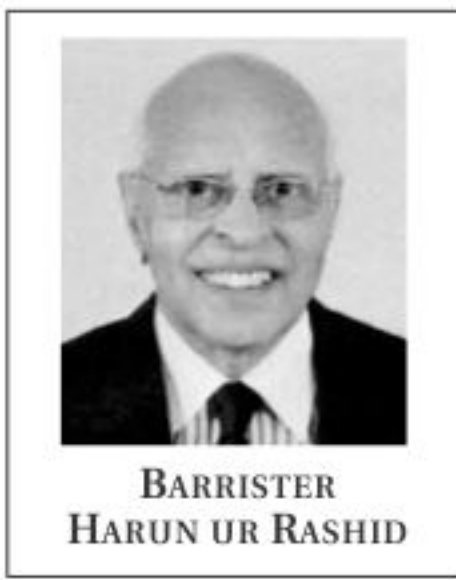


BOTTOM LINE

D-8 SUMMIT IN ISLAMABAD

Nothing concrete but lot of pledges



BARRISTER HARUN UR RASHID

D-8 consists of the eight most populous Muslim majority countries -- two from South East Asia (Indonesia and Malaysia), two from South Asia (Bangladesh and Pakistan), two from Middle East (Turkey and Iran) and two from Africa (Egypt and Nigeria). They constitute 60% of the total Muslim's and 13% of the world's population. The presidents of Iran, Indonesia, Nigeria and Pakistan, the prime minister of Turkey, vice-president of Egypt, deputy prime minister of Malaysia and international affairs adviser (minister) to the prime minister of Bangladesh attended the summit. The very fact that the heads of state/government of three countries such as, Bangladesh, Egypt and Malaysia, did not attend the summit for different reasons diminishes to a large extent the importance of this meeting. Furthermore, the summit started in Islamabad a day after militant attacks had killed 36 people across the country in some of the deadliest violence claimed by the Taliban for months. Twenty-three people were killed and 62 wounded overnight in Rawalpindi, the twin city of summit venue Islamabad, "It seems the new breed of religious zealots wanted to tell the D-8 dignitaries all about the mess dwelling the country." The D-8 member states are facing massive challenges including food security, communal violence, terrorism and a tarnished international image which needed to be addressed through a joint effort. It is necessary to create a framework of cooperation on long-term energy security; creating a level playing

field for all segments of the society, mandate scientific and technological cooperation, develop joint industrial projects and share engineering and management knowledge with the D-8 centre of excellence at the forefront of the collaborative effort. The summit adopted the 35-point Islamabad Declaration which contains the organisation's charter and the D-8 Global Vision. However, the documents were based on pledges and commitment and no decisions were announced. The last summit in Nigeria, in 2010, had also adopted similar commitments but no concrete actions were translated into action.

What, after all, has the D-8 achieved in concrete terms during its 15-year existence? Summits and conferences were held and tons of paperwork and documents emanated from summits. But the pledges were not translated on the ground.

In Islamabad, the leaders stressed the importance of collaborative efforts on:

- Capacity-building;
- Transfer of technology;
- Exploration of new energy resources;
- Development of alternative fuels and renewable sources of energy, as well as research; and
- Development and production of nuclear energy for peaceful purposes.

They welcomed Pakistan's offer to host the first energy

forum to evolve a framework of cooperation. They pledged to work jointly to confront common challenges faced by the D-8 countries; especially in achieving food security, mitigating the impact of natural disasters and countering all forms of extremism, which undermine economic progress and adversely affect people's livelihood. In an apparent reference to the unilateral sanctions against Iran, the D-8 leaders noted with concern the consequences of the coercive economic measures on the livelihood of people. They committed to creating a level playing field for all segments of the society, in particular for the youth to attain modern skills, to become participants in the emerging knowledge-based economy and the information society. They emphasised the need for scientific and technological cooperation and the development of joint industrial projects and sharing of engineering and management knowledge, with the D-8 centres of excellence at the forefront of the collaborative effort. Recognising the emerging role of Islamic banking and finance in the Muslim societies, including the D-8 community, they urged member states to assist in its development as a catalyst for expansion in financial and trade activities. It is reported in media in Pakistan that Islamabad can take comfort in the fact that the D-8 Summit of 8 major Muslim countries could be held at all. Given Pakistan's security situation, especially in Muharram, which happened to coincide with the dates of the summit, its holding per se could be considered an achievement. The question among people is: What, after all, has the D-8 achieved in concrete terms during its 15-year

existence? Summits and conferences were held and tons of paperwork and documents emanated from summits. But the pledges were not translated on the ground. At a time of global economic crisis, the role of economic bloc D-8 in safeguarding the interests of member-countries has assumed more importance. Although the summit expressed its intent to increase the bloc's trade from the present \$130 billion to \$507 billion by 2018, the declarations of the summit remained confined to mere pledges and commitments, without any concrete decisions being taken to translate these expressions of intent into reality. It is difficult to find the word "agreed or decided" in the Declaration but words such as "note" or "reiterate" are plenty. Often the national interests override those of the group's. For example, Pakistan and Turkey recently have not had a happy experience regarding the ship-borne Rental Power Plant docked in Karachi and awaiting a settlement so it can leave without having generated even one megawatt. The affair only serves to underline the difficulties in overcoming obstacles to the desired cooperation. Although Turkey and Iran attended the summit, each country came with a different political agenda. Both countries have vastly different views on Syria's civil war and unless political relations are harmonious, economic relations do not progress in multilateral forum. Observers say that forums such as D-8 focus on symbolism rather than substance, and on rhetoric rather than action. Given the time and money invested for such summit, people are starting to question its relevance. The ball now in the leaders' court.

The writer is former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.

NHRC AND THE ROHINGYAS

Protecting rights or the regime?

C.R. ABRAR

AFTER years of indifference the Rohingya issue has drawn interest nationally as well as internationally. While the recent plight of the members of the community has attracted huge international attention and compassion, it generated a negative reaction among the government circles and also in a section of the influential media in Bangladesh. The policy of denying entry and shelter to the Rohingyas has so far been justified on legal and practical grounds. While these may appear to be logical, a close scrutiny lays bare the gaps in such line of reasoning, an issue that has been treated by this author previously (*The Daily Star*, June 26). While an individual or an institution is at liberty to subscribe to certain opinions, one would expect those to be grounded in reason. This anticipation would be more so from those who hold high position in statutory bodies, particularly those mandated to uphold human rights. One further wishes that when intolerance and prejudice become pronounced, against a vulnerable community without protection, institutions such as the National Human Rights Commission would plead for compassion and empathy, and extend support to those who stand up for their rights and dignity. The NHRC Chair's statement at the recent RMMRU dialogue on the Rohingyas was disappointing for several reasons. They were contradictory, not based on proper interpretation of refugee law, and overtly partisan. At the outset, he questioned the intent of "the drawing room-centric intellectuals for putting the government and the state named Bangladesh in the dock." Referring to 1971, several participants noted that Bangladesh had a moral compulsion to provide asylum to the Rohingyas. The Commission Chair strongly disagreed with such position on grounds that "the context of 1971 is very different from the one Rohingyas are facing today." He went on to explain that after the war ended in 1971; the millions of Bangladeshis who went to India returned home. As against that scenario the Rohingyas have remained in Bangladesh since 1990s. He claimed Bangladesh had set a unique example of allowing integration after illegal infiltration and there was no such example anywhere else in the world. There is a major flaw in this line of reasoning. Bangladeshis came back because the successful end of the war ensured that not only the brutal Pakistani army regime and their cohorts were defeated and deposited but also that a new state was born with the professed aim to protect its citizens. A pertinent question is, what would have happened if the war had dragged on for years, our neighbour did not have any geopolitical and strategic interests to pursue and its patience in hosting Bangladeshi refugees wore thin? As against 1971 scenario, the sources of oppression of the Rohingyas are still controlling the state apparatus in Myanmar, their citizenship issue has remained unaddressed, and not only has the state shunned their claims to protection, Nobel Peace Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi has refused to take any responsibility. Under such circumstances, it is no wonder that the Rohingyas continue to flee Arakan and those in the squalid camps and outside in Bangladesh refuse to go back. The Commission Chair observed that, "today the Rohingya children are taking benefits in our schools, colleges and in workplaces." In frustration, he posed the question, "but do we want that these things increase?" One wonders whether the Chair is aware that under the Convention of the Rights of the Child, Bangladesh is obliged to

ensure access to education to any child on its territory. Needless to say, acquiring education and skills would allow the community members to stand on their feet and help them anchor in their country of origin once they return. Nothing can be further than the truth to claim that Bangladesh has set an example by "providing integration even after illegal infiltration." In the face of beefed-up security in the recent months, the Rohingyas outside camps are living in constant fear of deportation. By government diktat three international NGOs were barred from providing basic services to the unregistered Rohingyas in the makeshift camp. It is not difficult to find examples where, in protracted refugee situations, host countries allowed integration of refugees, in varying degrees -- Palestinians in the Gulf states, Tibetans and Tamils in India and Afghans in Pakistan. The NHRC Chair cautioned the audience, that "the groups that you are favouring and supporting and for whom the international community is exerting pressure (on the government) had close connection with the recent Ramu incident." However, almost in the same breath, he observed that the Rohingyas "have been used ... by some of our leaders or political parties. But ultimately the consequence is that our nation has to bear this burden. We have to repay for their ill deeds."

My own understanding is: human rights stands above group, party or country's interest. It is universal and inalienable. One wishes the Chair reflects on his own posting of NHRC website homepage, "shobar upore manush shotto." He is very right; human beings are truly above everything.

The next step is to recognise him as an asylee (sic) and ensure him the services and benefits that we can afford." Despite such clear understanding of the efficacy of claims to asylum of the incoming Rohingyas and the responsibility of the host government, instead of shaping public opinion for a just cause the Chair rationalised that one "can never expect that a democratically elected government to forcibly carry out tasks contrary to expectations of common people." "That is the harsh reality...Considering the political atmosphere in which we live, it would be logical and consistent with the greater interests of the state," he reasoned. The Commission chief vented his frustration that some people were "trying to put the country on the dock especially at a time when the whole nation is going through a critical phase. There is no scope to dismiss the fact that trial of war crimes is not a separate matter at all. Everything is now linked to this." His final salvo was reserved for the organisers. He said: "At this very moment, this is a newly acquired agenda of our intellectuals to denigrate and put the government on dock. We have to be careful of this." One wonders if it falls within the mandate of the NHRC Chair to protect the government from the alleged ill designs of motivated quarters. My own understanding is: human rights stands above group, party or country's interest. It is universal and inalienable. One wishes the Chair reflects on his own posting of NHRC website homepage, "shobar upore manush shotto." He is very right; human beings are truly above everything.

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China may want more say in HK

CHING CHEONG

ALARMED by the recent upsurge in anti-mainland sentiment in Hong Kong, with the more extreme residents openly denying their Chinese identity, Beijing has responded by adjusting some of its policies towards the Special Administrative Region (SAR). This change of tack can be discerned in President Hu Jintao's report to the 18th Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) earlier this month, in which he made three unprecedented remarks on Hong Kong. For the first time, China's sovereignty, security and development interests have become the key premises of its policy towards the SAR. Hu said: "The underlying goal of the principles and policies adopted by the central government concerning Hong Kong and Macau is to uphold China's sovereignty, security and development interests and maintain long-term prosperity and stability of the two regions."

In the past, China did not see Hong Kong as a threat to its sovereignty and security. Thus, whenever it stated its policy on the SAR, it merely highlighted the principles of "one country, two systems", Hong Kongers governing themselves, the SAR having a high degree of autonomy, and the preservation of its prosperity and stability. Now, with the rise of anti-mainland sentiment, some people are calling for an independent Hong Kong. Since Beijing views separatism as a threat to its sovereignty and security, it has decided that these national interests should come before the SAR's autonomy. For the first time, the same lexicon that Hu used to persuade self-ruling Taiwan to drop its separatist attempts was used in the Hong Kong context. "We are convinced that our compatriots in Hong Kong... (will) share with their mainland compatriots to share the dignity and glory of being Chinese," said Hu in his report. He first used the phrase "to share the dignity and glory of being Chinese" in a speech on Dec 31, 2008, exhorting the Taiwanese not to break away. He had said then: "(We are sure) that the Taiwanese would join hands with their mainland compatriots to share the dignity and glory of a great country, and to feel the pride and privilege of being a rightful Chinese." By applying the anti-separatist lexicon to the Hong Kong context, Beijing showed that it is indeed worried about the spread of the anti-mainland sentiment. Beijing is also hardening its attitude against foreign forces seen to be interfering in the affairs of the two SARs (the other being Macau). In his report to the 17th Congress in 2007, Hu had said merely that China "strongly opposes" foreign forces meddling in the SARs' affairs. This year, he said Beijing will be "guarding against and forestalling external intervention" in the affairs of the SARs. The previous phrasing "strongly opposes" has been strengthened into "guarding against" and "forestalling". Last but not least, Beijing for the first time dropped reference to the Basic Laws of the SARs in an important party document. The Basic Laws are mini-constitutions granting the SARs a high degree of autonomy. In all previous party and government documents, reference to the Basic Laws was made. For example, the 2007 communique endorsing Hu's report stressed that "(we shall) strictly abide by the Basic Laws". However, this year's communique reads: "The congress highlighted the need to fully and faithfully implement the principle of "one country, two systems", under which the people of Hong Kong govern Hong Kong and the people of Macau govern Macau and both regions enjoy a high degree of autonomy." It remains to be seen whether these lexical changes herald a major change in Beijing's policy on Hong Kong. Hong Kong, for the first time, appeared at the party congress as a separate entity, sending 16 local CCP delegates to it. In the past, its delegates had attended under either the Guangdong Provincial Delegation or the Delegation of the Centrally-administered Organisations. Appearing as a separate entity could mean one of two things: that numerically the local CCP has reached a certain size that it warrants a separate identity, or that Beijing has decided to give a more open role to Hong Kong's CCP members. To this day, the local CCP in the SAR continues to operate clandestinely. In 2010, Cao Erbao, Beijing's propaganda chief in the SAR, had openly advocated the creation of a second governing team, made up of central and local CCP members, to supplement the first, which is the official SAR government. Giving a separate entity to Hong Kong's CCP delegates to the 18th Party Congress might be a first move towards that end. All these unprecedented words and deeds suggest that to combat the growth of anti-mainland sentiment, Beijing will be increasingly involved in the running of Hong Kong.

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