

# What I saw in Ukhia



SHAHEEN ANAM

**A**CCORDING to the latest UN report, nearly 400,000 Rohingya refugees have crossed over to Bangladesh. The Rohingyas, people living in the Rakhine State of Myanmar, are fleeing their homes they have lived in for 200 hundred years. Subject to discrimination for years and not recognised as citizens, the Rohingyas, the majority of whom are Muslims, have for so long been able to eke out a living on agriculture and small farming. With little excitement from the state to guarantee them equal rights, all they want is to till their own land, harvest their crops and live in peace and security.

Alas! That is not to be! Blamed for alleged terrorist attacks on police outposts and a military base last month, in which at least 100 members of the security forces were killed, the innocent civilian population is being subjected to the worst kind of persecution imaginable—termed by the UN as ethnic cleansing and by some public figures as genocide.

Myanmar's army under instructions from the very top has come after them with machine guns, firing from helicopters, and resorted to using mines and machetes. Brutally murdering, raping and burning down their homes, sparing no one—women, the elderly and children—prompting lakhs to flee the homes of their ancestors into Bangladesh. They have arrived in a country with no guarantee of food, water, sanitation or a decent life because saving their lives has been their only thought. Most have come empty-handed, without assets or money, with just the clothes on their backs. On the way, they have lost loved ones, witnessed atrocities such as looting, arson, women raped in the presence of family, and children murdered. Most recount harrowing stories of unimaginable brutality.

Going into Ukhia amidst its scenic beauty, what I witnessed reminded me of the many movies we have seen of mass exodus of people fleeing persecution, the Nazi extermination of Jews and the most recent plight of the Syrian refugees. Streams of people walking or sitting by the roadside with expressions of utter despair, tragedy and loss written on their faces. Women recounted how their children were killed while running, some talked of husbands or brothers taken away never to return; some just kept quiet, too numb, hungry and traumatised to speak. Who can forget the

horrific photo of the half burnt body of a child barely alive in *The Daily Star* a few days ago?

The camp at Balukhah where thousands have taken refuge is nothing more than filthy, muddy pieces of land where thousands have taken shelter in makeshift tents comprised of thin plastic sheets slung over two bamboo poles. I saw several women holding babies, their eyes vacant, too weak to even ask for help. Children crying in hunger, burning with fever sitting on the muddy ground or lying listless in their mother's arms. As the Coast Trust van arrived with packets of cooked food, thousands ran towards it, extending their hands; those strong enough got them, the weak ones looked on helplessly. Some

paid attention to aid agencies. What about the thousands walking aimlessly in search of help on two sides of the highway? The Marine Drive, as it is called, is stunningly beautiful with hills on one side and the sea on the other and can be compared to any beach in the south of France or the coast of Italy. The drive takes one to the Naif river, one of the routes the Rohingyas are taking to cross over. Here, one can see the border with Myanmar, lush, green, yet so unwelcoming to these people. Thick clouds of smoke can be seen, a grim reminder of the horror on the other side. It is then that I realised why they are coming to Bangladesh, why they have no other alternative but to flee. The smoke is from their burnt homes, from

it would be night; she was standing alone no food, shelter or place to sleep. Where would she go? How would she spend the night?

The story is the same everywhere I went. Total desolation, helplessness with nothing to look forward to. Many compare their plight to ours in 1971 when 10 million of us became refugees in the neighbouring country. But it is not the same because then we had hope of returning someday to a free country. The Rohingyas have no country, no citizenship, nothing to go back to except death and persecution.

This is a huge humanitarian crisis for Bangladesh, one we have never faced

## US position on Rohingyas

*Move beyond articulation to action*

**W**E are glad that the US has moved beyond voicing its concern on the persecution of the Rohingyas by Myanmar to something relatively more substantive. It has realised that the situation, which has been described as a 'typical textbook ethnic cleansing' by the UN, merits dispatch of a senior-level state department official to that country.

Given the impunity with which the military junta in Myanmar has been perpetrating violence on this helpless ethnic minority, the international community must bring to bear the severest pressure on Myanmar to stop it forthwith. And in this regard, we feel that the US has an important role to play. It cannot escape notice that there is a direct correlation between the spike in the intensity of state-perpetrated violence on the Rohingyas and the lifting of US sanctions on Myanmar. It is thus our expectation that the US would use its multi-dimensional leverage on Myanmar to stop the violence.

The shift, albeit very minor, is an acknowledgement by the US administration of the ground reality in the State of Rakhine, and, according to a state department spokesperson, the message sent by the move is 'a tough one'. However, we deem it not quite the tough message that ought to be sent to the virtual rulers of Myanmar, the military.

What is equally important is to compel the Myanmar authorities to remove the fundamental cause of the unrest in Rakhine: that only can ensure a permanent peace in that region. The government must recant its position on the status of the Rohingyas, who must be accorded the full citizenship rights. Myanmar's position on this issue is a denial of history and unless that is rectified there cannot be permanent peace in that region.

## Using poison to fish

*Another threat to the Sundarbans*

**I**T'S a matter of grave concern that some fishermen are using lethal poison to catch fish, lobsters and other crustacean stocks in Sundarbans canals. The poison is so deadly that a few drops of it are sufficient to kill a large quantity of fish.

The authorities have imposed varied restrictions to protect the forest, but poaching continues unabated. It is evident by the fact that in spite of a complete fishing restriction in 18 canals across the forest the culprits are not only fishing but also using poison to do so. As toxic water flows into the large rivers, it is not only the fish species that are being destroyed, but the entire ecosystem is also under threat.

Such dangerous practices of poaching pose a great risk to the flora and fauna of the forest and may have long-term negative effects on its ecology. As at time when the Sundarbans faces an increasing number of threats, including the construction of environmentally-threatening industrial infrastructure and the operation of vessels carrying sensitive materials, this abominable activity indeed adds to the risk.

We urge the authorities to put the Sundarbans under constant watch and increase surveillance activities so that no such manmade harm can be done to the forest and the restrictions in place can be fully implemented. We also urge the government to introduce strict punitive measures against those who so venomously violate the environmental sanctity of our precious Sundarbans.

## PROJECT SYNDICATE

# An American political tragedy



HELMUT K. ANHEIER

**U**S President Donald Trump's nearly eight months in office have been characterised by a series of disturbing political developments. But Trump is not entirely to blame. His presidency is still the latest act in a long-running political tragedy.

From a foreign-policy perspective, the problem began in the 1990s, when the United States squandered the post-Cold War peace dividend. With regard to domestic policy, the failures began even earlier: From Reaganomics in the 1980s to Obamacare in the 2010s, major policies have often overpromised and underperformed, while failing to address underlying problems.

Of course, US politicians are rarely short on lofty rhetoric—from Ronald Reagan's "Morning in America" campaign to Barack Obama's "Yes, we can" slogan to Donald Trump's "America First" refrain. And, beginning

The reason is simple: Americans' longstanding suspicion of "big government" morphed into a kind of political self-hatred, with policymakers and citizens alike led to believe that government is at its best when it does not govern. And, as the US government has retreated from society, the US has retreated from the rest of the world.

These trends have culminated in Trump, whose most popular policies focus on destruction, rather than creation. Deregulation will supposedly sail the "deep state" chimerica, while enabling the US to achieve energy independence. A US-centred foreign policy focused not on reshaping America's role in the world, but on reducing it. From the Affordable Care Act (Obamacare) to the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) policy, Trump likes to reverse past policies, without devising anything to replace them.

American conservatives have so far failed to root Trump's intentions accurately. In July, Robert W Merry wrote that Trump had "yet to score anything approaching a serious legislative victory—or to demonstrate any

the result of Trump's approach is that America's existing problems are worsening and huge opportunities are being missed. But what can stop demons already unleashed? And, even if they are stopped, can the damage they have already wrought be reversed?

There was some backlash against Trump when he failed to condemn clearly the white supremacist demonstrators in Charlottesville, Virginia, whose "Unite the Right" rally in August ended with the murder of a counter-protester. But it has done little to weaken Trump's destructive momentum: just a few weeks later, Trump announced his plan to end DACA, a policy that protected from deportation some 800,000 young immigrants who were brought to the US as children.

Beyond lamenting the astonishing depths to which a great political culture and system can fall, what can be done? One obvious option, which Democrats largely seem to be taking, is to reject Trump and everything his administration stands for. But that risks ensuring the persistence of the dysfunctional dynamics that brought the US to this point.

Another option, however unappealing at first glance, is to accept the Trump administration. The result of such a choice may well be the worsening of domestic problems and the weakening of checks and balances. But it is also possible that checks and balances will hold until the next election, enabling America's existing political parties to rebuild and new parties to emerge. The result, one hopes, would be a much-needed political realignment—indeed, a political realignment.

To be sure, such a shift would take time—time that, depending on how long Trump remains in office, parties may not have. Republicans may be politically handicapped for years, as they are forced to reckon with the fascist bargain they struck for the sake of political power. Democrats, for their part, face a broad leadership vacuum and a lack of political vision, owing to their now-internationalised fear of being labelled "big spenders." And, as it stands, no third parties or candidates provide reasonable alternatives.

Nonetheless, there are encouraging signs that some Republicans and Democrats are thinking outside the party box. More must follow suit, recognising that realigning the existing party system may be the only way to break the stalemate of US politics and, potentially, reverse decades of dangerous democratic under-performance.

The next act in America's political drama, following the 2018 congressional midterm election, could be marked by a kind of reckoning, with the 2020 presidential campaign accompanied by civic breakdown and the escalation of violent confrontation that has lingered beneath the surface for years. To rewrite the plot before that scenario plays out requires reshuffling and revitalising US politics, so that, in the words of the poet Seamus Heaney, "hope and history rhyme" once again in America.



Civil rights activists rally in support of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) programme in Manhattan, New York City, September 5, 2017.

with John F Kennedy, presidents have likened the US to a "city upon a hill"—an example to the rest of the world.

Yet it is hard to remember the last time the US produced a policy that could serve as a model for others to emulate. The country has not had a pro-active, forward-looking government since the 1960s. Since the 1990s, it has not invested sufficiently in human capital to meet the fast-changing economy's shifting skill requirements; undertaken no effective education, environmental, or labour-market reforms; and launched no new urban initiatives or future-proofing infrastructure policies. The list goes on.

Serious political momentum." But the truth is that Trump's agenda has plenty of momentum; it is just focused on demolishing Obama's legacy.

As the international law expert Richard Falk has argued, it is Trump's "demagoguery" that enables this approach, as it "blinds adherents to their true material self-interests and misidentifies their real social enemies." Trump's rejection of "reasoned discourse, including commitments to truth and evidence," has been accompanied by an unlimited "capacity to manipulate mass opinion and play on such repressed emotions as racism and class envy."

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### Suu Kyi must halt massacre of Rohingyas

The Nobel Committee should invite Aung San Suu Kyi, Nobel Peace Prize laureate and Myanmar's de facto head of government, to come to Oslo to explain what she is doing to stop the massacre of her country's Rohingya Muslim minority.

As a recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize, Suu Kyi has a moral obligation to tell the Committee how she will restore peace in her own country. She has lost all credibility by not standing up against persecution of the Muslim minority by the Buddhist majority.

Mahatma Gandhi stopped Hindu-Muslim bloodletting on the eve of India's independence by resorting to the hunger strike. If she has the courage of conviction, she should do something similar.

Mahmood Elahi, Canada

### Heart-touching article by Milia Ali

Milia Ali's article titled "It's all in a word" published in *The Daily Star* was outstanding. She has truly upheld the social reality by saying that "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."

Moreover, I also appreciate the criticism of the emoji culture that has taken the form of an epidemic among the youth. The article has also made many other valid points that I completely agree with.

ASM Wasequzaman, By email

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