

# Stateless, hopeless

Nobody chooses to leave behind everything they know and understand; their loved ones, their livelihood, their language and their culture. As a nation we need to set an example to other countries in the region and take a collective stance to ensure that the Rohingya are treated with dignity.

MISHA HUSSAIN

IN Chittagong lives a very desperate community -- the Rohingya -- a religious and linguistic ethnic minority from Myanmar's northern Rakhine State, who have been fleeing state-sponsored persecution in their homeland since the late seventies. In 1991, when the population experienced widespread repression and abuse from security forces posted in Rakhine, a quarter of a million crossed the border to Bangladesh seeking asylum. Many of them still live here today.

Some 28,000 have been officially recognised as refugees and are living in a UN-run camp, waiting to be relocated to a third nation. Hundreds of thousands of others live outside these grounds, in the district of Chittagong or in unofficial camps such as Kutu Palong or Leda. Stateless and hopeless, these people carry on in dire conditions, often without food, sanitation and basic health care.

A European Parliament resolution passed only last month called on the Bangladesh government to "recognise that the unregistered Rohingyas are stateless asylum seekers who have fled persecution in Myanmar and are in need of international protection." However, in spite of such calls, the government still continues with its forced repatriation drive. In recent months, border authorities have launched an unprecedented crackdown in Bangladesh, pushing over 2,000 Rohingyas back across the border into Myanmar where they are likely to face arrest for leaving their villages without a travel permit.

Many here in Bangladesh though are beginning to wonder if forced repatriation really works. Bangladesh already witnessed two mass exoduses in 1978 and

again in 1991, which were also followed by forced repatriation, but since then the refugees trickling in from Myanmar have never stopped and the numbers today living in the Chittagong Division are still in the hundreds of thousands.

A report commissioned by the Dutch Embassy in 2008 shows that 55 percent of those living in the Kutu Palong makeshift camp were previously registered as refugees and have returned, despite being pushed back. It also shows the number crossing the border into Bangladesh is not decreasing. Pushing back the Rohingya against their will is clearly not working. This heavy handed, ill-thought-out action only blackens Bangladesh's image in the public eye (especially considering the recent attacks on non-Bengalis in the Chittagong Hill Tracts) as we ourselves rely so much on donor aid. Isn't it time to think of an alternative solution to the crisis?

Though half of the Rohingya who make their way to Bangladesh are taken in by sympathetic local families until they find their feet, it remains a fragile relationship. Many locals are competing for jobs with the Rohingya (who are often willing to work for less than Bangladeshis) and this often fuels local tensions. Others worry that armed extremist gangs are radicalising the youth of this marginalised, leaderless community, and suspicions of drug smuggling and an increase in petty crime in the camps have been recorded in the local press. With a new round of elections slated for later this year in Myanmar, locals are increasingly concerned that another exodus from its neighbour state may ensue and the situation in Bangladesh might further deteriorate.

As a result, a xenophobic campaign is being orchestrated by anti-Rohingya



MUNEM WASIF

committees formed and allegedly funded by the local political elite, demanding that the government take action against them. Announcements have been disseminated, ordering the Rohingya to leave and also threatening locals harbouring them with arrest and prosecution. Meanwhile, violence against the Rohingya is spiralling. Médecins sin Frontières (MSF) doctors who attend to both refugees and locals in Kutu Palong say they have been treating Rohingyas who have been beaten and raped. "[Border guards] broke my fingers and then they threw me into the river and told me to swim back," says Ziaur Rahman, a 23-year-old who managed to escape and walk for three days to get medical care at the MSF clinic.

If the Rohingya are willing to suffer such ill treatment here in Bangladesh, one can imagine how terrible the life they left behind must have been. An Amnesty International report from 2009 described the situation in Myanmar: "[The Rohingya] movement is severely restricted, they need permission to marry

and they are subject to forced labour and coercion." Failure to comply may result in up to 7 years' imprisonment. "They taxed us 15kg per 20kg of rice and we needed a permit to travel. If we didn't listen they beat us and raped our women," 25-year-old Robiul Aktar told me. "I'd rather die of starvation [in Bangladesh] than live in Myanmar." Is this not enough to awaken our empathy? Were we too not refugees once? It took us 35 years to recognise the injustice suffered by the Biharis before we came to our senses. Must it take a similar period of time and suffering before we come to terms with the plight of the Rohingya?

Yes, Bangladesh, like India, Thailand and Pakistan, didn't sign the 1951 Refugee Convention (the global treaty that defines who is eligible for refugee status and what rights they are guaranteed) and cannot be expected to take on such a massive challenge single-handed. As one of the poorest nations in the world, it doesn't have the financial resources to cope with such a huge influx of people.

However, the Thai boat crisis of 2009 should have made clear that regional solutions are needed to solve this issue. There has to be sustained regional pressure (including from India and China) on Myanmar to stop the ethnic cleansing and to recognise the Muslim Rohingya alongside the other 146 non-Muslim ethnic minorities.

The international community must also help relieve the pressure on Bangladesh by accepting some of the refugees that have already been registered. Since 2006, the UNHCR has resettled as few as 749 Rohingyas from the registered camp. Five hundred were relocated in 2009 and another 190 are pending departure for the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia and the US. It's a rate of departure that barely covers the population growth of 2.9 percent within the registered camp; right now, the system is simply paying off the human interest.

In the meantime, it's imperative that our government act immediately to stop

the violence and provide these people with the protection they require. The UNHCR needs to take greater steps toward developing a clear policy to tackle the issue, and must not let the terms of its agreement with the government undermine its role as international protector of those who have lost the protection of their state, or who have no state to turn to.

Of course, recognising these stateless people comes at a high moral price. With accepting that the Rohingya are indeed asylum seekers also comes the admission that every single government up till now has been wrong. Making such a statement would ultimately stain the hands, and the conscience, of all those before who had the power to take action and didn't. As such, a law may prove harder to push through than would seem. Our politicians must accept the responsibility and ensure that human ethics is never weighed against personal pride.

Few reading this editorial will ever come into contact with a Rohingya. Even fewer will ever see the dreadful conditions they live in. I write this article partly so you don't ever have to hear the cry of rape nor stomach the pain of hunger. So you don't have to watch babies die from curable diseases nor wade through stagnant water and human faeces in the monsoon season. I write this article so you don't ever have to endure the guilt which consumes me.

These words are not meant to name names or point fingers; simply to raise awareness that nobody chooses to live like this. Nobody chooses to leave behind everything they know and understand; their loved ones, their livelihood, their language and their culture. As a nation we need to set an example to other countries in the region and take a collective stance to ensure that the Rohingyas are treated with dignity. Who will join me and speak out against the appalling conditions that these wretched people live in?

Misha Hussain is a freelance journalist.

# How man can be righteous before God

Because of man's sinful nature he is so alienated from God that he cannot even think of coming before Him by virtue of anything that he possesses. He needs to put his faith and trust on a merciful and just God. He needs God's grace and mercy, which is revealed in the supreme sacrifice that Christ made on the cross.

MARTIN ADHIKARY

TODAY is Good Friday. Christians all over the world commemorate the death of Jesus Christ with due solemnity and earnestness this day. The ancient question in the caption for this writing was asked by Job in the Biblical book named Job (Job 9:2). This

supreme sacrifice that Christ made on the cross.

Cross is the universal symbol of Christianity. The Latin word for "cross" is "crux," from which comes the English word "crucial." The cross is crucially important for understanding the meaning of the death of Christ. There are no less than 175 references to Christ's death

and holy. He must punish sin. Therefore, God in His grace and justice, gave His only begotten perfect son as a sacrifice for the sins committed by man.

So Christ died for all, and once for all. The theme of God's wrath against human sin runs throughout the Bible, both in the Old and the New Testaments. It is spoken about in the Old Testament as many as 580 times! While the Old Testament sacrificial system was only a shadow or copy, what Christ did by sacrificing his life on the cross is the full and final settlement of the issue of sin. All priestly and sacrificial rights prefigured Christ's.

He did what he did because of God's love for mankind and fulfilment of the Scriptures. He gave up his life on the cross, which was the vilest of capital

God ignored them in His forbearance towards repenting people. All the former arrangements were preparatory and pointing to Christ, who was to come as the perfect sacrifice once and for all. Animal's blood cannot cleanse man's heart. We can be cleansed only by the perfect sacrifice, the sacrifice of Christ, the "Lamb of God," if our trust in him is with true repentance and change of our hearts and minds.

Christ was rejected, dejected and utterly humiliated, and eventually he died on the cross, the death of a vile criminal. Paul said of him: "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God (2 Corinthians 5:21)."

But to the worldly mind the Messiah dying on the cross was contradiction in terms, utterly foolish and absurd. Bible scholar E.F. Bruce captured this in what he said about what the worldly-wise people may think of the Messiah's death on the cross: "Over and above the disgrace of crucifixion, how could anyone accept as lord and deliverer a man who had not sufficient wit to save himself from so ghastly a death, or look to such a man as an exponent of wisdom?"

The world cannot understand the meaning of the cross with worldly knowledge. But the "foolishness" (if we are to call this) of God is wiser than human wisdom; and the weakness of God is more powerful than human strength.

God is the Father of all creation. He is a just and righteous God. He loves all people. He wants that all people come to Him. The greatest two commandments that God gave us are to love Him with all that we have, and to love other people. We cannot love God if we hate and neglect others, people whom God loves. Christ was crucified two millennia ago; but he is crucified today when we disobey these commandments.

The world today is characterised by hatred, jealousy, selfishness and greed, and abuse of authority and power. Christ came to the world with divine love for all mankind, he humbled himself and bore the punishment that was due to us for our sins, and ransomed believers from the bondage of sin and Satan. As we observe Good Friday let us try to internalise the message of the cross -- change where we need to change, and live lives of sanctity, love and respect for God and His creation. We can do this if we have authentic trust and faith in God. This is the way to be right with God and also with people.

punishment given to the worst criminal. This all happened because of the two crucial attributes of God. God is just or righteous and he is holy. So he must punish sin, but as man is sinful this was to be accomplished by the sinless son of God. Christ therefore, was the perfect sacrifice.

The elaborate and repeatable Levitical sacrificial system in the Old Testament could not take people's sins just because they were not perfect, but

# Our dying rivers

We must not dilly-dally with such an issue. We have waited for 36 years and failed to solve the problem bilaterally. It appears that we have no option except taking the matter before the UN to draw the attention of the world community to our miserable plight. We want dispensation of justice, not favour or benevolence.

A.B.M.S. ZAHUR

RIVERS are the lifeblood of the Bangladesh economy and social life. Its cultural life is also deeply related to rivers. It is extremely unfortunately that its three main rivers, Ganges-Padma, Brahmaputra-Jamuna and Surma-Meghna are dying. We see cultivation of paddy on the bed of Jamuna and mustard and potato on the bed of Meghna.

As per a survey of the Bangladesh Water Development Board (BWDB), there are three hundred and ten rivers in Bangladesh. Out of these fifty-seven are border rivers, the condition of one hundred and seventy five is miserable, and sixty five are almost dead. Eighty percent of the rivers lack proper depth. The latest study of BIWTA reveals that one hundred and seventeen rivers are either dead or have lost navigability. Such rivers/canals include Brahmaputra, Padma, Mahananda, Gorai, Meghna, Titas, Gomati, Kushiara, Dhaleswari, Bhairab, Sitalksha, Turag etc.

As per a report of BWDB, India is controlling the water of 57 rivers along with the Farakka barrage. Because of inadequate facilities for dredging, these rivers have become canals. Additionally, India has withdrawn water of several rivers including Surma, Kushiara and Mahananda. Sluice gates have been constructed on the rivers Senoa, Jamuna, Panga, Pan, Hatoori and Sui (situated near Panchagarh).

Apart from the scourge of Farakka barrage, a new dam, named Tipaimukh dam, is under construction in India. Our survival depends on saving our rivers. The following steps may be considered at this stage:

- Increasing our capacity for regular dredging;
  - Stopping dumping of effluents in the rivers;
  - Cleaning the effluents already dumped; and
  - Continuous cleaning of river beds.
- India has proceeded with the construction of fifty-two dams to produce electricity. However, it is reported that neither the ministry of irrigation nor any private research organisation of Bangladesh is aware of these developments in India.

Already 75 percent of our river routes have lost navigability due to silting. To obviate the problem of lack of capacity to

dredge them, it appears to be advisable to try greater utilisation of our idle manpower through food for work program in addition to continuous dredging with our available resources.

This needs, of course, planned dredging, river training and socio-economic development. Another less costly device may be "bundling" through utilisation of bamboo and chatai (mat). However, it needs vigorous concerted effort by BIWTA, Buet and River Research Institute to make such a project successful.

Killing of rivers in Bangladesh started from the Farakka Agreement in 1974. We are not certain about water flow of 54 rivers. Our Joint River Commission appears to be rather ineffective. Saarc so far could not bring us any real benefit. Even our membership of Bimstec has not been of much significance to our need.

From our past experience we may say that we see only raising of high hopes and aspirations on completion of high-level bilateral meetings with India.

How much we have benefited from these meetings is a moot point.

We have to take a look at our statistical base too. It appears that during the last 36 years (1974-2010) we have not been able to make any headway in the field of statistics, particularly statistics about rivers. It is reported that in the bilateral meetings with India we depend mainly on Indian statistics, which are vastly superior to ours. Even in recent high-level meetings we had to depend mainly (if not wholly) on Indian statistics. Thus, the decisions of such meetings are usually favourable to India. We must take immediate measures to improve our miserable position.

Our rivers are dying. This will result in immense suffering for the whole nation. Thus, the government needs the support of the whole nation for our survival. We must not dilly-dally with such an issue. We have waited for 36 years and failed to solve the problem bilaterally. It appears that we have no option except taking the matter before the UN to draw the attention of the world community to our miserable plight. We want dispensation of justice, not favour or benevolence.

A.B.M.S. Zahur is a former Joint Secretary.



Redemption for the sins of man.

question only leads us to search for the meaning of the cross of Christ, the cross of Calvary on which Jesus Christ died as ransom for the redemption of mankind from the bondage of sin.

Because of man's sinful nature he is so alienated from God that he cannot even think of coming before Him by virtue of anything that he possesses. He needs to put his faith and trust on a merciful and just God. He needs God's grace and mercy, which is revealed in the

in the New Testament. There are many prophecies and allusions to this in the Old Testament.

Jesus Christ, the sinless Son of God, gave up his life on the cross for atonement and as a ransom. He died as a substitute for sinful mankind. Peter said about his death: "For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive by the Spirit (1 Peter 3:18)." God is righteous

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Reverend Martin Adhikary is Director, Advocacy & Promotion of Leprosy Mission Bangladesh.