

Thousands at risk of landslides

Govt. must relocate them urgently

WE are deeply concerned about the thousands of families living at risk of landslides in the hill regions in Chittagong. It is unfortunate that, despite the accidents that take place every year, especially during monsoon, leading to loss of lives and property of low-income groups who live on the slopes and foots of hills, the authorities are yet to take any effective measures to evacuate them to safer places.

According to our reports, the Hill Management Committee (HMC) directed organisations and individuals who owned the hills or land around them to submit the lists of vulnerable families living there by June 8.

However, even though the deadline has passed, not a single list has been submitted. The committee, formed in 2007 after 127 people lost their lives in a landslide, has so far made 36 proposals including relocating the hill-dwellers vulnerable to landslides, constructing retaining walls, taking up afforestation programmes and erecting barbed-wire fences around the hills, but so far, most of these have not been implemented. Experts argue that the middlemen who occupy and rent the land continue to do so with impunity as they have political clout.

With landslides killing at least 185 people between 2007 and 2013 in Chittagong in monsoon, we simply cannot leave these low-income people in such a vulnerable state. The authorities must take immediate steps to implement the suggestions of the HMC, and take action against those who rent out the land, putting peoples' lives at risk. In addition, they must make an updated list of the people who are exposed to risks and relocate them urgently.

Minister's badmouthing disgraceful

Not the way to deal with public officials

THIS is not the first time that the minister for social welfare has come into news for all the wrong reasons. His latest act of utter impropriety has caused discontent among local officials including the police administration in Moulivibazar. We are shocked to learn that the minister allegedly called some senior officials 'bastards', hurled abuse at police for corruption and made unprintable disparaging remarks about female students of two universities. This sort of behaviour is not only unbecoming of a minister, it is downright condemnable.

Officers in Charge of police stations were made to stand and another member of a law enforcement agency was derided for not removing his cap in the minister's presence. This goes to show the minister's complete lack of official decorum and his feudalistic mindset. If the minister had definite information about 'corruption' against any law enforcer there are ways to deal with the matter.

Given eyewitness accounts of what happened in the monthly law and order meeting of the district, we feel that the behaviour of the minister has hurt the dignity and morale of officials. Rather than publicly degrading the administrative and law enforcement officials, he could have called for an explanation in a manner befitting his position. This is no way to behave and if anyone needed to be held to account for misdemeanour, it appears to be the minister himself.

Bangkok meeting failed to address root cause

MAHMOOD HASAN

WE'VE read or watched shocking stories and video clips of people being killed and buried in mass graves in remote jungles of Malaysia-Thailand border. Hundreds of boat people were found drifting for several weeks and stranded in rickety boats in the Andaman Sea. It was a humanitarian crisis of unprecedented proportion.

Malaysia and Indonesia have agreed to give temporary shelter to 7,000 people, on condition that these people will eventually be repatriated to their home countries. According to the United Nations, during April/May more than 3,500 starving migrants were given shelter in Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia. United Nations also said that more than 120,000 Myanmar nationals from Rakhine have fled in the past three years. More than 1000 people have died while trying to migrate.

To deal with this humanitarian crisis, Thailand called a special meeting on "Irregular Migration in the Indian Ocean" of 17 regional countries and international organisations on May 29, 2015 in Bangkok.

Who are these desperate people taking suicidal boat-rides? Why are they fleeing their country?

According to reports most of these people are Myanmar nationals (Rohingya Muslims) from Rakhine State, who are trying to escape persecution in the hands of the Myanmar government. The military regime of Myanmar has denied citizenship to 1.3 million Muslims of Rakhine, claiming that they were from Bangladesh, though they have been living there for more than thousand years.

In late 2011, Buddhist monks-led rioting in Rakhine state led to the death of several hundred Muslims. Subsequent riots in 2012 and 2013 have left many

dead and thousands homeless. Constant denial of human rights by the Myanmar regime has made the lives of these people insecure.

Here it should be noted that it is wrong to call these people by their ethnic name. Calling them "Rohingya" is misleading and discriminatory. They are rightfully "Myanmar nationals," whether the Myanmar government accepts it or not. The Bangladesh government rightly considers these people as Myanmar nationals. Bangladesh already has more than 50,000 Myanmar nationals illegally living as refugees and cannot accommodate more.

Interestingly, the Myanmar delegation to the Bangkok Meeting refused to attend if the word "Rohingya" was used by the organisers. Myanmar Foreign Ministry Director General Htin Linn, attending the meeting, has inadvertently accepted that the Muslims of Rakhine were indeed nationals of Myanmar.

The other group of people caught by human traffickers is from Bangladesh. These are young glibble people who were lured by traffickers for well paid jobs in Malaysia. Many of these young people eventually became victims of extortion and ransom.

The Bangkok Meeting was inaugurated by Thai Deputy Prime Minister General Tanasak Patimapragorn, who is also the foreign minister of the country. The Final Statement of Bangkok meeting reads as follows: i) Indonesia and Malaysia would continue to provide temporary shelter for the migrants, provided that the international community would resettle or repatriate them within a year; ii) regional countries would intensify search-and-rescue efforts to ensure the safety of migrants; iii) a joint task force would be established to coordinate assistance to countries dealing with migrants; iv) affordable and safe channels of legitimate migration would be enhanced; v) US pledged \$3 million

to help IOM deal with the crisis, while Australia pledged \$3.8 million towards humanitarian assistance for the victims.

Surprisingly, the meeting only addressed how to save the migrants at sea and not the core problem – the reason behind their escape from Myanmar.

Despite several recommendations, the meeting actually ended without any concrete solution. That was because of the denial mode taken by the Myanmar delegation. The meeting turned acrimonious when the UN Assistant High Commissioner for Refugees, Volker Turk, said that there could be no solution if the root causes of the migrant crisis were not addressed. "This will

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require full assumption of responsibility by Myanmar toward all its people. Granting citizenship is the ultimate goal ... and the removal of restrictions on basic freedom," he said.

To this Htin Linn shot back saying Mr. Turk should "be more informed," apparently alluding to Myanmar's position that these people were not Myanmar nationals. Htin Linn also denied that there was any persecution of Muslims in Myanmar. "Finger pointing will not serve any purpose," remarked Htin Linn.

Bangladesh delegation leader, Foreign Secretary Shahidul Haque, pointed at "external factors" that led Bangladeshis

to migrate. What exactly he meant is not clear. He argued that Bangladesh achieved sustained economic growth over the past decades. Therefore, poverty could not be the reason for young people to migrate. He, however, assured that Bangladesh will repatriate its nationals as soon as possible after verifying their nationality.

Since the boats used for trafficking were from Thailand and Myanmar, it is clear that a large international syndicate of traffickers is at work in the region. What is even more alarming is the involvement of powerful people and law enforcing agencies in Malaysia and Thailand in this racket. Myanmar authorities were fully aware that Muslims from Rakhine were migrating.

Thailand has arrested scores of people including army General Manas Kongpan on human trafficking charges. Malaysian government has arrested dozens including senior policemen. The Bangladesh government has also cracked down on trafficking networks. These networks need to be crushed.

It is high time that the UN considers imposing appropriate sanctions on the military government of Myanmar. ASEAN also has a responsibility to take credible steps to alleviate the condition of the wretched Muslim population of Myanmar.

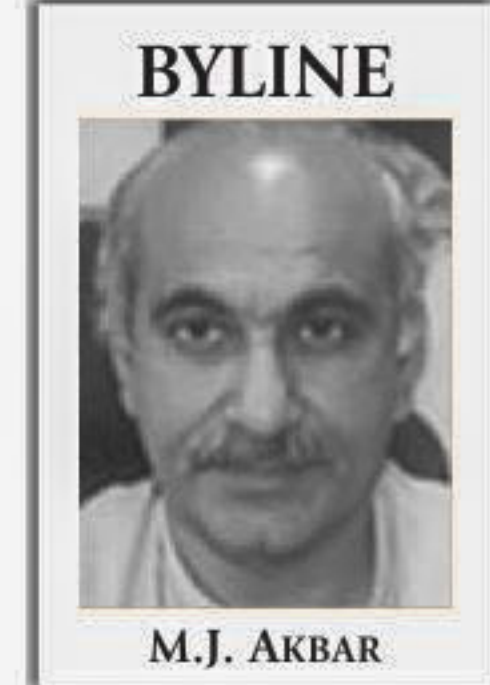
The international community along with Nobel laureates, the Dalai Lama and Malala Yousoufzai, have called upon Myanmar to recognise the Muslims of Rakhine as Myanmar citizens.

Denials by Thein Sein's government will not solve this problem. Migration of Myanmar Muslims cannot be stopped until the xenophobic Myanmar government is made to give proper recognition and citizenship to the persecuted Muslims of Rakhine State.

The Bangkok meeting failed to address this root cause.

The writer is former Ambassador and Secretary.

Poison on menu at wedding feast



M.J. AKBAR

BYLINE MARRIAGE, noted George Bernard Shaw, the finest playwright in English since Shakespeare, is an institution that thrives because there are such excellent divorce laws. Shaw, who was born in 1856, or one year before the British overthrew Bahadur Shah Zafar, and died in 1950, three years after India won independence, would have chortled at the suggestion that his maxim was so perfectly suited to the Bihar Assembly elections of 2015. Shaw was always irrepressible, and never irresponsible.

The shotgun wedding between Nitish Kumar and Laloo Yadav reaffirms the Shavian adage: some marriages need a prenuptial divorce clause. To be fair, Laloo Yadav is under no illusions. He dampened celebrations with the remark, made with all the pathos of a victim, that his diet at the wedding feast was poison.

The problem is not too complicated, if you understand the running theme of Nitish Kumar's politics. It does not matter where the wedding procession begins, or where it ends, Nitish Kumar has to be the bridegroom, or there will be no wedding at all. Such a claim, in politics, must be sustained by ground reality. The present Bihar scenario is succinct: Nitish Kumar is a leader without a party, and Laloo Yadav's outfit, thanks to his conviction in the fodder scam, is a party without a leader. Their deal, in practical terms, amounts to this. Yadav has to do the heavy lifting of votes, while Nitish Kumar picks up the cherry of top job.

This is why Nitish Kumar, the bridegroom, is always desperately in search of someone else's horse to ride. Alone, he goes nowhere. For a decade and a half, he used BJP as his horse, and did very well out of it, enjoying a major Cabinet position in Delhi before he became CM in Patna. When, in 2013, he miscalculated and thought he could become Prime Minister after the 2014 general elections, he ditched BJP without a minor flicker of guilt. Laloo Yadav knows that if it took Kumar 15 years to abandon the BJP, it will take him only 15 days to abandon Yadav. Laloo Yadav is staring at abuse after being used.

The long game has already begun. Both "partners" are determined to protect their interests by maximising their share of MLA candidates in the distribution of seats. Clever little stories are being planted in media with all the abandon of shrubs in a rain forest. The most imaginative one has emerged from the Nitish

Kumar camp, which hopes that a deflated Congress will also become part of the package. Opinion polls give Congress between two and five seats at the moment, but obviously the party's ambitions are more grandiose. It wants to contest somewhere in the vicinity of 60 seats. Where will they come from? From the seats that BJP won in the last Assembly elections, suggests the Nitish storytellers.

Very clever. In the last Assembly polls, Nitish Kumar was an ally of BJP. In other words, he is not ready to part with any seat that he won five years ago, but is very generous with seats where Laloo Yadav came second, and therefore is a legitimate claimant this time around. Obviously, the seasoned Yadav leader is nobody's fool.

rather than check with the electorate. Every election is fought on the basis of new realities. There is, moreover, a substantial, growing percentage which will vote on issues above caste loyalty, particularly among the young. Their decision will determine the result.

The swing in the next Bihar Assembly polls will hinge on the most fundamental of all fundamentalist questions: who can provide a stable government, which is a non-negotiable requisite for good governance? Bihar has paid a huge price for chronic instability. Laloo Yadav did get a stable mandate, but he could not deliver governance. The Nitish Kumar-BJP alliance gave Bihar stability and governance, until Nitish Kumar wrecked it. This is going to be the first Assembly



Laloo Yadav (L) and Nitish Kumar.

This concoction is about as believable as the plant that Rahul Gandhi was the mastermind behind the alliance. You have to be brain-dead to believe that Laloo Yadav and Nitish Kumar need instructions from Rahul Gandhi on what is in their best interests. But I suppose such media agriculture is par for the course at election time.

The early commentary is, however, repeating an old mistake. An election is not about arithmetic. Some silly mathematics is in play: add this number to that, on the basis of demographic aggregation, or switch so much from here to there, and presto! If it were that simple, the Election Commission could consult a statistician

election in Bihar after significant upheavals in the political landscape: Narendra Modi's emergence as a national leader; Nitish Kumar's long-winded, tortured switch to existential foe Laloo Yadav; Ram Jatan Majhi's installation and eviction by Nitish Kumar; Laloo Yadav's departure from the CM stakes, and a consequent transfer of power to the next generation in his family. Imponderables make democracy a wonderfully exciting process.

The writer is Editor of *The Sunday Guardian*, published from Delhi, *India on Sunday*, published from London and Editorial Director, *India Today and Headlines Today*.

COMMENTS

"Modi better salesman than me," says Manmohan" (June 10, 2015)

Shah Alam

He came for transit and he got it. No discussions about killing Bangladeshi people in border took place. Similarly, no Teesta water distribution solution has come to effect. So what did we get from Modi?

Munir Munna

Yes, truth comes to light at last. Certainly, Manmohan here indicates the role of Modi's visit to Bangladesh where he gains everything but loses nothing.

Mahfuz Nahid

It's true. Modi has done a very good sales job in Bangladesh!

Ahmed Naim

Teesta river treaty might never be in our favour.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Tobacco causes extensive harm

In his budget speech in parliament, finance minister AMA Muhith said, "It is evident that the tobacco or cigarette industry pays the least amount of taxes but this industry causes extensive harm to public health." I fully endorse Mr. AMA Muhith's views. We would appreciate it if the government imposed high levy on tobacco production for the interest of public health.

Jamshaid Taher
Banani, Dhaka

Peace has become elusive in Bangladesh

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina said on May 31, 2015 that there was no hesitation on Bangladesh's part to send its troops to conflict-ridden and dangerous regions of the world under the sponsorship of the United Nations Security Council Mandate.

We are very proud of our peacekeepers who are doing an excellent job worldwide and are being praised for it. But alas, we are not so lucky at home. In many instances we are deprived of their presence which could have made a difference, and the recently held mayoral election is one of them. Armed forces remained in the cantonment and the role of the police is unacceptable.

Is it not ironic that our troops are engaged in establishing peace in other countries while peace is elusive in our own country?
Nur Jahan, Chittagong

"Blame Islam and get rich" scheme?

Now we've got one more "Draw Muhammad" contest with another group of so called "free speech advocates." The organiser of this event, Jon Ritzheimer, and his group were promoting "peace" with arms and intimidation outside of a mosque in Phoenix, Arizona during Friday prayers, all the while showcasing insulting drawings of the Prophet Muhammad. Ritzheimer claims, "We're not the one threatening anybody". Apparently mustering an armed rally and terrorising innocent Muslims offering prayer is "non-threatening!"

Was he really promoting peace or was he trying to make money from promoting "Islamophobia"? Clearly, he has learned from his guru, Pamela Geller who is promoting this "phobia" as a profitable business. He has definitely proven the aforementioned statement when he set up a "GoFundMe" page to earn 10 million dollars to "protect his family" and go into hiding.

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