

Safe zones for Rohingyas

International community must step up efforts

BA NGLADESH has taken a much needed diplomatic initiative to request the UN, Germany, India and International Committee of the Red Cross to set up a "safe zone" in Myanmar to ensure safety, security, food and shelter for the thousands of Rohingyas fleeing violence and possible death. A safe zone will also help to stop further influx of Rohingya refugees into Bangladesh, already overburdened with an exodus of 1,64,000 Rohingyas in the last two weeks.

It should be clear to the UN and the international community in general, that solving the Rohingya crisis is everyone's responsibility. Bangladesh is far from being equipped to absorb the continuous influx of refugees that are adding to the existing lakhs who live in camps in dire conditions. But for the present humanitarian crisis, members of the international community must come forward and provide immediate humanitarian aid. The Rohingyas are fleeing the worst kind of violence that includes executions, torture and rape. They are in need of medical care, food and shelter. This should be immediately provided by the international community through coordinated efforts.

At the same time the international community must place pressure on Myanmar to put an immediate end to the persecution caused by its armed forces. For this it is crucial that heads of state of various countries strongly raise the Rohingya crisis in the next UN General Assembly meeting. In addition, China and India, both of which maintain close relations with Myanmar, must ask its government to put an end to the repression of Rohingyas and to help repatriate them to Myanmar. So far no such efforts have been seen.

This is a test for the international community to show how sincere, unprejudiced and effective it is in stopping what amounts to crimes against humanity and the ensuing humanitarian crisis, regardless of the ethnicity, race or religion of the victims.

Another electricity price hike

What is the rationale?

IT is surprising that a proposal has been sent to Bangladesh Energy Regulatory Commission to raise electricity tariff by Tk 0.30 per unit. The rationale given by the state minister for Power and Energy is that public sector power plants have to pay a higher price for petroleum than their private counterparts and hence this hike is necessary. This reasoning is not logical because the government can give a directive to change Bangladesh Petroleum Corporation's (BPC) policy of charging state-run power plants 9 percent commission, in the public interest.

It makes no sense for the BPC to be overcharging public power plants. In fact state-run power plants are having to pay the government rate for furnace oil, which is Tk 42 per litre. That is much higher than the price in the international market that stands at Tk 24 per litre, which privately-owned power plants are paying for their oil. Second we see little point of BPC charging import duties which merely inflates production costs. These are exploitative measures that may make perfect sense to BPC, but unfortunately drive up the costs for power plants which is ultimately passed on to consumers.

It is high time that the government takes steps so that furnace oil is supplied to power producing plants at the market rate to all oil-run power plants, state-owned or otherwise. Such a move would bring down cost of producing electricity by nearly 50 percent and the government can dispense with any price hike of electricity.

Are we entering into a "jobless" growth phase in South Asia?



SELIM RAIHAN

"JOBLESS" growth is the phenomenon when an economy experiences growth without an expansion of jobs. In recent times, South Asia is considered to be the fastest growing region in the world. However, there are marked differences among South Asian countries in terms of economic growth. Over the past one and half decades, the high growth performing countries have been Bangladesh and India. Sri Lanka has been growing at a slower rate, Nepal's growth has been stagnant, and Pakistan's growth rate has been on a declining trend. Other South Asian countries have experienced much volatility of their growth rates. In contrast, Bangladesh has the least volatile growth rate compared to all other South Asian countries. However, there are genuine concerns whether the growth dynamics in South Asian countries have been able to generate a good number of jobs or these countries have entered into a "jobless" growth phase.

The relationship between economic growth and employment is an important issue in economics discourse. Promotion of inclusive growth also requires economic growth processes to be employment friendly. The measure that captures the employment effect of economic growth is the "employment elasticity" of economic growth, which is the ratio of percentage change in employment to the percentage change in real gross domestic product (GDP).

We have calculated the employment elasticity with respect to the change in real GDP for the South Asian countries for three different periods from 2001 to 2015. There are mixed patterns among the South Asian countries. During 2001 and 2005, Maldives had the largest employment elasticities (1.39) and Sri Lanka had the lowest one (0.08). India, with a share of 75 percent of the total population in South Asia, had the employment elasticity of only 0.38, one of the lowest in South Asia. Two other large countries, Pakistan and Bangladesh, had employment elasticities of 0.70 and 0.77 respectively.

For the period of 2006-2010, India experienced a drastic fall in employment elasticity to only 0.03 despite the fact that the average GDP growth rate of

India increased from 6.6 percent (2001-2005) to more than 8 percent (2006-2010). Over these periods, Bangladesh also had a similar experience where employment elasticity declined from 0.77 to 0.4 in the wake of a rising average GDP growth rate from 5 to 6 percent. While Afghanistan, Maldives, and Nepal also experienced a decline, Pakistan and Sri Lanka could increase the elasticities.

Over the recent period between 2011 and 2015, Bangladesh experienced a

employment elasticities throughout the periods of high economic growth. While during 2001 and 2005, the annual average job creation in Bangladesh and India were 1.6 million and 11.3 million respectively, in 2011-2015, such numbers declined to 1 million and 3.2 million for Bangladesh and India respectively. Most of the other South Asian countries experienced either volatile, or slow or stagnant economic growth, and therefore, despite a rise in employment elasticities, the actual employment

(Bangladesh, India, Nepal, and Pakistan).

The upshots of the above discussion lead to some important policy concerns and the necessity of revisiting the growth processes of the South Asian countries. In order to avoid the "jobless" growth phenomenon, economic diversification can play an important role in the South Asian countries. The economic growth momentum in these countries needs to be tuned for "meaningful" structural transformations of the economy where



SOURCE: BOBULIX'S FLICKR PHOTOSTREAM, USED UNDER A CREATIVE COMMONS LICENSE

further fall in the employment elasticity to 0.28, while India's improvement is meagre (from 0.03 to only 0.09). Despite the slower economic growth rates during this period, Afghanistan, Maldives, Nepal, and Pakistan could increase their employment elasticities. Sri Lanka had a further fall in employment elasticity to only 0.14. During this period, India had the least employment elasticity among all South Asian countries.

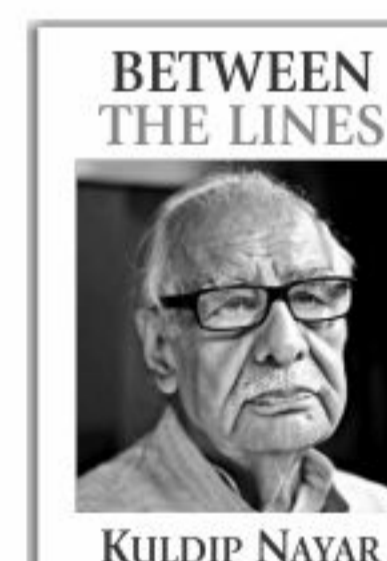
The aforementioned analysis points to the concern that two major South Asian countries, India and Bangladesh, experienced a substantial reduction in

generation in these countries had not been substantial. It is also important to mention that while SDG 8 talks about ensuring "decent" jobs for all, South Asian countries are seriously lagging far behind. In most of the South Asian countries, there are persistent employment challenges such as lack of economic diversification, poor working conditions, low productivity and a high degree of informality. This is reflected by the fact that among the top five countries in the world with very high proportion of informal employment in total employment, four are from South Asia

promotion of labour-intensive and high-productivity sectors, both in the farm and non-farm sectors, would be fundamental. This should be coupled with interventions to enhance productivity, jobs, and incomes in traditional and informal activities where there are large pools of surplus labour.

Dr. Selim Raihan is Professor, Department of Economics, University of Dhaka, Bangladesh, and Executive Director, South Asian Network on Economic Modeling (SANEM).
Email: selim.raihan@econdu.ac.bd

The harrowing prospects of soft Hindutva



KULDIP NAYAR

"BETWEEN THE LINES" WITH a clutch of followers, Rashtriya Swyamsevaka Sangh (RSS) chief Mohan Bhagwat was about to storm in Kolkata when West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee

cancelled the use of the hall which the RSS hired to address a meeting, is quite right when he criticised the cancellation as undemocratic. But the record of RSS in polluting the Hindu-Muslim equation is so long that the precaution is quite in order. True, Mamata Banerjee looks dictatorial. But her act can be rationalised. Still I wish that she had allowed another voice, however, critical to be raised.

Muslims, nor is it in their interest, as they perceive. The BJP, guided by the RSS is trying to create the same atmosphere. The equivocal stand by the government on pluralism has only helped the Hindutva elements.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi could have done something positive to clear the vitiated atmosphere. But his party does not appear to do so because it's getting dividends in keeping the society polarised. No outsider could interfere because the then chief minister of Uttar Pradesh, Kalyan Singh, did little to follow the Supreme Court's judgment, which said that the status quo should be maintained.

By "Hinduisation" a secular society, the integrity of the country is in danger. Religion can never integrate a nation as the example of Bangladesh cutting itself asunder from Pakistan shows. The

of Hinduism. True, some have sought freedom through conversions to other religions. But they have only adversely affected the Muslim and Christian societies. The converts from among the dalits face more or less the same discrimination in the religious society they join.

The RSS chief, claiming to be championing the cause of Hindus, did not react to the recent burning of a dalit because his goat strayed into the land of an upper caste member. Now that Modi has caught the imagination of the country, he should help the dalits and ask the upper castes to give up discrimination against them.

I have not seen even a mild criticism by Modi or his ardent followers, who claim that they would build a future India which will know of no discrepancy. At least the burning of dalits, if not the daily

to challenge the basic structure of the constitution, which includes secularism. The RSS chief should realise that the core of Hinduism is a sense of accommodation and spirit of tolerance, not the division of the society.

The spread of the BJP is a point of concern because it ignores the aspirations of Muslims. Modi's slogan of development has gone down well because it gives the hope of reducing, if not ousting, poverty. He has done well not to deviate from that path. Unfortunately, his regular contacts with the RSS and that of his Man Friday Amit Shah, effaces even the wishful thinking that Modi would build the society without any prejudice or bias.

Things would have been different if the demand by some liberal BJP men to sever all connections with the RSS had been implemented. This possibility was on the anvil when the Gandhian Jayaprakash Narayan was able to convince the top Jan Sangh leaders to dissolve the outfit and join the Janata Party. However, the old Jan Sangh members stayed constantly in touch with the RSS and this negated the very purpose.

Not long ago, the liberal Atal Behari Vajpayee tried his best to terminate the relationship between the RSS and the Jan Sangh. He, however, succeeded only on paper. He could not dilute the loyalty of the old members. L K Advani too was the one who had founded the BJP. He thought that the old Jan Sangh members were not trusted any longer in the Janata Party. He was successful in building the party because the Gandhian Jaya Prakash Narayan had given credibility to the Jan Sangh members when he brought them into the Janata fold. Obviously, he did not succeed in his mission. But the situation today is worse. The Congress is no more relevant and there is no other opposition in the horizon.

Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar can stop the BJP onslaught if he brings all the non-BJP parties on one platform to fight against the BJP. Even this combination would be late if it is not brought into being immediately. The soft Hindutva which has spread in the country will thicken and push the idea of India—secular and democratic—to the background. This is a harrowing prospect.

Kuldip Nayar is an eminent Indian columnist.



The soft Hindutava which has spread in the country will thicken and push the idea of India—secular and democratic—to the background. This is a harrowing prospect.

Other steps like including Muslims in Other Backward Classes (OBC) and giving stipend to selected Mullahs and Moulvis do not go well with the democratic India we are trying to build. Appealing to the sentiments of a particular community is obviously meant to get their vote. This is worse than what RSS does.

With a small temple, which came up overnight on the site where the Babri Masjid stood once, the chapter had been closed for the time being at least. But that does not seem to satisfy the

attempt to impose Urdu forced the same Muslim East Pakistan to become independent, sovereign republic of Bangladesh.

India has stayed as one country because the various cultural entities have not been disturbed. True, the Hindus are 80 percent of the population. But the minority, the Muslims, have not been threatened except by a lunatic fringe.

If the RSS is really interested in Hindutva, it should be agitating for the rights of dalits who, despite discrimination have remained in the fold

prejudice, should have been covered by the widely-watched Doordarshan network. But it seems that the government itself doesn't want to raise the pitch on this issue because it is dominated by the upper castes. Even otherwise, there seems to be an unwritten law which dictates that such stories should not be printed. Surely, this does not constitute the freedom of the press.

Consequently, the institutions in the country are languishing. Had the media, an important institution, been free from pressure, the RSS would not have dared

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

Reckless driving and unnecessary deaths

Road accidents have become a daily affair on the highways across the country, and the recent incident in Tangail was just a part of it. It was a shock to learn that 11 members of a family were killed in a single road accident. It was later discovered that the driver of the microbus tried to overtake a vehicle, resulting in a collision with a truck. Such incidents are occurring every day, and unfortunately, no appropriate actions are being taken to prevent this from happening.

The time has arrived for us to build awareness and ensure strict enforcement of laws so that we can at least reduce the death toll on the road.

Kowsar Rahman Sadit, Mastermind School

Extra burden of electricity price hike

The announcement made by a minister about a possible electricity bill hike comes as a shock to me. We are already finding it difficult to manage day-to-day affairs, with the prices of essential commodities increasing continuously in our unregulated market.

The rise in utility bills every year is becoming an additional financial burden for low-income families. The government has found it as an easy way to tax the whole population, whereas the rich are evading their fair share of taxes. It is simply unjust and unfair that the majority in the society should suffer for the irresponsibility of the minority.

AKM Ehsanul Haque, By email