

## A final push to stalled repatriation needed

The UNHCR chief's visit good augury

**I**t 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

**I**t 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.

## Acute shortage or fragile self-sufficiency?



DR SAADAT HUSAIN

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duction -- except the year following the devastating floods of 1998.

Flood 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 73 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 rice production depends on their compliance to government enjoinder.

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 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

**B**URMA 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 medics and other aid workers come from neighbouring countries.

Singapore's Foreign Minister George Yeo 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.

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It is reasonably possible to make a change in the administrations of public universities by just changing the 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.

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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.

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

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 the people at large.

Much depends, therefore, on what happens when the Asean teams arrive on the scene. India has also pledged to send medics, 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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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.

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