


Keep the pressure on Myanmar

FROM A BYSTANDER



MAHMOOD HASAN

1948. Besides fighting 15 insurgent groups along its borders, Myanmar has never been at peace with itself. The low intensity civil war is essentially between the government (Bamar military) and the non-Bamar insurgents. The new addition has been the Aqa Mul Mujahideen (AMM), which is suspected to be an offshoot of the defunct Rohingya Solidarity Organisation.

The latest round of atrocities against the Rohingyas began following an AMM attack in early October this year at police stations. The brunt of the mayhem perpetrated against the Rohingyas is being felt in Bangladesh, as thousands of these wretched people have started streaming into Bangladesh to escape military carnage. They have already lost their citizenship, and are now under threat of losing their home, hearth and lives.

The other reason for hostility against Rohingyas is the geographical location of Bangladesh. The Muslim majority Bangladesh is sandwiched between Hindu India and Buddhist Myanmar. The twisted argument is that people from overpopulated Bangladesh migrate illegally to these countries because of deprivation and poverty. The claim in the Indian Rajya Sabha on November 16, 2016, by Indian minister Kiren Rijiju that 20 million illegal Bangladeshis migrants

were living in India, is a case in point. The Burmese authorities repeatedly made similar accusations.

Bamars, who constitute 68 percent of the population, seem to have become xenophobes since the days of General Ne Win (1962) when he adopted the policy to make Myanmar language, Buddhism and Bamar culture the single cultural identity of Myanmar. Burmese military is exclusively made up of male Buddhist Bamars. Non-Bamar and non-Buddhists are excluded by policy from all government positions, opportunities and all elections.

What is ominous is that Aung San Suu Kyi has started using terminologies such as "Bengali" and "Muslims of Rakhine State" to describe Rohingyas. The government has given into the slogan of Ma Ba Tha, the extremely racist organisation led by the bigoted Buddhist monk Ashin Wirathu.

The term Rohingya has wide connotations. It means a person of Rohang, the old Muslim term for what is now Rakhine state, which confers historical legitimacy on the Muslim community of Myanmar. The Myanmar government refuses to call them Rohingya, because it will officially recognise the community as a race that has political and human rights. During the 2014 census, the Rohingyas were forced to identify themselves as "Bengali", so that the government could eventually expel them to Bangladesh. And thus, it is wrong to accept terminologies such as "Bengali" or "Muslims of Rakhine" as it strips the Rohingya community of their rights.

It is quite understandable why Suu Kyi has not condemned the military atrocities against the Rohingyas. Suu Kyi is not the Head of State and thus



PHOTO: AFP

is not in command of the military, which still holds important ministries (defence, home, border security) under its order. Her position in the government is precarious, as she presumably leads the government as State Councillor (Prime Minister) and holds the foreign ministry portfolio, but has few powers. Though Myanmar claims to have democracy, it is actually a charade, and the military has placed Suu Kyi as its facade, using her to get Western sanctions lifted. Hasn't she legitimised the genocide of the Rohingyas when she stated that the military was taking action based on the "rule of law"? Could she have said anything different and retained

her position?

There was a faint ray of hope when in August 2016 Kofi Annan was commissioned to chair the Advisory Commission on Rakhine "to finding the best possible solution to prevailing problems". Though Kofi Annan visited northern Rakhine recently, he is unlikely to see anything amiss. Given Annan's failure as UN Special Envoy to Syria in 2012, it is unlikely he will be able to bring peace in Rakhine with his recommendations. After what is happening in Rakhine, the Commission appears to be a futile exercise.

Given past experiences, Bangladesh's efforts to resolve the

crisis peacefully through "persuasion and mutual understanding" will not bear fruit. It is unlikely that the Myanmar government will take back the Rohingyas through peaceful negotiations. The visit of Bangladesh foreign ministers to Myanmar was cancelled recently, which shows that the Myanmar government is unwilling to talk to Bangladesh. Myanmar has mounted diplomatic campaigns against the so-called illegal migration of Bengalis from Bangladesh to Rakhine, and blames them for atrocities against Buddhist people there.

There is a sense of wishful thinking that pressure could be

mounted on Myanmar through regional groupings such as BCIM and BIMSTEC. One must understand that Myanmar government's membership of these groups is deceptive. The Myanmar military leaders have taken these memberships for junkets abroad, show that they are a part of the international community, but hardly ever care for these organisations. The military dominated government does not seem to care about its international image. Fighting insurgents has given the military a bunker mentality. They do not trust anyone and believe Myanmar can live in isolation.

The exodus of Rohingyas from Rakhine into Bangladesh is a grave threat to its socio-economic security. Soft-peddling with Myanmar will not resolve the crisis. Myanmar has always spurned Bangladesh's move for friendship, and friendship is never a one-way traffic.

Bangladesh has to be firm and consider calling for a UN Security Council (UNSC) meeting to address the grave security threat from Myanmar. UNSC can do the following: a) pass a resolution that all Rohingya refugees have to return to Myanmar from Bangladesh and regain their citizenship within a fixed time frame; b) deploy UN peacekeeping forces in Rakhine until all Rohingya refugees return to Rakhine; c) impose economic sanctions on Myanmar to be lifted after the crisis is resolved.

Unless strong determined steps are taken by the government to resolve this intractable crisis, Bangladesh is destined to host 1.4 million Rohingyas as refugees.

The writer is former Ambassador and Secretary, who served as Counsellor in Bangladesh Embassy, Rangoon (1988-1991).

MAKE CITIES CHILD-FRIENDLY

Let us see through children's eyes

LAILA KHONDKAR

"If you want your child to be cured of this respiratory problem then you have to live outside Dhaka."

THIS was what a renowned paediatrician said to the parent of a four year old child. The comment illustrates the level of frustration and helplessness about the air pollution of Dhaka. This is a growing concern for most cities. According to The State of the World's Children 2012, over half of the world's people (including more than a billion children) now live in cities and towns. Many children enjoy the advantages that urban life offers (educational, medical, recreational facilities) while many are denied access to these essentials.

In Bangladesh, access to services is usually better in urban areas if we compare with villages, but huge disparity exists within various groups; affluence and extreme poverty co-exist in urban settings. Most children living in slums lack access to decent housing, clean water, sanitation, health care and quality education. Many schools and communities in different areas of cities do not have playgrounds for children, which affects their development. Children are exposed to very high levels of air and noise pollution, and are unable to enjoy nature. The design of clinics and hospitals, as well as the services, are not child-friendly. Display of violent television shows that depict images of wars and conflicts is a common sight in the reception areas of pediatricians. Safety of children is not considered in infrastructure development.

Girls face sexual harassment on



The Child and the Vertical City Towards a New Street in the Sky, Elly Ward.

their way to schools or in communities. Children with disabilities face additional challenges in accessing services. Children living on the streets (boys and girls), and working children are vulnerable to violence, abuse and exploitation. Public spaces (airports, bus and train stations, shopping complexes, community centres, etc.) do not have breast feeding and changing facilities for children. It is challenging for them to use public transport, especially in overcrowded urban areas. Most restaurants do not have proper sitting arrangements for young children and lack food options

suitable for them. Museums and art galleries usually do not cater to the needs of children. There are very limited opportunities for recreational and cultural activities, thus leading to over-reliance on technology for communication and entertainment. A sense of community is disappearing very fast; children feel alienated.

The urban situation affects children's well-being; they are not able to grow in a holistic way and realise their full potential. In many cases, children are deprived of their childhood. This is a serious violation of children's rights, as they cannot develop properly.

Urban planning, infrastructure development, service delivery and broader efforts to reduce poverty and inequality must meet the particular needs and priorities of children. Basic services for children living in slums must be ensured. There should be an assessment on child safety before approving any new infrastructure and service. We have to listen to children while designing anything that they will use, and make streets and communities safe for them.

We must strengthen national and community based child protection system, following the Children Act 2013.

Some people claim that we do not have sufficient resources to have child friendly cities. I am reminded of a few insightful lines by the renowned economist Mahbub Ul Haq from his *Reflections on Human Development*:

"A society does not have to be rich to afford democracy. A family does not have to be wealthy to respect the rights of each member. A nation does not have to be affluent to treat women and men equally. Valuable social and cultural traditions can be and are maintained at all levels of human income."

It is important to increase investment in children, but everything does not require budgetary allocation. Moreover, we invest in something when that is a priority. In many cases, being child friendly does not require huge amount of financial resources. It is the thinking that matters the most. Recently I went to a restaurant in Canada with relatives, including two children. We found a couple of colouring pages along with two crayons on our table; the kids thus were allowed to be engaged in colouring the pages while waiting for food. Did this cost much? Not at all. Many examples can be given to illustrate that it is possible to be child-friendly just by considering things through a child-friendly lens. The above-mentioned doctor's waiting area is a prime example. One can easily screen programmes that are appropriate for children. The television is already there, and so there is no need for any added expense. Similarly, giving priority to children in public transport should not cost much. We can also have trolleys and play materials for

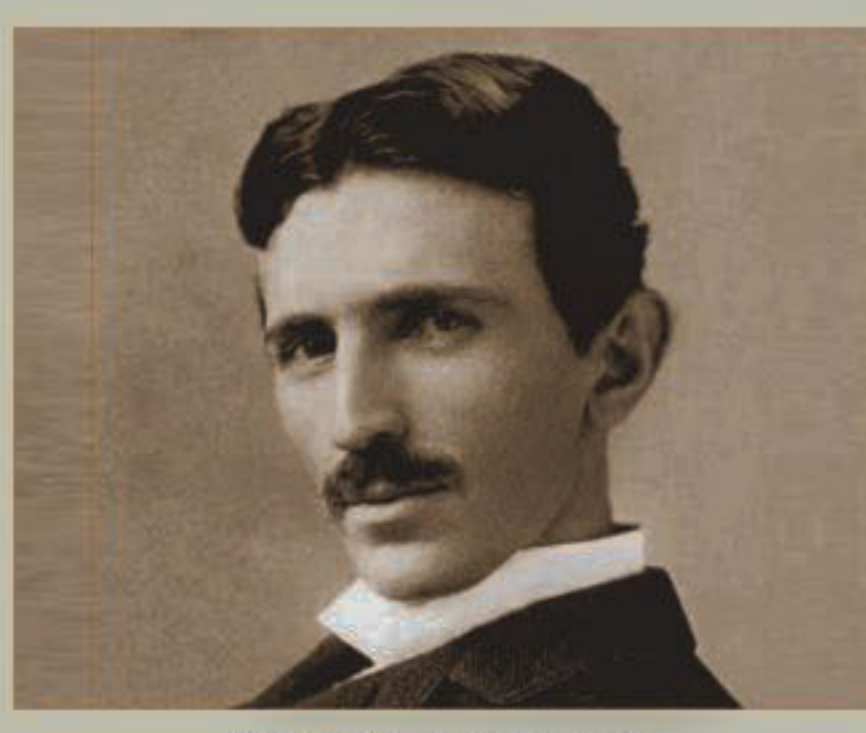
children in shopping centres, airports etc, and consider the needs of children in sitting arrangements and in the menu of restaurants.

There must be breast feeding rooms in all public buildings. Initiatives should be taken to reduce environmental pollution and stop encroachment of children's playgrounds. Bringing back greenery in urban areas and keeping space for children's play in apartment buildings and public places should be made a policy priority. Sports, cultural and entertainment opportunities for children should be created and community based children's organisations need to be revived. It is not too difficult to design programmes to make the exhibits of museums and art galleries interesting and understandable to children, and engage them in creative activities. I was encouraged to note that in some well-respected museums in Europe, North America, and Australia, children can read the description of some of the exhibits easily, as those are at their eye level. The language of the description is also child-friendly.

Do we consider children to be residents of cities and clients of services? Do we think of children's "best interest" in urban planning? Do we see things from their point of view? I hope city corporations can take initiatives in making cities child-friendly with support from all others concerned. Let us stop calling children the 'future' and do something so that they can realise their rights now!

The writer is Director of Child Protection, Save the Children.

QUOTABLE Quote



NICOLA TESLA

My brain is only but a receiver, in the Universe there is a core from which we obtain knowledge, strength and inspiration. I have not penetrated into the secrets of this core, but I know that it exists.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Social blunder

6 Tibia's end

11 Staggering

12 Justice Soto-mayor

13 Rating units

14 Publicity act

15 Catch

17 Frozen desserts

18 Pale

20 Scissors beater

22 Pollen collector

23 Early autos

26 Hall of Fame catcher

28 Consummate

29 Appended

31 Couple

32 Manual reader

33 Smoker's discard

34 Ultimate

36 Cell feature

38 Before

40 Airport areas

43 Carell of "The Big Short"

44 Turn outward

45 Trite

46 Contrite

DOWN

1 Ozone, e.g.

2 Cunning

3 Cleaning aid

4 River crosser

5 "Born Free" lion

6 Draypuller

7 Took in

8 Brass item that enhances a punch

9 Script bit

10 Puts away

16 Debate side

18 "Waterloo" group

19 Future flower

21 Valhalla VIP

23 Put together

24 Lacking slack

25 Mailbox feature

27 Fidgety

30 Sphere

33 Opera cheer

34 A deadly sin

35 Opposed to

37 A very long time

39 Was a pioneer

41 Goof

42 Porker place

YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

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BEETLE BAILEY by Mort Walker

BABY BLUES by Kirkman & Scott