

# The Rohingya Problem: Fresh Thinking Needed

## A Statesman Departs

The death of Willy Brandt, former chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany, on Friday in his hometown of Unkel near Bonn marked the end of an era, not only for the people of post-1945 Germany, but for mankind as a whole. Perhaps the fact that he had been out of the political limelight for over five years lessened the feeling of immense shock which his departure would otherwise have generated. But the sense of loss is sure to run deep, not only in Europe, a continent which owes a lot of its sense of destiny to Brandt's tireless work for peace and reconciliation between ideological adversaries, but also across the rest of the world, where he would be remembered for his dedicated efforts to bridge the huge wealth gap between the industrialised North and under-developed South.

Few statesmen of this century, a century marked by two world wars, rise and fall of communism, countless wars of national liberation, superpower war of nerves made frightening by a nuclear standoff etc, can hope to match the level of respect and admiration that the 78-year-old leader earned long before he contracted intestinal cancer just under two years ago. As chancellor of post-war Germany between 1969 and 1974, Brandt did not only preside over the re-emergence of his nation as an economic and political giant, he, more than any other Western leader, strove to establish a bridge of trust over the treacherous waters of East-West ideological rivalry that had disfigured the landscape of central Europe since 1945. Perhaps it would not be an exaggeration to say that Willy Brandt the statesman personified the policy of detente which reduced East-West tension to a point where confrontation not only became unattractive, it became an exercise in futility. The advent of Mikhail Gorbachev in Moscow, 12 years after Brandt had quit the chancellorship after a close aide was revealed to be an undercover East German intelligence officer, and the rapid collapse of the post-45 order in the East owed as much to the long-term effects of *Ostpolitik* as anything else that might have followed.

Brandt's dedication to better the world was reflected also in his work in the commission, he headed, seeking ways to achieve a more equitable distribution of wealth among a nations.

The Brandt Commission's report, like those before and after him, may not have led to the author's desired goal, but it did establish the principle that world economic relations could not go on the way they had in the past. The idea of a New International Economic Order did not come from Brandt, but his Commission did attempt to make the idea acceptable to the West. Brandt did not champion aid for its own sake, but he talked about better trading opportunities for the Third World, net flow of capital from the North to the South and not the other way round etc. At the end of his life he may well have looked upon Europe, with Germany unified again, as moving towards the goal of his *Ostpolitik*; unfortunately, the economic plight of the debt-ridden developing world may have made him feel that his work was all to nothing. It is now the duty of the successors and beneficiaries of Brandt's legacy to ensure that political freedom of Europe is matched by economic emancipation of the rest of the world.

## Environment: A question of bona fide

The State Minister of Irrigation, Water Development and Flood Control as the chief guest at the annual general meeting of the Institute for Environment and Development Studies, pronounced the profoundest headline of the day on Friday: "Life can be protected through biodiversity only." While expressing no doubts in the omniscience of our ministers, one knows that there is always a bevy of Sanco Panzas helping the administration leaders with the right words for the right occasions. Whoever the credits go in this case, thanks all the same to the minister for his specially courageous articulation: Life on earth is the outcome of ecological balance.

What such profound pronouncements from on high and in unending cascades do amount to? All the ministers of this and all past governments have between them given us all the wisdom in the world without effecting a centimetre of change in what has been going on. Let us take this case of ministerial edification to illustrate the utter futility of such exercises — which is one thing that the ministers are not unaware of.

Personal vices such as smoking are not amenable to outside control. Government is bent on fighting this to the end although most of its constituent continue to smoke and set examples for the lesser mortals to follow as to how lordly it looks to puff at imported brands with all the discourtesy in the world. They are serious about the fight even as they line the governmental coffers with money coming from the cigarette manufacturers. Side by side, government is very shy to do anything with any amount of effectiveness in matters where large-scale pollution of the environment is in operation but the thing happens to be capitally amenable to control. Why shall we have to take the ministerial disgorging of environmental *hifalutin* when government hasn't so far proved its seriousness in making the roads of Dhaka, to begin with free of defective motorised vehicles specially those belching black-smoke. If the government truly wants to gift Dhaka an atmosphere free of carbon monoxide, it is within its power to realise that within a week's time. The easy conclusion that can be drawn from the governments failure to stop defective automobiles from plying or the open shelling of migratory birds or the felling of large trees in the city — is a study in obviousness: the government is not at all serious about these things.

Then why go lecturing people on what to do and what not to do about the environment? As long as the government promotes the use of chemical fertilisers and polythene bags it doesn't have the bona fide to talk pollution and environment and special bio-diversity. Hundreds of species of life are going extinct in Bangladesh every passing decade with such a record it doesn't become us to hold forth on the uses of bio-diversity.

THE Rohingya problem seems to have become a part of the Bangladesh political scene. One or twice a week reports from the camps hit the headlines and then they disappear from public view for a few days only to reappear again, perhaps the following week. Having followed the reports closely I have the impression that Bangladesh is now passing through what I would call, a "make-believe" phase. We are told by the government to believe that the repatriation of the refugees is proceeding according to plan. The departure of a token number of refugees is expected to be taken seriously by us. However the number of people who have actually moved across the border is so minuscule that at this rate it will take many years to complete the process. What is really happening at the border? Why does not the government take the people into confidence so that the veil of mystery surrounding the issue may be removed and if necessary, fresh diplomatic efforts may be mounted to achieve our goal?

There is no reason to doubt the government's keenness to send back all the refugees. The agreement signed on April 28 aims at this objective. However, five months after the signing of the agreement, is it not the right time for the nation to ask the government about the fate of the agreement? We can, of course, guess about its fate. Whether the government admits it or not, its policies have failed. Not only do the refugees remain in the camps in Bangladesh but the problem threatens to go out of control. Is it not better to face the facts as they are instead of living in a world of "make-believe"? The time has come to review the whole situation with a view to initiating new policies. It is a matter of profound regret that in handling the question the government has alienated the UNHCR which is the designated UN agency to deal with refugee relief and other humanitarian problems. Ever

Bangladesh must untangle itself from this "no-win" situation in which it is caught. If the refugees do not return within the next few months, the agreement will be a dead document. If the government succeeds in sending back these people, it seems, much against their will, without any reliable method of supervision and guarantee of safety, we will be open to international criticism for having disregarded humanitarian norms in dealing with the refugees.

since its various agencies. It would certainly sadden me and I am sure, many others in the country, if any fine tradition of cordial and close relation with the world body and its agencies is replaced by distrust and bitterness. We must not, ostrich-like, bury our head in the sand but take a hard look at the problem in order to get out of the impasse.

It would be naive to believe that it is a simple issue. It has many facets and long and tortuous historical origin. It seems however that the Foreign Minister took a somewhat simplistic view and wanted, if one may say, rather naively, the credit for a spectacular diplomatic success. He might have been under the illusion that the success of 1979 can be easily repeated. As Home Minister his memories of the successful repatriation in 1979 seemed to have made him to complacent about the complexity of the issue. One wonders if this is at the root of the bungling that has taken place in its handling. Obviously the two situations are not identical. For one thing, the government of Myanmar in those days was headed by Ne Win who had developed a close working relation with the government of Bangladesh. Neither said questioned the good faith of the other. Bangladesh firmly resisted the pressures from some Middle Eastern countries to widen the scope of the problem. As a result a simple and straight forward deal was possible.

The most serious mistake which was committed by the Foreign Minister was to sign the agreement with Myanmar in April. In his eagerness he travelled to Rangoon and came back as a disillusioned man. The Myanmar Foreign Minister was not too eager to reciprocate our Foreign Minister's gesture. In the end we signed an agreement at a time when Bangladesh stood to gain by waiting for a few months. The international pressure on Myanmar was getting intensified and the passage of time was to our advantage. The western countries and Japan had stopped the flow of economic assistance to Myanmar and stepped up their campaign on the violation of human rights. They saw the Rohingya problem as a part of the bigger problem of disregard and violation of human rights by the

arranging repatriation and resettlement. Why did we let the Myanmar junta off the hook? Was it simply the desire for the glory of a diplomatic success or was there some other motive? I have not been able to fathom the reasons for this ill-judged action. Whatever might have been the reason we have undoubtedly suffered a diplomatic setback.

It is well known that certain Middle Eastern countries have political objectives in the area which Bangladesh does not share. It is also not a secret that the Jamatt-e-Islami military junta. While the regime was being pushed to a corner by the international community, we appeared on the scene as their saviour. Instead of taking advantage of the emerging speedy repatriation, we took them off the hook. By signing the agreement prematurely we enabled the Myanmar military junta to escape the wrath of the international community. It is indeed strange that even under those unfavorable circumstances it was not Myanmar which sought the agreement. It was Bangladesh which seemed to be over-eager to sign an agreement, even if the terms were not fully satisfactory or acceptable to us. For example, the most important safeguard provision for "safe" repatriation, namely, return and resettlement under international supervision, was most unwisely, not included in the agreement. The Myanmar side thus won a diplomatic victory in denying UNHCR any role in

which the UNHCR, the RSO, the Jamatt-e-Islami and the Middle Eastern NGOs with goals of their own are all on the same side of the issue. They are all opposed to the kind of unsupervised repatriation that the government is determined to carry out. Why did we isolate ourselves in this manner? The only party which is with us on this question seems to be the Myanmar military junta. Of course, friendship with the neighbouring people of Burma ought to be a basic goal of our policy but the military junta must not be equated with the people.

Bangladesh must untangle itself from this "no-win" situation in which it is caught. If the refugees do not return within the next few months, the agreement will be a dead document. If the government succeeds in sending back these people, it seems, much against their will, without any reliable method of supervision and guarantee of safety, we will be open to international criticism for having disregarded humanitarian norms in dealing with the refugees. In any case, what is the assurance that these unfortunate people will not be pushed back again? I am told that the Myanmar junta, whose unpopularity had reached the absolute bottom in the country, gained some measure of popularity among the ethnic Burmese by taking a tough line on the Rohingyas.

The western powers would be our natural allies in our search for a peaceful solution of the problem. As far as I recall, in the initial stage we did try to get their support and understanding but suddenly we altered course after the agreement was signed with the junta. We must also re-establish a relation of trust and confidence with the UN and especially the UNHCR. I have no reason to believe that the High Commissioner will not extend her hand of support and cooperation if we stop the current campaign against the senior officials of the agency. Such a policy cannot serve our national interests. Should we lose the financial assistance that the UNHCR is giving and will be able to mobilize in the future? Obviously this will be a most unwise course of action. We must not make the UNHCR a scapegoat for our failures. Finally we have to work out a modality for the repatriation which will lead to the actual return of all the refugees and not be content with token gestures. The presence of the UNHCR officials on the other side of the border will create the necessary confidence among the refugees and help motivate them to return. By sending back a few hundred refugees we may create an illusion that the agreement is working but in the long term interest of the nation we must give up this type of wishful thinking and "make-believe" diplomacy.

The first thing to do in charting a new course in handling the question is to ensure that external forces are not permitted to operate in the camps to foment unrest and develop linkages with those who do not want a speedy solution of the problem. The NGOs must be screened and those whose track records are not accept-

## ON THE RECORD

by Shah AMS Kibria

party has certain interests in the question which are not identical with the declared government policy of seeking the total repatriation of all the refugees. The NGOs with links with these interests are naturally supporting the militant RSO in fomenting unrest in the camps in order to frustrate the government's plans. What are we doing to prevent these activities? I have seen newspaper reports about the smuggling of arms in the camps from all kinds of external sources. Given the current law and order situation in the country this must be viewed as a serious threat to our national interests.

# Deng Faces Democracy Dilemma at Party Congress

Catherine Sampson writes from Beijing

Despite his advanced age and almost inaudible voice China's supreme leader Deng Xiaoping is likely to dominate proceedings at the 14th congress of the communist party, beginning October 12. Three thousands delegates meeting in their first congress for five years, and the first after the collapse of communism in the former Soviet bloc, will assess political and economic situation in the country. The Congress will also reopen debate about how to reconcile economic reform with socialism.

WHEN China's three thousand communist party delegates meet in their first congress for five years, the name and thoughts and policies of one frail old man will be more important than all their votes put together.

It is unlikely that the 88-year-old Deng Xiaoping will shuffle onto the platform at the 14th party congress. It is his name, however, which will be uttered more times than any other, and always in reverential tones.

It is his vision of the future which will be endorsed, and although nobody will dare to mention Deng's eventual passing, everyone will know that the congress is intended a his legacy.

But there is a feeling of deep unease surrounding this congress. This is not, after all, the first time that Deng has tried to set his radical reform policies in stone.

Five years ago, observers were touting the 13th party congress as Deng's last battle. In closed with substantial gains for the reformist faction, and yet the past five years have been turbulent and Deng and all he stands for have been called into question.

Less than a year after the 1987 congress, Deng's protégé, the then general secretary Zhao Ziyang, was bitterly criticised at the leadership's summer retreat in Beidaihe.

A rectification campaign was introduced to cool down the badly overheated economy. In 1989, demonstrations against corruption turned into calls for Deng's resignation and freedom of the press.

The army crackdown was followed by a conservative backlash which lasted until early this year Zhao was placed under what amounts to house arrest, where he remains. When Deng reappeared this year, he had to kickstart reform all over again. The 13th party congress can only be seen now as a hollow victory.

The prospects for the pe-

riod after the 14th party congress are little better. Ever since 1989 and the subsequent collapse of communism in the former Soviet bloc, China's communists have been living from day to day.

When Deng reappeared after nearly three years as a recluse, he did not choose and set-piece political function as his platform for a battle with hardliners. Rather, he chose guerrilla warfare in the form of a tour of the south, the scene of his greatest successes, to whip up support and to utter barbed comments against hardliners.

But his heyday is gone, and although his angry denunciation of leftism sent hardliners running for cover, he was revealed as Deng an old weak man without deputies sufficiently trusted or influential to fight his battles on his behalf.

Instead, he relies on the arm of his daughter Deng Lin, the ears of his daughter the voice of his daughter and even the tape recorder held in his daughter's hand to disseminate his almost inaudible words of wisdom.

Deng is known to dislike both Prime Minister Li Peng and communist party general secretary Jiang Zemin. Both, Deng believes, have mishandled the economy. Having ousted two general secretaries that he himself had hand-picked in the 1980s, however, Deng cannot now dismiss Jiang Zemin without bringing his own judgement into question.

There is speculation that during this congress one or two deputies be brought in un-

der Jiang to guide him and restrict his leftist tendencies which have become pronounced since he took office.

As for prime minister Li Peng, who is widely disliked because of his close involvement in the crackdown on demonstrators in 1989, he could not be removed until the parliamentary meeting next year.

Meanwhile, Deng may be trying to find a new position for Li which would mean he had to give up the premiership. Any such position would have to be high profile, in order not to offend Li too deeply, while giving him little power over the economy.

The politburo standing committee is expected to be expanded, but unless Deng brings off a coup, there will be nobody at or near the top who is a potential successor for the old man.

Who is up and who down will be of only minor importance when Deng Xiaoping dies, as he almost surely will before the next congress in 1997. Supreme power lies with Deng, and will die with him.

This month, reformists and hardliners are expected to cobble together adjustments to the leadership which will promote men from both camps, leaving neither with a free hand to formulate policy.

As one Beijing intellectual points out: "Deng himself is a contradiction, a reformer and hardliner together in one man, how can he choose between the two?"

The case of Zhao Ziyang should be resolved at this

congress. But it is most likely that some formula will be found to shelve it once more. His continued limbo may be an embarrassment to the party, but that is nothing to the potentially devastating results of opening the wounds of 1989 again. They are so lightly plastered over.

Enshrined at the centre of policy for the next half-decade is Deng's belief that reform in the economy can be successfully married with an undemocratic political system.

Yet all Deng's rule has proven is that Deng's vision does not work. Rather than bringing stability and harmony, the pull of economic reform against calls for political reform have led to wild swings back and forth.

In the past fourteen years, Deng himself has been forced repeatedly to change his spots from anti-leftist to anti-rightist so as to balance the political pendulum as it has swung out of control first in one direction then the other.

Indeed, at the upcoming congress, the contradictions will be made even more acute. Economic reform will be more radical than ever, with the implementation of a new formulation, the "socialist market economy" effectively meaning an end to central planning.

On the political front, however, there will be a big step backwards from 1987, when separation of party and government was on the agenda. This time there will not even be an attempt at pre-emptive separation of party and gov-

ernment is not up for discussion.

In 1989, the students were not calling specifically for democracy. But, whether they realised it or not, what they were demanding — a free press; freedom of speech; the right for ordinary people to present their views of politics and to be listened to; government answerable to the people on issues of concern like corruption — are all the constituent parts of democracy. Deng consistently refuses to deal with this issue, but it will not go away.

At first sight, Deng has little to worry about from democracy activists. In the past three years, Beijing has effectively castrated the democracy movement. After the army crackdown, thousands were put in prison, where unknown numbers remain.

Other cities of government policy have been effectively silenced with a passport and a flight out of China: Fang Lizhi, Dai Qing, Han Dongfang, Wang Ruowang, Zhou Duo, are among those who have gone. Even those who become involved with the pro-democracy movement in exile have little impact from such a distance.

Liberal intellectuals who are not in prison and not abroad tend to support Deng's reform drive for two reasons. First because however much they distrust Deng, he is more acceptable to them than hardline leftists. Second, because economic reform has always brought a more general liberalisation in its wake however much Deng disapproves.

The communists have

bought over the man on the street by offering him a version of do-it-yourself capitalism: a wealth of consumer goods in the shops and myriad semi-legal opportunities to make money.

But while Deng's policies may bring about an efficient economy, they are also likely to bring about resentment among those who do not immediately profit.

Loss-making state industries have only just begun to make mass lay-offs, and already there are reports of worker unrest. People complain about rent hikes, about inflation, and about the disintegration of education and health services because of underfunding.

Just as in 1989, dissatisfaction among workers in complemented by increased daring among those who are in favour of political change. Already, encouraged by talk of economic liberalisation, artists and writers are beginning to bring about their own slow cultural thaw.

Similarly, China's journalists are becoming just a little braver. And although liberal intellectuals say that they do not want to relive 1989, they find it difficult to stay silent when they see that economic liberalisation presents them with opportunities to speak out.

Such factors for instability do not bode well for a stable and united path to the next congress, five years from now. Even official newspapers are warning of an over-heated economy.

In what might be a replay of 1988, economists warn that whatever the pro-growth message in the run-up to the congress, a retrenchment programme will inevitably be introduced next spring. Other intellectuals identify a leftist backlash which they say will intensify after the congress.

— GEMINI NEWS

CATHERINE SAMPSON is a British Journalist based in Beijing and writes regularly for The Times, London.

## To the Editor...

**Toward non-polar world**

Sir, Jakarta Message has been heard loud and clear across the world with echoes to continue through the times ahead, as special significance was attached to the 10th NAM summit in a new world order that evidently empowered the majority of world's states with fresh hopes and zeal to materialize the declaration.

Teachings of history emphasize that the success of a movement cannot be guaranteed by the physical strength of an in-movement single entity or a conglomerate of organizations, rather dedication to the objectives can, such as Bangladesh's commitment to NAM reiterated by Bangladesh

Prime Minister at the last meeting.

Now with US as the mightiest political power on earth after abolition of communist empire following evaporation of Cold War, NAM may have a component force to carry forward such a movement envisioned by its founding fathers.

M Rahman  
Zila School Road, Mymensingh

**Bio-pesticide**

Sir, My friend M. Zahidul Haque has recently (9 Sept) written in your columns about the harmful effects of chemical pesticides and the potential benefits of bio-pesticides, which are being researched in various countries. I would like to mention a highly promising development in the USA as reported extensively in a New

York Times article of 18 August 1992.

Biosys Inc. of Palo Alto, California has patented a technique to raise insect-parasitic nematodes (of the genus *Steinernema*) with bacteria in a liquid broth of nutrients. Production is about 3.5 trillion nematodes per week. Such a big production is necessary because it requires several billion nematodes per acre to control many soil-dwelling insect pests of agricultural crops.

When nematode parasites penetrate into insects they carry with them a deadly kind of bacteria which kill the host. The parasites are usually applied with standard agricultural spraying equipment after being mixed well with water. Nematode treatment is still

expensive, costing about \$300 per acre, but for several crops it has been found to be more economical than chemicals.

Father Timm  
ex-nematologist.

**BBC**

Sir, It is learnt that the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) World Service is going to publish a magazine named "BBC Worldwide" under the editorship of Editor Steve Weinman which will cover more international news and views.

We sincerely hope that the BBC will intensify and strengthen its objective news coverage depicting correct socio-political situations of the third world countries and it

will continue its struggle to uphold the truth and justice. I have noticed that BBC usually puts emphasis on the views of the opposing parties; this is good for revealing facts but I think more in-depth survey of opinions is essential for projecting absolute truths. The opposition parties do not always stand on the right side, some opposes only because they are in the opposition. But such opposition often causes deep sufferings to the common people who do not understand politics much.

Meanwhile I would like to wish all success of the "BBC Worldwide".

M Zahidul Haque  
Assistant Professor,  
Bangladesh Agricultural Institute, Dhaka