter 2020 application has been

not based on their religion or outdated categories of ‘race’ which, in the case of the Rohingya, means denial of their identity.” Listing Rohingya candidates as “Bengali” on the app, was allegedly the reason for the election commission to disqualify at least one candidate from taking part in the upcoming elections.

Reports from Myanmar suggest the National Democratic League (NLD) and its leader Aung San Su Kyi face very little challenge in the elections. Unless the powerful military makes any surprise



A Rohingya refugee is seen in Balukhali refugee camp at dawn near Cox’s Bazaar, Bangladesh, March 28, 2018.

PHOTO: CLODAGH KILOCYNE/ REUTERS

country.”

When the bilateral talks on human rights were taking place, reports were coming out from the troubled Arakan State of continuing indiscriminate attacks against civilian population including aerial bombing, arsoning and use of mines by the military in the name of tackling another alleged insurgent group, the Arakan Army. A leading rights group, the Amnesty International on October 12 called on the UN Security Council to refer Myanmar to the International Criminal Court, ICC. It seems that the EU is not willing to use all its tools and opportunities to press Myanmar on meaningful and visible behavioural changes. Or else, it is incomprehensible that they were not aware of those disturbing developments. It has now emerged that on the same day, UN

developed under the EU-funded STEP Democracy Project, which claims to support “inclusive, peaceful and credible electoral processes” in Myanmar, in order to assist the democratic transition in the country. According to rights groups, however, the app, exacerbates religious tensions and contributes to the discrimination of subjugated Rohingya minorities. The app listed Rohingyas as “Bengali”, a term that suggests these individuals are immigrants from Bangladesh. The Rohingya community believe the term is applied in a derogatory context, taking into account the human rights abuses and persecutions they have been subjected to.

Yadanar Maung, a spokesperson for the rights group Justice for Myanmar said, “According to democratic values, voters should judge candidates on their merits,

moves, renewal of her government’s mandate is almost certain. It is therefore, plausible that in the absence of a credible alternative, western powers are preparing themselves for a continuation of a working relationship with Su Kyi, despite all her shortcomings.

Her government’s continued complicity with the military, however, brings more frustration and anguish to the victims of the atrocities and dashes their hopes for justice. Hence, president of the Burma Rohingya Organisation in UK, Tun Khin, in an opinion piece in the *Washington Post*, calls Myanmar’s democratic election a sham and warns the international community not to be fooled by it. His concerns are not unjustified.

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