

Making money from the tragedy of Rohingyas

Brokers must be stopped from this unscrupulous practice

IT is despicable when some unscrupulous, greedy men turn the plight of people into a business for making money. A report published in this paper yesterday revealed how some opportunist brokers are charging exorbitant amounts of money from Rohingyas to help them cross into Bangladesh.

The issue here is not one of whether Bangladesh should close its borders to the Rohingyas or not. We understand the horror of the situation of the Rohingyas in Myanmar, as the genocide against this minority continues unabated. The international silence is complicit in the mass murder and rape that the Rohingyas are victims to. And while we have previously said that Bangladesh should do what it can on humanitarian grounds, it cannot be the solution.

These details are all the more reason to find the business of brokers repulsive. We reported of Rohingyas who had to pay anywhere from Tk 1,000 to Tk 10,000 per head to cross the Naf. We condemn this 'business' not only on a moral standing, but due to the dangers that the Rohingyas are subject to from these villainous men.

The plight of refugees cannot be a money making business. The situation is tricky, and we repeat, that a balance needs to be found to help the Rohingya people. Our financial and security concerns are real, but that cannot be a reason to turn back refugees from the sea. But, none of this – even our concern to help them – can justify what these brokers are doing. We condemn this business of making profit out of lives of people fleeing persecution and ask that authorities put an end to it.

Uber provides an essential service

BRTA stand is unhelpful

WE are surprised to see the Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA) take such a tough stand against the on-demand transport service Uber. That advertisements have been posted in media terming its usage as "illegal" and punishable by law is not a step in the right direction because Uber is providing a workable transport service that Dhaka lacks. The service is a technology platform that has revolutionised urban movement in more than 450 cities across 74 countries by connecting drivers and riders with the tap of a smart phone. As in every other country, taxi drivers have been up in arms against Uber drivers and Bangladesh is no exception. But let us face the facts. Dhaka has been in sore need of a workable taxi service for many years and the ones that do exist in the city are both woefully inadequate and exorbitantly pricey. The unavailability of taxis force thousands of commuters to use less safe means to get around and this becomes all too evident during rush hour.

It is interesting to note that the Road Transport and Bridges Minister Obaidul Qader has welcomed the introduction of this phone-based transportation service. We agree with Uber and the minister that the service may have to come under some sort of a framework to operate, but then why wasn't this issue addressed when Uber teamed up with the largest telecom company when it launched its service? From customer feedback, it stands to reason that Uber is a workable model that fulfils a basic demand Dhaka residents have and we hope the service will not be nipped in the bud to satisfy a select few.

Child marriage is wrong, exceptions are unacceptable

NO STRINGS ATTACHED



AASHA MEHREEN AMIN

PERHAPS we were a bit delusional in thinking that there was a consensus regarding the fact that child marriage, that is marriage of a girl under 18, would be considered a social evil that should be completely shunned in our country. At least that's what we thought – especially after all the lofty promises made by our government to make sure that minors are not forced into marriage, so that girls can continue to study and do not have to drop out at the secondary school level. So that they can have a normal, healthy life without the threat of forced sex, early pregnancy, physical violence and mental trauma that many child brides face because they are so young.

But that unfortunately is not going to happen. The 'special provisions' in the draft of the law to prevent child marriage have been approved by the cabinet. This is the fine print you forget to read in a contract but which leads you to pay a hidden cost for what you think is a pretty good deal. The provisions will allow marriages of girls and boys below 18 under 'special circumstances' as consented by the parent or the court. Despite continuous demands by human rights activists to abolish the provision, the government has chosen to stick to their stance of allowing this dangerous loophole in the law. The special provisions will ultimately allow parents to marry off their daughters not just at 16 but at 15, 14, 13, 12 – there is no lower limit. All they will have to do is cite 'special circumstances'. The State Minister for Women and Children Affairs Meher

Afroze Chumki, known for her championing of women's causes, has assured that only when it is in the interest of the child, for instance when an underage girl gets pregnant, will such a marriage be allowed. Such an 'allowance' is not only contradictory to the whole purpose of having the Child Marriage Restraint Act, it is dangerous as it will give legitimacy to many child marriages where all sorts of 'special circumstances' will be cited. We all know how birth certificates

making education till the secondary level free for them, encouraging them to be part of the work force, even bringing down the percentage of child marriage to apparently 43 percent, they are going to jeopardise all these achievements by allowing provisions in the law that will pull the country backwards in the most debilitating way. And here are the ways in which child marriage cripples a nation (just to remind all those who think the provisions are a great idea):

run the risk of birth complications (which could result in them dying) and then give birth to underweight babies who will grow up stunted and underdeveloped. They will also be more vulnerable to cruel husbands and in-laws who may torture them for dowry or for any trivial reason. These girls will either die of the violence inflicted on them or will be physically and mentally ill for most of their lives, making them less productive, unhappy women in, no doubt, unhappy households.

It is therefore a destructive path that we are headed for by ignoring the ambivalence created by these provisions of a law that could have made a big difference in the lives of millions of young girls and ultimately the nation's development dreams. Instead of this wishy-washy approach to child marriage, the government should be concentrating on removing the factors that drive parents to send their girls to a life that will rob them of their childhood, health and happiness. This means enforcing anti-dowry laws and creating awareness about the illegality of taking dowry. It means providing better security for girls, enforcing stringent laws against sexual harassment, quick disposal of cases and exemplary punishment for sex crimes, more schools in all neighbourhoods to make them accessible to girls, better paying jobs for their parents so that poverty is not the reason, and constant messages through all kinds of media that tells society that child marriage is morally wrong and puts a heavy burden on the family's and the country's future. It is inconceivable that all the efforts of the government to take Bangladesh forward are at the risk of being undone because of this controversial provision.

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A child bride in Rayer Bazar, Dhaka.

COURTESY: MH KAWSAR

and other forms of identification are faked to increase the age of young girls to 18 so that they can be married off. A 12-year-old becoming pregnant as a result of sexual abuse (because that is what it is whether it is consensual or not) being married off to her abuser just to protect her reputation and that of her family's, is an unacceptable, abhorrent premise.

It is bewildering that when the government has made such significant strides in getting more girls enrolled,

A study by IFPRI (International Food Policy Research Institute) research that has actually found a reduction in child marriage (to 43 percent from 62.3) in the last two decades because of rising incomes and education levels, has also revealed, as many other studies, that young married girls (there are still many of them) are also more likely to drop out of school and so will not have the opportunity to work and earn. They will also most likely get pregnant very early,

THE PLIGHT OF THE ROHINGYAS IN MYANMAR

Time to act

SHAMSHER M. CHOWDHURY

IN an op-ed piece I had written for this daily shortly after the historic elections in Myanmar in November 2015, I had expressed my fear that among all the euphoria that followed Aung San Suu Kyi's thumping victory, the fate of the disenfranchised and persecuted Rohingyas in Myanmar may continue to remain uncertain if the elected leadership fail to take concrete remedial steps in earnest. A year later, my fears are turning out to be true and in a worse form than what one would have thought.

The history of the sufferings of the Rohingyas in Myanmar is all too well known and is well documented. That the community had been socially marginalised and politically persecuted for long is also an established fact. One had been guardedly optimistic that a democratically elected government would make a sincere effort at rectifying the

best that one could have hoped for was a reduction of the tension until the elected lot got time to consolidate their position in the state structure. Instead, what one is witnessing now is a slide towards anarchy by the state's security forces where murder, mayhem, arson, rape, looting of the Rohingyas is assuming alarming proportions. Even the appointment of the UN Secretary General's special envoy on the Rohingya issue in the person of Kofi Annan now looks like a futile exercise.

The international community needs to realise the fact that what is happening in Myanmar is not just a case of political persecution of a minority community; it is in fact a violent manifestation of religious fundamentalism by the majority Buddhist community. For long, the world has come to believe that Buddhism as preached by Gautama Buddha is a religion of peace. One has no reason to doubt that the great Buddha

the minorities can be glanced over in their pursuit for achieving their narrow geopolitical goals. Aung San Suu Kyi may have accepted the Nobel Prize for Peace, but how much she has succeeded in bringing lasting peace to the country she now leads is a question that is being asked increasingly, and not without reason. For the global community, ignoring the plight of the minorities in Myanmar, ethnic or religious, cannot be an option.

One country that has been directly affected by the policies of successive governments in Myanmar is Bangladesh, which borders Myanmar's Rakhine state where the overwhelming majority of the Rohingyas lives, and have lived for centuries. Fleeing persecution at home, large numbers of Rohingyas have taken refuge in Bangladesh over the years. At any given time, anything up to half a million Rohingyas have been sheltered in Bangladesh, only a portion of whom have been provided for by the UN's Refugee agency. Successive governments in Bangladesh have demonstrated boundless generosity in feeding, clothing and housing them, even when such generosity put strains on the country's economy and threatened social harmony. As early as 2002, the UNHCR came up with the unreasonable suggestion that the Rohingya refugees be provided employment opportunities in Bangladesh till such time the situation in their own country becomes safe for them to return. In so doing, the pundits in Geneva were unwittingly providing further incentives to the government of the day in Myanmar not to let up on their policy of persecution of the Rohingyas, and force them to flee to safer havens in Bangladesh. Not surprising therefore, that all governments in Bangladesh had summarily spurned this unworkable proposition.

The media and the civil society in Bangladesh have been fiercely critical of any incident of attacks on minority communities in Bangladesh, be it on the Buddhists in Ramu, Hindus in Nasirnagar or Santals in Gaibandha. They have also not spared the government for any perceived failure to prevent or pre-empt such occurrences. This speaks volumes for our societal commitment to a culture of pluralism and communal harmony. It is time for these players to raise their voices in a crescendo and draw the attention of the world community that what is happening in our neighbour to the East is not civilised behaviour and it must stop. The world must also be made to see the bigger picture that the Rohingya refugees, especially the youth, scorned and fleeing persecution at home, can become easy recruits for extremist and terrorist groups like the Al-Qaeda and now the ISIS. They can be easily tempted to buy the ISIS narrative that Muslims everywhere are victims of concerted injustice and must therefore strike back with vengeance. The ramifications for inaction can be far reaching and perilous. The time to act is now.

The writer is a former Foreign Secretary of Bangladesh.



A Rohingya migrant eats food dropped by a Thai army helicopter off the island of Koh Lipe in the Andaman sea.

situation. However, as recent events show, things on the ground have turned for the worse; today the Rohingyas are being subjected to a systematic cycle of military repression that borders on ethnic cleansing, one that should bring back memories of the horrors the world witnessed helplessly in the Balkans in Europe over two decades back. Sadly, the victims in both cases have been Muslims.

Even in the lead up to the elections, Nobel Peace laureate Aung San Suu Kyi's unnerving silence on the Rohingya situation was indication enough that she was not ready to get on the wrong side of the headline Buddhist clergy and those inside her own National League for Democracy Party. Least of all, she could not risk alarming the country's military that has ruled the country for well over four decades and who are at the root of this systematic persecution of Rohingyas. The

personally espoused and preached such a philosophy. But the manner in which it is being played out in Myanmar today would make the faith's founder shudder if he knew that homes are being burnt, helpless people are being murdered, women are being raped and children are being tortured, all in the name of religion. The scenario is no different from what one is witnessing in other parts of the world where the ugly face of religious intolerance, fundamentalism and radicalism is threatening the peaceful coexistence among people of different faiths. The alarming difference in the case of Myanmar though is that the perpetrators here are state actors.

While regional and global powers may want to look at the evolving political changes in Myanmar as an opening to create their own spheres of influence and a chance to exploit the economic opportunities on offer, they will be wrong to assume that such persecution of

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Brutality against Rohingyas must be stopped

We are flabbergasted after witnessing the brutality on Rohingyas. We appeal to the government and the people of Bangladesh to immediately respond to the humanitarian need in such dark hours and allow the Rohingyas into our country. We hope that the government will honour its commitment to uphold basic tenets of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and international treaties such as the 'Child Rights Convention' and 'Convention against Torture'.

Bangladesh is now in quandary between humanity versus reality. Local Bangladeshis have sympathies for the Rohingyas but, considering the realities, they believe allowing more Rohingyas will add to the burden in this small country.

It is unfortunate that UN and ASEAN have been unable to exert their influence on the Myanmar government against this ethnic cleansing. We call on both agencies to shore up their efforts so that Myanmar authorities are forced to abandon such brutality.

Rafik Alamgir, Chittagong

Save the Brahmaputra river

The Brahmaputra runs under the Sombhuganj Bridge (Chin Moitri Setu) in Mymensingh city, with a bus terminal situated on one side. The area of land taken up by the bus stand is increasing by the day as restaurants and tea stalls keep springing up. These things hamper the natural flow and beauty of the river. Concerned authorities aren't doing anything to mitigate the illegal land grabbing. If immediate and stern action is not taken, the river will lose its navigability and natural beauty.

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