

The Rohingya dilemma

Rohingya refugees who have been creating social and economic crisis have already become a big problem for Bangladesh, both at home and abroad. Bangladesh, with its limited resources, cannot provide them shelter and other assistance for an indefinite period.



A.N.M. NURUL HAQUE

MEDECINS San Frontiers (MSF), an international aid agency, has accused Bangladesh of launching a violent crackdown recently against the unregistered Rohingya refugees from Myanmar.

The *New York Times*, BBC, and al-Jazeera English all published the news on the basis of a report released by Paul Critchley, the MSF head of mission in Bangladesh.

Quoting Critchley, the *New York Times* wrote: "They (Rohingyas) cannot receive general food distribution. It is illegal for them to work. All they can legally do in Bangladesh is to starve to death."

The MSF report released on February 18 said that Bangladesh has unleashed a crackdown of unprecedented violence against Muslim refugees from neighbouring Myanmar. Ethnic Rohingya refugees who have been living for years in Bangladesh are being seized, beaten and forced back to Myanmar, which they had left to escape persecution and abuse and which does not want them. Some had escaped after being forced into a river that forms the border with Myanmar.

Paul Critchley states: "Over the last few months we have treated victims of violence, people who claim to have been beaten by the police. We have treated patients for beating, for machete wounds and for rape ... I have seen small girls going out in the forest to collect fire wood, we have treated young girls and women who have been raped doing this."

Agreeing to the fact that international

media's information that Rohingyas in Bangladesh are ill-treated is not right, the UNHCR envoy in Bangladesh is on record as saying that the Rohingya problem has spread to the south-east Asian region, including Malaysia and Thailand.

The Rohingyas are a Muslim ethnic group of the northern Arakan state of Myanmar who are united by ancient heritage and have lived for many centuries in a contiguous area within well-defined geographical boundaries. They exercised their voting right and right to be elected in all elections of Myanmar held in the colonial period and also in the democratic periods.

The ruling military government has deliberately deprived Rohingyas of their citizenship rights. Over 200,000 Rohingyas fled to Bangladesh in 1978 following operations by the Myanmar army. In another wave, over 250,000 Rohingyas fled to Bangladesh during 1991-92 to escape from forced labour, rape, and religious persecution at the hands of the Myanmar military.

Despite efforts made by the UN for repatriation of Rohingyas in 2005, a vast majority of them have remained in Bangladesh, unable to return because of the negative attitude of the ruling regime in Myanmar. According to Bangladeshi officials, there are about 100,000 undocumented Rohingyas in Bangladesh who are taking daily wage jobs as farmers, vendors, rickshaw-pullers, and construction labourers.

Since they are not accepted in the existing refugee camps run by UNHCR, they have mingled with the local people

and are creating a law and order problem as some are allegedly involved in various crimes including smuggling of arms and ammunition and trafficking of addictive drugs.

The daily *Prothom Alo* carried a report on Rohingyas on the first page on February 18. The report said that over 50,000 Rohingyas holding Bangladeshi passport are involved in various criminal activities in Saudi Arabia and thus tarnishing the image of the country. These Rohingyas have entered into Saudi Arabia illegally through India, Pakistan, and Malaysia. Many of them have also gone there in the name of performing Umra using fake Bangladeshi passport.

After arriving in Saudi Arabia the Rohingyas managed to get Bangladeshi passports from the embassy there in fraudulent ways through brokers and with the help of some unscrupulous employees of the embassy. The involvement of Rohingyas in various criminal activities is not only tarnishing the image of the country, but also squeezing access of Bangladeshi workers in the international job market.

The expatriate Bangladeshis of Saudi Arabia have lodged complaints to our foreign minister regarding roguery of the brokers and some of the employees in the embassy who are helping Rohingyas in getting Bangladeshi passport fraudulently. The government is also under diplomatic pressure to bring back nearly 600 Rohingyas confined at Tabhil camp in Jeddah for more than two years, as they hold Bangladesh passports.

Ironically, the MSF report on persecution of Rohingyas in Bangladesh was released on the day when the *Prothom Alo* carried the report on involvement of Rohingyas in criminal activities in Saudi Arabia. The MSF report has also been uploaded onto some websites in a bid to generate sympathy for Rohingya refugees.

The main cause of the outflows of Rohingyas from Arakan is religious and political persecution to rid Arakan of Muslims and eventually to turn it into a Buddhist region. The Rohingyas after entering into Bangladesh have been taking advantage of their religious identity and political persecution to draw sympathy of the local people. Many of them reportedly have become voters and obtained Bangladesh passports with the help of local people.

Rohingya refugees who have been creating a social and economic crisis have already become a big problem for Bangladesh, both at home and abroad. Bangladesh, with its limited resources, cannot provide them shelter and other assistance for an indefinite period.

Repatriation of the Rohingyas to their own country would be the only permanent solution to this problem. So Bangladesh should take the problem seriously with UNHCR to resolve the Rohingya issue immediately.

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Winning the healthcare fight

Obama's ancestors are from Kenya, a country well-known for long-distance runners. It has been a long slog, but after fourteen months in office, Barack Obama carried himself and his health care bill through the finish line.

FAKHRUDDIN AHMED

PRESIDENT Barack Obama sent the following email to his supporters on the night of March 21, after the US House of Representatives passed the same bill that the US Senate had passed in December 2009.

It was accomplished despite unanimous and hostile opposition from the Republican Party. Early on, the Republican Party decided to adopt the Karl Rovian tactics of attacking Obama where he was perceived to be strongest -- bipartisanship. They wanted to "expose" him as just another partisan politician.

For the better part of his first year as president, Obama tried to work with the Republicans on health care. It soon became clear that the Republicans were determined to deny Obama his main election pledge -- to reform America's health care system.

The Democrats introduced two health care bills, one in the Senate and one in the House of Representatives. The Republicans attempted the filibuster the bill in the Senate through non-stop talking. Fortunately, for a while the Democrats enjoyed a filibuster-proof majority of 60 senators. It was in December that they passed the Senate version of the healthcare bill (60-40).

With so many Democratic congressmen representing Republican-majority congressional districts and worrying about their reelection, things were tougher in the House, although a simple majority was needed to pass a House bill. It barely passed (219-216), also in December.

At this stage, the two bills are normally sent to a House-Senate conference committee, where the differences are resolved. Next, both the Senate and the House pass the same modified bill, and the President signs the bill into law.

Democratic plans were shattered in January with the election of Republican Scott Brown to replace the late Senator Ted Kennedy, reducing to 59 the Senate seats held by the Democrats. With the Republicans threatening to filibuster any health care bill brought to the Senate, the only option for the Democrats was to pass the Senate bill by the House.

There were complications. A group of 12 anti-abortion Democratic congressmen, led by Bart Stupak of Michigan threatened to vote against the Senate bill, because according to them, it allowed federal money for abortion. However, if anything in the Senate bill were changed, it would have to be

passed by the Senate again, which would have been impossible because of Republican filibuster. After prolonged negotiations, President Obama agreed to issue an executive order banning use of federal funds for abortion in the healthcare bill, and the Stupak 12 (turned out to be 7) agreed to vote for the Senate bill.

Although President Obama signed the Senate bill into law on March 23, Democrats are already trying to improve the bill by removing some pork. The House already passed the improved bill on March 21, and if the Senate passes the exact same bill through "reconciliation,"



A triumph for the American people.

which requires a simple Senate majority, the improved bill will become the final version of the health care bill.

Republicans promised to repeal the bill and are predicting that the bill will result in the Democrats' electoral demise come November. Actually, the opposite may happen. The Republicans have opposed every progressive social legislation that has made America a better society -- Social Security, Civil Rights, Housing Rights, Medicare and Medicaid. Sooner or later this little dirty secret is going to dawn on American people. Having bet the house on defeating the health care bill, and having failed miserably, the Republicans are now angry and predicting doomsday. But the American voters do not like angry candidates or prophets of doom; they prefer

candidates who are composed and optimistic.

The health care bill is front-loaded with goodies. No one can be denied insurance coverage for pre-existing conditions; children can be covered under their parents' insurance up to the age of 26; no coverage for illegal immigrants; more money for student loans; tax relief for small business to create jobs. With the passing of time, these provisions will become increasingly popular with Americans. Any Republican attempt to tinker with these provisions will earn them the voters' wrath.

America likes a winner. By enacting health care legislation, President Obama has fulfilled his number one election pledge -- to reform America's health care system. Americans like someone who fulfils a promise and gets things done. Now Obama is free to concentrate his energy on financial reform, immigration



A triumph for the American people.

reform, and job creation.

The passage of the health care bill is a monumental achievement for Obama. It almost assures Obama's re-election in 2012. If he can create jobs and turn the economy around, the mid-term election in November may not be as dire for the Democrats as was predicted only last week.

There was a time last January when all hopes for healthcare reform seemed to have been dashed. But, Obama did not give up. He was there for the long haul. Obama's ancestors are from Kenya, a country well-known for long-distance runners. It has been a long slog, but after fourteen months in office, Barack Obama carried himself and his health care bill through the finish line.

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Whither people-to-people contact?

Pakistan should be able to appreciate India's role better because the fury of the Taliban would be hard to check. It has experienced the Taliban effect in the Swat Valley. Fundamentalism, like terrorism, has to be fought tooth and nail, without any compromise. The Taliban may have India as their target but before hitting at it, they would have to create a favourable ground in Pakistan.

KULDIP NAYAR

INDIA and Pakistan are going further and further from each other. In any case, they have never been normal neighbours. But after the attack on Mumbai some 15 months ago, both are intentionally moving apart. Détente is no more on their agenda. Recent talks between foreign secretaries of the two countries, more because of international pressure, have shown that they have no heart for normalising relations.

What has suffered the most in the process is people-to-people contact. New Delhi and Islamabad have always paid lip sympathy to the concept. Now they are doing everything possible to dilute it, slashing the number of visas they issue and reducing the quantum of trade through the points at Wagah and Kashmir. An academic conference at Delhi was abandoned because India did not give visas to some leading intellectuals from Pakistan. It was reportedly New Delhi's retort to the denial of visas by Islamabad to India's top professors. A couple from Karachi rang me to complain that their application for a visa to India was rejected after months of consideration.

I know the credentials of academicians who were to visit India or Pakistan. They are at the top of their profession. By no stretch of imagination are they connected

with terrorists or with the rhetoric of the latter use. The only inference I can draw is that the two governments or, more so, bureaucrats on both sides, are determined to see that even the limited contact becomes rare. Yet, these very bureaucrats, after retirement, will constitute Track II and meet outside their countries at the expense of some western power and criticise their governments for spoiling mutual relations.

Air India even wound up their depleted offices at Lahore and Karachi last week. When asked, the airlines said it was "an economy measure." If any loss out of Rs.8,000 crore the airlines bears every year is justified it is the one on the offices at Lahore and Karachi. Were PIA to stop its reduced flights between Delhi and Lahore and Karachi, the connection between the two countries would be through the exasperating Samjhotha Express and the unending journey by bus. What an average person goes through in train or bus is nothing less than hell. Still, both governments do not stop saying that people-to-people contact must improve. How? Whatever is there, it is because of the people themselves.

I recall the conversation I had with the late Benazir Bhutto some years ago. I was visiting Lahore then and she was leading the movement for Restoration of Democracy. She told me that the govern-



Honest communication starts with a handshake.

ments in the two countries would never be able to normalise relations, but if ever it were to occur it would be because of the people. Nawaz Sharif, Pakistan's prime minister at that time, was equally emphatic on the role of people. Yet, I have wondered why he does not say anything positive on Indo-Pak relations.

My guess is that the Pakistan establishment, including the military, is against any kind of rapprochement with India because they have developed a vested interest in the status quo. This is probably the reason why President Asif Zardari, an outsider for the establishment, has become silent after expressing pro-India sentiments in public.

In India, the hawks, mostly retired

foreign service hands, are so vociferous in their criticism -- they are encouraged by leading TV networks -- that the puny efforts the government tries to make gets stalled in their tracks.

It is an open secret that Manmohan Singh wants to settle all differences between the two countries once and for all. Former national security adviser Narayanan was always in the way of any move that the prime minister would contemplate. Present national security adviser Menon, who has served in Pakistan as India's high commissioner, believes in conciliation. But he too is afraid to annoy the Indian establishment, which is largely a caucus of retired civil and military officials.

A Pakistan spokesman has said that they would take part in the talks if they were "meaningful." Foreign Minister Mohammad Qureshi has also said that it was no use having talks for the sake of talks. This is an erroneous fallacy because the very fact of having talks is a positive step.

I fear that the atmosphere of deep estrangement built at Delhi after Pakistan crowded it out from playing any role in Afghanistan may sour relations still further. Islamabad's induction of Gulbuddin Yar, who led the movement against the Soviet Union in the early eighties, is telling upon Indo-Pak relations. He is regarded as an anti-India force. I met him at Peshawar when he was in the midst of

his jihad against "Russian infidels." He was critical of New Delhi's tilt towards Moscow. One remark that I distinctly remember is that the more India went closer to Afghanistan the less credible its credentials would be with Pakistan.

Now that the US has recognised the "strategic" interests of Pakistan in Afghanistan, it is time that New Delhi talked directly with Islamabad or Kabul. That Afghanistan is an independent country and should remain so is not a matter of negotiation. What India and Pakistan can discuss is the increased pressure the Taliban would put on Afghanistan once the US forces quit.

Pakistan should be able to appreciate India's role better because the fury of the Taliban would be hard to check. It has experienced the Taliban effect in the Swat Valley. Fundamentalism, like terrorism, has to be fought tooth and nail, without any compromise. The Taliban may have India as their target but before hitting at it, they would have to create a favourable ground in Pakistan. Their bomb blasts in practically every city of Pakistan makes clear that they want their version of Islam to take over.

If this were to happen, as a top intellectual at Islamabad warned me, people in lakhs would cross into India. It is a scary scenario but not an impossible one. New Delhi and Islamabad have to sit across the table to bury the hatchet, not with the purpose of scoring points but with honest endeavour to find a solution.

India and Pakistan have to sort out things between themselves. People-to-people contact is a sure way to reach that destination. When Manmohan Singh and Yousuf Reza Gilani meet at the Saarc Summit in April, they should ponder over concrete steps to expand people-to-people contact.

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