

Inordinately lengthy trials!

Address the systemic lacunae

WE have highlighted the plight of the accused in this country before; how many of them languish for years on end in prison because the trial process takes seemingly forever to conclude. In the latest episode of this sad saga, the High Court (HC) has asked for case documents of 20 accused and ordered jail authorities to produce them before it this month. Indeed, the stories of some of these people are mindboggling. For instance, Nazrul Islam has been incarcerated for 12 years now in Mymensingh jail and has appeared in court 63 times; another prisoner Selim Mia has been in and out of court 122 times in about 12 years till November last year.

The Honourable Chief Justice himself has made mention of the lengthy trial process more than once. There is something not quite right if the justice system has to suffer due to longwinded process, including process of investigation, which militates against timely conclusion of the case, and which ultimately ends up badly for a lot of accused who cannot afford legal assistance. Although the Supreme Court Legal Aid Office has been offering free legal services to those deemed financially insolvent and sent letters to that effect to all 68 jails, how many inmates actually know of this service? There are obviously lapses on the part of jail authorities too.

We thank the HC for this intervention, which came to know of the plight of so many through media reports. But it is imperative that the authorities fix the complications that exist in the criminal justice system so that no one ends up wasting valuable years in jail.

Burning of Santal houses

Flagrant violation of police discipline

ON Tuesday, the High Court ordered the withdrawal of the superintendent of Gaibandha police and all policemen who were on duty on November 6 of last year in Chamgari Beel where Santal houses were torched during an eviction drive that left three people dead. The HC issued the order after holding a brief hearing on the probe report prepared by the Chief Judicial Magistrate of Gaibandha which states that three policemen along with some locals were directly involved in the arson of Santal homes. The SP failed to produce the names and designations of the concerned officials who, beyond a shadow of a doubt, participated in unlawful conduct.

The actions of the SP can only be interpreted as obstruction of justice, designed to protect errant policemen whose reprehensible conduct—captured on video—displayed their utmost disregard for the rule of law. The SP's failure to deliver the list of names of the officials who were seen collaborating with locals in torching Santal houses, on the pretext that they could not be identified because they were wearing helmets, is unacceptable. Is there not a system of keeping record of the movements of policemen whenever they are deployed on duty?

We can only hope that within the next four weeks, when the HC is set to pass the next order, the officials, who not only overstepped their jurisdiction but also compromised the dignity of their uniform, will be identified and brought to book. Ultimately, what cannot be encouraged in any civilised society is a culture of impunity where law enforcers turn into lawbreakers. The slightest breach of discipline in a disciplined force should be severely dealt with, and those who protect violators should be made examples of.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Look after our water bodies

Bangladesh is blessed with its surrounding rivers, especially the Buriganga, Dhaleshwari, and Sitalakhya, which serve as lifelines to the capital city. These rivers are being encroached upon illegally by land-grabbers with heavy influence and political connections.

River beds of most major rivers are also filled by gradual deposition of silt, which makes it difficult to cope with excess water during monsoon season. As a result, rivers tend to overflow and cause damage to crops and cattle in surrounding rural areas.

The government should take stern actions against these illegal land-grabbers to free our rivers and canals and sanction adequate budget for dredging major water bodies in the country. A.K.M. Ehsanul Haque
Dhaka

An admirable message

Kudos to Mr. Shuva Das for the humanitarian letter titled 'Ragging in public universities must be stopped', published in your newspaper on February 1.

Do parents send their children to colleges to get physically abused by cruel and uncivilised classmates? The menace of ragging is indeed increasing. However, far from being punished, the offenders meet no consequences for their actions on most occasions. As a result, they continue to torture innocent juniors without any hesitation.

Ragging leaves a permanent mark on a victim's psyche. Educational institutions must take actions to curb this cruel trend.
Kajal Chatterjee
Kolkata

ROHINGYA CRISIS

The best possible solution

THE OVERTON WINDOW



ERSHAD OMAR JAMAL

SINCE the re-escalation of tensions between the government of Myanmar and the Rohingya people in October 2016 and the reinvigorated persecution of the minority group that followed, thousands of Rohingyas have again fled to Bangladesh - the United Nations humanitarian office's most recent estimate is 69,000. Scores of them have, meanwhile, been seen begging on the streets between Ukhia and Teknaf in Cox's Bazar, as Bangladesh, with its lack of resources, struggled severely to deal with the crisis that Myanmar started.

Fast forward to today, the Bangladesh government on February 5 announced a plan to relocate thousands of Rohingyas as stranded on its territory to Thengar Char in Hatiya in the Bay of Bengal. While revealing its plans, the government sought financial support from the UN and the international community for the relocation project. Describing the miserable condition that the Rohingyas are now living in, in the coastal areas of Bangladesh, the Foreign Minister said that the "authorities were facing formidable challenges of providing them with humanitarian assistances" ("Rohingya Relocation: Dhaka seeks help; diplomats sceptic", *The Daily Star*, February 6, 2017).

Optimistically, he said that the government would develop the remote island where the Rohingyas are planned to be relocated; but many, including foreign diplomats, have said that the Rohingyas "should not be moved against their will and that the place chosen for relocation was uninhabitable and prone to floods". This, the Foreign Minister has said, is not so. He said that the necessary infrastructure, including shelters, schools, hospitals/health centres, mosques, roads, etc., will be built by the government. And that the diplomats could even visit the island once the infrastructure is in place, to see for themselves whether the island was habitable or not.

This can hardly be a permanent solution. And the Foreign Minister himself has said so. For a permanent solution, the best case scenario would be for Myanmar to take the Rohingyas back, stop persecuting them anymore



IMAGE CREDIT: MUHAMMAD ZULFIKAR RAKHMAT

and provide them with citizenship and basic human rights. Given all that has happened and is happening, however, that, unfortunately, seems highly unlikely. But regardless, it has to be realised that it is the state of Myanmar that is guilty for the current mess and for committing horrific crimes against the Rohingya people.

Even the UN Human Rights Special Rapporteur, Yanghee Lee, last month criticised the Myanmar government's treatment of the country's Rohingya minority and said that its defensive reaction, when presented with claims of abuse, is eroding its credibility. These

abuses she was referring to include killings, rape, assault, and much more. The UN's human rights office last week, for example, said that Myanmar's military had likely "killed hundreds of Rohingyas" during a continuing crackdown in a "calculated policy of terror" against the minority group ("UN Report on Rohingya Abuses: Myanmar rejects criticism", *The Daily Star*, February 8, 2017).

The OHCHR said that the accounts of "torture, murder and gang-rape at the hands of security forces were so severe they may account to ethnic cleansing". Unfortunately, for various geostrategic reasons, most countries including the

PROJECT SYNDICATE

The Female Resistance



SLAWOMIR SIERAKOWSKI

ANTIAGONISM is mounting between today's right-wing populists and a somewhat unexpected but formidable opponent: women. In the United States,

much like in Poland, women's rights have been among the first targets of attack by populist leaders. Women are not taking it lying down.

Traditional conservatism in the West has largely come to terms with the need to grant women broad reproductive freedom. Today's right-wing populist administrations, by contrast, are downright pre-modern in this regard, attempting to reverse reforms championed not just by the left - and long accepted by the conventional right.

It is no secret that the mainstream consensus is a source of contempt - and success - for the modern populist, and not just on women's rights. Donald Trump's first acts as US President show an eagerness to reject longstanding norms in many other areas as well, including foreign affairs and economic policy.

But it is the attack on women's rights that is receiving the most powerful pushback. Poland's de facto leader, Jarosław Kaczyński, has retreated politically only once since his party's return to power in 2015. Last October, when thousands of women of all ages took to the streets in the "black protest," his government was forced to withdraw from its plan to introduce a total ban on abortion. (Under the current law, abortion is allowed in the event of rape, severe fetal defects, or a threat to the health of the mother.)

Similarly, of all the sources of opposition to Trump, only women have been able to organise quickly and efficiently. Last month's Women's March on Washington boasted a turnout some three times larger than Trump's own inauguration the previous day. In other words, Trump began his term with a symbolic defeat at the hands of American women.

Trump's subsequent reinstatement of

the "global gag rule," which undermines women's health in developing countries by defunding organisations that provide abortion counselling, could not obscure that loss, nor could his pledges to defund Planned Parenthood, which offers reproductive health services in the US. Instead, women continued to resist - for example, by creating the #DressLikeAWoman hashtag on Twitter, to shine a spotlight on Trump's sexist demand of female staffers.

As women have stood in the path of the populists, mainstream political leaders and parties have practically cowered; unsurprisingly, they continue to

democratic. Women have stood above the rest in the opposition, because they are, in many ways, the antithesis of right-wing populism, support for which comes primarily from poorly educated white men - the demographic cohort with the least comprehension of feminism.

The question now is whether women can win the battle against the populists. While the answer is not yet clear, they do have a few powerful weapons in their arsenal.

For starters, women are more numerous than any other single social group, including blacks, Latinos, the left, the right, liberals, conservatives,

makes it relatively easy for women to build solidarity.

During Poland's black protest, thousands more people protested in solidarity, from Berlin (where several thousand took to the streets) to Kenya (where about 100 people demonstrated). During the Women's March on Washington, up to two million people marched in solidarity around the world. Clearly, women are a global force. Who better, then, to resist the likes of Trump, Kaczyński, and other right-wing populists, as they launch an assault on globalism?

Perhaps the most important weapon in women's arsenal is that they are unashamed. While the twentieth century was characterised by discipline through fear, the twenty-first century has been characterised by repression through shame. Unlike fear, shame can be hidden - and that's the point.

Whereas one can feel fear without losing one's dignity, shame arises from feelings of inferiority. That is what women are rejecting in their anti-populist protests. Defending the rights of women to choose whether to have an abortion - particularly in places where abortion is still relatively accessible - amounts to defending women's dignity and autonomy.

Mainstream political parties, however, still experience shame, as do other traditional organisations like trade unions. They have scruples, and are concerned about how they are perceived. That makes them poorly equipped to stand up to the most shameless group of all: the populists.

The likes of Kaczyński and Trump have benefited massively from their lack of shame, saying and doing whatever wins them the support of their political base. But women aren't having it. They are throwing off the shackles of the shame that has long been used to repress them, and fighting fire with fire. Can the populists take the heat?

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A woman raises her umbrella as a symbol of their protest, as thousands of women launched another round of protests against efforts to tighten Poland's abortion law on October 24, 2016.

PHOTO: AFP

lose ground. But women have not been entirely alone. NGOs and other kinds of social movements have also stepped up. Even the media have helped the cause; though they are not accustomed to such a blatantly political role, circumstances - such as Trump's "war" on them - have forced their hand.

The composition of the resistance actually makes considerable sense. Right-wing populism is, at its core, an attack on liberalism, not necessarily on democracy. Separation of powers, a free press, an independent judiciary, and free trade are liberal ideals; they are not

Catholics, and Protestants. There are more women than there are white men in the US - or in Poland, for that matter. And, most important, women far outnumber populists. (Women must fight for their rights as if they were a minority, though they are a majority, and as if they lacked human capital, though, in the West, they tend to be better educated than men.)

Moreover, women are everywhere, and discrimination, to varying degrees, is part of all women's experiences. This makes women something of a revolutionary class, in the Marxist sense. It also