

A final push to stalled repatriation needed

The UNHCR chief's visit good augury

It is a pity that repatriation of some 27,000 Rohingya refugees encamped on our soil to Myanmar remains an unfinished agenda since 2006. In terms of the 1992 trilateral agreement among Myanmar, UNHCR and Bangladesh for voluntary repatriation of Rohingyas, 2,37,000 of them returned to Myanmar up to 2006. Altogether 2,58,000 ethnic Rohingyas had trekked to Bangladesh in 1991 fleeing persecution from the Myanmar military junta.

The residual 21,000 who awaited repatriation at that time increased through child-births while there is reason to believe that a large number of unregistered Rohingyas continue to live in southern Cox's Bazar without access to official facilities.

Refugees doubtless evoke humanitarian concern; but they can also have economic and social ramifications for the host country. It also remains an avoidable thorn in the relationship between two neighbouring countries. That is why it is imperative that the predicament be ended through repatriation to their homeland, if necessary under international auspices, should the bilateral avenues of solution need to be complemented. Let's not forget that repatriation process continued from Bangladesh to Myanmar for a long time resulting in assimilation of the vast majority of the refugees in their homeland. Why must the fate of the residual number of refugees remain undecided?

Against this backdrop, it is heartening to note that Bangladesh government and the UNHCR during the visit of Antonio Guterres, the high commissioner for refugees, have agreed to reestablish the trilateral mechanism to create conditions for voluntary repatriation of the Rohingya refugees to Myanmar.

The high commissioner has spoken of taking advantage of a 'better environment' for dialogues to carry forward the repatriation process. Probably, a reference is drawn towards Bangladesh's empathy for the cyclone victims in Myanmar, her quick despatch of relief teams to the country and the Myanmar authorities' positive approach to help from neighbouring Bangladesh. Practically speaking though, revival of the repatriation process will involve effective intercession from the UNHCR.

Dealing with the disabled

Their potential must be realised

It is a worrying piece of news, transpiring from a discussion meeting held in the city, that over five percent of our population lives with some kind of disability.

The disabled are less fortunate than normal humans in that they start with a sort of disadvantage. And their plight is multiplied by the harsh truth that our society is still not sensitive enough to their needs. These people are still looked upon as some kind of a burden which actually they need not be. Society at large needs to create the facilities that the disabled require to live an almost normal life.

In the developed world, the disabled are getting all the facilities to realise their full potential. The first thing that has to be recognised universally is that disability can be overcome by providing due assistance to the men and women struggling to survive in a hostile setting. Having sympathy for the disabled is not enough, we must have faith in their ability.

It is a matter of great regret that only four percent of the disabled children have access to education, while the rest are doomed to a life of perpetual passivity and no promise. Neglecting these children would only mean that they would not be able to render any service to society.

A change in attitude is necessary to handle the issue more effectively. Disability is a stark reality which cannot be ignored. It is rather inhuman to look upon the disabled as a liability. They are humans like us and would like to lead a decent life as much as we do.

The participants in the discussion meeting have very rightly demanded recognition of the disabled in the national development policy and also budgetary allocations for them. We must not only admit but also insist on the fact that the disabled need special care, particularly in the early years of their lives. And only a broad social consensus and commitment to their cause can enable them to avoid being pushed out of the mainstream of life.

WAHED SABIR

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The government may be thinking that the VCs and Pro-Vice Chancellors (pro VC) of Dhaka and Chittagong Universities were selected according to the 1973 act of the Dhaka and Chittagong Universities. But the actual fact is

that the VC of Chittagong University was not elected by the senate, as stipulated in the Chittagong University Act 1973, but chosen by the then Jamat-BNP government.

Since the central thrust of the government is fight against corruption, it can remove the corrupt VCs and pro-VCs and appoint corruption free administrations in the premier seats of learning, and motivate and educate the students, the future leaders of the country, against corruption.

We had observed throughout the last few years that some vice-chancellors of public universities were engaged in administrative and financial dishonesty.

Acute shortage or fragile self-sufficiency?



DR SAADAT HUSAIN

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I am writing this paper to allay the misapprehension that Bangladesh might confront an acute food crisis in the near future. The price hike and market volatility may have bred this fear in the mind of many sensible persons, let alone the not-too-informed laity. Reduction in global food stock and abnormal food shortage in some countries accentuated the phobia in people's minds. In Bangladesh, aman crop of 2007 was adversely affected by floods and Cyclone Sidr. Food stock in government godowns was not enough to launch a massive public distribution program throughout the country. Our helplessness in ensuring timely procurement of only 2 to 5 hundred thousand (lac) tons of promised rice at reasonable price pushed us almost to a point of despondency. Some amongst us thought that only a *deux ex machina* could save us from such a difficult situation.

Bangladesh has not exported food grains for at least the last 50 years. I do not think it had ever done so. At the same time, it was not a terribly food deficit country since Pakistan days. As a province, former East Pakistan always imported wheat from West Pakistan and other countries because it was never self-sufficient in wheat. There were years of crop failure when the country had to import food grains in larger quantities, usually not exceeding 10-15% of domestic pro-

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duction -- except the year following the devastating floods of 1999.

Food aid was a major source of external procurement. This dwindled over the years. The country had to make up for the insignificant shortfall through commercial import, the bulk of which comprised wheat. Rice import through food aid virtually dried up in the last one decade. Despite this unfavourable development there were years when Bangladesh did not import any significant quantity of rice through commercial channels.

Nonetheless, it always imported wheat, which had a very insignificant demand during pre-independence days because people of this province were averse to considering it as a substitute of rice, the only staple food at that time. The situation has changed. Wheat has gained such acceptance as an important food item, bakery input, and raw material for diversified production processes, that the country has to import about 2.5 million tons on average annually.

At the time of independence, total food production was around 10 million tons, with a population of 75 million. With a bumper boro harvest this season, food production is expected to reach 30 million tons, with a population of slightly less than 150 million. Production of food grain has increased three times, while population has increased two times. Simple arithmetic will say that per capita availability of food grains has increased substantially. Except 2001-02, boro production has increased to reach about 18 million tons this year. This is about four times the production in 1986-87. Aman production has also increased, except in the years following devastating floods.

Production of wheat showed an increasing trend up to 1998-99, when it hit a buffer. It then started declining and plummeted to 737 thousand tons from its peak of 1908 tons. It appears that we have not keenly monitored the production of wheat to arrest this slide. The demand for wheat import has increased; in the absence of favourable aid climate we had to meet the import gap by using foreign exchange.

BBS and FPMU figures, as quoted by Ruhul Amin (Development Review, volume 18, 2006), show that while Bangladesh was slightly deficit in food grains in 1980-81 it turned out to be a rice surplus country in 1999-2000, and continued to be so up to 2004-05. Import figures support this position. Import of wheat, however, showed an increasing trend over the last decade or so, keeping pace with the development trend. World rice production also maintained increasing trend, by and large from 1998 to 2005 when the figure reached 622 million tons. Production suffered in 2007. It, however, bounced back in 2008; the expected production is 666 million tons.

It is not clear why we should be so alarmed about food security in Bangladesh. In the absence of any devastating natural calamity, the country may well be considered self-sufficient in food. If natural calamity afflicts any food surplus country with an unprecedented impact, it will be rendered a wretched country with a yawning food deficit for a year or two, but it will revert to its original position when the effect of the calamity is over. God forbid, disaster can bludgeon any country. The problem of Bangladesh is that its self-sufficiency is on the fringe; it has as yet no cushion against external or

internal shocks. Any slight mismanagement or alarm-mongering exacerbates the problem.

Increased production does not per se lead to a satisfactory marketable surplus. There is no one to one relation between these two variables. Mechanisms, along with income elasticity, play their role in determining the marketable surplus. Rice or paddy is not a perishable commodity, it has a reasonably long shelf life. As the economic position of farmers improves they hold more stock, both for higher consumption and for meeting contingencies.

With the obsolescence of native technology, the husking equipment, the millers have come to rule the market. Over the last few years, they have almost completely wrested the market power and manipulated both supply and price of rice in the market. The volume of procurement depends on their compliance to government enjoyment.

It is interesting to see that government's internal procurement of rice reached nearly one million tons in '80-'81, '89-'90 and '91-'92, when the production of food grains was far below its present level. 14.97 million tons in '80-'81 and 19.31 million tons in '91-'92. It is intriguing to note that government is finding it extremely difficult to procure one million tons of rice when production of a single crop has jumped to about 18 million tons.

It appears that government's endeavour is dominated by the miller's market power. The game has become more important than the actual production. Unless the surplus farmers and millers are made to comply with their social obligations, the position may remain unaltered, much to the

frustration of the government and the people in general.

A word about the price of rice may be relevant at this stage. Price is clearly distinct from the stock of rice. Stock is a real variable while price is a nominal variable. Price is determined by a complex interaction of a plethora of variables. Production is only one such variable. The most important variable in the determination of price is still the money supply. If supply of money outstrips the increased production, price hike will continue unabated. In Bangladesh, money supply has reached a staggering height in the last few years. This increase, coupled with income elasticity, has created a ratchet effect in the market.

The price of potato is also much higher compared to year before last, though the country harvested an unprecedented bumper production of potato this year. This has gone unnoticed because potato does not constitute the staple food in the country, and people have grown inured to high prices of such essential commodities in the recent past. We cannot expect that price of rice will drastically tumble down because the procurement price has been fixed at a sufficiently high level (Tk28/kg), such that the farmers are convincingly compensated; the price is about 25% higher than the cost of production.

The point being driven at is that we have nothing to be alarmed about the aggregate availability of food grains in the country. Food production has demonstrably outpaced population growth. Per capita availability of food grains has markedly increased. We have imported rice; this implies that there might be a discernible gap in the demand and production of rice. At the same time, we observe in the market place that grains produced last year have spilled over into the current year. This implies that last year's production has not been exhausted, as has been the case with potatoes for the last few years.

A bumper crop, and we do not have place for storage of the surplus potatoes. One may have good rationale to be optimistic about the future of rice stock as well. With concerted effort, it is well nigh possible for Bangladesh to generate a surplus rice stock for export. That will be a real boon given the international price situation: a commendable example of turning one's weakness into strength.

The real concern is that the country's Public Food Distribution System (PFDS) has been severely undermined in the last three decades. We had a highly developed public distribution system -- ration card system -- in this part of the world. That has been phased out with the declining food grain prices in the open market on the one hand and our commitment to free market economy on the other. It is time that a modified rationing system is reintroduced, at least for the priority target groups.

Identifying the target groups is not a difficult task in the Bangladesh context because the country happens to be an intensively surveyed area and income or asset-based target groups are already well identified. The ultra poor, the VGD-VGF groups, the elderly groups, the poor widows and abandoned women, the landless labourers, the fixed income employees in government, autonomous bodies, companies and industrial units, the unemployed family heads, and insolvent freedom fighters comprise the priority groups.

The screening of the groups has to be extremely fair. Around 25 hundred thousand (lac) tons of grains should suffice to carry out the program. It will be a big task, but not an unmanageable one, given our previous experience in the field. Instead of alarm mongering we should immediately get down to work and try to make the best out of the present situation, which is not as horrifying as is perceived by many.

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A cyclone's aftermath and political implications

Burma's generals are in for a delicate balancing act. They must also maintain the hitherto remarkable unity among top level officers as well as the loyalty of the rank and file of the armed forces, many of whom have relatives affected by the cyclone. What began as a cyclone and humanitarian catastrophe has taken on political dimensions, which could open a series of challenges and different scenarios for the country's future.

BERTIL LINTNER

BURMA has at long last agreed to allow foreign medical workers into the country to help the victims of the devastating cyclone that hit the Irrawaddy Delta region and the main city of Rangoon on 2 May, but with a catch. Setting conditions that fall short of what the international community, including the United Nations and its various agencies, had requested, the ruling military junta insists that the foreign medical and other aid workers come from neighbouring countries.

Singapore's Foreign Minister George Yee announced the decision after a meeting with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, or Asean, of which Burma is a member. Asean will also serve as a "bridge" between international agencies and the worst-affected areas of southern Burma.

It's unclear how this effort will be coordinated, especially given the magnitude of the disaster. According to the United Nations, 2.4 million people have lost their homes or planted rice fields. Experts at Johns Hopkins University's School of Public Health, based on their own research, said as many as 3.2 million Burmese have been affected.

More than 40 percent of those affected are children, that in a region where young people already suffer from malnutrition. Drinking water is in short supply as most sources have been contaminated by decomposing corpses.

Entire villages have been wiped out with hardly a building standing, except for the Buddhist temples, usually built from stronger material than ordinary wooden houses.

Crops have been destroyed by saltwater seeping into the fields, which could have a devastating long-term impact on the country's food supply.

The situation in Burma today is comparable only to what happened in Aceh, Indonesia, after the December 2004 tsunami, and clearly requires more extensive international effort than what the military rulers of Burma have accepted.

Behind their reluctance to admit foreigners lies the main fear: to lose control and, ultimately, power. Burma's partners in Asean are seen as no threat, but the regime is loath to allow aid providers from Western countries, which have been sharply critical of the military regime.

Unfortunately, for Burmese victims, only the Western countries have the capacity of response matching the magnitude of the

crisis. The US amphibious assault ship USS Essex, is moored 60 nautical miles off Burma's southern coast, while the French naval ship Le Mistral waits in the same waters.

Tens of thousands of gallons of drinking water, ambulances, heavy trucks and medical teams could reach Burma within an hour by helicopters and landing craft from the USS Essex. Le Mistral carries a cargo of 1,000 tons of food, enough to feed at least 100,000 people for two weeks, as well as thousands of shelters for the homeless.

Burma's reclusive government is unlikely to allow those ships to carry out their missions. If foreign troops, which must oversee the distribution of the supplies, entered Burma, their presence could embolden the country's citizens to launch another uprising against the regime.

Ordinary Burmese are already angered because of the bloody crackdown on pro-democracy demonstrations led by Buddhist monks in September 2007. If anti-government activists thought they could count on foreign protection, even if the foreign troops were in Burma on a purely humanitarian mission, they could take to the streets again.

Whatever sympathy there might have been for the country's military junta has dwindled in the wake of

the cyclone. The generals must be aware of this, worrying more about their future now than they had eight months ago.

Hence, troops from foreign countries that have criticised the regime and expressed support for Burma's pro-democracy movement must be kept out at all cost, no matter how much food and medicine they could supply.

Similar concern about the regime's stability has led the military to try keeping the country's Buddhist clergy from participating in relief efforts, fearing a renewed alliance between the monks and population at large.

Much depends, therefore, on what happens when the Asean teams arrive on the scene. India has also pledged to send medical, if needed, and more than 60 Chinese doctors reportedly wait across the border in Yunnan for permission to travel to the affected areas.

So even without Western participation, it will be the biggest foreign intervention in Burma since independence from Britain in 1948. And even if the teams are made up of "friendly neighbors," leery of interfering in the internal affairs of Burma, the generals risk losing control of the situation, which in the long run, could undermine their grip on power.

Under such circumstances, it's likely that Burma's generals will continue to cling to their Asean partners. India and China are big and powerful, and the generals don't really trust either.

China, more than any other country, may have supplied Burma with military hardware since the generals crushed the first main

uprising against their rule in August-September 1988. But China is a new friend for the generals.

During the decade spanning 1968-78, China provided massive support for the insurgent Communist Party of Burma (CPB) -- and junta leader General Than Shwe as well as his deputy General Maung Aye spent years fighting the CPB in the northeastern mountains, watching Chinese bullets kill their men.

The CPB collapsed in April 1989 following a mutiny among the hill-tribe rank and file of its army against the party's aging, mainly Burman Maoist leadership.

But China continues to maintain close relations with the successor of the CPB, the United Wa State Army. The UWSA has a ceasefire agreement with the Burmese government, but nevertheless has strengthened its forces in recent years and, according to Jane's Intelligence Review of March 2008, taken delivery of Chinese-made 12.7 millimeter and 14.5 millimeter anti-aircraft guns and 122 millimeter howitzers, apart from mortars and small arms.

Clearly, the Chinese are not putting all their eggs in one basket; if something were to happen to the military rulers of Burma, Beijing would still have a foothold inside the country.

Relations with India are more complex. The role Indian migrants played as intermediaries between the colonial British and the native population has not been forgotten and has given rise to sometimes fierce anti-Indian sentiments.

Even today, people of South Asian origin are often looked down

upon in Burma, referred to as "kala," a Burmese pejorative for "foreigner" or "Indian." As for the generals, they remember that India until recently was a staunch supporter of the country's pro-democracy movement. But, to counter China's growing influence in Burma, and take advantage of new trade arrangements India has moved closer to the generals.

Burma is likely to accept some aid from China and India, while keeping some distance. Asean will remain the main partner on the ground and conduit for aid from other countries. At the same time, international pressure on Burma is bound to continue, especially if the limited effort proves inadequate for Burma's needs.

In short, Burma's generals are in for a delicate balancing act. They must also maintain the hitherto remarkable unity among top level officers, as well as the loyalty of the rank and file of the armed forces, many of whom have relatives affected by the cyclone.

What began as a cyclone and humanitarian catastrophe has taken on political dimensions, which could open a series of challenges and different scenarios for the country's future.

Generals Than Shwe and Maung Aye should consider their options because it's far from certain that they'll be part of that future.

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Remove politically appointed VCs

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THE highly condemned administrations of public universities, appointed on political consideration by the last government, have unfortunately been continuing for one and half years longer than their terms. But, recently, the government has changed vice-chancellors (VCs) in the some of the public universities.

The government may be thinking that the VCs and Pro-Vice Chancellors (pro VC) of Dhaka and Chittagong Universities were selected according to the 1973 act of the Dhaka and Chittagong Universities. But the actual fact is

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Since the central thrust of the government is fight against corruption, it can remove the corrupt VCs and pro-VCs and appoint corruption free administrations in the premier seats of learning, and motivate and educate the students, the future leaders of the country, against corruption.

We had observed throughout the last few years that some vice-chancellors of public universities were engaged in administrative and financial dishonesty.

These VCs had appointed many teachers to different administrative positions of the universities, like provosts and house tutors of the halls, considering their political identity.

It is reasonably possible to make a change in the administrations of public universities by just changing the VCs and pro-VCs. It will be possible for newly appointed VCs and pro-VCs to appoint competent and non-political teachers to different posts of the university administration.

There are many eligible university teachers who do not belong to any politically motivated groups like blue, white, red, pink etc. The government can appoint VCs and pro-VCs from

those teachers to bring about a qualitative change in the university administration.

So we feel that the present anti-corruption drive will get an impetus if the government makes immediate arrangements to change the VCs and pro-VCs of different public universities.

We would like to propose that the present government should appoint VCs and pro-VCs from the senior teachers of each public university. According to a number of newspaper reports, the government has already collected names of twenty professors from each university according to seniority and prepared a panel.

We would like to urge the government to appoint VCs and pro-VCs from this panel. The sooner the government brings a change in the university administration the clearer will be its good intention to bring about a depoliticised education administration.

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Japan focuses on Africa

Fukuda also pledged to double Japan's ODA to Africa over a period of five years and said that Japan would coordinate with the international community to address issues of debt relief for Africa. As Japan prepares for the upcoming G8 summit in early July, where the issue of climate change will be one of the major themes for discussion, Fukuda said that Japan intended to engage in assistance to developing countries, including African nations that aim to achieve greenhouse gas emissions reductions and economic growth in a compatible way.

MONZURUL HUQ

THE fourth Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD IV) started today in the port city of Yokohama with more than forty heads of state and government from the continent joining the gathering. The three-day conference, the fourth in the series with a five-year gap, is being held at a time when Africa's average economic growth has reached 6 percent and peace-building and democratisation are bringing desired results.

But at the same time, the progress has been slowed down in part of the continent due to recent surge in food prices and sky-rocketing of

the price of oil. Against this backdrop, the Japanese Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda inaugurated TICAD IV with a generous offer of up to \$4 billion of soft loans to Africa over the next five years. Much of that Japanese funding is intended for the use of infrastructure development of the continent.

The Japanese prime minister also stressed on the importance of direct investment by Japanese companies in Africa, and linked infrastructure development with that initiative by saying that Japanese companies would have greater interest in Africa as infrastructure of the continent increased.

He also said that the increased private sector direct investment from Japan would pave the way for

transfer of technology and managerial know how from Japan towards Africa.

Fukuda reminded African leaders that for this reason the Japanese government would implement measures to promote the activities of Japanese companies in Africa in tandem with country's involvement in the development of African infrastructure.

The Japanese prime minister also made a call to double the current rice output of Africa over the next ten years. Expressing concern over difficulties African countries were facing as a result of the sharp rise in the food prices, he pledged targeting to Africa a significant amount of emergency food assistance package

equivalent to \$100 million that Japan recently announced.

On issues related to health and combating infectious diseases, Japan is considering a number of measures to ease the Africa's burden, and Fukuda's speech outlined some of those steps, including the training of one hundred thousand health workers in Africa over the next five years and dispatching of Japanese researchers to universities and research institutes in Africa.

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