

A Twist in the Rohingya Issue

We feel a deep concern over the latest a development in the relations between the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the Government of Bangladesh, which casts a shadow over co-operation between the two and threatens to create new complications in what is already a complex exercise, the repatriation of Rohingya refugees to Myanmar. True, at this moment, the damage is largely caused by an exchange of statements between the two, with the United States government, rather surprisingly, taking the side of UNHCR in accusing Dhaka of "Coercing" the refugees to return to their homeland and of "Preventing the UN body from fulfilling its international mandate."

What makes the development particularly serious is a kind of an ultimatum from the UNHCR Chief Sadako Ogata that her organisation would pull out of the refugee management process if Bangladesh authorities did not review its repatriation policy. It is, in effect, a veiled threat from a UN body that no member state of the world body can take lightly, no matter how serious are the differences between Dhaka and the Geneva-based organisation. One cannot recall if any such statement had been issued by UNHCR to Britain over the treatment meted out to Vietnamese refugees in Hong Kong last year, a treatment that many human rights bodies regarded as unacceptable or, for that matter, to some Southeast Asian countries which, in the eighties, often pushed back the so-called boat people into the open sea; instead of giving them even temporary sanctuary. Refugees from other places, including from Haiti trying to land in the United States, have also been victims of indifference of governments. Compared to these cases, Bangladesh has done reasonably well — not certainly to everyone's satisfaction — in handling the issue of repatriation of Rohingya refugees — despite its lack of resources, political pressures, unhelpful attitude of the Myanmar authorities and the deteriorating law and order situation in the camps.

Here, we should comment the spirited but restrained and dignified defence provided on Saturday by Foreign Secretary Reaz Rahman of the government's position, especially on the allegations made by Ogata. It is possible to find a grey area in Rahman's detailed explanation, but it certainly makes one wonder if the UNHCR Chief could not handle the situation without going public, especially when, as the Foreign Secretary revealed, the UN body's South Asia Chief Werner Blatter had "appreciated" the efforts of Bangladesh in handling this problem and that too, only four days earlier. If Blatter was just being polite, he was certainly misleading the authorities here, leaving it to his boss to commit a breach in the standard diplomacy that governs the UN's relations with a member state.

What happens next should be a matter of concern for both UNHCR and the Government of Bangladesh. Rahman is perfectly right in suggesting the two sides should maintain their dialogue. We will go further and recommend that Dhaka should also be ready to change the modalities relating to the UNHCR's participation in the programme. Both sides may be guilty of lapses, but both share the common concern for the safe repatriation of all the Rohingya refugees to their homeland, under the watchful eyes of the UN body. There should, therefore, be no question of UNHCR walking out of the scene, thus abdicating its responsibility for the welfare of nearly quarter of a million people, the refugees from Myanmar.

Unsavory Meat

Latest studies in dietetics tend largely to wean people away from meat-eating. If they knew how the residents of Dhaka get their daily portion of meat, they would straightaway ban this as poison. The Daily Star of Sunday exposes, albeit superficially, the problem of meat in the capital city.

Dhaka is going to be one of the most populous cities of the world in possibly a decade's time. Which is hardly a happy outlook. The big cities around the world have been resorting to ever new devices to cope with this snowballing effect in urban population. Dhaka is lagging far behind in preparing for the great challenge and, in the bargain badly failing to cope with the needs and problems of its present anything-beyond-seven-million population. Nobody is warning that there is grave danger there and everybody is busy either in anti-social self-aggrandizement or in cowardly giving in to bullying and all kinds of exploitation.

That Dhaka is capably unfit to take off as a city befitting the first century of the third millennium is convincingly proved by the fact that the residents of the city hardly have any feeling for the city as their very own and take pleasure in breaking every law and flouting all regulations geared to keep such a large mass of people going about their business of eking out a living with a sense of satisfaction. The hawkers of the migratory birds are committing crime with impunity and even felicity. The whole city population including those belonging to all the authorities that have powers over people seem not to be disturbed by this open violation of law — rather they possibly feel grateful to those criminals but for whom they couldn't have Siberian fowl on their dinner table. Similar is the case with meat. Although on the papers there were one or more meatless days in a week, in practice there was none for last so many years.

The blame must first go to the municipal authorities who have not been able to provide ample abattoir facilities to cover the meat demand of a supposedly eight million population. And they have not enough enforcement manpower either. No one can be blamed for suspecting that rather than making the three meatless days of the week truly meatless they are more interested in collecting fine money that only infringements of law can generate.

The bird offenders are seasonal culprits but the butchers slaughter animals round the year on any point of the road network they please, fouling up whole areas of the city for years on end. And all meat that comes from such spot is sold without the health seal it must carry from the municipal veterinarian. As in the case of the migratory birds, both the criminally acting butchers and the meatloving patrons join each other in making an unfit-for-living hole of this city.

The bottom-line for all eaters of meat should be: Don't buy meat on the three meatless days — whatever the pressure from the family and, don't buy meat that doesn't carry the proper seal.

It was election time in Kuwait. Everyone appeared to be busy with something or the other connected with the first-ever election to choose a representative Legislature. Hardly anyone was brooding over the fact that only two years ago this oil-rich emirate, having an area of only 6877 square miles or roughly the size of one eighth of Bangladesh, was under the occupation of the invading Iraqi army and that some months later it became the theatre for a full-scale war which was one of the fiercest since the Korean and Vietnam wars.

I reached Kuwait City on October 02 to be in time to observe the election proceedings of October 5. As we moved around the city we were surprised at the ease with which the people had reconstructed their war-torn life and at the robust confidence with which they were looking at the future. What worked behind that sense of security was the thought that they were not alone in their hour of peace as they were not alone in their dark hours of horror. They had friends, real friends.

In fact, as I soon found out, the sense of security the Kuwaitis were enjoying was psychological rather than real. They were literally living on top of a live volcano made up of hundreds of thousands of tons of mines, explosives and body traps planted by the Iraqis to secure their occupation and dropped by the allied forces to

give hell to those Iraqis. The allied air forces alone dropped about 88,000 tons of bombs and missiles with many hitting the soft desert sand to remain unexploded. An estimated one million mines were left planted by the Iraqis before quitting. I had a view of this volcano when Col. Abdul Haliz Malik of the Bangladesh Army arranged for me to visit on October 8 a large desolated sector of pure sand about 75 kilometer northwest of Kuwait city to see how the three guest battalions of our army were clearing dangerous explosives. The contingent drawn mainly from the Corps of Engineers, to which our chief of army staff General Nuruddin Khan himself belongs, has been assigned, under an agreement signed between the two governments on 10 November 1991, an area of about 3300 sq KM south of Iraqi border and west of Kuwait-Basra highway to be cleared of explosives by March 1994. The very topography of the area made it obvious that this was a very strategic piece of land from the Iraqi point of view and perhaps to use it as the final battleground it was duly prepared by dump-

Bangladesh Army Engineers Making Kuwait Safe for All

by Enayetullah Khan who recently visited Kuwait

Exclusive to The Star

ing a huge quantity of logistic ammunitions and explosives for the armoured divisions of the much publicised Republican Guards.

Although apparently awe-inspiring the territory's danger was hardly reflected on the faces of our-troops. What was reflected was the work of the extreme desert weather — 55 degree centigrade of heat during day dropping to zero degree at night with sand storms lashing them all the time. In answer to my anxious queries the soldiers said the weather looked inhospitable in the beginning but nothing compared to the risk and dare involved in their task. So quickly they learnt to ignore the weather and got down to the dangerous work of clearing the explosives. They showed no emotion in explaining to me that what mattered to them then and now was the honour of the flag they were carrying and even the risk of death would not deter them from discharging their assigned duty.

Commander Malik said the hazard involved had increased manifold because thousands of

cluster bombs and mines and thousands of tons of ammunitions and explosives had been under exposure of extreme weather conditions for a long period and many of these items had sunk in the ground due to drifting of sand. But he hastened to add that his officers and men were determined to fight all odds of the operation and make area safe for the brotherly people of Kuwait.

During the day-long visit I was first taken to Al-Jahra, 40 Km from Kuwait city for a briefing at the Bangladesh Army Clearance Operations headquarters and then to Regah, 22 km northwest of Jahra, to see some activities of an Engineer battalion involving central demolition, ammunition bunkers, missiles and launchers, underground tanks and guns and searching and

breaching. Next I was taken to Umm Al-Qatit, 4 km further from Regah to see more explosives clearance operations and visited some Iraqi underground bunkers and water tanks. Col Malik and the local commanders readily answered my queries. In the company of robustly confident Bangladeshi

troops, talking in Bangali in the wild desert of Kuwait which still bore heavy scars of a fierce modern war, I became imperceptibly unaware of the proximity of danger. I must say I never reckoned I would see so much and so wide a variety of weapons of mass destruction. Many of these new generation weapons may have been used in a war for the first time to test their destructive capability. The experience left me awe-struck. As the officers described their status in the modern weaponry I wondered what have would these bombs, ammunition and missiles cause if used in thickly populated cities and towns.

I learnt from Brigadier Shah Jalal, Chief Liaison Officer of Bangladesh military contingent to Kuwait that when Bangladesh was assigned the task of clearing a Kuwaiti warfield eyebrows were raised in the western nations but they were unaware of the training and competence of our Corps of Engineers and their experience at home and abroad. When Bangladesh was liberated in 1971 after a 9-month war they had to undertake a similar task over a much bigger

territory. A large quantity of weapons and equipment were also recovered. These achievements earned our troops spontaneous appreciation of the Kuwaiti army and people. The critics must have been surprised to see that on the basis of their performance the Bangladesh contingent has been assigned newer tasks including quality assurance checks of clearance works done by contingents from other countries. This is a tribute that speaks volumes of the efficiency and dedication of our troops working in a land far away from home.

At the end of the day I felt immensely happy that I could visit the front and be with our troops watching them perform a most difficult humanitarian task to make the life of the brotherly people of Kuwait safer. The war was over, the country was liberated from the invaders but much of its territory was yet dangerously unsafe for its people. Bangladesh along with USA, UK, France, Egypt, Pakistan and Turkey was engaged in the task of removing that limitation on the restored sovereignty of Kuwait to rhyme happily with its new democratic aspirations. For the brotherly people of Bangladesh what could be a better message than the news that their troops were accomplishing their noble task well? I was happy to bring that news home.

The writer is the Chief Editor of the United News of Bangladesh (UNB) and of the Dhaka Courier.

Don't Ignore Muslims' Cries in Bosnia

by Fakhruddin Ahmed

As the Serbs violate cease-fire after cease-fire, flout one UN resolution after another, you purport to punish them with yet another unenforced, toothless resolution. As you become more and more creative in suggesting ways to punish Iraq, it probably has not occurred to you that the Serbs also merit some punishment.

Gentiles and Jews, would you not go berserk if you had evidence that 3,000 of your own men, women and children were massacred by the savages in the concentration camps? Well, the Serbs have done this to the Muslims.

And what does the State Department of the most powerful nation on Earth do? Fearlessly, it passes on the information to the United Nations. No moral outrage shakes the Earth. No action is demanded by the president of the nation "under God." Europe points toward the United States; the United

States points toward the United Nations. The buck is passed.

President Bush, when someone mentions Iraq to you, you turn into a roaring tiger. When Bosnia-Herzegovina is mentioned you are a helpless "Chicken George." All the United States and the United Nations are willing to do is feed the Bosnians until such time when the Serbs see it fit to butcher them.

When you were finding it difficult to stomach the impending gulf war, Margaret Thatcher had supposedly steeled you: "This is not time to get wobbly, George." Thatcher was not quite successful in converting you, it

seems. Bush has ignored her plea to arm the Bosnians for self-defence.

Everyone is giving up any hope that the Muslims can be saved. It is so easy to give up when the people being butchered are not your own.

The West rules the Earth with economic and military power. Is the West forgetting that while it can subdue people with force and seduce them with money, it can only win them over with moral power? Tolerance of such barbaric acts by your own kind is chipping away at your moral authority.

Third World, in the height of Superpower rivalry, you strutted with such naive and refreshing idealism. Nowadays, you exhibit an incredible capacity for self-destruction.

Asian-African stalwarts such as China, India and Zimbabwe have opposed every UN move to help Bosnia-Herzegovina.

This is not a good time to be a Muslim. At a time when the Muslims have sold their soul to the West for a pittance, Time magazine picks the Crusades as the most important event of the last millennium. Small Muslims languish in starvation. Floods drown thousands of Pakistanis. An earthquake devastates Cairo. Muslims continuously fight Muslims inconclusively, and destroy each other with the help of so-called allies.

Humanity, why don't you declare Bosnia-Herzegovina a "No Ethnic Cleansing Zone"?

Dr Fakhruddin Ahmed is a member of the Islamic Society of Central Jersey. As scientist, Ahmed lives in West Windsor Township.

Dollar Mania Hits Myanmar

Minn Thu writes from Rangoon

A dollar mania seems to have gripped Burma which is in desperate need of foreign exchange.

Maintaining a foreign currency account or buying goods with dollars has become a status symbol in this country, now officially known as Myanmar. The dollar mania affects both the citizenry and the government. The junta-led government plans to lease its embassy in Singapore to a developer and will instead rent a new building for its mission in the island republic. Unconfirmed reports, never denied, have it that it has also sold part of its embassy in Tokyo.

And after 26 years of "socialist reconstruction," the government has turned to the privatisation of many of its assets in a bid to turn around unproductive factories into dollar-earners.

Recently, a new Ministry of Tourism was established with an eye on dollar-bearing visitors. Myanmar plans to lure 500,000 tourists into the country, an ambitious programme given the current 20,000 tourist arrivals each year.

The ruling State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) is determined to earn as much foreign exchange amidst a suspension of foreign aid and an external debt of US\$4 billion. Foreign donors have suspended all aids and loans after the SLORC staged a coup in 1987 that ended not only a rigid one-party rule but

also a pro-democracy movement which toppled the former regime.

Donor countries are still dissatisfied with the way the military has handled the pro-democracy movement, forcing hundreds if not thousands of students and other activists into the underground or into self-exile, mainly in Thailand. There have also been reports of forced labour used as porters in military anti-insurgency drives and other alleged human rights violations which are always denied by the military.

None of the donor countries has resumed aids and loans except for selected ongoing projects. And these countries are still calling for the release of political detainees, including Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, and the speedy transfer of power to a still unconvened legislature elected in 1990.

Myanmar's estimated external debt of US\$4.2 billion has gone down to just around US\$4 billion as Japan, which has converted all loans prior to 1978 into outright grants, has been turning Myanmar's repayments into debt relief grants.

France has cancelled Myanmar's outstanding debt of about US\$83 million. Germany has also decided to turn Myanmar's outstanding debts into outright grants.

While foreign exchange reserves are reportedly low, analysts wonder where Burma got US\$1 billion to pay for arms and equipment bought from China

Still, critics are quick to note that while the country's foreign exchange reserves are low, Myanmar has bought over US\$1 billion worth of arms and equipment from China and also some helicopters from Poland, according to still unconfirmed reports. Diplomatic analysts in fact are wondering where the country gets these funds.

Still, under an open-door policy, the SLORC has long encouraged citizens to open foreign currency bank accounts with the state-run Myanmar Foreign Trade Bank. Prior to the coup, this was a privilege enjoyed only by seamen serving abroad and official delegations.

Today, local companies have foreign currency accounts. So do citizens who have sold goods at state-run emporiums, landlords who charge their rent in dollars and employees working with foreign firms.

Cars, motorcycles and other consumer goods sent on consignment basis are sold in foreign exchange as well as in kyats calculate, at the unofficial rate of exchange. The official rate has floated at around six

kyats to the dollar which fetches about 20 times more in the black market.

Those who do not have the foreign currency buy the dollars from those with the dollar accounts, paying the black market rate which varies according to the type of commodity being bought.

When the government recently announced in October it will install telephones faster for those who could pay in dollars, there was a rush for the currency and the black-market rate shot up 30 times. Some 3,774 people applied for telephones in the first two days of the offer alone, despite the stiff US\$1,100 installation fee.

More significant, after 26 years of "socialist construction" which saw hundreds of enterprises turned into state property, Myanmar is now turning to privatisation. About a hundred factories and mills have been leased to the private sector on a joint venture basis, with options to buy. The move comes at a time when the SLORC, now in its fifth year of power, designated 1992 as the year of economic development.

Since it came to power, the SLORC has declared an open door policy now being emphasised as a market economy. The private sector has been allowed to participate not only in the export and import trade but also in the production sector, an area from which it was banned by the former regime.

Fishing rights in Burmese waters have been granted to foreign firms while the private sector has been urged to take up fish and prawn production. According to Livestock and Fisheries Minister Maung Maung, an air force brigadier, a ton of selected fish could fetch up to US\$ 3,000 while a ton of prawns US\$ 7,000.

Timber logging concessions have also been granted to Thai firms. Along the Thai-Burmese border, some 14 foreign oil companies have been allowed to explore and exploit both land and offshore oil deposits under production sharing agreements.

In addition to two private banks, Myanmar has permitted the Thai Military Bank to open a branch in Yangon (Rangoon), the capital, making it the first foreign bank to get an operating licence. Myanmar nationalised 10 foreign banks and 14 national banks in 1963, followed by the nationalisation of industries, schools, hospitals and even big stores in

factories now available for lease include those making tiles, ice, wheat, metals, ceramics, umbrellas, fountain pens, paints and jute. Four flour mills were auctioned off for US\$ 4.765 million and four ice factories fetched about US\$ 1 million.

Private participation has also been permitted in the mining of jade, gems, tin and tungsten. The state-run soap factory has also begun accepting orders from the private sector, enabling it to earn US\$10 million in the last three years or so.

During Myanmar's socialist days, literally none of the state-run establishments was able to supply consumer demands because of inefficiency, worn out machineries which lacked spare parts and the shortage of raw materials, analysts say.

Rationing and quota systems emerged, and most consumer goods went to favoured persons and top government officials. Some of the factories which emerged had no proper feasibility studies while insufficient energy supply led to production decline, analysts point out.

Even government departments had to buy energy and fuel oils from the black market. "Socialist construction," in fact, encouraged smuggling and the black market which ran parallel to the economy literally right throughout the socialist days.

— Depthnews Asia

To the Editor...

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

Subsidy to sector corporations

Sir, Subsidy to different sector corporations has become a routine feature in Bangladesh. Every year government is subsidizing crores of Taka to the losing sector corporations. Workers, employees, officers and trade unions take the subsidy for granted and do not feel any urge to work hard to overcome the loss and earn profit for the corporations.

While the government has withdrawn subsidy from the poor farmers whose contribution to national income is maximum, continuation of huge subsidy to the losing sector corporations makes no economic and moral sense. Unless

subsidy is withdrawn, existing lethargy, indiscipline and mismanagement will continue to plague the sector corporations.

Hence, without further delay, all subsidies to sector corporations should be withdrawn and they should be paid on the basis of the earnings made by the relevant corporations after meeting other fixed costs.

After careful scrutiny and analysis, targets should be fixed for each corporation.

They have to reach a minimum target for drawing full salary. If they can exceed the target they may be allowed bonus and if they fail to reach the target, they will get proportionately less pay. Some such arrangements will induce the workers

and management to put in their best and make the corporations economically viable. Just because trade unions are strong and volatile, corporations cannot be paid huge subsidy from the public exchequer which is virtually dealing a devastating blow to national economic development.

Gas connection to Golapgonj

Sir, Of late Petro Bangla under instruction from the Prime Minister has laid gas pipe lines in the nearby villages of Kailastila gas field. We highly appreciate this gesture as this is going to fulfill a pledge of the honourable Prime Minister.

But most of the homesteads are situated at a distance from the pipe line. This is unlike urban areas where kitchens are within a few yards of the gas line and that it costs very little to take gas connection. People in the rural areas are mostly poor and it will be difficult for them to spend around Taka twenty thousand for taking a domestic connection. So the purpose of laying the gas line around the villages of Kailastila will not be served unless the lines are extended further and taken within a few yards of the houses.

Political unity

Sir, The nation has celebrated 21st Victory Day on December 16, 1992. On the day I read a lot of statements

May I therefore request the Petro Bangla to be thoughtful enough to extend their pipe lines to atleast ten yards of the houses to facilitate gas connection to these village homesteads. Gas from this area is feeding far flung areas of Ashugonj, Dhaka etc. And if the local people are not helped by extending the gas line a little it will be very unfortunate. Will the relevant authorities look into it?

Kanita Rituwana Fulbari, Golapgonj Sylhet.

in the newspaper from our esteemed political leaders of both the sides. It seems that even after restoration of democracy in the country there still exists a sort of political racism between the main political parties which is seriously hindering our smooth movement to prosperity and development.

Can't we fix the status of the late leaders Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and Ziaur Rahman to the right places to bridge political controversies and conflicts? National unity is indispensable for making our ever weeping poor Bangladesh into a smiling, happy and prosperous society.

This is inhuman

Sir, We are worried to know that four hundred Palestinian have been expelled by Israel and they have been deported in a no man's land bordering Israel and Lebanon. All the four

hundred Palestinians have been suspected to be connected with the radical fundamentalists Hama and Islamic Jihad Organisation. Deportation on the basis of suspicion is inhuman and clear violation of human rights. Israel could have tried the suspected persons keeping them inside Israel.

This type of deportation will surely hamper the progress of the ongoing peace talk. I would request the Amnesty International and other governments of the world to put pressure on Israel to take back the 400 Palestinians in Israel and allow them to live there in a civilised way.

M Zahidul Haque Assistant Professor, Bangladesh Agricultural College, Dhaka.

Students and politics

Sir, Please ask through your esteemed daily, the political leaders of our country not to drag the students into fatal politics. And don't let "death" be the name of the game.

F M Mehedi Hasan Pallabi, Mirpur, Dhaka