

SPOTLIGHT

"No one is asked to foot the bill for staying in prison," begins Sheikh Naziruddin Rashed, a leader at the Mirpur camp for the Urdu-speaking community, which comprises of people who were native to Bihar, Assam, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal. They migrated to these parts around the 1945-47, when the Partition would split undivided India into two. Mirpur is home to about 40 different camps of the Urdu-speaking community, who had abandoned their homes and property during the Bangladeshi Liberation War to take shelter in makeshift camps that were designed by ICRC (International Council of the Red Cross). Of the camps that had been legally demarcated, Geneva camp in Mohammadpur happens to be the biggest. Many of these people, who had been brought to East Pakistan as *Muhajirs* (refugees in the Quranic sense, who are guaranteed a spot in heaven) had actually been part of a ploy by the West Pakistani army and government to maintain an Urdu-speaking stronghold over East Pakistan, which was inhabited by a vast majority of the Bangali population. Their role during the Liberation War remains one of contention, with accounts on both sides saying they were accomplice to the

genocide conducted by the Pakistani army or were silent as the Bangalis were butchered, while other accounts make the claim that they were simply the unwitting tools of a political battle over land and resources.

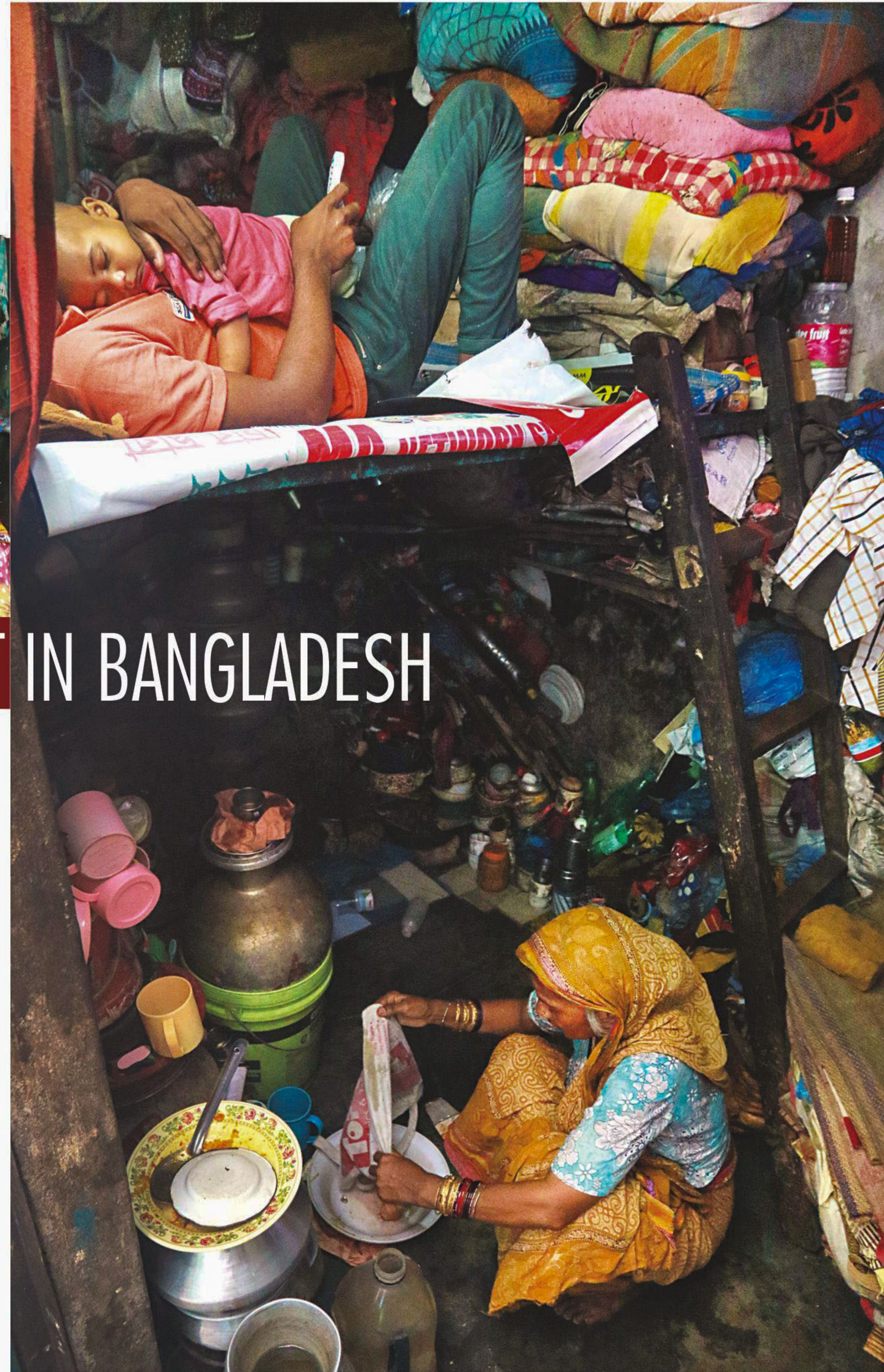
At the end of March, the High Court issued a ruling that paved the way for the government to clear out the Urdu-speaking communities that are living outside of demarcated camp lines. This ruling came after the court declared illegal several writ petitions that had been filed in order to allow the camp-dwellers to continue living in Mirpur. What Mirpur has in common with camps in Saidpur and Nilphamari is that it does not have a defined border, and so every settlement there is at risk of eviction. Where Mirpur housed the urban, well to do Urdu speaker, Saidpur camp is inhabited mostly by the railroad workers who had built their tents along the rail line. The court, however, instructed the authorities to provide proper rehabilitation (in the form of housing, payment or otherwise) to those who were to be removed from the lands and who held a Bangladeshi national ID card.

"We have waited and waited, there has never been rehabilitation," says Ali Mohammad, another camp dweller and a leader of Mirpur camp. "After Rana Plaza happened, a few officials came and

inspected a very shaky building in Wapda Camp, which housed about 200 families. They said that the building needs to be torn down or it might collapse at any moment. They did not want another large scale disaster drawing attention to a contested site." The authorities did come and they did tear down the building, but what they did not do was provide any form of compensation or rehabilitation to those families, who were then forced to build tin shed housing on the road, taking

by the British imperialists and readily accepted by Muhammad Ali Jinnah, whose depictions in the pages of history are far less kind outside of the borders of an imagined Muslim state.

In Mirpur, a long procession snakes through the area's crowded streets. Under the banner of the Stranded-Pakistanis General Committee, these individuals are protesting the government's decision to remove them from areas they have been calling homes for decades. Forcefully is a



Bangladeshi, they had a hard time getting jobs and economic emancipation and thus it was only prudent to provide them with such relief. Till 2004, the government also provided the community with 3.5 kg rice or wheat for adults and half of that for minors. "The government stopped that in 2004 but we didn't really die out. The point is, if we are given the conditions to survive, we will but not if we are isolated," Hasan, a former resident of the one of the camps informs. "When it comes to rehabilitation, you cannot expect an entire community, that has been in an urban setting for over four decades to suddenly thrive in a rural setting," he continued, explaining the difficulties of such a transition. There is a real fear that rehabilitation may mean relocation to the outskirts for these communities as well. There are several complex threats to ponder- most of the land being asked to give up belongs to the National Housing Authority in Mirpur and to the Railway Board in Saidpur and Nilphamari. Most likely, the government seeks to sell off plots to private holders in order to develop housing and other complexes. The

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argument about the 'freeloading *Bihari*' does not hold once someone actually steps foot inside the camp, where sometimes people are forced to stand at night for lack of space in their sheds. In simple terms, this is a case of gentrification by which an ethnic minority is to be displaced, something that has been happening all over the country in recent times. As these poor and marked bodies are displaced internally yet again, they become vulnerable to labour exploitation. Big win for the developers, big win for the sweat shops.

The government has every right to demand its citizens not break the laws. The government has every ground to demand citizens to vacate premises they illegally hold. But the government must, as enshrined in our constitution in its socialist cloak, provide rehabilitation for the people of its country when it chooses to uproot their very entire societies. Thus, the government must properly show the demarcated areas, specifically those that are to be removed and then come up with a logical rehabilitation programme, conducive with the demands of what it now calls its very own people and ensure proper dialogue to reach an agreement appealing to both parties. ■

STATELESS: AN ACCOUNT OF DISPLACEMENT IN BANGLADESH

OSAMA RAHMAN and AHMAD IBRAHIM
PHOTOS: KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO



over further land in Mirpur. "What choice did they leave us? There are only communal toilets and communal water lines and there are fights breaking out every morning for water. If you expect 500 people to get water from the same source then you obviously don't expect them to be alive, or care if they die," as he speaks, Ali Mohammad points to a large gaping man-hole, which contained putrid water, which would be used to wash clothes.

In that regard, WASA has already begun the eviction drive in Mirpur. About ten days ago, two of the main water lines were cut by Cobra Ltd, a private company to which WASA outsources its contracts. No explanations were given and the camps have been without water altogether. "We took to the streets to protest because we were dying. A woman had died and we could barely manage enough water to bathe her dead body. What crime deserves such a severe punishment?" Sheikh Naziruddin asked.

There is a very long and ambiguous history of the internal displacement of the Urdu-speaking community in Bangladesh. There is little doubt that many expressed desire to move to West Pakistan once Bangladesh was independent, but it seems clear four decades on that it was Pakistan the idea, and not Pakistan the cold, military state that they yearned for. None of these people had ever been to West Pakistan, or had any ties to their land. They were transfixed by the idea of a Muslim state, an imprint of the dangerous communalism of the subcontinent stoked

term tossed about repeatedly to describe the impending evictions, however there is sound legal reasoning behind it- they are squatters in a way and have knowingly set up hastily built homes on public property. Using this logic, the government has every right to ask them either to remove the structures and move elsewhere or rehabilitate them, as would be done with any other citizen of Bangladesh. The conundrum though lies in how the former "Stranded-Pakistanis" would be divided between Bangladeshis and non-Bangladeshis. One idea is to use the basis of the national identity card. Those with the card would be treated as Bangladeshis and those without it, would not.

The fallacy here though is that apparently many could not register for the national ID cards for various reasons, including lack of knowledge and ill-health. Another important point is that there are many people, outside the camps themselves, who have applied but not gotten their national ID cards due to lackadaisical management on the part of those who are to issue these cards. "Even having an ID card isn't enough, because having a camp address as your permanent residence actually works against us because landlords are less willing to have us as tenants," one resident of Geneva camp said.

The government had for long been providing free water and free electricity to these camps. This was quite cumbersome but the argument was that since these individuals weren't classified as