

ROHINGYA CRISIS

Time for a new beginning

NAVINE MURSHID

BA NGLADESH'S refusal to allow a fresh influx of refugees has had a positive externality: it has brought to the world's attention the plight of half-a-million Rohingyas who live in squalid conditions in camps in Bangladesh's south east borders. *The New York Times*, for example, published six articles on Rohingyas between June 10 and June 19 compared to eleven in the last thirty years. From *The Wall Street Journal* to *The Sydney Morning Herald*, major newspapers across the world expressed concern towards the stance that Bangladesh has taken. With pictures of refugees on boats trying to reach Bangladesh's shores popping up in international media, Bangladesh appears as a state without a conscience. Thus, Dan Morrison wrote in his recent piece in the *New York Times*: "It's a pity that Bangladesh, itself born in 1971 amid a massive refugee crisis, should be so unwilling to help." But one must also concede that allowing them entry is only a stop-gap arrangement which could lead to continuation of the problem.

The United States, the United Nations, and numerous human rights organisations were quick to send messages to Dhaka to allow the Rohingyas in. Many Bangladeshis are sympathetic to the Rohingyas as well and would like their government to protect them. However, to focus on this specific demand and to expect a state whose capacities are already stretched to continue hosting refugees indefinitely is to ignore the historical conditions that produced this problem in the first place.

The Rohingya-crisis began in 1974 when the Burmese military government took away the Rohingyas' citizenship claiming they were economic migrants who traveled to Myanmar during British rule. This ethnic group is, thus, stateless with the Burmese government not only refusing them citi-

zenship but also engaging in ethnic-cleansing. Backed by China and North Korea, Myanmar has not been held to account for its repression of minority groups.

Bangladesh has been the primary host to those fleeing such repression ever since. While refuge in Bangladesh saved their lives, the conditions the Rohingyas faced and continue to face are dire.

Bangladesh barely has the resources or the capability to provide even the basic necessities: the half-a-million Rohingyas living in official and unofficial camps in Cox's Bazar along Bangladesh's south-east border with Myanmar live in cramped and unsanitary conditions in makeshift homes with little access to clean drinking water and proper food. Moreover, they are subjected to maltreatment by local law-enforcement authorities as well as by locals who see them as a threat and as competition for the limited resources and jobs that exist in this already impoverished country. The perception that Rohingyas are there "forever," given their stateless status, only serves to further marginalise them.

Thus, the Bangladeshi position is a contradictory one: on the one hand, it engages in "quiet diplomacy" in its interaction with the Myanmar government, but on the other, it continues to refuse Rohingyas



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**Western hypocrisy and Islamophobia**

The Karens are a Myanmar ethnic minority group who began fleeing Myanmar in 1984. Like the Rohingyas they continue to face state repression. These refugees are resettled in advanced industrialised countries -- most notably in the United States and Australia -- where they are rehabilitated and integrated into society. Refugees from Myanmar's neighbouring countries such as Cambodia, Vietnam, Indonesia have also benefitted from similar programmes. Why haven't the Rohingyas been similarly accommodated by the West?

Here lies the hypocrisy. While the world is quick to point fingers at Bangladesh for its inhuman stance, it is Islamophobia that prevents a real solution from being enacted. My interviews with UNHCR researchers indicate that after 9/11 there is reluctance in resettling Rohingyas in countries like the United States because of "potential links to Islamic terrorism" given that they are Muslims.

**Myanmar's democratic opportunity**

This is a time when Myanmar is opening up to the world; there are hopes of a democratic government; Aung San Suu Kyi has reached out to minority groups and even visited Karen refugee camps in Thailand. Amidst all these positive changes in Myanmar, however, there seems to be no mention of Rohingyas. Instead, there is fresh violence perpetrated against them which is causing yet another refugee-flight into Bangladesh. Closing the border may be Bangladesh's cry for attention at a time when perhaps there is an audience, in Myanmar and internationally.

There are signs of democratic change with Suu Kyi gaining political ground and negotiating with the military government. Although segments of Myanmar's population would like to see Rohingyas as Bangladesh's "problem," democracy advocates should be aware that democratic

transition in Myanmar cannot be complete without addressing the plight of its minorities, including Rohingyas.

In the past six months, the likes of Hillary Clinton and Manmohan Singh made official visits to Myanmar. Investors from across the world are swarming to take advantage of Myanmar's oil, natural gas, gems, and markets as it liberalises its economy. The world is watching Myanmar keenly. This scrutiny should extend to Myanmar's continued refusal to take responsibility for the plight of the Rohingyas.

What better time to draw attention to Rohingyas than now when it is in transition and all eyes are on Myanmar?

**Elusive durable solution?**

For almost thirty years, Myanmar has refused to accept Rohingyas as its citizens. It is time for Myanmar, Bangladesh, the UNHCR, and the Rohingyas to come to an understanding about both a short-term and a long-term, durable solution.

While the Bangladeshi government has a responsibility to ensure that Rohingyas are not victimised by locals or by law-enforcement authorities, the solution is not only about Bangladesh opening its borders to give Rohingyas shelter. The root of the problem must be addressed, for which Myanmar needs to be held accountable if democracy is to have any meaning. It is about coordinating efforts across countries and international organisations; about recognising that nationalistic and racist elements are an impediment to any kind of resolution; about shedding biases, prejudices, and Islamophobia; and about demanding that the world that is now eyeing Myanmar to explore and exploit has a responsibility too.

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Science cannot coexist with backwardness

QUAMRUL HAIDER and SANJOY K. SARKER

I N a recent article (TDS, May 21, 2012) we discussed the importance of developing research capability in Science and Technology (S&T) in Bangladesh. It was emphasised that if Bangladesh hopes to eliminate poverty and provide a reasonable standard of living for its people, the government will have to invest heavily in scientific Research and Development (R&D). Unfortunately, Bangladesh is unable to keep pace with the rapid global developments in S&T. It will be naïve and simplistic to say that there is a singular cause for the slow pace of R&D works. In this article, we identify some of the significant ones Bangladesh faces in developing a viable scientific research capability.

**Infrastructure & partnership:** A principal reason for an unfavourable research environment is the poor infrastructure for R&D. The blame for this rests squarely on the shoulder of the government. The commitment by successive governments toward funding R&D has been minimal. The current level of support is not enough to sustain a domestic research effort by itself. Furthermore, lack of a coherent, tenable science policy and action plan contributes to the absence of a healthy research atmosphere. It is also the cause of isolation from Regional and International Network of Science and Technology.

An essential component of fruitful and innovative research is partnership among industry, academia and research institutions, which is practically nonexistent in Bangladesh. Consequently, R&D work done by the scientists does not address the needs of the industries and private sector. The link is so weak that the impact of R&D on productivity is minimal.

**Scientific manpower:** For a populous nation like Bangladesh, it is paradoxical that the pool of talented scientific manpower is very small. Colleges and universities, whose role is central to the development of scientific research, have failed in producing enough qualified scientists. As a result, except for a few individuals, quality of scientists employed in research institutes is not up to the international standard.

Politics, archaic curricula, inadequate institutional support and reluctance to introduce innovative teaching methods are some of the reasons for this failure. Emphasis on memorisation, rather than

problem solving, and a lack of computational content in courses have left science education decades behind. Besides, there are hardly any research practicum courses that engage students with faculty. When the worldwide trend is toward subdividing one field of science into more and more specialised areas and synthesising of many distinctive specialties, Bangladesh is still clinging to the traditional and outmoded approach to science education with no discernible unity of curriculum.

**Academia & politics:** The academic atmosphere in Bangladesh is not conducive for R&D work. Weak institutions and rampant corruption in all sectors of life contribute significantly to the paucity of R&D. Conflicts and tensions permeate every sphere of higher education. Colleges and universities are the nexus of corruption and crime with dirty student politics reigning supreme. Political patronage of students and teachers vitiated the academic atmosphere to an epidemic form. Even high-ups in the academia work in cahoots with thugs, politicians and their student-lackeys.

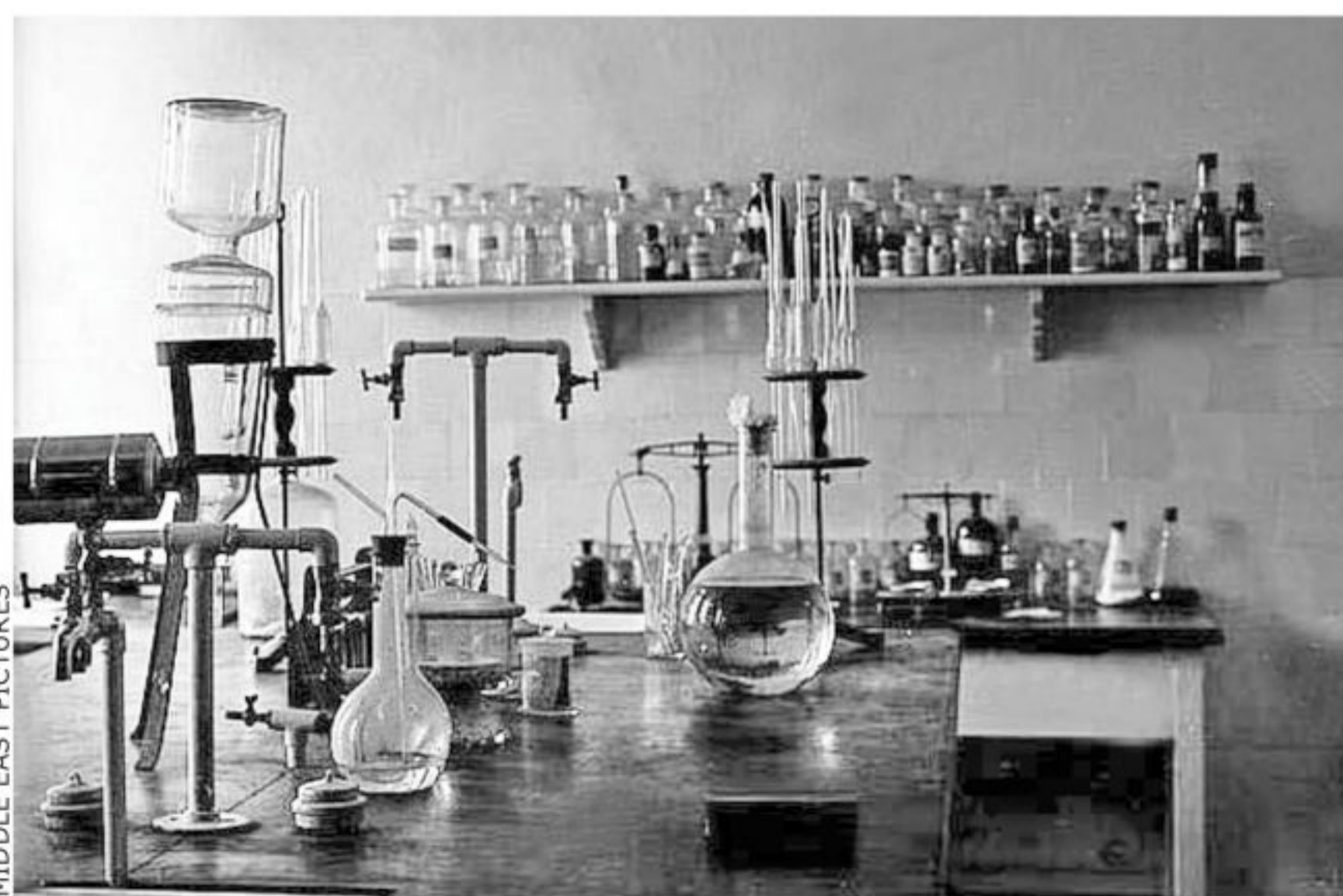
"The prime problem for degeneracy in Bangladesh lies in the scarcity of good teachers," laments a physicist living in Bangladesh. The high-handedness and pressures upon the colleges and universities by the government hampers the recruitment and retention of high-quality teachers and researchers. Faculties are often hired based on their political affiliation, many of whom do not even meet the minimum requirements for an academic position.

Research productivity: Publication and citation are major indicators of noteworthy scientific research. In the case of Bangladeshi scientists, number of publications in high impact professional journals is meager. It is partly due to a lack of competent personnel, and partly due to a lack of oversight, accountability and incentives.

Also technological support and staffing are insufficient to serve a research productive environment. Moreover, there is no detectable coordination, communication or collaboration between scientists of different institutes. This leads to waste and inefficiency, and unnecessary duplication of efforts.

Another reason for the low output is the blasé attitude of the scientists. For univer-

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MIDDLE EAST PICTURES

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**Economics:** Just like people in other professions, a scientist must consider both short-range and long-range consequences when selecting his/her course of action. However, economic necessities and inadequate compensation keeps them away from pursuing science as a full-time vocation, if not as an avocation. Majority of

those who are in the academia have to hold multiple jobs in order to make ends meet, leaving them with very little time to do research.

**Isolation:** Science is no longer confined within the borders of a single nation. Mobility of scientists is now a universal character of science. There is increased cooperation and exchange of information between scientists of different countries -- developed and underdeveloped alike. Bangladeshi scientists are neither mobile, nor do they have sufficient grants to attend international conferences, interact with foreign colleagues and establish collaborative research with scientists from advanced countries. It prevents them from maintaining contact with the mainstream of ideas and developments in their respective fields. Thus they remain isolated, not by choice, but by circumstances; research is a pipe dream for them.

**Funding:** Research in the sciences is impossible without adequate resources. Due to the need for laboratories and equipment, science education is more expensive than other curricular offerings. Virtually every institution in Bangladesh finds it extremely difficult to meet the financial responsibilities to provide high-quality science education to the citizens.

According to a physics faculty, a good number of equipment used for teaching are still the ones that were used by us four decades ago. This is outrageous and unacceptable. The shelf life of most of the instruments is at best ten years as spare parts required to keep them operational are often not available after that period. The obsolescence of the equipment makes the science experiences of students a horrific one. This inevitably leads to the development of an apathetic attitude toward science.

**Brain drain:** A problem faced by majority of the developing nations including

Bangladesh is the hemorrhage of talent. Since very little quality research is done in the country, many of the best students go to European and North American universities for higher degrees and post-doctoral level training. Once trained, most stay back because of access to advanced research facilities and unfettered institutional support they receive from their adopted countries. Those who do go back find it difficult to keep up with the rapidly advancing and highly competitive world of modern science due to chronic lack of facilities and financial support for research, dearth of high caliber students, post-docs and, most of all, absence of a robust research climate.

The problem of brain drain is exacerbated by the open door policy of the developed countries that consider scientists among the most valuable economic assets. Ironically, it is the scientists from third-world countries who provide powerful intellectual input to the research achievements of other countries but returns less benefit to the country of their birth.

**Private funding:** Philanthropy plays a big role in financing R&D work in the developed countries. In the USA endowments and alumni donations fuel a large chunk of the budget apportioned for basic, applied, interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary research. There is no shortage of Rockefellers, Fords, Carnegies and their ilk in Bangladesh. How many of them patronise R&D work? Regrettably, the culture of philanthropy is totally absent in Bangladesh.

**Future:** Whether it is due to ignorance or unwise decisions, the apathetic attitude of the government is primarily responsible for the sorry state of scientific research in Bangladesh. Solution to the problems and necessary reforms are not hard to find. The challenge is, once solutions are found and if a high level of scientific attainment is aspired to, will they be implemented and sustained? Do the citizens, particularly the educated and affluent ones, including expatriates, really want a scientifically advanced and modern society?

Science brings enlightenment. It does not coexist with backwardness. A world-class science capability, even a small one, would have a salutary effect on the society and the nation as a whole.

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