

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR  
LATE S. M. ALI

DHAKA SUNDAY OCTOBER 25, 2020, KARTIK 9, 1427 BS

# Fresh international pledge of monetary help for Rohingya refugees

*International community still has a moral responsibility to help end the crisis*

WHILE Bangladesh needs more in terms of money and material help for the Rohingya refugees, that is but a temporary palliative that will do very little to redress the distress of Bangladesh or solve the problems for the Rohingyas. We deem it necessary to reiterate the timely and very appropriate call of our prime minister to the UN, and to the international community under the auspices of the UN, to assume a stronger position in dealing with and evolving a permanent solution to one of the world's worst humanitarian disaster of this century. The prime minister's call underpins the very fundamental issue of the problem. And the longer it takes to get the Myanmar government to accept a solution, just and equitable to the Rohingyas, the more will the issue become resistant to resolution. And the longer the Rohingyas stay in Bangladesh in the current circumstances, the sufferings of all the parties will multiply.

Thus, while we thank the UN and the international community for pledging USD 597 million in humanitarian assistance for Rohingyas in the region we all know it falls far short of the USD 1 billion needed. Apart from increasing the aid amount, what we feel is equally imperative is that the UN should do more than what it has done so far to bring about a permanent solution to the crisis. No amount of money can lessen the tremendous long-term impact created by the presence of nearly a million Rohingya refugees on our soil for more than three years.

The Rohingya issue has exerted tremendous strain on the country's economy, its social cohesion, ecology and security. The Rohingyas have fallen victims of human traffickers; become partners of narcotics and illegal weapon traders; the area is now a handy recruiting ground for religious and political extremists, and they have become a political tool of local politicians—being used as vote banks. Bangladesh is being pressured to issue passports to thousands of Rohingyas who have managed to travel to the Mideast. The corrupt and immoral government functionaries have reaped a healthy harvest by issuing them Bangladeshi NID cards and passports. For a country heavily encumbered by the pandemic and its economic consequences, the situation is becoming untenable.

Thus, what we would like to see is the international community doing more than urging Myanmar to create conditions for their repatriation, as they have done, once again, at the donors' conference for the Rohingyas. We urge our good friends who are friends of Myanmar too, to not allow economic and monetary considerations trump over humanitarian issues.

# 140 ghost centres for expectant mothers and their babies!

*Why have the doctors and other medical staff not been recruited yet?*

MEDICAL services in remote areas are either non-existent or hours away, making it virtually impossible for emergency patients to be given medical attention on time. This is especially true in the case of maternal and neonatal care. A report in this paper has given us a picture of how expectant mothers suffer the consequences of not having medical care services nearby, forcing them to travel long hours to the closest hospitals that are miles away and require risky transportation. But what is most bewildering is that the government has set up around 140 mother and children welfare centres geared towards these very mothers and their babies and are supposed to be giving the medical care they would need. What then is the problem?

The problem is that these centres do not have any doctors or staff even though some of them have been setup years ago.

In Dharmapasha, Sunamganj, a remote part of the country, for instance, there are two new such centres but expectant mothers have to take long, risky journeys to the nearest public health facility. In the last one month at least three expectant mothers had complications during labour but they had to go all the way to Mymensingh Medical College Hospital, part of the journey by boat.

In Dharmapasha the roads are dilapidated and the only two options to get to the nearest hospital is by motorbike or a slow circuitous route by boat. How would an expectant mother requiring emergency medical attention be taken through such a difficult route? Because of the lack of basic healthcare services, people in these remote villages rely on quacks leading to health complications, even death.

From the same report we learn that since 2014, 159 such centres have been set up all over the country by the Directorate General of Family Planning but 140 of them are not functional because they have no staff. How can this be an acceptable situation? Do we not have enough doctors and other personnel to get such essential services going?

According to an official of the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, requests to recruit doctors were made several years ago to the Public Service Commission (PSC) but so far this has not happened. We are shocked at such indifference by the PSC to apparently ignore such an urgent matter as finding doctors for maternal and child care clinics that are so acutely needed in these areas. The DGFP must find out why the centres they have set up are empty of medical staff. The PSC must be held accountable for such negligence. Doctors, nurses, midwives and other staff must be recruited immediately. This is just another example of how precious government resources are wasted and all the well-intentioned endeavours of the state are undermined leaving thousands to suffer from a lack of basic medical services. In this case it is the welfare of mothers and newborn babies. Could anything be more important?

# Giving aid with one hand, taking away rights with the other

*Donor countries must hold Myanmar to account*



At the donors' conference co-hosted by the US, UK, EU and UNHCR on October 22, the international community pledged USD 597 million in humanitarian assistance for the Rohingya. The promises of aid were accompanied by the usual virtue signalling—US Deputy Secretary of State Stephen Biegun said, “As the world’s most generous donor, we are a catalyst for the international humanitarian response and call on others to contribute to this cause”; European Commissioner for Crisis Management Janecz Lenarcic asked the international community to, “strengthen its shared efforts towards reaching a sustainable solution”; and UK Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab spoke of how the UK has, “taken action against the architects of this systemic violence, including through sanctions and we will continue to hold those responsible to account.”

One does not have to look too closely to see the cracks in these pretty speeches. Take, for instance, Dominic Raab's claim about sanctions. According to Burma Campaign UK, these measures are completely “toothless” and that “symbolic measures do not constitute an effective response to genocide”—a recent review from the British Treasury showed that none of the 16 individuals sanctioned have had any of their assets frozen and are unlikely to have any assets in the UK anyway.

However, the UK is not the only state to have a bark that is worse than their bite. Despite the UN and the International Court of Justice (ICJ) recognising Myanmar's treatment of the Rohingyas as genocide, the international community has, by and large, failed to hold Myanmar to account or even strongly condemn them for actions that even Myanmar's State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi has grudgingly conceded could be crimes against humanity.

As Bangladesh's State Minister for Foreign Affairs Shahriar Alam bluntly stated on Thursday, the business-as-usual approach and appeasement theory pursued by the international community are emboldening Myanmar to act with impunity.

This business-as-usual attitude is perhaps best reflected in the international community's response to the upcoming elections in Myanmar. A joint statement issued in September by the UK, Belgium, the Dominican Republic, Estonia, France, Germany, Tunisia and USA stated that “the elections on November 8 are an important milestone in Myanmar's transition, which the international community has supported with funding and technical expertise.”

Why is the international community giving funding and technical expertise to elections that have barred Rohingya candidates from running for office and disenfranchised 1.2 million out of the 1.6 million voters in the state of Rakhine? According to Reuters, Myanmar's election

committee announced last week that more than half the polling stations initially planned in Rakhine will no longer operate, as parts of the state are “too unstable for voting”. Locals have condemned this as political manoeuvring since in the 2015 elections, the Arakan National Party defeated the ruling National League for Democracy in Rakhine and gained the third highest number of votes in the country. Rakhine is not the only state to be targeted—a Radio Free Asia report suggests that voting has been stopped or restricted in over 50 townships in different states so far, meaning this year's parliament could have at least 17 less representatives.

Human rights organisations have also roundly criticised the EU for funding and helping to create an app being used in the Myanmar elections, which has been accused of contributing to the erasure of the Rohingya identity. The app categorises parliamentary candidates based on their race and religion, and

for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), conflict between the Myanmar military and the Arakan Army in Rakhine has already displaced over 90,000 people. Last month, the UN high commissioner for human rights Michelle Bachelet warned that the Myanmar military was again killing and abducting civilians with impunity in Rakhine and neighbouring Chin, saying this “may constitute further war crimes or even crimes against humanity”. On October 5, two children were killed in Rakhine under dubious circumstances—the locals alleged that the army used them as human shields to clear landmines ahead of the soldiers.

Under such circumstances, if/when the repatriation of refugees to Myanmar occur, is there any guarantee that they won't be returning as soon as a new spate of violence begins? Bangladesh has made it clear that it cannot host close to 1.1 million refugees indefinitely, and the process of repatriation has to be started. Chinese Foreign

Minister Wang Yi spoke to his Bangladeshi counterpart on Thursday, saying Myanmar has assured China that repatriation talks will begin again after elections. But with Myanmar still holding around 600,000 Rohingya in camps and villages under conditions that, according to Human Rights Watch, “amount to the crimes against humanity of apartheid, persecution, and severe deprivation of liberty,” how do we convince refugees to return?

At the fourth session of the Union Peace Conference in August, it became clear how little interest the rulers of Myanmar have in peace. The exclusion of the Arakan Army led to the absence of many major players, and the Myanmar military's commander-in-chief openly warned against using terms like “minority rights” since it can “encourage disunity, inferiority, and doubts,” thus reiterating Myanmar's policy of assimilation. Political analyst David Scott Mathieson argued how this shows that the USD 100 million Joint Peace Fund, established in 2016 by the donor community, has been squandered in the name of peace. As he puts it, “The

woeful role of Western peacebuilders and their dubious background manoeuvrings with shady envoys has potentially doomed Myanmar to future decades of uneven armed conflict, environmental degradation due to corruptly regulated resource plunder, drug production and forced internal migration due to climate change and a flagging economy.”

Aid for refugees is always welcome, especially to support the host countries, but the question now arises—will the international community continue to give minimal aid without pushing for any real change within Myanmar? With Canada and Netherlands joining the Gambia's lawsuit at the ICJ, an investigation against Myanmar open at the International Criminal Court (ICC) regarding crimes against humanity and a universal jurisdiction case at the Argentinian judiciary, there is now no space for complacency.

There has to be a political cost for the actions of the Myanmar military. If donor countries truly want to solve the conflict, they need to stop attempting appeasement and implement a coordinated policy of arms embargo, financial sanctions and asset freezes. The 2019 UN fact-finding mission report said nearly 60 foreign companies have dealings with at least 120 businesses controlled by two military-owned firms in Myanmar, and that 14 companies from China, North Korea, India, Israel, the Philippines, Russia and Ukraine have been supplying fighter jets, armoured fighting vehicles, warships, missiles and missile launchers to Myanmar since 2016.

There has never been a better time to act—these companies must be held accountable for contributing to war crimes, and Myanmar's allies in the region must also reconsider their policies. While China has attempted to intervene in the crisis, albeit for its own interests—especially the economic corridor that will give China direct access to a deep water port on the Bay of Bengal—India's silence on the matter is highly questionable and disappointing given its “special relationship” with Bangladesh. Let us also not forget that Russia, while staying aloof from the Rohingya crisis, has used its veto to block UN Security Council resolutions against Myanmar (as has China) and even in the middle of the pandemic, Myanmar's Senior General Min Aung Hlaing spent a week in Russia to “foster ties” between the two countries' armed forces.

For many years, Myanmar has been talking peace and waging war while the international community has been talking peace and trading goods, especially since Myanmar started its so-called journey towards democracy. In the meantime, Covid-19 has hit Yangon's poorest slums so hard that, according to a Reuters report, people have resorted to eating snakes and rats. Armed with donor funds, foreign investments and ample resources, Myanmar's ruling elite wins, and it is the most marginalised people of Myanmar who always lose. As long as Myanmar has “democracy” and “economic freedom”, will the world continue to look away?

Shuprova Tasneem is a member of the editorial team at The Daily Star. Her Twitter handle is @shuprovatasneem



An exhausted Rohingya refugee woman touches the shore after crossing the Bangladesh-Myanmar border by boat through the Bay of Bengal, in Shah Porir Dwp, Bangladesh September 11, 2017.

PHOTO: DANISH SIDDIQUI/REUTERS

listed Rohingya candidate Aye Win as “Bengali”. He was later disqualified from running on the grounds of ethnic identity, despite previously being considered to be an eligible candidate. This erasure of identity has been recognised as part of the genocide against Rohingyas—there is huge pressure on the community to either accept national verification cards categorising them as “Bengali” or live in apartheid conditions, with no access to travel and economic opportunities. Despite this, a statement from the EU after the Sixth European Union-Myanmar Human Rights Dialogue on October 14, referring to the state of human rights in the country, did not mention the word “Rohingya” once. Could this really have been an insensitive mistake, or a deliberate attempt to appease Myanmar?

Of course, one could argue that some form of democratic elections is better than no elections at all. However, we must also consider the cost of Myanmar's tiresomely slow path to democratisation. The violence within the country has only gotten worse—according to the UN Office

Minister Wang Yi spoke to his Bangladeshi counterpart on Thursday, saying Myanmar has assured China that repatriation talks will begin again after elections. But with Myanmar still holding around 600,000 Rohingya in camps and villages under conditions that, according to Human Rights Watch, “amount to the crimes against humanity of apartheid, persecution, and severe deprivation of liberty,” how do we convince refugees to return?

At the fourth session of the Union Peace Conference in August, it became clear how little interest the rulers of Myanmar have in peace. The exclusion of the Arakan Army led to the absence of many major players, and the Myanmar military's commander-in-chief openly warned against using terms like “minority rights” since it can “encourage disunity, inferiority, and doubts,” thus reiterating Myanmar's policy of assimilation. Political analyst David Scott Mathieson argued how this shows that the USD 100 million Joint Peace Fund, established in 2016 by the donor community, has been squandered in the name of peace. As he puts it, “The

# An agreement that can turn fish to gold in the blue ocean

JENIFAR NESA POPI

WE all know how fish is a vital source of protein for people and fishing is a livelihood that millions depend on. But the fisheries sector is also a source of foreign exchange as it provides one of the most traded food commodities worldwide. In fact, marine fisheries have become one of the important components of the “Blue economy”. So what about Bangladesh, are we exploiting the opportunities at hand? After the legal battle with Myanmar (2012) and India (2014), maritime zones and especially Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ i.e., where a state has sovereign right to explore and exploit marine resources) were increased by three times which opened a door of immense prosperity. But how far could we be benefited in terms of marine fisheries from such vast waters?

Unfortunately, the marine fisheries sector has very poor contribution to the overall national economy. Our maritime zones are enriched with diversified fisheries resources comprised of more than 500 marine species, together with shrimps. In 2009-10 fiscal year, contribution of marine fisheries was around 5 lakh MT. But after a three times increase of EEZ (Exclusive economic zones) and with more than 90 commercially important fish species, its contribution remains only around 8 lakh MT in 2018-19. Over 250 industrial trawlers and over 67 thousand mechanised fishing boats can catch fish up to 70 km from the shoreline out of the total of 660 km available. The rest of the area (around 600km) remains untapped due to lack of proper vessels, modern technology and skilled manpower. To explore this unexploited

area, the Bangladesh government tried to start negotiations to enter into joint ventures with foreign countries which, however, proved unsuccessful. Later, the government granted permission to a few firms to launch long liners for deep sea fishing, but due to a lack of necessary survey regarding the availability of fish stocks, none of them were willing to take the risk till date. Although a multipurpose survey and research vessel, named, Meen Sandhani has been working since 2016, any reference point for stock assessment is not yet possible from these surveys.

With the increase of our population, we need to take initiatives to explore and exploit the full 118,813 km2 EEZ to fulfil the protein demand of the people. It has not only capabilities to fulfil the protein need, but it can also be a secure source of foreign currency. As Bangladesh does not have long liners, modern technologies and other logistical support and cooperation with developed countries to explore maritime zones is crucial now. Although we did not realise the importance of cooperation to explore marine fisheries, many African countries have already shown the effectiveness of cooperation in reality through fisheries access agreement with the European Union.

International fisheries access agreements have been instrumental in the exploration of untapped fisheries by developing countries. However, this is a new concept to South-Asian countries. These agreements allow fishermen from one country to harvest fish in another country's maritime waters. Generally these agreements are concluded between distant water fishing nations and developing countries for ensuring access to EEZ waters and resources of developing countries.

These agreements help developing countries not only to earn foreign currency by allowing other nations to catch fish in their maritime zones, but also ensure sustainable fisheries and development of fisheries sector. The United Nations Convention on Law of the Sea empowers the coastal states with sovereign rights to explore and exploit marine resources within EEZ. On the contrary, it imposed a duty on the coastal state to determine total allowable catch for its marine fisheries. Allowable catch is the maximum fishing limit which will not hamper the regeneration of the fish stock. If a country cannot harvest the entire allowable catch within its EEZ, it is obligated to permit other countries regulated access to the “surplus” marine resources.

Access agreements of African countries with the European Union improved the performance of their local fisheries sectors. In many African countries, these agreements have become a source of income that got reinvested into domestic industries and ensured partnerships in management and enforcement. With a small area of EEZ, many African countries such as, Gambia, Guinea-Bissau, Senegal, Mauritania, etc., are entering into access agreements which are contributing to their national economy a lot. Due to the contributions to the national economies, with 158,861 km2 and 23,184 km2 EEZ area, Senegal and Gambia have been entering into agreements with the European Union from 1980 and 1987 respectively.

Although Bangladesh has been a member of Law of the Sea Convention from 2001, there is no determination of total allowable catch for our marine fisheries yet. No fisheries law of

Bangladesh provides any provision for it. Let alone determine the total allowable catch and entering into access agreements—we are unable to assess our fish stocks yet. Under the circumstances, cooperation with developed countries can play a vital role which has been seen in African countries. The convention also imposed an obligation for optimum and sustainable use of marine fisheries. But Bangladesh is extracting fish from the reachable marine area with traditional vessels unsustainably; on the other hand, unreachable areas are totally unexplored and unexploited. It is the high time for Bangladesh to think about fisheries access agreements to ensure sustainable marine fisheries.

One of the noteworthy initiatives taken by the Bangladesh government to ensure sustainable blue economy is the establishment of a specialised university, named, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman Maritime University. Beside carrying out various researches, this university is conducting research regarding fisheries access agreements and their prospective impact on the national economy. Such research will reveal the existing problems of deep sea fishing and whether the littorals of the Bay of Bengal should proceed for strong cooperation with developed countries through fisheries access agreements in order to reap the benefits of the blue economy. Besides giving impetus to these research studies, the Bangladesh government should be sincere enough to implement the research results and take all other necessary initiatives to explore our enormous undiscovered marine fisheries.

Jenifar Nesa Popi, lecturer, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman Maritime University.