

DIPLOMATIC PUSH ON ROHINGYA CRISIS

What Bangladesh needs to do now



ALI RIAZ

WHILE it is encouraging to know that Bangladesh has taken diplomatic initiatives to bring the ongoing Rohingya refugee crisis to the international fora, the question is whether it has devised a strategy to go forward. Press reports inform us that the Bangladesh foreign ministry has reached out to world powers

such as Germany, China and Russia and contacted several multilateral bodies such as the United Nations, European Union, ASEAN and OIC for their help in addressing the humanitarian crisis that has befallen the Rohingya refugees who have crossed the border into Bangladesh in the past two weeks. These steps, along with a concrete proposal for establishing a "safe zone" within Myanmar by the UN for persecuted Rohingyas, are a step in the right direction, although a bit late.

The scope of this crisis is monumental as an estimated 270,000 Rohingyas have taken refuge in Bangladesh in the past two weeks. A ruthless military operation of the Myanmar government, which many observers have described as "ethnic cleansing" and "genocide," has prompted this crisis. However, since the beginning of the recent security operation the Myanmar government has portrayed the attackers as Islamist militants connected to transnational terrorist groups such as ISIS. Additionally, Aung San Suu Kyi claimed that the government is trying to protect all citizens.

Thanks to strategic and business interests, a number of countries have extended their support to the Myanmar government remaining oblivious to the humanitarian crisis and the long history of persecution of Rohingyas. This ethnic minority group, most of whom are Muslims, had been stateless through the 1982 Citizenship Act and was excluded from the 2015 national census. Equally important to note is the rise of extremist Buddhist nationalist groups, which have relentlessly campaigned against Muslims; and the mainstream politicians' policy of appeasement of these extremist groups has made the situation worse. The Commission on Rakhine State, appointed by the Myanmar Government and the Annan Center last year, which submitted its report last month, warned of possible radicalisation sans a political solution and developmental intervention helping the Rohingyas. International Crisis Group, in a report last December, indicated that a new insurgency is in the making. Yet the international community remained silent and allowed the situation to deteriorate.

Bangladesh, on the other hand, has been on the receiving end of this crisis for decades. Several waves of refugees, since 1978, have crossed the border for shelter. Although an UN-brokered deal succeeded in repatriating 200,000 refugees in 1979, thousands have continued to arrive after episodes of state-supported ethnic riots; almost 500,000 have remained in Bangladesh, many in squalid conditions in camps near the Bangladesh-Myanmar border even before the latest round of influx. Bangladesh's first reaction to deny the entry of the refugees fell by the wayside under the weight of sheer number and also a change of heart. In the first days, it bought into Myanmar's argument that it is an ongoing Islamist militancy and offered a joint security operation. Fortunately, Myanmar didn't respond to the proposal; on the contrary, its helicopters repeatedly violated Bangladesh's air space.

The deafening silence of the international community on the plight of Rohingyas is matched with the unqualified support of China to Myanmar, a close ally for decades. Myanmar plays a key role in China's

planned 'One Belt One Road' initiatives with billions of dollars of investments in energy and infrastructure projects. Russia has remained a steadfast supporter of the regime. In December last year, both China and Russia vetoed the UN Security Council motion to censure Myanmar. India, in a bid to weaken Chinese influence in the region, has warmed up to Myanmar. In the wake of the present crisis, the Indian prime minister has extended unequivocal support to the Myanmar government while making an official trip last week, and the Indian government has threatened to deport 40,000 Rohingya refugees from the country. Despite an embargo on weapons sale to Myanmar, Israel has supplied weapons to the country. In February this year, Pakistan signed a deal to supply F-16 jets to Myanmar. The United States, which began a new era of engagement with Myanmar when the country moved towards democracy in 2014, is now embroiled in a row with North Korea and is paying little attention elsewhere. A muted reaction came in on Thursday when it condemned the violence and urged to allow

a possible serious reprimand of or pressure on Myanmar. Despite the gloomy picture it is incumbent on Bangladesh to take the lead as the most affected country. The national interest of the country demands robust action. It cannot look at other countries and follow in their footsteps. Now that it has taken the first step, the Foreign Ministry of Bangladesh should consider appointing a special envoy on Rohingya and the refugee issue with the support of the highest political office. It will send the message that the country has prioritised the crisis and impart a sense of urgency among the international community.

The present government has a close relationship with India; the question is how much Bangladesh is willing to engage India on this issue. It is not surprising that India is prioritising its national interests, but it is intriguing that Delhi hasn't considered Bangladesh's concerns while extending unqualified support to Myanmar in the wake of the present crisis. The first task of the Bangladesh government, therefore, is to make a case to India while mobilising the support of others. In



Many countries have extended their support to the Myanmar government ignoring the humanitarian crisis and the long history of persecution of Rohingyas. PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

humanitarian access to Rakhine State.

This is just the tip of the iceberg of the deep defence, strategic and business relationships between Myanmar and regional and global powers. These countries have vested interests in supporting the Myanmar government, making it an uphill task for Bangladesh to convince the international community for a concerted action against Myanmar.

However, European countries have taken note of the deteriorating situation. They were vocal critics of Myanmar at the UN Human Rights Council. On Thursday, the EU condemned the ongoing violence. Previously, Myanmar blocked a UN fact-finding mission. But the UN Secretary-General, in a rare move, sent a letter to the UN Security Council requesting urgent action to address the situation.

A few Muslim-majority countries, especially Turkey, Indonesia and Malaysia, not only expressed serious concerns but also tried to rally support. Turkey holds the Presidency of the OIC and Recep Tayyip Erdogan is trying to use the office to bolster his standing among Muslim-majority countries. As Turkey's own human rights record is very poor, one understands that the Turkish initiative is more a political maneuvering than a humanitarian gesture.

These do not provide an optimistic picture regarding

April, China offered to mediate which was not responded to by Myanmar. Dhaka should now impress upon Beijing that in the absence of a quick judicious and long-term solution the situation will create grave insecurity which is detrimental to their interests in Myanmar and Bangladesh. The repatriation of the refugees is the urgent task, but Bangladesh must insist on a long-term solution; the Annan Commission provides a blueprint in this regard.

Although more than two weeks have passed since the first group of refugees crossed the border, the foreign ministry has briefed the media only informally. The ministry should immediately make arrangements for regular briefings. The decision of the government to allow media access and to withdraw restrictions on international agencies to visit the border are positive actions. This will allow the world to see the picture and perhaps garner support.

The diplomatic initiative is a welcome development, but to achieve a real result it must be done with great urgency and with a clear strategy, keeping in mind that no one will do the bidding for Bangladesh.

Ali Riaz is Professor of Politics and Government at Illinois State University, USA. His recent publication is entitled *Bangladesh: A Political History since Independence* (IB Tauris, 2016).

Lower court judge crisis

Fill up positions quickly

IT is said the wheels of justice move slowly in Bangladesh. When each lower court judge is burdened with an average of 2,000 cases for hearing and disposal, we begin to comprehend why it takes years to wind up legal proceedings. This has been a nagging problem for some time now and we understand that there are some 397 judges' posts lying vacant in the lower courts. The Bangladesh Judicial Service Commission has taken up the process of appointing some 207 judges (who would complement the existing pool of 1,397 judges) which would go a long way to disposing many of the 27.5 lakh cases pending disposal nationwide.

The whole course of action is slowed down as police verification is needed but we find that there is delay each step of the way as the home ministry has apparently not yet sent the files to the police to complete the checking and vetting needed before the recruitment process may commence. And when we look at the fact that back in September 2014, the law commission had recommended the recruitment of 3,000 judges to ease the case congestion; we find that slow decision-making at policy level is primarily responsible for not appointing judges quickly enough.

All these delays inevitably are detrimental to the development of an effective and empowered judicial system. This is an issue of utmost importance and although we appreciate the law minister's recognition of the need for new judges to deal with the millions of pending cases, the case of police verification must be prioritised so that justice seekers don't have to suffer lengthy legal battles anymore.

Women in Politics

Create conducive conditions

IT'S disappointing that despite having two women at the country's helm for decades, the presence of women in our wider political landscape is barely noticeable. A recent report by the Election Commission shows that the political parties are nowhere near fulfilling their obligation to ensure that women hold at least one-third posts in all tiers by 2020.

Of the major political parties, the ruling party Awami League performed better than did its nationalist counterpart. The worst performance was that of the religion-based parties. They seem to be in consensus that the law should be relaxed. Not surprisingly, some of them are also promising us only one percent women in their committees. Left-leaning political parties are also indifferent in this regard. Of all the major parties, only BNP sounds most optimistic about reaching the target, despite the fact that it is lagging behind with no women in its standing committee except for its chairperson.

While all parties noted that women themselves don't want to join politics citing the prevalent conservative mindset in society, they should not forget that it's for them to create a healthy political environment where all people irrespective of their gender, religion, colour and race would feel welcome. Most importantly, women should not be tokens in our politics, and they shouldn't be included in the party for the sake of meeting the obligation; it should be done as part of society's efforts to achieve gender parity in the country. Instead of picking women to fulfil quotas, letting them develop spontaneously from the grassroots to the top levels will help our democracy become better represented.

SHIFTING IMAGES



MILIA ALI

LAST week a close friend left for an extended trip abroad. I planned to visit her the day before her departure to say good-bye, but inclement weather kept me from driving to her home. Hence, I called and left a long, emotional voice message apologising—"I'll miss you... may God be with you, etc." Her response? A text with

a single emoji, that of a crying face. Frankly, I was both disappointed and puzzled at this rather callous reply to my warm message. Could she not have called back or at least sent a few words? Is it really that difficult to do?

However, I was not as upset with my friend as with emojis: They allow us to express our sentiments in an

voice. Online texts or emoticons have replaced meaningful written or verbal interactions. How this is impacting the emotional dynamics of relationships needs to be studied and analysed.

For now, I was more concerned about the emoji response from someone of my generation who grew up in an era where letter writing or conversational exchange was the common form of communication. I, too, use an emoji occasionally, but only when it complements a written message or in the course of casual interactions. I simply cannot imagine bidding farewell to a close friend with a sticker of a sobbing face. For me, these symbols are merely pictorial depictions (the term "emoji" originates from the Japanese word for picture) of a feeling or a scenery—an abridgment without specificity, devoid of the personal touch. My friend's "crying face sticker" may have been economical in terms of time and effort,

While emojis have gained popularity today, the concept is not entirely new. In the past, people have toyed with the idea of creating a universal pictorial language: Francis Bacon and John Wilkins dreamed about developing a visual language that could take us back to the pre-Babel era. As a matter of fact, the earliest examples of written communication in human civilisation are the Egyptian pictographic hieroglyphs and cuneiform inscriptions from Mesopotamia about 5,000 years ago. It was only around 1,200 BC that the Phoenicians developed the first alphabets.

With time words were formed from alphabets and man learned to express the most complex emotions and feelings by using language. It opened up channels of communication between human beings who began to articulate their wants, desires, views and opinions through a common medium: language. Despite all the hype around emoji, one wonders if it can convey the subtleties that a word can. For words are not just alphabets strung together, they express deep passions, excitement, torment, ecstasy and despair in multiple forms and ways!

Perhaps the most troubling thing is that the emoji culture is having a transformational effect on not just language but also on our emotions. For it short-circuits all those emotional channels that are kindled when we search for a word to express our inner feelings. Let's also admit that there is a gulf of difference between a picture symbol and words that express our thoughts. The writings of poets, authors and historians embody the collective wisdom and emotions of a long span of human civilisation and continue to inspire and influence us in so many ways. One cannot even begin to imagine a world of communication and emotional expression without the beautiful words of Shakespeare, Tagore and Eliot.

As I looked at the emoji sticker my friend sent me, I was reminded of what Mark Twain wrote: "The difference between the almost right word and the right word is really a large matter—it's the difference between the lightning bug and the lightning." My friend's emoji message was "almost right," but it left so much unsaid. It did not, for instance, capture the trust, respect and love that we share. Instead, it seemed to say: "I didn't have time to write or call, so I sent an emoji." I wonder... was there also a message of one-upmanship: "See how cool I am, even at my age?" Cool, yes—but lacking in the warmth of soul and spirit!

Milia Ali is a renowned Rabindra Sangeet exponent and a former employee of the World Bank.



ambiguous way without actually saying anything substantive. Unfortunately, this new medium of communication is gradually becoming a substitute for articulating our feelings and opinions in words.

When I see the younger generation, particularly the Millennials, embracing the emoji culture, I don't particularly like it but I accept it. Because today's youth, mostly, dwell in the virtual world where relationships are bereft of physical contact or the sound of a warm

but was definitely not a substitute for a warm voice, or a couple of emotive words.

I don't mean to provoke a generational debate on the appropriate use of emoji symbols. And it is highly likely that emoji enthusiasts will disagree with me, for some of them even believe that the system has literary potential: apparently the classic novel *Moby Dick* has been translated into emoji and sold online, for USD 200 in hardcover. Even the Library of Congress carries a copy.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR
 letters@thedailystar.net

India's silence on Rohingya persecution
 India's position on the Rohingya crisis has shocked us. It has exposed its true face by siding with the Myanmar government and indirectly supporting the latter's cleansing of the ethnic minority.

It is sad that the Indian government has decided to remain silent while the Myanmar army with support from Aung San Suu Kyi's ruling party continues to commit atrocities with impunity.

The Indian government's policy about the Rohingya crisis should open our eyes to the truth that India has left us in our hour of need. Its approach to this matter raises some serious questions about its sincerity in supporting Bangladeshi interests as a so-called friendly neighbour.

AKM Ehsanul Haque, Dhaka

Buyer's credit facility is a commendable step
 Buyer's credit facility has been gaining popularity in the country. Under this credit facility, importers can take a short-term loan in foreign currencies to make payment to the exporters. Bangladesh Bank extended this facility for importers to facilitate the import of capital machinery and raw materials.

One of the good sides of this credit facility is its low interest rate. If the importers take a loan in the local currency, a staggering interest rate of 8-9 percent has to be paid. But in the case of loans in foreign currency, the interest rate is around 3.50-4.50 percent. However, due to the increased demand for loans in foreign currency, the demand for local currency is on the wane. There are also some misuses of this credit facility, which need to be addressed.

Mohammad Zonaed Emran, By email