

Rohingya persecution continues

International community must respond

THE UN estimates that in just over one week more than 70,000 Rohingyas have crossed over to Bangladesh. Bangladesh estimates the number stands between fifty and sixty thousand. The fact that there is no consensus about the exact number of Rohingyas who have crossed over speaks volumes about our handling of the problem.

The UN Security Council, in a recent meeting, discussed the violence in Myanmar but no formal statement from the 15-member council has emerged following that. The Association of ASEAN Parliamentarians for Human Rights has also called on Myanmar to take immediate action to protect civilians from violent clashes in Rakhine. However, the international community still fails to create sufficient pressure on Aung San Suu Kyi while she deems "ethnic cleansing as too strong an expression," with the exception of the Turkish president who has called the genocide what it is. Given the gravity of the situation, Bangladesh cannot remain aloof, neither can the rest of the world.

An immediate priority for Bangladesh should be to urgently respond to the humanitarian needs. After all, in spite of resource constraints, we have been providing humanitarian assistance to the Rohingya refugees for so long. Also, it is high time to undertake an assertive, proactive diplomacy. And the plight of the Rohingyas should be disseminated as widely as possible to the world.

With the continued influx of Rohingya refugees this has become a humanitarian catastrophe of gargantuan proportions with far reaching economic, political and social implications for the country. A disaster has been created by Myanmar that Bangladesh is suffering the consequences of, and it must garner all international efforts to persuade Myanmar to resolve the problem without delay.

A threat to world peace

DPRK's deplorable nuclear test

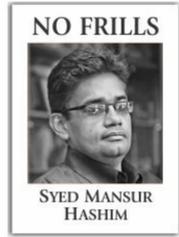
IT is regrettable that the tension in the Korean peninsula has been ratcheted up several notches by the latest nuclear test by the DPRK. It has come at a time when the US and DPRK are teetering on the brink of a flare-up which would have been catastrophic for the rest of the world. We join our voice to the worldwide chorus of condemnation that the nuclear test has rightly generated.

The indicators have been very clear. That the hermit kingdom was preparing to match its intercontinental delivery capability with appropriate payload was eminently apparent considering the series of missile tests conducted by the regime of Kim Jong-un since he assumed power.

Regrettably, the consequences of this will be an unbridled arms race in the region, and we are already seeing the signs of it with South Korea giving the go-ahead to deploy more anti-missile system and other military assets in its territory, and similar will be the compulsion for Japan to do likewise to protect itself. And equally worrisome aspect of the nuclear test is that it has snuffed the international efforts to denuclearize the Peninsula.

Given the recklessness displayed by DPRK there is a need to double the international efforts to engage it in negotiations to persuade it to go no further and roll back its nuclear programme, and for China and Russia to double down on it to restrain itself. It is time also to consider restarting the 6-Nation talks to address the problem. After all, a military option to resolve the issue is imponderable. There is also, we feel, need to revisit the non-proliferation regime and plug the loopholes therein.

Why another hike in power tariff?



SYED MANSUR HASHIM

NO FRILLS
 THE Bangladesh Energy Regulatory Commission (BERC) is going to hold a seven-day public hearing on September 25 to discuss the proposals of state-run power

distribution companies to raise electricity tariff. BERC had earlier asked these entities to revise their original proposals and this has been done. It is somewhat perplexing to find that the government is actually considering a power tariff hike at a time when a significant portion of the electricity generated comes from the 50 oil-fired power plants that run on oil, and the price of oil has been flat in the international market for some time now.

When we take the cost of electricity generation, we see a pattern of falling costs. Indeed, according to a report in a leading English daily, "the average electricity generation cost fell by 11.48 percent to Tk 5.55 per unit (1 kilowatt-hour) in the FY 2015-16 compared to Tk 6.27 per unit in the FY 2014-15 due to sharp fall in oil prices in the international market." As we move to the privately-owned power plants, one finds that these power plants are paying Tk 24 per litre of furnace oil (which is much lower than the price in the local market, which stands at Tk 42). This is so because these companies enjoy both duty and tax waiver for the import of furnace oil to generate electricity. Interestingly, BPDB pays Bangladesh Petroleum Corporation (BPC) for oil at the government rate which is much higher than the price in the international market. If the government were to waive duties on import of furnace oil by BPC, then the generation costs of oil-fired power plants would fall significantly. Instead of exploring such measures, we are looking at the prospect of another round of rise in electricity bills as BPC insists on making profit at the cost of the consumers.

The rationale in the past was that BPC owed the government a huge amount in loans and hence it needed to keep the price of oil inflated. The government argument was that the higher profit earned by BPC would enable the

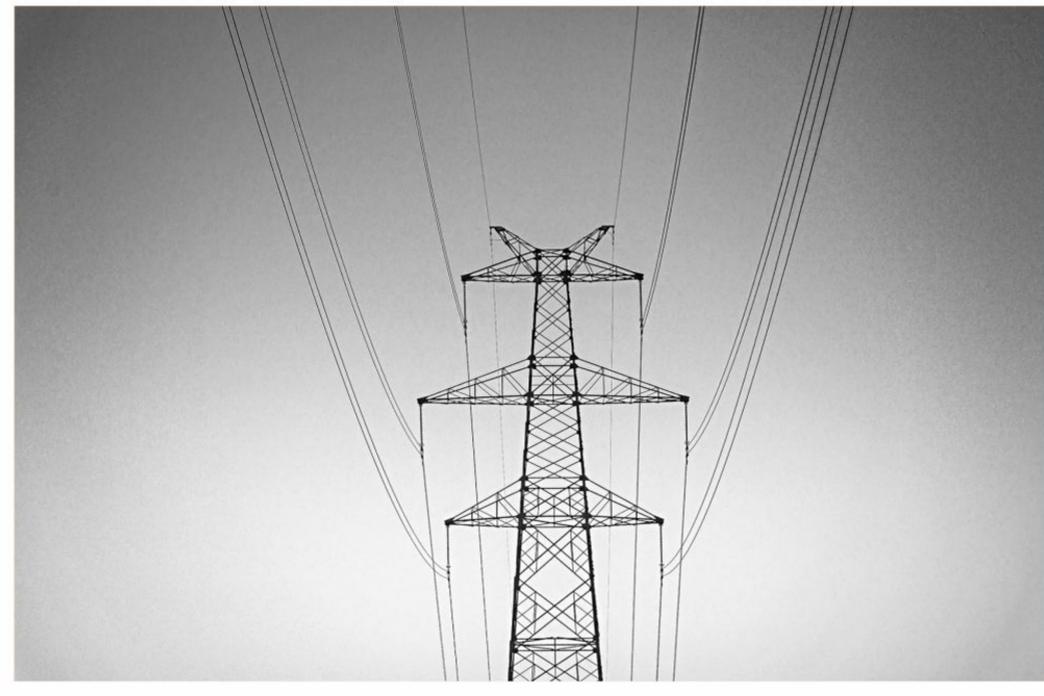


PHOTO: FREEPIX

government to spend more on public welfare. But the reality is that there is no logic to another hike when we find that BERC has raised retail pricing of electricity by 69.25 percent to Tk 6.33 per unit from Tk 3.76 per unit in eight phases from March 2010 to September 2015 with the logic of higher prices of imported oil. A similar scenario exists in the bulk price of electricity. What we gather from media reports is that the current proposal by distribution entities is to hike tariff because they are incurring losses due to prices set by BERC in September 2015.

The general trend has been to pass on "losses" sustained by state-owned entities to retail and bulk consumers alike without so much as reducing a part of their profit or efficiency. Does the government care for rewarding efficient management and cost saving enterprises? If it does, why not provide incentives for those entrepreneurs who can generate power at a better plant and punish (often the managers of the public enterprises) the costlier plants? The same applies to energy efficient

industries. If an industry consumes less energy and produces products at market competitive rates and quality, the industry should receive incentives (for instance, a reduced tariff rate). The World Bank suggested not too long ago that BERC, along with Petrobangla, needs to come up with a retail-based pricing mechanism that is built on the basis of costs—production, transmission and distribution. What we do not need is ad-hoc rise of prices like clockwork every year because state-owned companies demand it. Every time prices are raised, the business community and service providers are left in the lurch and simply pass on these added energy bills to consumers.

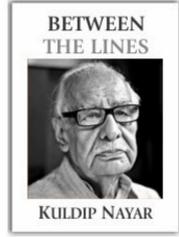
While revising prices upward is probably inevitable, without having any monitoring mechanisms in place to stop unscrupulous business entities from taking advantage of government inefficiency, as a regulator, what guarantee can the government give to the consumers that they will not be exploited with higher retail prices? BERC is set to hold its hearing on September

25 and from what has been stated in the media, power hikes proposed by different distribution agencies range from 3 to 10.75 percent. Should a hike be accepted, no matter what the percentage, it will bring no respite for consumers at any level and merely pass the buck on to them because state-owned entities wish to keep making profit regardless of the pains it brings to people.

The BPC and BPDB continue to keep the higher prices of fuel (petroleum) and electric energy to accumulate profit at the cost of public sufferings (and receive fat bonuses from company profits). Where are the indices for reducing "system loss" and initiative to make their business market competitive without government subsidies and protection? Until the time comes when efficient managers receive rewards and inefficient ones receive punishment, this spoon feeding culture will continue and a few favoured people will continue to get rich.

Syed Mansur Hashim is Assistant Editor, The Daily Star.

The ugly side of god-men



KULDIP NAYAR

BETWEEN THE LINES
 BABA Gurmeet Ram Rahim was a Bhindranwale in making. He, too, saw to it that nobody dared him. But he turned out to be a paper tiger. When CBI court judge

Jagdeep Singh pronounced his verdict, the Baba wept openly in the court and implored him not to give severe punishment. His followers, too, were reportedly surprised at the manner in which the Baba capsized.

But there is no doubting the Baba's vast following. It did not matter that he

skeletons tumbling out of the Dera cupboards. The CBI court is already hearing murder charges against the Baba and it will be sooner than later that the court will give its verdict on them, too. There are other cases of castration of male followers in the Dera which are being pursued. All these clearly indicate the mindset of the Baba and the connivance of the authorities.

There are some similarities between Bhindranwale and Baba Gurmeet Ram Rahim. If the former was the creation of the Congress Party, the latter has had the support of a plethora of parties in the state of Haryana, including the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). The Baba may not be a militant like Bhindranwale but his motivation was very clear as he used political benevolence to further his

by the time Indira Gandhi realised that a Frankenstein had been created and it was time for him to go, nothing less than the Indian Army would do to flush him out of Akal Takht inside the Golden Temple complex in Amritsar.

Before using the tanks, the Army sought the permission of Mrs Gandhi and woke her up at midnight. Mrs Gandhi ended up committing a costly mistake by sending in the Army into the sanctum sanctorum in June 1984. Bhindranwale was killed but the anger over Operation Blue Star cost Mrs Gandhi her life four months later.

Similarly, Baba Gurmeet Ram Rahim was encouraged by the leaders of the BJP because it suited the party's vote bank politics. The Baba endorsed the BJP in both the 2014 Lok Sabha elections and

not complicit. In 2009, the Dera chief extended his support to the Congress which was his return gift for the Z-plus security cover the UPA provided to him in 2007. It was palpable how the Baba had become powerful that the state went weak in the knees when challenged by his private army. That the state of Haryana deliberately bungled in imposing Section 144 before the verdict, sending a cold invitation to murderers, asking them to take over.

Apparently, there were intelligence reports before the verdict and both the states of Punjab and Haryana, including the Chandigarh Administration, were warned of the trouble brewing as the Dera followers were gathering in Panchkula and preparing themselves for the show of strength if the verdict went against the Baba. Punjab, however, did safeguard its interests taking all necessary measures while Haryana, despite assuring that they were well-prepared to meet any situation, failed to stop the followers from destroying public property and killing people. Only after the Punjab and Haryana High Court's order did the Haryana government wake up and make preparations to stall any further damage.

When history repeats itself, it is basically mocking our system of not learning any lessons. Who will account for the loss of 30 lives and damage to public property? But the BJP leadership has not done anything to touch chief minister Khattar because of the backing he has from the RSS. The problem then is how to curb the god-men and stop the government from supporting them. Maybe, they provide the vote bank but they do an irreparable damage to the polity.

Democracy demands a direct contact between the voter and the party. The Babas come in the way and try to become a parallel authority. When the ballot box is stalled by another force, democracy gets weakened. Therefore, the god-men have no place in a system which runs with the consent of the people. They are only like mahants in temples. The more they are allowed to have a say, the less free democratic expressions would be.

Religion is a private affair. There are no problems with the Asarams, Nithyanandas and Ram Rahims as long as they pursue and preach spiritual thoughts. The problem arises when they indulge in fraudulent and illegal activities, going to the extent of committing rapes and murders. What gives the whole thing an ugly shape is the support of the political parties for their own gains.

Kuldip Nayar is an eminent Indian columnist.



A security personnel walks past burning vehicles set alight by rioting followers of religious leader Gurmeet Ram Rahim of Dera Sacha Sauda who was convicted of rape in Panchkula on August 25.

PHOTO: AFP

was being punished for raping two *sadhvis*, who were his followers at the Dera. It shows how ignorant and gullible can the followers be as they always looked towards him for leadership and guidance. Bhindranwale, too, had become so powerful because of the vast following that the government turned a blind eye towards whatever he did.

Now that the verdict is out with the quantum of punishment pronounced on rape cases, there is a likelihood of more

own interests. Otherwise, he could not have amassed huge wealth and built 132 Deras around the world, including in the UK and the US.

The Akalis were gaining upper hand and slowly eroding the base of the Congress in Punjab after the Akali-Janata Party government came to power in 1977. That was when the Congress under Sanjay Gandhi and Zail Singh selected and supported Bhindranwale to take on the Akalis. He became so powerful that

the Haryana assembly elections in the same year. He also supported the saffron party in Punjab against Captain Amarinder Singh's Congress but that was not good enough to make it win. There are rumours that the entire Manohar Lal Khattar's cabinet, minus the chief minister, visited Baba's Dera Sacha Sauda in Sirsa after the swearing-in ceremony to pay obeisance to him.

But it is not as if the other parties are

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Save the Rohingyas from genocide

Systematic elimination of the Rohingyas by the Myanmar military is tantamount to genocide. It's all happening in front of our eyes, but sadly the international community is playing the role of a silent spectator.

Myanmar's de-facto leader Aung San Suu Kyi has not voiced her concern or condemned this human tragedy. Instead, she continues to justify the atrocities committed on the Rohingyas, terming them as "foreigners" despite the fact that they have lived in the state of Arakan for generations.

The UN and the international community have a moral responsibility in this regard. They must come forward and put political pressure on the Myanmar government to stop this ethnic cleansing and help resolve this festering problem permanently. On the other hand, Bangladesh has a responsibility to shelter these helpless and displaced people on humanitarian grounds.
 Ehsan Ul Haque, By email

Speedy trials for rapists

Every day we find at least one report about rape in the newspapers. And not all the cases are even reported by the victims due to social stigma. In most cases, the victims are tortured and/or killed after being raped. People all over the country are frightened and disgusted at such displays of cruelty.

In cases where the perpetrators are arrested, many later avoid punishment because of our prolonged judicial process. As the legal maxim goes, justice delayed is justice denied.

The trial of the rape cases should be completed within a short period so that a strong message is delivered that no one can get away with committing rape.

Biplob Biswas, Faridpur