

KALEIDOSCOPE

Independent probe into violence against Rohingyas

UN's call must be implemented

THE UN human rights chief Navi Pillay's call for an independent investigation into the widely reported abuses by the security forces in Myanmar's Rakhine state against ethnic minority Muslims Rohingyas couldn't have come a day later. We welcome the rather belated but strongly worded justification for an independent inquiry into the unabated human tragedy articulated by the UNHCR chief.

The call for investigation carries an extra weight and relevance in view of the fact that it is set against the backdrop of Myanmar president's unprecedented suggestion to the UNHCR chief that Rohingya Muslims be deported to a third country by way of solving the ethnic conflict. Such an approach has no standing in international law where even there is standard provision for citizenship by naturalisation, let alone the Rohingyas' historical claim to citizenship.

The UNHCR chief has categorically disapproved of the manner in which the ethnic conflict is being handled in Rakhine state by the Myanmar authorities. Pillay has clearly alluded to "stream of reports from independent sources alleging discriminatory and arbitrary responses by security forces, and even their instigation of and involvement in clashes."

What could have been an initial swift response of the authorities putting out the fire of ethnic violence was instead turned into a crackdown targeting Muslims of the Rohingya community. Whereas the state is supposed to protect the minority, helplessly did they fall victim to a majority onslaught.

Since May when sectarian violence broke out in the Rakhine state of Myanmar with the Rohingya Muslims being brutalised and dislodged, we in this paper, urged the international community to persuade the Myanmar government to solve the conflict internally. We pinned our hopes given that Myanmar embraced a policy of liberalisation marking a break with its closed society paradigm. But so far our expectations have been belied.

Now that, however, the UNHCR chief has demanded an independent investigation into the escalating violence in Rakhine state, the powerful UN member states must pull their weight to institute a thorough going probe into the handling of ethnic conflict in Myanmar and come to the relief of the minority community in the Rakhine state. Simultaneously, citizenship rights must be restored to the Rohingyas.

Noise pollution getting unbearable

Find ways to put brake on it

ALTHOUGH water and air pollution have received attention at least at the verbal level, sound pollution which also exposes us to serious health hazards has yet to attract even that little attention. Factories and construction firms rampantly violate environmental laws by producing continuous grating sounds with their heavy machinery, going well beyond the limit fixed by the Noise Pollution (Control) Rules, 2006. The rules clearly prohibit the use of brick crushers within a 500-metre radius of a residential area and also restrict the use of loudspeakers without prior permission. Honking horns is also strictly prohibited in a 100-metre radius of hospitals, schools, colleges and offices.

In spite of such well pronounced laws and rules on sound pollution with specific provisions for punishment, we fail to understand why there has been no organized step from concerned government authorities. Understandably, checking sound pollution on the streets rests solely on the shoulders of Bangladesh Road Transport Authority and the traffic police but do they care?

Except for a few drives conducted by the Department of Environment (DoE), we have not seen any conspicuous government move to put brakes on sound polluters, least of all penalize them. Nor has there been any significant campaign to raise mass awareness either by the government or by any non-government organization. Resultantly, apart from the hefty fines realized by the DoE during its drives, there has been no substantial change as far as sound pollution goes.

There is also a particular need for massive campaigns to make people aware of the whole host of diseases that noise pollution causes, including depression, anxiety, risk of cardiac arrest, hearing losses and miscarriages, to name just a few. Alongside, monitoring by DoE, traffic police and



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It is reassuring that journalists and the interne doctors and senior administrative officials of Dhaka Medical

College and Hospital (DMCH) have decided to withdraw the cases they had lodged against one another with the Shahbagh police station. Mercifully, good sense has finally prevailed over insensitivity and madness.

Before we heave a sigh of relief, it would be worthwhile to consider in retrospect the odious chain of events that had brought the DMCH administration, interne doctors and working journalists face to face. Needless to say, since July 22 till July 25, the journalists engaged in their professional duty at the DMCH remained at the receiving end. What was their fault? First, they reported in the electronic and the print media the alleged mistreatment of a patient at the hands of a DMCH doctor. The report enraged the doctors and they thought that by making the incident public through the media, they have been wronged.

What happened over the next four days was the result of that misplaced feeling of being wronged. Strangely, it never crossed the minds of the angry interne doctors and the DMCH administration that the journalists were just performing their duties, like they were (doctors) doing theirs. There is, however, a world of difference between the kinds of duty doctors and the journalists do. Even so, either has a job to do. And it must be understood that journalists have nothing personal against doctors.

It would also be naïve to think that the students with best performance in the Higher Secondary School Certificate (HSC) exams who qualify as medical students and then go through the gruelling years of intensive studies and training at the medical colleges are

A threatened profession



STAR

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not aware about the job of a journalist. They very much are. But then how could these most brilliant products of our universities think that journalists were out to harm their reputations and were thus provoked to behave so irrationally and thought nothing of attacking the working journalists with clubs, hockey sticks and brickbats? Had the reporters on the spot made a wrong reporting, they (doctors) could well send their rejoinder with clarification along with their own version of what actually happened regarding the treatment of the patient in question to the newspapers and TV stations.

The same papers that carried the report or electronic media houses that aired it would have also carried or broadcast their rejoinder as well as their own version of the incident. That is the standard procedure to deal with the media. They could also have recourse to the court for redress. That the DMCH interne did not choose that standard procedure makes the entire

episode intriguing as to why the fallout of the said report could take such a violent turn!

We may recall here the recent incidents of face off between the police and journalists. Police on different occasions had beat up journalists on duty with truncheons, broke and snatched their cameras and even confined them in isolation. We may also recall the advice the state minister for home had given to the journalists that they (journalists) should keep away from the police. But the journalists and the police are not at war with one another. The members of the police are also not fools not to understand the job of an on-duty journalist.

Why do then such incidents take place again and again?

The important point to note here is that these untoward incidents, though happening sporadically, are not all isolated instances of misunderstanding among the parties involved. Whatever the specific circumstances of a particular incident involving journal-

ist, in most cases, it falls into a pattern. And in each case, there is a political overtone to these sporadically occurring incidents.

In the DMCH incident, for example, people were first wondering how could doctors go to that length as to take sticks in their hands and chase, of all people, the journalists! Later, there was no mystery as it became clear from follow-up reports that political elements were behind the violent incidents.

It was a case of partisan politics versus journalism, where people of medical profession were incidentally the mere actors. In another case, it could be professionals from other vocations such as students, teachers, the police, businessmen or others. It is the infusion of overarching politics, or to be more precise, power politics, in different professional bodies that has rendered these otherwise highly dedicated professional institutions violence-prone.

In some cases even journalists themselves are not immune from the evil influence of partisan politics. The phenomenon has been instrumental in creating political turfs and its attendant turf wars at every conceivable place: in the administration, in the professional bodies, in the academic institutions, research organisations, you name it. On top of everything else is the attitude of power politics towards the Press in general.

This is very unfortunate that in Bangladesh the role of the Fourth Estate, the Press, is yet to get its due recognition. The press people are constantly being made the target of unkind criticism and violence. Clearly, it is the facts reported in the media that irks the powerful vested quarters.

Until the government is earnest in its commitment to allow free flow of information by allowing the Press to function without any hindrance, the threat to working journalists will continue. Until the situation changes for the better, journalism will remain an endangered profession in Bangladesh.

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World stands by as Syria reaches tipping point

JOHN J. METZLER

THESE are tumultuous times in Syria. Civil war has engulfed the country, fierce fighting plagues the capital of Damascus, a bomb blast decimated the ruling regime's top security chiefs, and the Arab League called on President Bashar al-Assad to step down. But as the world watches in suspended animation, the UN Security Council remains checkmated by Russian and Chinese support for the regime. Syria on the crossroads of the Middle East is heading full-throttle towards the abyss.

Civil war confronts the forty year plus Assad family rule. For the past 17 months, emboldened by the "Arab Spring," the violence has increased and over 20,000 people mostly civilians have been killed and according to the UN over one million people have been displaced inside the country. An additional 42,000 refugees are in neighbouring Turkey, 35,000 in Jordan and 32,000 in Lebanon.

The ruling regime which is based in the Alawite sect of Islam (closer to that of Iran), and at odds with the majority Sunni, battles on with the ferocity of a cornered mongoose.

Significant UN Security Council actions to sanction Assad have been stopped short on three occasions, by double vetoes of Russia and China. First in October, then in February and now in July, cautiously optimistic US and British diplomacy was jolted by the riveting realpolitik that both Russia and Mainland China are still willing to

give Assad diplomatic cover fire in the Security Council despite the growing political collateral damage throughout much of the Arab world.

Knowing the political intransigence of both Moscow and Beijing towards any serious action by the Security Council, former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan made a mission to Moscow hat in hand to see Vladimir Putin.

Annan was trying to revive his moribund peace plan, while at the same time trying to encourage Russian flexibility and support for a unified approach to Syria. His answer was Nyet. Additionally 300 UN military observers are now going to be phased out.

In the meantime globetrotting Secretary General Ban Ki-moon arrived in Beijing to try to persuade the PRC rulers to soften its stance backing the Syrian regime.

After the double veto, British Ambassador Sir Mark Lyall Grant stated he was "appalled by the decision of Russia and China to veto this resolution aimed at ending the bloodshed in Syria." American Ambassador Susan Rice rightly called it "a dark day," but that does not belie the Obama

Administration's amateurish inconsistency in the UN.

Despite the stunning diplomatic setback in the Security Council, Hillary Clinton's State Department rationalises that such votes will shame Russia and the People's Republic of China; as if Vladimir Putin or Hu Jintao really care?

As Richard Haass, president of the New York's prestigious Council on

Foreign Relations advised, "The United States and other like minded government should not equate the United Nations with multilateralism, nor should they see the UN as having a monopoly on legitimacy."

But why do Russia and China still back the dictator Assad in the face of growing opposition in the Arab world? Since the 1960's Syria was close ally of the old Soviet Union and

still relies on Moscow. Russia sees Syria as a regional firewall against the spread of separatism and sectarianism.

For China there's some of the same logic; keeping the lid on restive ethnic, religious and national groups inside the confines of the People's Republic.

Of course there's the Iran connection. Though Assad's Syria is a secular

state, the ruling Alawite minority in Damascus are close to Iranian Islam. Syria's remains the Islamic Republic's sole serious ally in the Arab world and thus a loss of Assad would be a stunning setback to Tehran. Senator Marco Rubio (R-Florida) has regularly stressed the strategic significance of Iran's loss of its Syrian satrap.

Put in a geopolitical perspective, Syria's loss to Russia would mirror the US' loss of secular Egypt, and France's setback in Tunisia.

Ominously as the endgame approaches, we are reminded that Syria holds a major supply of chemical and biological weapons. Should Assad cross the threshold and use them, foreign intervention would become near certain.

Yet sectarian violence could be on the horizon. Syria remains a complex country of many faiths, sects and minorities including about two million Christians. Given harassment of Christians in post-Mubarak Egypt for example, Syria's Christians have ample reason for concern and fears for the future.

Shaping the outcome of the Syrian crisis is ultimately up the Free Syrian Army and fragmented opposition. It is not America's responsibility to open the political Pandora's Box in Damascus.

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THIS DAY IN HISTORY

July 30

1969

Vietnam War: US President Richard M. Nixon makes an unscheduled visit to South Vietnam and meets with President Nguyen Van Thi?u and U.S. military commanders.

1974

Watergate Scandal: U.S. President Richard M. Nixon releases subpoenaed White House recordings after being ordered to do so by the United States Supreme Court.