

UNSC meeting on Myanmar

Mere "call" is not enough

WE are happy that the Security Council has at last come out on Myanmar and the Rohingyas, and we are equally glad to see that everyone of its members is on board the Council's call on Myanmar to stop violence immediately, particularly China who has so far resisted all efforts by the international body to pass a resolution or censure the country for its pervasive and consistent persecution of a minority community.

It is for the first time that the Council had agreed on any kind of statement on Myanmar in nine years. Obviously, absence of any kind of international response to hold Myanmar accountable for its appalling treatment of Rohingyas for so long has given the rulers in Naypyidaw the feeling of impunity.

The call of the world body comes in tandem with the demand of the 27 internationally eminent personalities including 12 Nobel Laureates to take appropriate action to end violence in Rakhine State. However, we feel that the reaction of the UN cannot be restricted to merely making a call on the Myanmar rulers. A definitive time-bound action is called for and which the UN must ensure the Myanmar government implements. And the time-bound action should ensure fulfillment of three things.

Firstly, persecution of the Rohingyas must cease forthwith. Secondly, the Rohingyas must be taken back immediately and for which necessary conditions must be created for them to return. The government of Myanmar must guarantee complete safety and security of these people once they return. And thirdly, but equally importantly, action must be initiated without any procrastination to implement the recommendations of the Annan Commission Report.

Without these caveats, the call will remain only an open-ended, meaningless proposition.

Chain of accidents claiming lives

It cannot be tolerated anymore

A passengers' welfare association on Wednesday disclosed its findings on accidents during the last Eid holiday, saying at least 322 people were killed and 759 others injured in accidents on roads, waterways and railways in just 13 days starting August 28.

Vacationers have been dying year after year in accidents during Eid holidays because of a very clearly identified set of problems, but we've evidently failed to address them and break the chain of repeat accidents.

These were avoidable deaths and the passengers, who had little control over the circumstances that led to these often-fatal accidents, were primarily victims of institutional failures, the responsibility for which should be taken by the public transport authorities, transport owners and drivers. Add to the casualty list the 311 people killed in accidents during Eid-ul-Fitr and the 265 people killed during last year's Eid-ul-Azha, and you've a pretty clear idea of the extent of our failure to get on top of the situation.

Some of the immediate reasons responsible for the accidents include bad condition of roads, over-speeding and overtaking, lack of roadworthiness tests resulting in unfit transports carrying passengers, and untrained drivers. As things stand now, preventing the casualties and bringing those responsible for them to book should be a top priority. And not just during Eid holidays.

We think the suggestion that there should be a separate cell to deal with the accidents is a good one but whether it will work, without the supporting reforms, is anyone's guess. It's important that all measures to tackle accidents involve close collaboration among the different transportation-related ministries and departments to maximise their impact.

Putting people at the heart of development

SHAMSUL BARI and RUHI NAZ

LATER this month, the world will mark the International Day for Universal Access to Information, hitherto known as International Right to Know Day. Like many an international day, its relevance to our lives seems murky. Yet there is no development without people. The Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 2030, adopted by the UN General Assembly in 2015, underlined the key role of people for their implementation. Among the SDGs is Goal 16, aiming for "accountable and inclusive institutions."

Translating this concept into practice is a challenging task. We have seen it in relation to the implementation of the Right to Information (RTI) Act in our country, as in many others.

The challenge is rooted in people's perception that activities relating to development and governance are the sole prerogative of the state. In the authoritarian tradition inherited from colonial history, state activities are hidden from the people. This created a rigid and secretive attitude in our public officials which is inimical to people's participation in state affairs. The key to success, therefore, lies in changing the mindset both of people and state authorities.

We have emphasised in some earlier columns that without a larger involvement of our citizens in making use of the RTI Act 2009, the objectives of the law cannot be truly advanced. We have similarly underlined the need for our government to invest greater attention on Goal 16, with its targets and indicators, which incorporates the same objective in the SDGs.

Bangladesh has made a good start in setting the SDG ball rolling. The government proclaims its commitment to the goals in all national and international fora. It quickly set up an inter-ministerial committee, under supervision of the Prime Minister's Office, to monitor implementation and report on progress.

Bangladesh became one of the first few countries to participate in the voluntary progress review which took place at the UN last July. In her foreword to the report submitted in this regard, the prime minister reiterated: "We have earned international acclamations for our tremendous success in MDG implementation ... We are committed to redoubling our efforts to achieve SDG targets."

The government has incorporated the key provisions of the SDGs in the 7th Five Year Plan for 2016-2020. It has also drawn up a handbook mapping the responsibilities of different ministries/authorities for implementation of the SDGs and their targets.

Let us be clear: Poverty, hunger, gender discrimination, education, health, water and sanitation, clean energy, decent work and economic growth, climate change and so on, are normal subjects of a government's development agenda. Goal 16, however, is unfamiliar territory, particularly as it pertains to RTI and guarantees public access to information (indicator 16.10.2). It is not surprising, therefore, that the handbook provides little

(FOI) Acts are in force, is collaborating under the banner of "FOIANet" to develop a common approach to measure progress of indicator 16.10.2 in every country. This network has suggested that at the initial stage, the national groups should focus their efforts on: (i) how much a state is proactively disclosing information to its citizens; (ii) what institutional measures are in place to facilitate implementation of RTI/FOI laws; and (iii) to what extent information requests are made by citizens and responded to by the authorities. The latter action would be based on submitting test requests to a few public authorities in each country. Additional elements would be gradually introduced, as experience is gained and

promotion of SDGs and RTI in the country.

Help increase the number of RTI requests submitted to public authorities annually. Set a target to increase the yearly figure (say, by 20 percent). Last year's Annual Report of the Information Commission recorded only 6,369 requests.

Develop a strategy to attract the middle class to engage in the RTI process. This section of the society, with enormous influence, has largely stayed away either for lack of awareness or trust in its efficacy. If well-known public figures, including members of the Platform, submit RTI requests, it may encourage others.

Lobby with the government to designate a nodal agency to promote the RTI Act. Presently, the Ministry of Information plays a limited role, with the Cabinet Division becoming increasingly engaged. There should be more clarity on the subject.

Devise a mechanism to monitor the work of the Information Commission, provide it with encouragement and moral support to interpret and apply the RTI Act more objectively, and impose sanctions on public officials who deliberately disregard the law. Set a target for annual percentage increase in the number of sanctions imposed. Around 15 penalties have been awarded since the beginning.

Provide civil society input to the selection process of a neutral and objective Information Commission. The selection of the new Chief Information Commissioner due in few months provides an opportunity.

Take heart from the fact that the marginalised communities of the country, who were introduced to RTI by NGOs, have both benefited from and contributed to establishing a transparent delivery system of the government's safety net programmes through their persistent use of the law. There can be no better example of RTI helping the realisation of SDG objectives of ending poverty, hunger and discrimination.

Finally, we hope that the Inter-Ministerial SDG Monitoring and Implementation Committee will take note of these points and support civil society efforts towards forging closer collaboration between citizens and public authorities. This will advance our SDG objectives and make Bangladesh a role model again.

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information yet on how the government intends to go about it.

Among other things, Goal 16 seeks to "ensure public access to information and protect fundamental freedoms" as, without them, development is incomplete. These objectives are unquantifiable, imperceptible and non-tangible; hence difficult to monitor and assess. National and international efforts have, therefore, been set in motion to develop appropriate tracking methods.

This is where civil society's role comes in. In Bangladesh, a "Citizen's Platform for SDGs" has been set up by a group of individuals "to contribute to the delivery of the SDGs and enhance accountability in the process." Their efforts should include specific attention to the more difficult targets of Goal 16, particularly its indicator 16.10.2, which relates to RTI. NGOs and individuals promoting RTI implementation could give them a helping hand.

At the international level, a network of individuals and activists, from countries where RTI/Freedom of Information

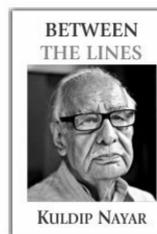
progress made towards 2030.

The exercise has already commenced in many countries. It is expected that the information so compiled by national groups will be collated by UNESCO and reported to the General Assembly annually. A ranking of state performance is likely to emerge. Some national groups expect to release preliminary reports later this month. Bangladesh's should follow soon.

We hope that Citizen's Platform members will soon recognise that success of the SDGs would require more than tracking progress of government undertakings. It would call for concrete measures by citizens, individually and collectively, to promote transparent, accountable and citizen-friendly governance. An effective strategy here would be to generate a sizable number of RTI requests by citizens to public authorities, thereby initiating greater interaction between the two and contributing to changing the colonial mindset of both.

We propose the following "to-do list" for civil society groups engaged in the

Dynastic politics in India



KULDIP NAYAR

CONGRESS Vice President Rahul Gandhi is wrong when he says that all of India runs on dynasties. Ruling means wielding power at the centre. Only Jawaharlal Nehru's

family has had the opportunity to do so. Nehru ruled for 17 years, his daughter Indira Gandhi for 18 years and Rajiv Gandhi, son of Indira Gandhi, for 5 years. Thus, the dynasty has been in power at the centre for 40 years, more than half of the period since independence in August 1947.

Nehru saw to it that his daughter would rule, if not soon after his rule, in due course. When I was working as Information Officer to Lal Bahadur Shastri the then Home Minister, I would tell him to get ready, particularly, when Nehru had a stroke. Shastri told me that *unke man me to unki saputri he* (His daughter is on his mind), adding that it would not be easy. He would not challenge Pandit Ji and go back to Allahabad. But Morarji Desai would not accept Indira Gandhi.

This happened when Nehru died. K Kamaraj, the then Congress President, was a staunch follower of Nehru. He wanted, who he had discovered, to be the key to open many locks. Sanjiva Reddy from the South, Atulya Ghosh from Calcutta and SK Patil from Bombay were stalwarts in their own right but were willing to accept Shastri because he did not push himself to give them the feeling as if they were not equal.

I was working as a political correspondent of *Indian Express*. I wrote at that time that: "In the hush of a summer night in 1963, five men groped their way to a sequestered bungalow overlooking an expansive valley in the temple town of Tirupati down South. One was ungainly and heavy, another portly, the third brisk and breezy, the fourth, slight in stature, and the fifth looked like a muscular wrestler. All of them came from different directions to defy detection, and they succeeded in doing so. There was hardly anybody in the streets. Most people had gone to bed to get sufficient sleep before responding to the pre-dawn call of the temple. After Shastri's death, power reverted back to the dynasty."

Rahul Gandhi is, however, correct

when he criticises Prime Minister Narendra Modi for creating an "atmosphere of intolerance". As many as 17 crore Muslims in the country do not figure anywhere. They have also withdrawn from the public gaze. It is as if they have accepted themselves the status of being number-2 citizen in their own country.

On the other hand, the Hindus on the whole have not forgiven them for partition. Even today, when there is tension between India and Pakistan, the Muslims are seen with mistrust. Even

people when the living condition is impossible.

With Prime Minister Narendra Modi's rule, the gulf between the two is increasing. RSS men are seeing to it that no Muslim holds a key position in the public sector. I recall that a Muslim engineer who dropped me at the Srinagar airport complained that he had gone to Bangalore in search of a job but was rejected straightaway when his credentials were known.

Quaid-e-Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah, founder of Pakistan, envisaged that the

inherent. In fact, it is surprising that Nehru's name is sought to be effaced. Liberal BJP leader Atal Behari Vajpayee was an ardent follower of Nehru.

Once when Vajpayee was Prime Minister, I, then Member of Parliament, met him in his room; he very proudly told me that he occupied the same chair which once Nehru did. But today the BJP is even trying to change the name of Nehru from the Nehru Memorial Centre. Some scholars are trying to stop the effort but the matter has been left to the Prime Minister's Office (PMO).



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otherwise they are left to fend for themselves in the localities which are slums. Employment-wise, they can be counted on fingers. Very few make it in competitive exams. The Sachar's committee has brought out how their plight is worse than that of the dalits.

The Hindus have to retrieve them from the pool of poverty. But they are left to wallow in the abyss of helplessness. Partition on the basis of religion has drawn a line whereby the Muslims in India have suffered the most and still they are for the religious prejudice. Even mixed colonies are disappearing and Muslims feel safe among their own community

two countries, one with Hindu majority and the other with Muslim majority, would conduct affairs in such a way that religion does not come in the way of state affairs.

It is a pity that the Congress has become irrelevant. Otherwise, it could have provided secular platform to the country. Rahul Gandhi would increasingly realise that his party would have to work at the grassroots once again and try to change the temperament of the people. India fought for a democratic and secular country. Both Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru reminded the people of their heritage which had both Hindus and Muslims as it's

They should remember that Nehru was one of the stalwarts who sacrificed everything to oust the British. He went to jail many a time but this did not in any way lessen his determination for the country's independence. Rahul Gandhi, his great grandson, should tear a leaf from his book and put up the fight, not for the perpetuation of the dynasty but for the protection of the country's ethos: democracy and secularism. People of India would again make Congress relevant. The important thing is the heritage: United, Secular and Democratic.

Kuldip Nayar is an eminent Indian columnist.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Verification system needed to curb forgery

Recently, a national daily published a report that forged educational certificates were available in the open market. Certificates of the reputed educational institutions including Dhaka University, BUET, and medical colleges can be easily bought at varying prices. The buyers use these forged documents to apply for admission in universities, medical colleges and for jobs and other purposes. Law enforcement forces have reportedly conducted raids against the culprits and arrested some offenders. However, they later get out on bail and resume their illegal business, the report says.

There should be a process for employers and institutions to verify the originality of such educational certificates. For example, many private universities offer their own online database using which anyone can verify certificates issued by them. Such a database for all educational boards and institutions could curb this illicit practice.

Zubair Khaled Huq, Dhaka

Why Soumya Sarkar?

In spite of disastrous performances in Dhaka and Chittagong test series against Australia, Soumya Sarkar has again been included in the national squad. It was disappointing to see his name in the squad. I fail to understand what the selectors see in him. We saw with astonishment that Mominul Haque was dropped for the first test against Australia despite having a wonderful test record. So, what made our selectors pick Soumya again despite his repeatedly bad performance?

Nuruzzaman Khan, By email