

Parliament's resolution on 16th amendment verdict

Challenges the spirit of democracy

IT is unfortunate that the parliament has passed a resolution calling for legal steps to nullify the Supreme Court's verdict that scraps the 16th amendment from the Constitution. The amendment in question, which gives power to remove a SC judge on grounds of misconduct and incapacity, has been seen by the High Court and Supreme Court as going against the grain of the Constitution that provides distinct powers to its three organs—namely the executive, legislative and judicial branches.

That is the fundamental structure of a democratic constitution—the distribution of power between these three organs of the state and the check and balance that exists between them. This division gives the highest law making authority to the legislative, the highest implementing power to the executive and the highest adjudicating power to the judiciary. All of these branches operate in harmony and by respecting each other's domains under the rubric of the Constitution. We must remember that it is the people who make the Constitution that then distributes this power to the three branches in a way that no single organ has monopoly of power. Thus the crucial role of the judiciary is to act as the guardian of the Constitution which is adopted by the people. The passing of the resolution in parliament challenges this delicate balance of power.

In the scheme of things the parliament oversees the functioning of the executive and tries to formulate laws to ensure good governance. The judiciary, as the ultimate guardian of the Constitution keeps watch over the executive and legislative to make sure laws do not, in any way, violate the constitution. By negating the distribution of power ensured by the constitution, the passing of this resolution will have far reaching consequences. However, the review petition is the right way to go about this as the legal structure, as envisioned by the Constitution, should not be violated.

25 million suffer from malnutrition

Make food more affordable

A report titled "World Food Security and Nutrition Situation-2017" brought out jointly by a number of UN organisations states that some 815 million people in the world go to sleep hungry. Although precise numbers are not available for Bangladesh, estimates point that some 25 million people, mostly women and children, suffer from malnutrition. Although the overall food nutrition in the country has improved, natural calamities like floods, landslides and are having a detrimental effect on the nutrition situation.

Bangladesh has made strides in reducing stunted growth among children (aged under 5) to 36.1 percent from 45 percent over the period 2005 to 2016. However the decrease in number of people suffering malnutrition remains the lowest in South Asian countries, with India reducing to 14.5 percent and Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Maldives and Myanmar recording noteworthy progress. The country has largely achieved food self-sufficiency and peoples' incomes have grown steadily over the years. So, why have we not been able to effectively reduce malnutrition? Simply greater intake of food does not automatically translate into the right types of foods being consumed.

When it comes to ensuring food security, policy interventions must take into account measures that will increase food price stability, and recovery of local agricultural and food markets. Such steps will greatly aid vulnerable groups (such as women and children) and households to mitigate the impact of natural calamities like devastating floods we have been witnessing the last few years. There have to be concerted efforts by the health and food ministries to ensure that nutritious food is accessible to those who need it the most.

ROHINGYA PERSECUTION IN MYANMAR

International community has two things on their hands



ALI RIAZ

THE unanimously adopted press statement of the UN Security Council (UNSC) condemning violence in Myanmar at the closed-door meeting on Wednesday is encouraging

but unlikely to deter the Myanmar government from continuing its heinous acts of ethnic cleansing. The UNSC statement is more of a symbolic gesture rather than a substantive action. It won't even be included in the official records, unless there is a Presidential Statement of the UNSC, which some members have demanded.

The language of the statement, by itself, is remarkably mellow: "They (member states) expressed concern about excessive violence during the security operations and called for immediate steps to end the violence in Rakhine, de-escalate the situation, re-establish law and order, ensure the protection of civilians, restore normal socio-economic conditions, and resolve the refugee problem."

That China and Russia concurred with the statement, obviously, is not a small feat. However, Egypt proposed to include the right to return of the Rohingya refugees to Myanmar, which was blocked by China. As we are aware, China and Russia vetoed a resolution on Myanmar in January 2007 and blocked a short statement in March 2017. The 2007 double veto was a rare occurrence. Prior to this, China and then Soviet Union cast vetoes together only once, in 1972, against a resolution on the Middle East. Therefore, Wednesday's statement is not a plan of action of the UNSC. It has drawn more attention because China and Russia acted in an unanticipated manner.

The justification for the 2007 veto warrants our attention, as it has an implication for 2017. In 2007, China and Russia argued that human rights violations were not the purview of the Security Council unless they endangered regional or international peace and security, which Myanmar did not (*Reuters*, January 12, 2007). In opposition to the resolution, these two countries were joined by South Africa, while Indonesia, Qatar, and the Republic of Congo abstained, and nine countries including the US supported the resolution.

In March 2017, this duo blocked a short statement of the Security Council. The meeting was convened at the request of Britain. The short draft press statement, which was seen by *Reuters* at that time said, "[The members] noted with concern renewed fighting in some parts of the country and stressed the importance of humanitarian access to all affected areas." The Council had a closed-door meeting on Myanmar in November 2016. Following the meeting "as Western nations became increasingly

concerned about how Aung San Suu Kyi's government was dealing with violence in the divided northwest, Suu Kyi told diplomats in the capital, Naypyitaw, that her country was being treated unfairly" (*Reuters*, March 17, 2017).

These episodes, and the recent unequivocal statement of China that it stands with Myanmar, led many to believe that the Wednesday meeting would be a repeat of January 2007 or March 2017. The cycle has been broken, at least for now.

What made this possible? A definite answer will remain unknown until the envoys of these two countries speak on the issue or perhaps write memoirs. None are currently forthcoming. Sources allude to three events in the wake of this meeting: First, the rare request of the UN Secretary General António Guterres to the UNSC. History tells us that last time such a request from the Secretary General went to the Council was 28 years ago. The Secretary General reminded

number of refugees. The number swelled to hundreds and thousands in a short span of time. It surpassed the previous two episodes, of 1978 and of 1991, within a few days. It was too obvious to avoid these hapless faces as these countries sat around a table in New York.

Whatever may have caused it, the UNSC did come up with the statement.

Notwithstanding the irresolute nature of the statement, that the statement is unanimous and that this is the first statement on Rohingya in nine years are both important. The most significant is that it has created an opportunity for further diplomatic efforts in the coming days, particularly during the General Assembly session. The British UN Ambassador informed that there could be open sessions because some countries have indicated their desire for it. Two meetings are already expected soon—at the request of Turkey, and Britain. Additional meetings with the Bangladesh Foreign Minister on the sidelines during

ready to act, the European Parliament has laid out some measures it may consider. The Parliament adopted a resolution on Thursday which is clear and unequivocal in condemning the violence. The most important element is that it mentioned that it is ready to take "targeted punitive sanctions against individuals and entities." This shouldn't be taken lightly, because the EU has been following the events in Myanmar for years and has been vocal on human rights situation. It was the European Union which drafted the resolution in the UN Human Rights Council in April this year for appointing a three-member fact-finding mission to Myanmar. (In addition to Myanmar, four countries—China, India, the Philippines and Venezuela—disassociated themselves from the resolution. Although Japan disassociated itself, it welcomed the resolution).

As hundreds and thousands of



Displaced Rohingya refugees from Rakhine state in Myanmar carry their belongings as they flee violence.

PHOTO: AFP

everybody in the press briefing that, "The last official letter sent by the secretary general to the Security Council on an issue was in 1989 about Lebanon." This evidently put somewhat a not-so-tacit pressure on the Council members to do something and the "duo" not to be viewed as "obstructionists".

The second event was the letter from the 27 eminent personalities including 12 Nobel Laureates which urged the Council to act. "We call on UNSC to intervene immediately by using all available means. We request you to take immediate action for cessation of indiscriminate military attack on innocent civilians that is forcing them to leave their home and flee their country to turn into stateless people," the letter said. Reportedly organised by Bangladeshi Peace Nobel Laureate Professor Muhammed Yunus, the timing of the letter was too close to the meeting to ignore.

The third potential factor was the

General Assembly session are being planned too.

This is where the 1972 justification of China and Russia becomes handy. Does the Rohingya crisis "endanger regional and international peace and security?" Granted, what was considered as "endangerment of security" in 1972 may not be valid any longer. Yet, this is an argument one can take back to China. The danger to human security is the most obvious consequence of the so-called security operation of the Myanmar government. More than 400,000 people are now facing a dire situation as refugees and that number may soon reach 1 million. Besides, there are reasons to believe that transnational terrorist groups will try to take advantage of the situation.

The letter of the eminent personalities had asked the UNSC to use "whatever means available." Although the UN Security Council members are yet to be

Rohingyas face a grave situation under the open sky in Bangladesh, and many more face life and death questions inside Myanmar, the international community has two things on its hands: first, a plan as to how to address the causes of and conditions for the humanitarian disaster; that's the Annan Commission report. Second, how to make the recalcitrant Myanmar government stop the ethnic cleansing and engage in a dialogue; that's the EP's suggestion—imposing sanctions.

If the international community is sincere in addressing the current catastrophe unfolding in Myanmar it should highlight these. It's incumbent on Bangladesh, which is unduly bearing the burden of hundreds and thousands of refugees for the third time and risking its own security, to make the case to the international community.

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PROJECT SYNDICATE

Data driven gender equality



MARK SUZMAN

A key agenda item at this year's annual meeting of the United Nations General Assembly, under way this week, will be to assess global progress on the Sustainable

Development Goals (SDGs), the UN's consensus roadmap for solving the world's biggest challenges by 2030.

I was part of the UN team that helped create the Millennium Development Goals, which preceded the SDGs. By the time the MDGs concluded in 2015, they had fuelled some of the fastest and most extensive gains in global health and development the world has ever seen. The MDGs paved the way for the SDGs, and I have been encouraged by the commitment the global community has shown to sustaining the post-2015 development agenda.

But it has also become clear to me and others that without a more deliberate, data-driven focus on the needs of women and girls in particular, progress toward a wide range of objectives will suffer. If we fail to achieve universal gender equality, we will fall short of many other goals, from ending poverty to ensuring good health.

One of my personal frustrations with the MDGs was that gender equality was more a matter of rhetoric than of action. Despite their promise of empowerment,

the MDGs didn't adequately target many of the biggest challenges that women and girls face, such as gender-based violence and economic discrimination. These gaps have persisted, because in the 1990s, when the MDGs were being formulated, most people, including me, did not adequately understand the scale or complexity of the problem.

We must avoid a similar fate with the SDGs. Achieving gender equality is more than a once-in-a-generation opportunity; it is also the best way to make progress on nearly all of the SDGs, and to build a world where everyone can thrive. As Bill and Melinda Gates will discuss at a gathering of world leaders next week in New York, and show in a new report, collective action is needed to address the various dimensions of gender inequality and drive progress.

One of the biggest impediments is a dearth of good data on issues that disproportionately affect women and girls, such as land rights, access to education, family planning, or health care. Data are essential to understanding what is working and how to track progress. Yet up-to-date data exist for only a small fraction of the indicators that were developed to assess progress on the 17 SDGs—including the more than 40 that directly relate to gender equality. Of the 14 indicators of progress associated with the primary gender equity goal, SDG 5, most countries are measuring just three.

To help fill these critical gaps, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation has created a three-year, USD 80 million worth initiative to generate more reliable data that can improve the design and

targeting of programmes and policy interventions. As part of that effort, the foundation recently launched a USD 10 million partnership with UN Women to help countries improve the quality of the gender-specific data they collect. The foundation is also supporting Equal Measures 2030, an initiative to empower advocates and civil-society groups with easy-to-use evidence to assess progress toward targets and keep the SDGs for women and girls on track.

These and other efforts will provide gender-equality advocates and decision-makers with better information about the nature and scale of the social and economic barriers holding women and girls back, and help identify who is falling through the cracks.

We know from existing evidence that empowering women and girls can accelerate progress. For example, when girls attend secondary school (SDG 4), they are up to six times less likely to be married as a child. And higher literacy rates among adolescent girls are associated with lower adolescent birth rates and improved health (SDG 3). Likewise, women are much more likely than men to invest surplus income in ways that improve the lives of their children.

The benefits of gender equity are also apparent when women have access to basic financial services, like credit and savings accounts, which enable them to start businesses and save money for family essentials.

Closing the gender gap in agriculture, meanwhile, could have an even more profound impact on families and productivity in the developing world.

Today, for example, women make up nearly half of the agricultural workforce in Sub-Saharan Africa. Yet, they typically work smaller, less productive plots of land than men, and often lack access to the best seeds, fertiliser, credit, and training opportunities. Studies show that giving women more decision-making power over productive assets has the potential to increase farm yields by more than 20 percent, which is essential to "end poverty in all its forms everywhere" by 2030 (SDG 1).

When we remove the barriers confronting the most vulnerable in society, the effects are transformational. But to do that, donors, development partners, governments, and the private sector must invest in more and better data that are sorted by age and sex. Doing so will allow programmes to be tailored to the needs of women and girls everywhere.

Our challenge—and opportunity—is to overcome the deeply entrenched barriers that impede progress for women and girls. The SDGs are a huge step in that direction. But goals without actionable strategies are just good intentions. The SDGs provide the roadmap to ending poverty and creating a better, healthier, more secure world for everyone. Ensuring that we have quality data is the best way to ensure that no one gets lost along the way.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Rice price hike must be addressed

It is a matter of concern that the price of rice has been on the rise for months. Many fear that the price may increase again, with one kg of rice costing as much as Tk 70-80. The consumers—especially lower- and middle-income families—are already suffering, as the price of vegetables has also increased apparently due to the recent rainfall. People's incomes, however, did not increase simultaneously. So how can they support themselves with the burgeoning prices of staples such as rice? I think the government should find a way urgently to stabilise the situation.

Zabed Wali, Chittagong

Myanmar govt should be taken to int'l court

The Government of Myanmar, especially its army, should be taken to the International Criminal Court for its crimes against humanity in the Rakhine State. According to the United Nations, about 3-4 lakh Rohingya Muslims have fled the country and entered Bangladesh, and the number is increasing on a daily basis.

If the perpetrators of this massacre are not tried, it may be repeated in other parts of the world. The United Nations and the international human rights organisations should join hands to hold the Myanmar government responsible for its heinous conduct.

We hope that the international community will stand up for humanity and take urgent measures to stop the Rohingya crisis and bring the perpetrators to justice.

Biplob Biswas, Faridpur