

Ethnic cleansing in Myanmar

MAHMOOD HASAN

MYANMARESE President General Thein Sein is riding high. He is the new darling of the West. On April 22, the International Crisis Group presented him its annual “In Pursuit of Peace” award at a gala dinner in New York, apparently in recognition of democratic reforms he introduced in Myanmar. The same day European Union lifted trade, economic and individual sanctions against Myanmar.

While Thein Sein basked in glory in New York, Human Rights Watch released a 153-page report the same day, stating Myanmar has waged “a campaign of ethnic cleansing” against Rohingya Muslims. Rohingyas have faced crimes against humanity including murder, persecution, and deportation. HRW report squarely blamed the Myanmar government for being responsible for the atrocities and for denying humanitarian aid to the affected people.

Myanmar’s quasi-military regime has been directly involved in anti-Muslim riots and ethnic cleansing in different states of the country. Since June 2012 the indigenous Muslim population in Rakhine state have been facing systematic pogrom at the hands of Buddhists monks and civilians, and Myanmar forces. More than 200 Muslims were killed in the month long violence that left thousands displaced. The minority Muslim community in Rakhine is known as Rohingyas. They had been robbed of their nationality when the xenophobic dictator General Ne Win promulgated the Citizenship Law in 1982. Burmans call Rohingyas as “Kalars,” a racist word containing deep hatred.

Since the outbreak of murderous riots in Rakhine thousands have fled to neighbouring Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, Bangladesh and other countries seeking refuge. Hundreds have perished at sea while trying to escape

from Rakhine in flimsy boats.

On March 20, fierce rioting broke out in the town of Meikhtila in central Myanmar over a trivial argument between a Muslim gold shop owner and a Buddhist couple. The violence left 43 dead, mostly Muslims burnt to death. The government declared local emergency on March 22 to control the situation. BBC video footage released recently shows that police stood by as Buddhist arsonists, including monks, set fire to Muslim shops, mosques, and homes and went on a killing rampage. Several thousand Muslims were displaced.

If one looks at Myanmar map it becomes clear that central Myanmar -- the Irrawaddy basin -- is the homeland of Buddhist Burmans (Bamar), who constitute 68% of the country’s population of 60 million. Minority ethnic

general elections in November 2010.

Political prisoners have been freed though many still remain behind bars. The ban on print media has been lifted recently. In the April 2012 by-elections Aung San Suu Kyi was taken on board the parliament and dubbed as the opposition leader. Suu Kyi’s NLD has 41 seats in the parliament of 440. Interestingly the lower house has 110 unelected seats reserved for the military.

Thein Sein has played the democracy card well, so far. The West has waived Myanmar’s \$6 billion debt. Western leaders made a bee-line to visit Yangon. British Prime Minister David Cameron, French Foreign Minister Alain Juppe’, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, and finally US President Barack Obama all visited Myanmar and encouraged Thein Sein to continue with

she can do.

“She has absolutely nothing to gain by opening her mouth ... she is no longer a political dissident trying to stick to her principles. She is a politician and her eyes are fixed on the majority Buddhist vote at the 2015 election,” said Dr. Maung Zami, a Myanmar expert and visiting fellow at London School of Economics. “To be honest, Aung San Suu Kyi is a prop, not a strategic player,” commented Dr. Zami.

“The Irrawaddy Blog” in a commentary reported: “These days in Rangoon, it is not uncommon to see monks distributing pamphlets labeled ‘969’, the name of a newly surfaced campaign against Muslim minorities. The first ‘9’ stands for the nine attributes of Buddha; ‘6’ for the special attributes of his ‘Dhamma’, and last ‘9’ for the nine attributes of Buddhist monks.” Destroyed mosques, buildings and vehicles have been spray-painted with ‘969’ and car stickers were also seen in Pegu Division. It is not unlikely that elements from the army are involved in inciting the violence. One wonders whether Thein Sein is in control of his armed forces.

What is disturbing is that the international community has pulled wool over its eyes. Many feel that US and EU have withdrawn the sanctions against Myanmar prematurely. Their greedy eyes are fixed on the rich natural resources of the country, particularly huge oil and gas reserves. The other strategy of the West is to encircle and weaken China’s growing influence in the region.

What is sad and frustrating is the frightful plight of the Muslims in Myanmar. Muslims today are faced with systematic annihilation. Democracy ensures freedom, security and a just society for all citizens. If citizenship of the Rohingyas is not returned by the Myanmar government it will destabilise the reform process. More ethnic violence may actually lead to Rwanda-type genocide.

The writer is former ambassador and secretary.



Weighing scales at the airport

Finally someone creates a fair way to fly. Families with children are loving the new air ticket system where small skinny passengers pay less than big fat ones. At Samoa Air, staff weigh the traveler and his or her baggage and charge \$4.16 per kilo, I hear from reader Helen Woo. Beefy rugby players pay a fortune.

Being a short, Mr-Puniverse-type person, this columnist hopes this spreads to all airlines.

But I foresee difficulties now that many people book air tickets online. Staff will have to conduct spot checks at the gate. Airline staffer: “It says on your cheapo ticket you are a tiny anorexic midget weighing 45 kilos.” Huge man: “That’s right. These baggy clothes are terribly unflattering, aren’t they?”

There have already been angry complaints. On a BBC web report, a reader who is six feet tall and weighs 90 kilos without being overweight demanded to know why he should be penalised for his high score “in the genetic lottery.”

Because, my friend, we short people are penalised for our low score “in the genetic lottery” every day of our lives, statistically getting worse jobs, worse salary, uglier partners, etc, so it’s only fair that you ugly overgrown gorillas suffer horribly now, not that I have a chip on my shoulder or anything.

The curious thing is that the plan has been implemented in Samoa, listed in the Guinness Book of Records as the world’s fattest country. Someone’s going to get rich.

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BITTER TRUTH

Earth suffocated by greenhouse gases



Md. ASADULLAH KHAN

It has been established beyond doubt now that greenhouse gases (GHG) pose serious threat to humans. Even then, it is true that without these gases the world would have been much too cold for comfort, unable to sustain life as we know it.

Many scientists today see the next 100 years as a time of traumatic environmental change. The United Nations Intergovernmental panel on Climate Change (IPCC) projects a rise in average global temperature of about 1 to 3.5 degrees Celsius by 2100. The report further says that this pattern of warming is a cause for concern, if not alarm. Because global temperatures are like bank rates, a small change can make a big difference.

A 1% rise in surface temperature could cause major disruptions in weather patterns that could produce flash floods and unexpected droughts. It could also melt the ice in the Arctic and Antarctica. Such ice melts may cause massive floods as rivers would be unable to cope with the tons of water released. At the same time, declining snow cover over the Himalayas could dramatically change the ecology of the region, causing desertification of the fertile mountain valleys. That could raise sea levels, with catastrophic consequences to island nations. And this pattern of warming -- more in the Arctic than in the equator, more in the night than the day, more in winter than summer -- fits that predicted by the supercomputer models about man-made climate change.

The impact of warming on water bodies is much more severe. IPCC projects that the world’s oceans will rise anywhere from 15 to 95 cm by 2100. This may not sound much but figures at the high end of that scale would rob a low lying nation like Bangladesh of over 20% of its arable land. And in the US it could put the cities of New York, New Orleans and Florida Keys under water.

The worst has already started playing out -- seas have risen by 25 cm this century and more thermal expansion of sea water and glacier melting will push it up even further. Even at the low end of the scale mentioned above, rising waters would increase coastal erosion and heighten the damaging effects of hurricanes and coastal storms. Encroaching salt water has the potential to contaminate water supplies that coastal cities and farms depend on. Leaving aside the outright loss of land to the ocean, the threat of contaminated water supplies is perhaps the most serious problem faced by rising sea levels.

Inevitably, the adverse effect of climate change in areas like Bangladesh is grimmer. Research reports made public in the year 2002 indicated that 36,000 sq km in Bangladesh out of 1,47,550 sq km face an uncertain and grim future. This includes the Sundarbans, the biggest mangrove forest in the world, and the longest sea beach in Cox’s Bazaar. The stark fact is that about 14,000 sq km in the coastal zone is just one metre above sea level.



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Forests, home to two thirds of all species, temper climate and capture and store water. They store 40% of terrestrial carbon and can slow down build up of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. Deforestation in mountains can worsen floods in grasslands or agricultural land below, as was the case in China and Madagascar and more recently in the hill region of Bangladesh.

Humans have hurt coastal and marine ecosystems directly by draining wetlands, cutting mangroves, trawling oceans for fish and destroying reefs and lagoons. Besides we damage these ecosystems indirectly as rivers transport the effluents and byproducts of agriculture, industry and urban areas to the coasts. Man-made climate change threatens all coastal areas, as melting glaciers send more water seaward and the warming and expanding of the oceans cause sea levels to rise.

This makes it abundantly clear for industrialised and affluent nations to set national or regional limits on the release of carbon dioxide, the chief suspect in global warming. Topping the list of offenders are China and the US, who are least bothered about the disasters this gas has been wreaking on the environment, even if they are not now immune from the catastrophes sweeping through their countries.

The situation, not only in Bangladesh but also around the world, is assuming serious proportions. Much of the world’s land is too rocky, arid or salty for agriculture. Forests that have already been cut deserve protection -- they harbour the habitats of earth’s endangered wild life. Fewer than two million species of animals, plants and micro-organisms have been identified. Yet tens of millions more may exist in oceans, rainforests and everybody’s gardens. In fact, nature does not seek to make a connection with us, nature does not care if we live or die. The hard truth is that we can’t survive without the oceans or the forests, for example, but they can do fine without us.

The extinction of forests has come in the wake of unprecedented population boom, especially in the Third World. Much of the land becomes less arable by the minute, assaulted by urbanisation, chemical pollution, desertification and overuse of limited water supplies. The exhaustion of land has created a new class of displaced persons known as “environment migrants.” While wars were fought over territory, the future may see “Green Wars” triggered by shortages of such basic resources as topsoil or water.

As a region loses its forests, it also loses its ability to trap and absorb water, and so run-off from the denuded woodland worsens the natural process of soil erosion. The result -- the world wears away 24 billion tons of topsoil a year. When dry areas are worn down by the wind and by intensive farming, the region may eventually become a sterile desert, a fate that has befallen 3% of the world’s farm lands.

Now efforts are underway to right some of the wrongs. It is time to put environment or ecosystems at the centre of decision making in government. China, whose factories spew out poisons that fall as acid rain on its neighbours, must cut back on the use of coal and thus reduce sulphur dioxide emissions.

For poor countries as ours, the top priority should be to reduce rapid population growth and urbanisation. Overpopulation means overloading the earth’s carrying capacity and that translates into diminishing resources for development and deteriorating quality of life.

In developing countries, which contain more than 80% of the world’s 6 billion people, poverty, population growth and environmental damage are closely linked. The damage will accelerate as our population swells. In consequence, social unrest that we are witnessing now will erupt in more vicious form. In a bid to arrest such trends, especially in this age of globalisation and interdependence, all our activities have to be linked with sustainable development to create a hybrid concept of user-friendly economic growth.

The message from either the Copenhagen or Cancun climate talks has not been very assuring. At the same time “Earth Day” seminars, meetings and rallies in our country, other than being just a slogan, must focus on the progress achieved in respect of providing clean water, protecting forests and reducing pollution.

The Cancun Deal in 2010 set a goal of limiting global warming to 2 degrees Celsius (3.6 degrees Fahrenheit) but does not identify the stepping stones to achieving this -- and the promises to curb GHG, the toughest issue of all, are only voluntary.

Issues where the Cancun talks could make progress include measures to avert deforestation which accounts for between 12 to 25% of global emissions of GHG. Countries could also give the formal go-ahead to a ‘Green Fund’ proposed as the main vehicle for providing up to \$100 billion a year in aid to poor countries.

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