

ROHINGYA TRAGEDY
97 asylum seekers die after 25 days sat sea

THE GUARDIAN ONLINE

Burmese asylum seekers rescued by Sri Lanka's navy last week said they floated at sea for 25 days and 97 people died of starvation after Thailand's navy intercepted them and forcibly removed their boat's engine. The Thai navy has denied the allegation.

Thirty-two men and a boy now held at an immigration detention centre near Sri Lanka's capital, Colombo, were rescued last Saturday when their dilapidated wooden vessel began sinking while making a perilous journey to Malaysia.

All are Rohingya Muslims who face heavy discrimination in Burma, and say they do not want to return there.

The survivors were suffering from serious dehydration when they were rescued about 250 miles off Sri Lanka's east coast. The Sri Lankan navy said it was alerted to the sinking vessel by a fisherman.

"The journey was dangerous, but we had to do that ... as we fear for our lives, no jobs, and big fighting [in Burma]," one of the survivors, Shofiulla, said.

Sectarian violence in western Burma has killed hundreds of people and displaced 100,000 more since last June. The United Nations estimates the Rohingya population in Burma at 800,000, but the Burmese government does not recognise them as one of the country's 135 ethnic groups.

Securing the state

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Islam these purveyors of fanaticism insulted, it was the sacred precincts of mosques they defiled through their irreligiosity when after the Juma prayers they went after citizens on Friday. They deliberately forgot or ignored the sublime teachings of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him).

There is a clear need today for the state, with its necessarily secular nature, to be made secure through firm, unrelenting action from the vandalism of the Jamaat, its followers and its friends. There is an imperative today for every citizen, across the board and across political convictions and religious beliefs, to come together and add vigour and energy to the struggle to free Bangladesh of these apostates who misrepresent Islam and who have no room in their dark souls for an appreciation of beliefs not their own. People who do not respect their country are people who end up being enemies of their religion.

Back in 1971, the Jamaat and its murder squads al-Badr and al-Shams committed treachery against the land of their birth. Today, the Jamaat and the Shibir and every single fanatic in this country have committed treachery again. They do not remember the three million who died because they helped Pakistan's soldiers to kill them; they look away from the tens of thousands of Bangalee women raped by the soldiers and the Razakars because they cannot face up to the truth

of what their earlier generation did in that year of unmitigated horror. They do not remember, deliberately, the scores of leading Bangalees led to their deaths on the eve of liberation by the very war criminals whose freedom they demand today.

And so what must we do to run these vandals out of our lives today?

We must, first, ask the government to take firm action against all these extremists, a task in which it will have the full, unconditional support of the nation -- a truth proved at Projonmo Chottor in recent days. Round up all those who carried out the mayhem on Friday and go after those who organise such chaos and have their secret societies busted decisively.

And then we must make it clear to the government and to scholars and preachers of Islam that measures must be taken to prevent mosques around the country from being used as pulpits by these enemies of the state and religion through ensuring that fanatics do not have access to such holy places.

And, finally, let all Bangalees come together in a huge, great, unmistakable renewal of patriotic spirit -- through adding to the crowds at Projonmo Chottor, through disseminating the message of 1971 and of 2013 across the hamlets and villages and towns of this land.

In 1971, a nation of 75 million people defeated a formidable army of 93,000 genocidal soldiers. In 2013, a nation of 140 million people will not find it hard

to send a noisy, ragtag band of fanatics and remnants of al-Badr and al-Shams and Razakars packing.

Nothing, absolutely nothing must come in the way of a proper and judicious prosecution of the trials of those who committed crimes against humanity more than four decades ago and who have brazenly chosen to remain unrepentant about their criminality.

Remarks, printing those same crime

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and its ally Jamaat-e-Islami had been playing various games to foil the trials.

"No one has any right to play any game with other's religion; if anyone wants to do that they'll be resisted. I, therefore, remind them [BNP-Jamaat] to stop the game as the government won't allow them to play with the faiths of people," Hasina said.

She urged people to remain alert about BNP-

Jamaat's games and foil those.

About the elections, Hasina said her government established people's voting rights and peacefully held 5,440 fair elections at different levels over the last four years. "Arrangements have also been made to hold peaceful elections in the future," she told the meeting.

The premier said her government wants balanced development of the country

and has been implementing programmes to that end.

Hasina said, "As the district [Rangamati] is very important for the country, the government has made special allocations for its development."

She said a technology university would be set up in Rangamati which would have arrangements for all kinds of studies.

She said, "People had seen many bloodbaths in the past, but they don't

want any more bloodshed."

She also sought votes for her party.

Foreign Minister Dipu Moni, Civil Aviation and Tourism Minister Faruk Khan, Primary and Mass Education Minister Afsarul Ameen, Environment and Forests Minister Hasan Mahmud, former Chittagong City Corporation mayor ABM Mohiuddin Chowdhury, Bir Bahdur M and Dipankar Talukder also attended the meeting.

BNP slates crime, supports culprits

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party condemns the damaging of Shaheed Minars, insulting of the national flags and assaults on journalists on Friday by members of the Islamist outfits that sponsor today's shutdown.

Talking to The Daily Star in return for anonymity, the BNP policymaker said the ruling Awami League had been trying to score points over the ongoing mass movement for capital punishment to war criminals.

Likewise, the BNP leader added, his party would now try to make some political gains by using people's religious sentiments amid agitation by Islamist parties.

Before and after the Juma prayers on Friday, Jamaat-e-Islami and its sympathisers attacked law enforcers and journalists, burned and tore national flags and damaged Shaheed Minars to counter the people's movement against war criminals.

Later, they declared today's dawn-to-dusk hartal in protest against what they said were "Friday's police action".

Moudud Ahmed, a mem-

ber of BNP standing committee, yesterday told The Daily Star: "We are perceived as a pro-Islamist party. So, we have to honour the mass people's sentiment against anti-Islamic campaign by a section of bloggers."

Asked if the BNP's support to the hartal was tantamount to backing vandalism at Shaheed Minars and defiling of national flags, he said, "We condemn such acts as well as the attacks on journalists."

Another member of the BNP standing committee, Lt Gen (ret'd) Mahbubur Rahman, blamed the government for the unrest.

"It is the government's responsibility to ensure public security. The government also has the responsibility to protect the sanctity of Shaheed Minars. But they have failed to do so," he told The Daily Star.

The BNP, however, did not issue a formal statement to condemn the defiling of Shaheed Minars and national flags.

Addressing the local leaders in Dinajpur, BNP's acting secretary general

Mirza Fakhru Islam Alamgir yesterday claimed his party believed in non-communal politics.

"Everyone will follow his/her religion in peace. BNP does not believe in creating anarchy in the name of religion," he added.

His statement came in marked contrasts to the party's latest stance.

Requesting not to be named, a number of BNP leaders yesterday told The Daily Star they knew well that Jamaat-e-Islami and some like-minded parties had indeed been running a clever campaign to whip up people's religious sentiment.

Those parties were distributing leaflets to convince people that the Shahbagh movement was demeaning Islam.

They were doing it even though the Shahbagh protesters had all along maintained respect for all the religions and made no comments that might hurt people's religious sentiment.

"The BNP is a pro-Islamist party. So, it cannot allow developing any gap with the Islamist parties," one of the leaders said.

The BNP came up with the announcement of supporting today's hartal without discussion at any party forum. "I came to know through a television news report that the BNP extended its support to the hartal," a BNP policymaker said.

Ruhul Kabir Rizvi Ahmed, joint secretary general of the BNP, at a press conference at the party's Nayapaltan central office in the afternoon announced BNP's support for today's hartal.

Asked why his party was supporting a hartal called by those who on Friday vandalised Shaheed Minars and insulted national flags, Rizvi did not give any direct reply.

Contacted over telephone, Tariqul Islam, a member of the party's standing committee, said he was on the way to his home district. "I am now at airport. Ask the secretary general about it."

Fakhru Islam Alamgir could not be contacted as his mobile phone was found switched off.

Four of the eight parties that sponsor today's hartal belong to BNP-led 18-party alliance. Jamaat-e-Islami, a major partner in the alli-

ance, on Friday night gave support to the hartal.

BNP's latest stance seems to have made Jamaat happy. The party extended support to Jamaat's hartal on January 31, but it remained silent when Jamaat called hartals for February 4 and 5 and 18.

The main opposition party refrained from supporting the last three Jamaat hartals because by that time the Shahbagh protest began and spread through the country, said sources.

It even did not hold a rally, scheduled for February 9, under the banner of 18-party alliance. The rally was staged on February 18 without Jamaat.

"A wide gap between the BNP and Jamaat has been created following their [BNP's] refusal to support our hartal. But now we are pleased as the BNP extended support to hartal called by other Islamist parties," a Jamaat leader told The Daily Star on condition of anonymity.

Meanwhile, around 40 name-only parties yesterday issued statements supporting today's hartal.

Is it the struggle of 1952

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ones? By breaking the Shaheed Minar are they not trying to say that they do not believe in our national identity? Do they think our language movement was unjustified? Are they not trying to tell us that everything we have fought for, all the struggles that our people undertook, all the sacrifices they made and lives we lost to give Bangla the status of a national language were wrong? By implication are they not denying the rights of Bangalees to have Bangla as their mother tongue? So in effect people who insulted our flag and broke our Shaheed Minar do not believe in any of the struggles that have resulted in the birth of this beautiful country we call Bangladesh.

We think the desecration of the National Flag and of the Shaheed Minar are telling revelations that should alert us all as to what Jamaat, Shibir and their supporters stand for. In their eyes, the War of Liberation was wrong, our fight for independence was wrong, our fighting the Pakistanis was wrong. On the contrary, the Pakistani army's attacking our civilian population was correct, the genocide was correct, the raping of our women was correct and the killing our freedom fighters was correct. In their views, the war criminals are heroes because they not only opposed the birth of this country but carried crimes against humanity to prevent Bangladesh from becoming independent. In their thinking, Bangla cannot be our national language and as such the Bangladesh of our dreams does not have the right to exist. How can our freedom-

loving people tolerate this stance? How can the children of our martyrs accept this position of Jamaat and Shibir? How can anybody with an iota of pride and self-respect accept such an insult to our very existence?

As believers in democracy and as supporters of plurality of political views, we have tolerated Jamaat's politics and viewpoints for all these years and have given them a chance to participate in our politics. It was our hope that given political space and being tolerated, though they stood against our independence, Jamaat and Shibir will, in time, repent and apologise to our people for their politics of 1971.

Our hopes stand belied. After 42 years of our independence, Jamaat and Shibir not only did not apologise for their murderous role in '71, they now seem to feel strong enough to burn our National Flag and destroy Shaheed Minars in several parts of the country.

So the destruction Shaheed Minar means that we are fighting the battle of 1952 all over again.

It is well known what the religious extremists said at that time to oppose our language movement. It was that Bangla was not a language of the Muslims, our culture was not what we practise, our heritage was not ours, and everything, including our literature, music, dance, art, sculpture and painting, was polluted by Hindu influence and hence should be discarded. The language itself must be shunned and in its place the Muslims of the then East Pakistan should try to practise either Arabic or Urdu. Everything Bangalee

was non-Muslim and as such should be disowned.

The language movement itself was termed a Hindu conspiracy to divide the Muslims of the new born Pakistan and hence should be thoroughly opposed.

Today, as our demand for the trial of the war criminals intensifies, we hear the same attack on our language, heritage and culture, and using the same line of attack that Bangla and Bangalees are against Islam. Suddenly fictitious claims of insult to the Holy Prophet and to Islam are begin spread throughout the country and among the poor and illiterate masses so that confusion can be created and the trial of the war criminals cannot proceed to finish the job now, what should have been done four decades ago.

We ardently believe in democracy, and cherish the ideals of pluralism. However, today we declare with as much clarity, determination and forcefulness we are able to master that our right to exist as Bangalees cannot be taken away from us and that we will fight till the very end to preserve and protect our independence and culture.

The violence that has been carried out against our people, culture and independence cannot and will not be tolerated. The nation is ready to make all sacrifices required to protect and preserve our nation and our culture. Let our tolerance not be taken as our weakness, nor our faith in democracy as our incapacity to fight our enemies.

Many of my fellow freedom fighters may, perhaps, not agree with me but we say that there is still time for Jamaat and Shibir to renounce their politics,

reject their blood thirsty ways and pledge their loyalty to the independence and cultural identity of Bangladesh. The violence they are indulging in will only cost innocent lives, and they will never be able to win. The war criminals who are still enjoying leadership role should be rejected by the younger members of Jamaat and Shibir, most of whom were not born when the language movement and our liberation struggle took place. The older leaders, many of whom took direct part in the genocide of our people in 1971, now stand thoroughly exposed through the trial process. The younger members of religion-based political parties should not take on their shoulders the crimes against humanity committed by their older leaders.

We also condemn the attacks on the journalists who were merely performing their duties in reporting facts. The brutal attacks that a section of our journalists has been subjected to reveal only too well the fascist nature of Jamaat and Shibir. They use the democratic rights given by our constitution to kill that very same rights by resorting to terrorism and violence.

We assert in the strongest of terms that no amount of violence will stop the media from reporting the truth and that the war criminals will be tried and that the culture and language of Bangalees will survive for thousands and thousands of years, and killings and violence by Jamaat-Shibir will never make us give up what we have won through the sacrifice of millions of martyrs ever since the early 1950s.

Jamaat demeans Islam

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reporters after attending the annual general meeting of Bangladesh Registration Service Association at the Institute of Diploma Engineers, Bangladesh.

In a democracy, every body has the right to form and join political parties or organisations. But if any organisation is involved in extremism, destroys public properties and attacks law enforcers and media workers, it has no right to co-exist in the society or state, Shafique said.

Replying to a question, he said a writ petition challenging the legality of Jamaat's registration with

the Election Commission was now pending with the High Court.

The High Court may dispose of the petition within two to three weeks, passing a directive on Jamaat's politics, the law minister said. And then would follow a decision to ban Jamaat.

Bangladesh Tariqat Federation filed the appeal in 2009, challenging the legality of the EC registering Jamaat as a political party in November 2008.

Following the petition, the HC issued a rule upon the EC and the Jamaat ameer and the secretary general, asking them to

explain why the registration of Jamaat should not be cancelled.

Meanwhile, National Human Rights Commission Chairman Mizanur Rahman urged the government to take steps immediately to ban Jamaat, saying it is a terrorist organisation.

Jamaat and student body Islami Chhatra Shibir has taken an anti-state and anti-liberation stance, which was very clear from the Friday's countrywide mayhem, he said.

"They [Jamaat-Shibir] have defamed the state through burning the national flag and vandalis-

ing Shaheed Minars." All these acts are tantamount to sedition, Mizanur said.

The NHRC chief also called upon all the pro-liberation political parties to be united for fighting against the terrorist organisation.

Jamaat-Shibir killed intellectuals, tortured women and looted properties during the 1971 Liberation War and tried to justify them, using religious sentiments, Mizanur said.

"We have seen similar activities last Friday."

Now, the government has to make a bold political decision to resist Jamaat, the NHRC chief said.

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