

Take back the

Rohingya

Myanmar can't abdicate its responsibilities

THE head of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) renewed the organisation's calls to Myanmar government to take back Rohingya refugees who took shelters in Bangladesh. Yousef bin Ahmad Al-Othaimeen, the OIC chief, reiterated the call while visiting two refugee shelters in Cox's Bazar district on Friday. He promised that pressure would be put on Myanmar to take Rohingya refugees back and grant them citizenship. His comments are welcome and should be heeded.

International bodies and commission such as UN human rights and refugee agencies, Kofi Anan led Rakhine Commission, UN Special Rapporteur Yanghee Lee and numerous other human rights groups have previously reached the same conclusion that Rohingyas should be taken back. Unfortunately, such international calls on Myanmar authorities fell on deaf ears.

However, Othaimeen's comments are particularly important, given that his organisation reflects a unified voice of 57 Muslim states. He also pragmatically called on the South East Asian nations to join hands in tackling the problem, because these countries collectively wield significant leverage over Myanmar.

The Nobel peace prize winner Aung Sun Suu Kyi led government's refusal to properly acknowledge and address the problem is inhumane and reprehensible. The country cannot deprive its ethnic minority of basic human rights. As the OIC chief adds his voice to a growing chorus of global bodies and figures urging Myanmar to take a sensible stand on the issue, the government of Myanmar cannot abdicate its responsibilities any longer.

Ensuring safety on waterways

Graft is a major problem

A press briefing held in the city on August 5 bringing together experts on safety highlighted that graft is rampant in the shipping ministry that allows for unfit vessels to ply the country's waterways. This comes in the backdrop of the third anniversary of the sinking of Pinak-6, a double-deck passenger launch that sank in the Padma River which was heavily overloaded. Speakers contend that the investigations that are formed to investigate disasters such as those by the ministry seldom bring in experts and that allow vessel owners to go scot free.

Every year, we are faced with dozens of such accidents where the vessels plying our waterways have fitness certificates that have been obtained through speed money and vessels that are being piloted by unsafe hands. But as pointed out by experts, the so-called probes into these disasters seldom put the blame on owners. Indeed, for those who either lose lives or suffer injury, there is little comfort in terms of compensation. This culture of patronising the vessel owners is costing lives but there is hardly any effort to change the system.

We have been covering the issue of safety on waterways for some time now and now that Eid-ul-Azha is barely a month away, the need for better managing our waterways has become all the more important. We would rather not witness disasters the likes of Pinak-6 in the future, but for that to happen, the regulatory bodies need to be made free of graft.

BOMBING OF HIROSHIMA & NAGASAKI

"An ethical standard common to the barbarians of the Dark Ages"

STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING



BRIG GEN SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN
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EVEN after long seventy years of the most catastrophic event of the last century, the jury is still out on whether the bombings of the two Japanese cities were

justified, morally or strategically. There are those who argue in favour of Truman's decision, flaunting the same argument as his—destruction of the two major Japanese cities saved several million American soldiers' lives. And to lace it with a patina of morality they add "and the lives of many thousands Japanese too". Many opine that it was absolutely unnecessary.

It was not as if Hiroshima and Nagasaki were the only Japanese cities to come under severe aerial assaults during the Second World War. Strategic bombardment or firebombing of one another's strategic conurbations was a plan adopted by both the Allies and the Axis Powers. And while one gets to hear and read more about the Battle of Britain, glorifying the role of the Royal Air Force against Luftwaffe's action in support of Hitler's strategy to bomb to smithereens London and other industrial cities of Britain, we come across very little about the destruction of German and Japanese towns and cities by allied aerial bombardment—Dresden, Hamburg and Tokyo among which stand out as having suffered the most devastation.

In fact between November 1944 and June 1945 assault by USAAF B-29 bombers on Tokyo destroyed an estimated 286,358 buildings, killed an estimated 100,000, more than the number that perished in the two atomic bombings, and injured 1,000,000. London pales when compared to the sheer scale of destruction wreaked on Tokyo during those seven months.

Hiroshima and Nagasaki were different stories though. The "Little Boy" and "Fat Man", names of the two atom bombs, the first dropped on Hiroshima on August 6, 1945, and the second three days later on Nagasaki, were the only two instances of atomic attack which have not been repeated, thankfully, since then. But the effects of the explosions have been carried down by the succeeding generations of Japanese, very much like the many North Vietnamese who bear the debilitating after-effects of "Agent Orange" used by the US military against North Vietnam, even to this day. And thus it is no wonder that a leading



A picture taken by the US military shows a mushroom cloud from one of the two atomic bombs dropped on Japan in August 1945.

American Catholic voice, Commonweal, in August 1945 termed Hiroshima and Nagasaki as "Names for American Guilt of Shame."

Reportedly, even now 56 percent of Americans believe that the bombing was necessary, which was not the case, going by the comments and reflections of many US senior military officers. Obviously another instance of "manufacturing consent" through demonising and over-blowing the potential of an adversary, as we saw being done in the case of the invasion and occupation of Iraq; more than 100 rationales were cooked-up for the occupation of that country. Japan in the spring of 1945, was an adversary that was already defeated and seeking the help of a third country while suing for an "honourable peace".

According to General Eisenhower, "Japan was already defeated and that dropping the bomb was completely unnecessary ... I thought that our country should avoid shocking world opinion by the use of a weapon whose employment was, I thought, no longer mandatory as a measure to save American lives. It was my belief that Japan was, at that very moment, seeking some way to surrender with a minimum loss of 'face'."

Similarly, Admiral Leahy, Chief of Staff to President Truman, commented,

"It is my opinion that the use of the barbarous weapon at Hiroshima and Nagasaki was of no material assistance in our war against Japan...The Japanese were already defeated and ready to surrender...My own feeling was that in being the first to use it, we had adopted an ethical standard common to the barbarians of the Dark Ages. I was not taught to make war in that fashion, and wars cannot be won by destroying women and children."

The *New York Times* had this to say of the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. "We are the inheritors to the mantle of Genghis Khan and of all those in history who have justified the use of utter ruthlessness in war." Norman Thomas, a six-time presidential candidate, called Nagasaki "the greatest single atrocity of a very cruel war."

There are others reasons why Truman went for the use of atomic weapon. But that can be a separate subject of discussion altogether. For us let us revisit Hiroshima and Nagasaki, if only to remind ourselves of the havoc that can be perpetrated on humanity by those whose obsession for power causes them to suspend their faculties and use the most destructive weapon ever produced by mankind on mankind itself.

It takes only a single egoistic maniac to pull the nuclear trigger, as the world

witnessed on August 6, 1945. And there are still a few of them about with their hands on the button. It is a near miracle that nuclear war has been avoided so far but escalation of the threat has continued due to the activities of some countries.

The non-proliferation regime is skewed. In the Middle East we have a country—Israel, considered in the polls of European public opinion, according to Chomsky, as the most dangerous country in the world, "which has armed itself with nuclear weapons which inspires other countries in the region to do so". In South Asia we have the most unique situation of two nuclear-armed states sharing a common border and constantly on the throes of a conflagration.

The world must unite on, what experts claim, the two most pressing issues which threaten the species—environmental disaster and nuclear proliferation. The world has come together on the former, although the so-called leader of the free world has chosen to opt out of the Paris Agreement. But the complete denuclearisation of the world remains a far cry. We can only keep our fingers crossed.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Financial stability at stake

Bangladesh Bank has recently revealed its Financial Stability Report (FSR) on banks and made some observations on the banking sector and warned the sector of bad consequences. Non-performing loans are soaring at an unexpected level, which is a serious cause for concern for the overall banking sector and the country's economy. The central bank also hinted that the banks' assets quality is poor and a big chunk of loans are concentrated in only five sectors. Many banks are exercising an aggressive policy of lending. In the prevailing bad situation, all the stakeholders, banks, the central bank and the government should come forward to save the banking sector from any negative consequences. **Emran Zonaed, by email**

Single admission test for all public universities

Like every other year, seats under the top public universities are very limited given the lower, yet still high number of GPA-5 achievers. Students have to apply to as many universities as they can. The entire task involves huge cost. Applicants have to travel from one end to the other end of the country. It's quite impossible to attend many admission tests because of the tight schedule.

I would like to request to the concerned authorities to take actions immediately to let students obtain admission in the public and private universities based on their previous results or through a single combined test. **Md. Tofazzel Hossain, Kushtia**



SHAGUFTA HOSSAIN

A fairly recent study conducted by the World Health Organization (WHO) identified depression as the leading cause of disability. According to a report on *The Independent*, in 1998 WHO's estimate of mental patients in Bangladesh with a population of about 130 million had nearly 1.2 million and 12 million severe and mild mentally ill patients, respectively. A 2011 National Institute of Mental Health report found there are 14.5 million adults with mental disorders in the country.

Interestingly though, most people in Bangladesh would not consider mental health a disease. It raises hope, therefore, that the conversations about mental health, are beginning to occur in the context of general health issues as has been on the occasion of World Health Day on the 7th of April this year.

However, much of the conversation around mental health has been led mostly by civil society members and seen from a rights based perspective. And until recently, given there are daily human rights violations, arguably of higher proportions, the conversation around mental health has taken a backseat. However, regardless of whether we consider rights of the mentally ill as urgent or mental illness a disease, the harmful impact that mental illness has on the productivity of a nation is undeniable. I would quote the unemployment rate of Bangladesh here but unfortunately, the unemployment rate only takes into account those who are actively looking for jobs and not those who are too ill to look, and in turn fails to take into account those whose abilities are impaired, either physically or mentally.

A 2013 report published by the icddr,b indicates there is a 13-31 percent prevalence rate of mental illness. This means, 13-31 percent of the population, when left un-catered to, are either not engaged or partially engaged in productive employment. According to the WHO, every dollar invested in improving access to treatment leads to a return of USD 4 in better health and productivity. But how do we ensure that investment in mental health, does in fact, result in greater productivity?

An obvious method would be to build institutional capacity to strengthen both the demand and supply side factors in the labour market. If we were to consider mental illness as a problem that negates productivity of labour, we have to acknowledge that employers reluctant to hire persons with mental illnesses or

accommodate their needs are posing demand side barriers, while institutions which fail to provide adequate support for sufferers of mental health issues are posing supply side barriers.

To explore the supply side barriers one must inquire what services are being offered by public institutions to counter this problem. The WHO-AIMS (World Health Organization Assessment Instrument for Mental Health Systems) report on Bangladesh, published in 2007, pointed out that approximately four percent of the training for medical doctors in Bangladesh is devoted to mental health. The number of professionals that graduated in 2006 from academic and educational institutions in psychiatry per 100,000 graduates is 0.0036 psychiatrists. Moreover, a large portion of these graduated psychiatrists emigrate out of the country. The department of psychology at the Dhaka University takes in 150 students in the first year. Assuming they all graduate and serve as mental health professionals, it is



still unlikely that the number is enough to meet the demand.

The National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) established in Dhaka started functioning in 2000 as a coordinating body which promotes public education and awareness. Farzana Alam, a student of psychology at the Dhaka University, visited NIMH as part of her placement for the Identity Inclusion project, which aims to identify the needs of people with a psychosocial disability, and break the barriers that affect their capacity to participate in the community. Alam describes her experience at the NIMH as unpleasant to say the least, where the filth, stench, and the unhygienic conditions create an environment far from suitable for healing. She reports that the psychotherapists saw multiple patients simultaneously in the same room and the service providers engaged in rude and inappropriate behaviour.

Dr Razia Sultana, an occupational therapist working

at the NIMH as part of a joint project undertaken with the Centre for the Rehabilitation of the Paralyzed (CRP) since September 2014, deems the facilities and services decent compared to the psychiatric wards in Pabna Mental Hospital. In fact, she believes the medical services provided at the NIMH are of reasonable standard because they have sufficient manpower. However, the psychosocial services suffer because of a shortage in manpower. The NIMH is trying to improve their rehabilitation services in order to better cater to the needs of those who are mentally challenged.

But it is not only the supply side, i.e. the lack of available services to cater to and build capacity of those who are mentally challenged, that poses a problem. On the demand side, Dr Sultana thinks the stigma associated with mental health prevents employers from recruiting those who have suffered from a mental illness even when the recovery is complete. Mental illness, much like diabetes, can be managed when adequate measures are taken. However, colleagues at work and family at home often fail to provide the kind of support system required for the patient to recover fully and engage in employment.

Shamsin Ahmed, founder of Identity Inclusion and a social inclusion activist, supports this and further adds that there is little effort on the side of employers to accommodate those who suffer from mental illness. For instance, most organisations do not have an in-house counsellor. BRAC is one of the very few organisations that do but that is a fairly recent development.

While public institutions do not have enough capacity to cater to the challenges posed by mental illness, there has been a rise in the number of non-government initiatives and youth based groups who have taken it upon themselves to break the stigma around mental health issues. Noteworthy among them are Innovation for Wellbeing, MindMatters, End Stigma Save Lives, Identity Inclusion, Sajida Foundation and ADD International at the grassroots level.

While these ongoing conversations to help break stigma and initiatives to provide both medical services and psychosocial counselling are definite positive steps, much remains unaddressed on the demand side of employers. Unless employers are decisively inclusive of those with mental illnesses, not only will this add to the burden of the person suffering and their families but slowly and steadily, this will grow into one of the heaviest burdens that the nation must then bear. Therefore, we must reflect on whether we have built enough muscle required for this heavy lifting.

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