

Pope's concern over Rohingya persecution

It's time international community acted decisively

POPE Francis has voiced concern over the persecution of Rohingyas in Myanmar. He had, on several occasions, slammed the violence inflicted on this minority community. We appreciate the Pope's unequivocal remarks on the matter which is in contrast with the somewhat muted response of the international community, by and large, so far.

According to UN refugee agency, more than 3,000 Rohingyas have entered Bangladesh in the past three days following the fresh outbreak of conflict between militants and Myanmar troops in the Rakhine State and a few thousand are thronging the no man's land trying to cross the border. The Myanmar security forces have set their homes on fire, drove them away and even shot at them while they were fleeing towards the Bangladesh border.

The persecution of Rohingyas seems like a never ending issue, as they have been fleeing Myanmar to Bangladesh since early 1990s and around 400,000 of them now live in this country.

We hope that the international community would wake up and heed Pope Francis's call and act immediately by mounting pressure on the Myanmar government so that such state-sponsored violence on the minority Rohingya community stops once and for all. Merely issuing routine statements will not help solve the problem. Persecution of Rohingyas, who are citizens of Myanmar, can't go on forever. The Annan Commission's recommendations should be taken cognisance of and the Rohingyas must have their legal rights as citizens of Myanmar, among other things, restored.

Enforced disappearances

Must not be allowed to continue

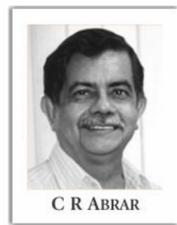
AS we observe the International Day of the Victims of Enforced Disappearances today, we restate our abhorrence of the phenomenon. Regrettably, people continue to be victims of enforced disappearances and we have no idea regarding the whereabouts of many of them. As per data of a leading human rights organisation of Bangladesh, no less than 519 people have allegedly fallen victim to such 'forced' disappearances from 2010 to 2017 and approximately 329 of them remain missing.

There may be multiple reasons for people to go missing but the public perception that law enforcers are involved in a great many of these cases, is overwhelming. When Jasmin Nahar, whose husband went missing on August 4, 2016 tells that she saw her husband in the police lockup of the Satkhira Sadar Police Station, where she had had gone the next day to lodge a missing person's diary about her husband, and be told after four days that the police had not taken him into custody, we begin to comprehend why public perception is what it is. How does one grapple with the numerous eyewitness reports that many victims were picked up by groups of people identifying themselves as members of the law enforcement agencies?

On the other hand, if the government agencies are not involved in it, as the administration would have us believe, then there must be clandestine groups moving around with impunity picking people off the streets and from homes. That is an equally alarming situation. Thus the government, instead of dismissing the allegations against the agencies out of hand, must set up a special inquiry body to get to the bottom of the matter and put a stop to this, once and for all. The state owes at least that much to the relatives of those who have disappeared.

INTERNATIONAL DAY OF THE VICTIMS OF ENFORCED DISAPPEARANCES

Need for a credible independent commission



C R ABRAR

AUGUST 30 reminds the international community that enforced disappearance is a crime and cannot be condoned under any circumstances. It is

a day of reckoning not only for the near and dear ones of the victims of enforced disappearance; the day also provides an opportunity for the broader community and those at the helm of the State to engage in some soul searching.

Enforced disappearance is used as a tool to spread fear within society. It occurs when "people are arrested, detained or abducted against their will and when government refuses to disclose the whereabouts of these people" (UN Declaration on the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance). Like many other states in the world, enforced disappearance is a reality in Bangladesh.

A typical scenario of enforced disappearance would involve several men forcing their entry into a family home or in a vehicle in any village or city at any time of the day, usually in plainclothes, sometimes in uniform, always carrying weapons and dragging off one or more members of the family without producing any arrest warrant and assigning any reason, frequently without stating who they are and on whose authority they are acting, using violence in the process, if necessary. This practice of enforced or involuntary disappearance has been labelled as "heinous violation of human rights" and "international crime".

By now a pattern has emerged about the fate of victims of enforced disappearance in Bangladesh. In most instances they are kept in undisclosed custody for weeks or months before police suddenly claim to have arrested them the previous day. They are taken to the magistrates' court and are remanded into police custody often on the basis of fabricated charges. Others are found dead, being labelled as victims of "cross-fires", "shoot-outs" and "encounters". The lucky ones are released with stern instruction not to divulge what they experienced in detention, a directive all unquestioningly comply with. In at least two cases the victims of "disappearance" made their appearance in a neighbouring country.

Another pattern has emerged about the experiences that members of the families of victims endure following the disappearance. Almost in every instance the police refuse the families file a General Diary if the complaint contains an

allegation that a law enforcement agency is involved. In rare cases where the families are finally able to lodge complaint, there is no progress in investigation. Prolonged periods of uncertainty regarding the whereabouts of a family member take immense psychological toll on the members of the victim's families, as "they alternate between hope and despair, wondering and waiting, sometimes for years, for news that may never come". Many are threatened of similar consequences if they share their plights with others, particularly with the media. In some instances, instead of helping the families find the disappeared, pressure is exerted on them to produce the latter. The law enforcers justify such action alleging

abuses. Citing Odhikar figure, Human Rights Watch alleges that since January 2009, 320 persons including suspected criminals, militants, and more recently, opposition members have "disappeared".

Successive governments have justified extrajudicial killing by law enforcement agencies on grounds of lawful self-defence. As rights groups have highlighted and alleged that state security forces were engaged in such killings, the incidence of enforced disappearance registered an increase. Odhikar informs that during 2017 until July, 60 people have fallen victim to enforced disappearance. Of them 26 were subsequently produced before courts, bodies of 6 were recovered and 28 still remain traceless.

It is in this context that a group of

Rapporteur on the Independence of Judges and Lawyers.

Some hold the view that given the weakness in the criminal justice system (where serious offenders often secure bail and subsequent release), disappearance and extrajudicial killing though irregular are justified. This position is further buoyed in tackling religious militancy and terror. Others may feel it is by creating an environment of fear that undesirable political activism can be contained. Both such approaches are flawed. There are no quick fixes to problems of law enforcement. Political challenges should only to be met politically and unlawful denial of freedom to any citizen (including religious bigots, criminals and terrorists) cannot be justified under any circumstances. "All citizens are equal before the law and are entitled to equal protection of the law", ordains the Bangladesh Constitution (Article 27), the supreme law of the land.

The responses of the senior state functionaries on allegations of enforced disappearances have been diverse. In November 2016 the home minister dismissed the allegations as "baseless" and claimed that those missing were hiding "to embarrass the government internationally". The minister branded the Human Rights Watch report (July 2017) on Secret Detentions and Enforced Disappearances in Bangladesh as a "smear campaign". The refusal of River Shitalakkhya to be an accomplice to the Naraynganj seven murders has conclusively established the hollowness of the claims of the home minister. In contrast, in March 2017 the law minister acknowledged to the UN Human Rights Committee that disappearances had indeed taken place and that their number has been brought down to "a very low level". He further reiterated the government's avowed policy of "zero tolerance" of the practice.

On this International Day of the Victims of Enforced Disappearances all freedom loving people of Bangladesh call upon those at the helm of the State to acknowledge the horrid reality of enforced disappearances, take appropriate actions to bring an end to the practice including setting up a credible and independent enquiry commission to look into the allegations, bring perpetrators to justice and provide reparations to the victims' families. The formation of special mechanisms within Bangladesh and the ratification of the International Convention for the Protection of All persons from Enforced Disappearance can be the befitting beginning of that process of redemption.

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SOURCE: PEACE AND JUSTICE

there are pending cases against those activists who have "disappeared".

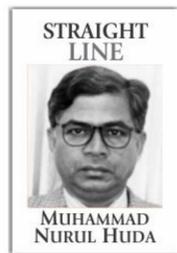
The families' suffering may get compounded if the missing person happens to be the family's main breadwinner. The extended uncertainty causes huge disruption in household earnings and adjusting to new situations. The absence of death certificate makes it difficult to draw pension or receive other means of support. Under such circumstances it is the women and children who suffer disproportionately.

Bangladesh's experience with disappearance and extra-judicial killing go back to the setting up of the Jatiya Rakkhi Bahini by the first Awami League government. In 2002 the BNP government launched the infamous "Operation Clean-Heart" and in 2004 created the Rapid Action Battalion. The second Awami League government came to office with a promise of "zero tolerance" to such

United Nations human rights experts have called on Bangladesh to act now to halt an increasing number of enforced disappearances. The UN Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances says the number of cases has risen from a few isolated ones a few years ago, to more than 40 (by February 2017), and that the number is continuing to grow. The working group observed that "(en)forced disappearance is a heinous crime and an offence to human dignity and no circumstances whatsoever may be invoked to justify it."

The Working Group's appeal has been collectively endorsed by the UN Special Rapporteur on torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, the UN Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association; the Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions, and the Special

Apartheid in our neighbourhood!



MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

THE expression "apartheid", according to the Oxford Dictionary, means racial segregation, especially in South Africa. I am not sure if apartheid has, in real terms, taken leave off the

mindset of racial supremacists in that country and also elsewhere in both western and eastern hemispheres. The fact remains that the building and the nurturing of the ethos of a multi-racial society, howsoever lofty it may sound, continues to be a difficult objective to achieve. For the cynical observer of the world scene that is an elusive goal.

Closer at home, do we witness clear evidence of a new apartheid with attendant marks of racist rage in the atrocities committed on the minority Muslim Rohingya community in neighbouring Myanmar? In this regard, a concerned academic ruefully says, "If apartheid is understood as a political and social system that promotes racial discrimination in favour of a particular community then at the moment no country in the world can compete to fittingly qualify the top spot of an apartheid State other than Myanmar".

To appreciate developments from historical perspectives, in recent years the monks, and the terrorist acts, have been associated with the nationalist 969 movement, particularly in Myanmar. The violence reached prominence in June 2012 when more than 200 people were killed and around 100,000 were displaced. As of 2012, the "969" movement by monks (the prominent among whom is Wirathu) had helped create anti-Islamic nationalist movements in the region, and have urged Myanmar Buddhists to boycott Muslim services and trades, resulting in persecution of Muslims in Myanmar by Buddhist-led mobs. However, not all of the culprits were Buddhists and the motives were as much economic as religious.

According to a Human Rights Watch report, the Myanmar government and local authorities played a key role in the forcible displacement of more than 125,000 Rohingya people and other Muslims in the region. The report further specifies the coordinated attacks of

October 2012 that were carried out in different cities by Myanmar officials, community leaders and Buddhist monks to terrorise and forcibly relocate the population. The violence of Meiktila, Lashio (2013) and Mandalay (2014) were notable incidents of Buddhist violence in Myanmar in the not-too-distant past.

The world needs to take note of the preacher of hate in Myanmar who uses racism and rumours to spread hatred. His name is Wirathu, he calls himself the "Burmese Bin Laden" and he is a Buddhist monk who is stoking religious hatred across Myanmar. This saffron-robed 47-year-old regularly shares his hate-filled rants through DVD and social media, in which he warns against Muslims who "target innocent young Myanmar girls and rape them", and "indulge in cronyism".

"To ears untrained in the Burmese language, his sermons seem steady and calm—almost trance-like—with Wirathu rocking back and forth, eyes downcast. Translate his softly spoken words, however, and it becomes clear how his paranoia and fear, muddled with racist stereotypes and unfounded rumours, have helped incite violence and spread misinformation in a nation still stumbling towards democracy."

It would be easy to disregard Wirathu as a misinformed monk with militant views, were it not for his popularity. Presiding over some 2,500 monks at his respected monastery, Wirathu has thousands of followers on Facebook and his YouTube videos have been watched tens of thousands of times. The increasing openness of Myanmar, which was once tightly controlled under a military junta, has seen a wave of anti-Muslim sentiment spread across the 60 million-strong Buddhist majority population—and Wirathu is behind much of it.

Wirathu is leading the nationalist "969" campaign, encouraging Buddhists to "buy Buddhist and shop Buddhist" and demarcate their homes and businesses using numbers related to the Buddha (the number refers to his nine attributes, the six attributes of his teaching and the nine attributes of the Buddhist order), seemingly with the intention of creating an apartheid state.

Despite spending seven years in prison for stoking religious violence, Wirathu won a "freedom of religion" award in February 2013 from the UK's foremost Myanmar monastery, Maha Sasana Ramsi in London, in the same week that he

spread rumours that a Rangoon school would be developed into a mosque.

Wirathu openly blames Muslims for instigating the recent violence. A minority population that makes up just 5 percent of the nation's total, Wirathu says Myanmar's Muslims are being financed by Middle Eastern forces. "The local Muslims are crude and savage because the extremists are pulling the strings, providing them with financial, military and technical power," he said.

Analysts warn that Wirathu's seeming freedom to preach as he pleases—in addition to his influence over other monks, who have also started preaching against Islam—should be taken as a wake-up call to the rest of the world. "If a

forgiveness, tolerance, compassion. If from one corner of your mind, some emotion makes you want to hit, or want to kill, then please remember Buddha's faith. We are followers of Buddha." He said that "All problems must be solved through dialogue, through talk. The use of violence is outdated, and never solves problems."

Maung Zarni, a Burmese democracy advocate, human rights campaigner, and a research fellow at the London School of Economics who has written on the violence in Myanmar and Sri Lanka, states that there is no room for fundamentalism in Buddhism. "No Buddhist can be nationalistic," said Zarni, "There is no country for Buddhists. I mean, no such



According to a HRW report, the Myanmar government and local authorities played a key role in the displacement of more than 125,000 Rohingya people. PHOTO: AFP

similar hate movement like Myanmar's '969' movement, which spreads hate speech and hate symbols, specifically against, say, the Jews in Europe, no European government would tolerate it," says Myanmar activist and London School of Economics visiting fellow Maung Zarni.

However, several Buddhist leaders including Thich Nhat Hân, Bhikkhu Bodhi, Shodo Harada and the Dalai Lama among others, have condemned the violence against Muslims in Myanmar and called for peace, supporting the practice of the fundamental Buddhist principles of non-harming, mutual respect and compassion. The Dalai Lama said "Buddha always teaches us about

thing as 'me,' 'my' community, 'my' country, 'my' race or even 'my' faith."

I am not sure if continued oppression of Rohingya minority of Myanmar will foment the so-called Islamic extremism in the region but the premonition does not seem to be unfounded. One would agree with our Prime Minister's observation that the issue is political and has to be solved and settled accordingly. As concerned Bangladeshis we can only hope that the Myanmar establishment and the monks would live up to the real precepts of Buddhism and ensure peaceful coexistence.

Muhammad Nurul Huda is a former IGP and a columnist of The Daily Star.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Odd-even formula will not work in Dhaka

I was recently having a conversation with a friend who lives in Delhi. I asked him how Delhi's odd-even rule—which restricts cars to alternate days based on whether they carry odd or even-numbered licence plates—was working out. He told me that the plan has been shelved as it prompted people to buy more cars instead of helping to reduce traffic congestion. For the same reason, I don't think the odd-even plan will work here in Dhaka. Parking is already a problem for us and if everyone just bought more cars to use every alternate day, the problem will get worse. Dhaka's roads have been narrowed down by the illegally set up roadside shops, dumping of garbage and haphazard parking especially by buses and trucks. In such a situation, reintroduction of comfortable public transportation can be a good idea.

Aminur Rahim, Mohakhali

Repairing sewer, water lines causes sufferings

The sewer and water lines of Dhaka City are repaired and reconstructed every year. It creates huge sufferings for the city dwellers. I think I speak for everyone when I ask, why do the same lines have to be repaired and reconstructed every year? Dhaka is an overcrowded city and traffic gridlock is a common phenomenon of our daily life. These repair tasks further complicate the situation. Sewer and water lines should be constructed firmly so that no repair is required before a considerable period of time.

Mohammad Ahsan Habib, By email