

Failure of the Syrian ceasefire

What next?

MUHAMMAD RUHUL AMIN

AFTER the US and Russian foreign ministers agreed upon an effective ceasefire following a number of discussions, expectations for peace intensified. Unfortunately, with a series of military strikes in Syria in support of their respective parties, tensions have now flared both at home in Syria and outside, as to whether the Syrian ceasefire plan will succumb to failure. The continuous failure of a Syrian ceasefire has brought another significant question to the limelight: whether the Syrian war will at all end in the foreseeable future or the suffocating situation in the war-run country will trigger a regional cold war or a grand global war. The efforts towards the 'cessation of hostility in Syria' brokered by the US and Russia and backed by the UN, requires a unified role by the regional and global powers. Without global unity, ceasefire activities must fail. The irony is that global measures to find a peaceful (!) solution to the problem are evident on one side and on the other, there have been concerns over the truce violations by the great regional and global powers.

Let's first look into the concept of ceasefire. The terms 'cessation of hostilities', 'truce', and 'ceasefire' - despite their distinct legal and symbolic connotations - have been indiscriminately used as attempts to resolve the Syrian conflict. We know a truce refers to a limited and temporary halt of activities or hostilities during a war. A cessation of hostilities, on the contrary, provides a more formal designation which falls short of a formal ceasefire signed by the warring parties. It is considered as the first essential step to resolving a conflict, notably to permit the delivery of humanitarian aid. AFP from Paris noted on March 6, 2016 that a simple cessation of hostilities could also permit a military response to the side that breaks. Now is the time to see whether any of these 'ceasefire' attempts are at all functioning or the bagpipes of peace-drama are played by the global leaders.

Peace efforts, starting from the 70th General Assembly of 2015 to the present ceasefire plan upheld by the US and Russia with UN support, are threatened by the contrasting policies of the two great powers. According to political analysts, their countervailing strategies risk plunging the West and Russia into a crisis not seen since the Cold War. Russian efforts and subsequent Western reactions have emerged as a tragedy in contemporary international relations. Against this backdrop, the reasons behind the crisis need to be identified and the unified role of the world community should be determined.

It's true that Syria's internal and external factors, including economic

backwardness, unemployment, inflation and corruption springing from the dictatorship of Bashar al Asad, have been responsible for its political instability. However, the much more dangerous challenge emanates from its leaders' failure to construct the Syrian nationhood and consolidate its statehood by binding the different religious factions such as Shiites, Sunnis and Kurds into one integrated nation. Without paying attention to its eco-historical, geopolitical and anthropological construct, extreme dictatorship was imposed which worked as a major barrier to its national consolidation. Thus, on the micro sub-systemic level, Syria became highly destabilised and disorganised, while on

assistance and cooperation to Saudi Arabia and other gulf states, in order to expand their spheres of influence as the Cold war strategy and similarly, Russia sides with Syria to combat the US policy. Thus, the countervailing strategies of the erstwhile superpowers are solely responsible for the tragic incidents developing in Syria. With the rise and growth of IS and Al-Qaeda rebels in recent years, Syria has emerged as the fertile ground of the struggle between global powers for preserving their geostrategic and political interests. The pro-Moscow Bashar supporters have been prone to formulate pro-Russian policies and the pro-western rebels have been fighting to offset them. The Syrian political crisis

protect its military base and nuclear arsenals, and that self defense would be its bottom line.

Russian leaders also need to understand the danger of triggering east-west confrontations. Both Russia and the West should find a peaceful and diplomatic way of resolving the Syrian crisis based on mutual understanding and friendship. Any effort to use force by Russia would only tickle the sleeping tigers of the cold war era, and lead the world to the verge of total destruction.

Some news media consider the western policy on Syria as the main culprit that eroded the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Syria. Some think that the Russian government, through its blind support to the Syrian government, has struck a rather discordant note in the post-détente state of equilibrium. However, there are people who would also like to respect Syria's right of self-determination and render support to the Syrian government, which is clearly in the line of Arab democracy under the Western-propagated models in the post-World War II period. This suggests that Bashar's government is as democratic as the Saudi government. In other words, if the Saudi government can be supported by the democratic America, the Syrian government should, in principle, also be supported by them. Other extremes are of the opinion that Russia has not done anything wrong by launching military intervention in support of the Syrian government. They believe that if pro-Western political activists did not try to topple the Syrian government, Syria would not have to suffer such a situation.

Bearing in mind military intervention of great powers in Syria, the global community needs to be united to prevent great powers from engaging in any war involving Syria. Any irresponsible behaviour of any country, any single firing in the warring zones within the Syrian boundary and beyond is likely to turn to a complete war, involving nuclear arsenals that may even burst into a nuclear confrontation.

History has laid the giant responsibility on the United Nations to bring all regional and global powers, especially the erstwhile superpowers, to work together to resolve the issue. If it fails in that, it falters in its mission for which it came into existence. The UN as well the global powers need to adopt sincere, transparent and pragmatic policies in order to save the world from another global devastation. The unanimity of global powers can resolve the Syrian conflict.

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ILLUSTRATION: MOLLY CRABAPPLE

macro systemic level, Syria remained disintegrated and fragmented.

Anthropologically speaking, the ethnic Sunni Muslims form the majority of Syrian population, which has been ruled by the minority Shiites. Syrian leaders failed in the grand task of national homogenisation of its people comprising of different religious and ethnic groups.

More dangerous than the domestic factors is the involvement of global powers in enlivening the ongoing crisis. Global powers have historically exercised influence and domination in the Arab world through their Arab stooges. Dictatorial rulers in most Arab countries have turned out to be either pro-west or pro-Russia. The US and its western allies extend political, economic and military

today has been built with this inherent and complex chemistry of internal and external dynamics.

In order to end the crisis, the international community, especially the US, the EU and Russia, need to come out of this psychology of this 'power zeal' while framing their policies regarding the war-torn country. Russian President Vladimir Putin still considers Bashar as Syria's legitimate president and terms the oust-government movement as anti-constitutional and terrorism. The West should understand the reality of Russia's concern to defend its naval base in Tartus and strategic base in Caspian Sea from where Russian jets flew combat missions. It's little wonder that the erstwhile superpower Russia would be adamant to

First anniversary of SDGs

Can the 'Global Goals' be achieved in a peace-deficit world?

REZAUL HAQUE

SEPTEMBER 25, 2016 marked the first anniversary of the launching of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). On this day last year, the 193-Member United Nations General Assembly formally adopted the 2030 Agenda with a new set of SDGs, also known as Global Goals. World leaders pledged to the 17 SDGs to overcome poverty and restore human dignity by 2030. UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon hailed the Global Goals as "a universal, integrated and transformative vision for a better world".

It is rather premature to take a stock of how much progress has been made in terms of achieving the SDGs just after a year of their launching. However, the growing concern around the world that the prevailing global state of affairs is impeding the progress of SDGs cannot be ignored. Political and economic stability is critical and central to the implementation of the SDGs. Unfortunately, however, the world has only witnessed a growing deficit of those during the past twelve months. Self-serving interests of individual nation-states, groups, and in some cases, even individuals seem to have obscured the shared vision of development and dignity for all individuals across the globe. Increasingly, the world is becoming a less safe place to live in for a growing number of people. Values of diversity, tolerance, plurality and co-existence are eroding fast, creating space for selfishness, intolerance, barbarism, extremism, xenophobia and bigotry. Under these circumstances, and in the midst of so much violence and instability around the world, implementation of the SDGs has become extremely challenging.

Today, the world is experiencing the most severe and widespread refugee crisis since the World War II. According to the UN, there are now 244 million migrants in the world. Civil war and violence have displaced 65 million people, half of

whom are children. Eighty-six percent of these displaced people are sheltered in the developing regions of the world, imposing a heavy burden on their economies and social infrastructure and undermining their efforts towards achieving the SDGs. Tackling the root causes of human displacement on this massive scale is as important as responding to the immediate humanitarian needs of the refugees. It is also in line with Goal No. 16 of the SDGs, which urges all countries to "establish peace, justice and strong institutions to promote peaceful and inclusive societies". Elimination of the root causes of human displacement is dependent on fast and full achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. The SDGs are not merely confined to any particular aspect (social, economic, political, cultural etc.) of human life, but they encapsulate the entire gamut of all peoples' well-being across the globe.

Armed conflicts in Syria, Iraq, Yemen and elsewhere; civil wars and anti-regime violent protests in South Sudan, Ukraine, Afghanistan and Libya; and global terrorism causing loss of human life and property at an unprecedented scale and destabilising economic and social activities in many regions are not conducive to the implementation of SDGs. Tensions emanating from the manoeuvres of the big powers to establish their supremacy over the South China Sea, escalation of unease in the relationship between the two nuclear powers in South Asia, growing tensions between North and South Korea, the potential of the Syrian crisis to turn into an even larger catastrophe, are all contrary to Goal No. 17 of the SDGs, which calls for global partnership for sustainable development.

The continuing sluggish global economic growth and increasing unemployment and under-employment both in the developed and developing countries are not conducive to materialisation of Goal No. 8 of the SDGs that seeks to 'promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth' along

with 'full and productive employment and decent work for all'. The economic shock emanating from Brexit is being felt not only in the UK and EU, but in countries and regions far away from Europe. The recently concluded G20 Summit in Hangzhou, China, did not produce any concrete plan or strategy to boost global economic growth and to accelerate trade and investment. Even for many the G20 countries, the growth forecast is not at all encouraging.

The good news, however, is that efforts are underway at various levels, particularly under the auspices of the UN, to restore peace and stability in the volatile regions of the world. The UN trucks with humanitarian aid have again started rolling into Aleppo, Syria, under the shadow of the fragile truce brokered by Russia and the US. At the first-ever UN Summit on Refugees and Migrants held in conjunction with the 71st Session of the UN General Assembly, governments from around the world have pledged to do more to address both the symptoms and root causes of the refugee crisis. In a recent inter-faith dialogue with more than 500 top representatives from different religious traditions, Pope Francis denounced war by declaring that there is 'no God of war', and urged people to unite for peace. China and the US have formally accepted the Paris Agreement on Climate Change. The 120-member group that constitutes the Non-Aligned Movement concluded its latest summit meeting in Venezuela recently, with a call for peace while voicing concern over violence in Syria, Iraq and the Palestinian Territories.

For Bangladesh, implementation of the SDGs remains high on the national development agenda. An inter-ministerial committee on SDGs' monitoring and evaluation has been constituted by the government. Some senior parliamentarians and government officials of the country have been taking keen interest in the implementation of the SDGs. The UN has recently commended the Government of Bangladesh for its

commitment to the SDGs. However, more inclusive efforts are needed to stay on the right course for achieving them. The government has to proactively engage the private sector, and create meaningful space for civil society input to achieve the targets of SDGs. Public-private partnership (PPP) will have to be strengthened, and the private sector will have to commit much larger financial resources for the SDGs.

At the international level, Bangladesh's commitment to the SDGs, and to the creation of a congenial global atmosphere for their smooth implementation, has been both laudable and visible. In 2015, after the adoption of the 2030 Agenda at the UN, Bangladesh's Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina made a clarion call to the international community to come forward with united and coordinated efforts for the success of the SDGs. This year, Bangladesh has taken a firm stand in major global forums, including the UN in favour of restoring global stability and peace urgently for the sake of global development. Speaking at the 'Leaders' Summit on Refugees' organised by US President Barack Obama at the UN, and referring to the refugees, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina said, "We need to treat them with compassion, solidarity and fairness". It is also noteworthy here that a Bangladeshi girl, Shougat Naznin Khan, has been selected by the UN as one of 17 youth leaders to support SDGs.

SDGs and peace are interdependent and mutually inclusive and reinforcing. Every single sustainable development goal can contribute to achieving peace and restoring human dignity. Similarly, without restoration and sustenance of peace, the SDGs cannot be implemented. On the first anniversary of SDGs, let the global community renew its commitment to both SDGs and peace, and thereby fulfill its obligations to the coming generations.

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Sorry state of BFSA

Empower the regulator

WE are deeply disturbed by a report published in this paper on Saturday, according to which Bangladesh Food Safety Authority (BFSA) remains a regulator on paper only, as requisite manpower has not been made available for it to carry out its task. It has been left heavily understaffed to the extent that its daily activities are severely hampered. It begs rationale that the body, which was mandated by the Safe Food Act 2013 to combat the menace of food adulteration, has been reduced to an 11-man army, whereas its organogram requires it to be 1,004 and the authorities have agreed to sanction a 422-strong manpower! This huge gulf has adversely affected the functioning of the BFSA at a time when food adulteration has grown into a social disease.

While the situation on the ground remains distressing, it is natural that mice will play while the cat is away. Only last year, the National Food Safety Laboratory found that nine out of 15 foods tested contained dangerous levels of harmful chemicals. And that too ranged from rice, fish and vegetables to fruits containing deleterious adulterants which we are forced to consume every day. Its worst victims are children, who are deprived of the nutrients necessary for their proper physical and mental growth, resulting in stunted development with long term consequences.

We find it incumbent to bring to the notice of the authorities that we are fighting an increasingly uphill battle against contamination of the food chain and it is essential that the BFSA is empowered with the necessary resources to effectively play its role. Also, the body should be armed with the required laboratory facilities to test foodstuff and adequate legal apparatus to punish the culprits.

Uber taxis in Dhaka

Can they fill the gap?

THE introduction of Uber taxis to Dhaka is certainly welcome news. The acute shortage of public transport in a city of over 17 million has made travelling from point A to point B an arduous battle. Taxi services over the last few years have dwindled dramatically forcing commuters to pay exorbitant fares for taxi cabs, if they are at all available.

Uber has revolutionised taxi service in many countries of the world, even Indonesian cities which have similar traffic congestions as in Dhaka. Being an App-based service, it will allow anyone with a smartphone to call a taxi at any time as the nearest vehicle will arrive. The worldwide popularity of the company is based on the promptness with which taxis can be availed by consumers as well as the fact that drivers of Uber cars are properly screened which makes the service safe, especially for women. Such a service, therefore will be the perfect solution to Dhaka's commuter woes.

The fact that anyone with a car and reliable credentials can be an Uber driver means that it will provide opportunities for people to earn, hence it will be creating much needed jobs.

The only concern at this point we may have is whether it will be an affordable mode of transport for commuters. If it is, then having a brand new taxi service that will provide safe, comfortable, easily available, transport for an increasingly busy city, is certainly something to look forward to.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Commendable initiative by government

Over 21 people died from road accidents the day after Qurbani Eid this year. The daily reporting of such news may have made many of us immune to their effect, but the fact remains that lives are lost on a daily basis just because of the insensitivity and recklessness of a few people. Buses driving at high speed on highways is one of the major reasons for road accidents especially during the Eid season. The government, thankfully, has taken initiatives to control the speed of vehicles of highways. A bus was fined for driving over 80km/hour while driving on the Aricha highway, where a machine has been set to check the speed of running vehicles. I hope this initiative will ensure fewer road accidents. I would like to express my gratitude to the government for such a wonderful measure and hope that similar machines will be installed on other highways of the country as well.
 Aziz Ahmed
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PHOTO: STAR

Well done Tigers!

The recent cricket match between Bangladesh and Afghanistan was quite interesting. It was interesting as it showed how much the Tigers have matured over the years. Afghanistan did put in a valiant effort. But it was experience that tipped the game in Bangladesh's favour. The Bangladeshi players did not panic when things were not going in their favour. They stuck at it and, eventually, their perseverance paid off. In the past, one would have expected the Tigers to lose from the position they were in. Not so any more.

Tahmeed Newaz, By E-mail