

ROHINGYA GENOCIDE AND THE LIBERAL STATES

Dancing with the demon of destruction



ARAKAN is burning. The Burmese rulers appear to be on the brink of achieving their much-longed-for a "final solution" of the Rohingya question. A reign of terror has been let loose in northern Arakan.

Rohingyas are being shot, butchered, disembowelled, torched and drowned. Women are being raped and gang-raped, and children are being mutilated often in front of their helpless parents and siblings. To stave off foul smell from the rotting corpses, they are either being charred or dumped in shallow mass graves, often dug under duress by the ones who are to meet the same fate. Village after village are being torched, resulting in "midnight in summer noon." In short, genocide of unimaginable barbarity is in progress against the Rohingyas.

Those who managed to flee had harrowing tales to share. A mother who was away from home when attackers came later found her baby daughter cut into halves; a paralysed elderly woman unable to run was torched to death; people trying to flee atrocity were indiscriminately fired upon from helicopter gunships. Many survivors suffer from the heart-wrenching burden of not being able to provide the last rites

to their loved ones, not even sheets to cover the bodies; a fleeing mother has to live with the agonising memory of watching vultures zeroing in on the mutilated body of her dead son whom she was unable to bury.

Their flight was no less distressing. Most walked for days on difficult terrains through hills, jungles and knee-deep water, often drenched in monsoon rain, constantly in fear of being attacked by the military or their cohorts, and by armed goons who pounced on them for whatever meagre valuables they were carrying. Many narrated that their fellow travellers' journey was harshly cut short as they could no longer endure hunger and hardship, some falling victim to snakebites. Losing family members as they ran in different directions during the mayhem and at night-time treks in deep jungles was also reported.

When they were about to cross the border with Bangladesh and were beginning to feel relieved, they were faced with the stark reality of denial of entry. Left with no option, they had to pick up both energy and hope to undertake the next part of the trip, not to mention through more perilous and vulnerable routes. Others capable of dispensing fair sums of money secured the services of fixers, thriving on facilitating border crossing. The story of exploitation of the escaping people by unscrupulous locals has been aptly covered by this daily in several reports. For instance, a fleeing family was

paid only Tk 8,000 (less than USD 100) in exchange for ten cows that they managed to bring with them.

This is the gruesome reality of the hundreds of thousands of Rohingyas escaping the genocide being committed by the Burmese authorities. The world is witnessing the Arakan version of Rwanda and Srebrenica massacres. Commentators, campaigners, politicians, Nobel laureates, faith leaders and general masses in many parts of the world have been stunned by the stance taken by the unofficial head of the Burmese government, Aung San Suu Kyi, the icon of liberty and freedom. Strong criticism and caricatures of the fallen idol have flooded the social and print media. Some view it as her inability to stop the genocide crafted and executed by the Burmese military against her wishes; the less charitable ones accuse her of being an active accomplice.

As Mark Farmaner of Burma Campaign UK, in his incisive piece published on *HuffPost* on September 13, 2017, reminded us that while Suu Kyi continues to receive the flak for failing to live up to her image, it is the military that completes the unfinished agenda of ridding Arakan of Rohingyas. Quite cogently, he puts forward the case that the powerful states, including those who present themselves as champions of human rights and rule of law and style themselves as moral guardians of countries like Bangladesh, are pampering and promoting the head of the Burmese army, Senior General Min Aung

Hlaing. Included among are the US, Germany, Italy, Austria, the European Union, Japan and India.

Hlaing is reputed for his hard-line stand in dealing with Kachin, Shan and Rohingya communities. The General "is guilty of ethnic cleansing, he is under investigation for war crimes and crimes against humanity and he is the biggest obstacle to democratic reform," effectively running a parallel government in the country.

The Obama administration lifted most of the US sanctions targeting the country's military in October 2016; the British government continues to provide training to the army; Germany and Austria accorded "red carpet treatment" to the General when he visited those countries; Italy hosted him last year; and the EU "even had him address their prestigious annual meeting of military heads of EU countries." The Prime Ministers of Japan and India were perhaps honoured to grant him audience. The latter provides the Burmese army a range of military hardware from artillery guns and rocket launchers to war gaming software. Quite understandably, the Israel and Burma relationship is premised on transferring knowledge of Israeli oppression and dispossession of the Palestinians. As Israeli rights activist Ofer Neiman observes, "Weapons used against the Palestinians are being sold as 'field-tested' to some of the worst regimes on the planet," including Burma.

This policy of placating the Burmese military commander in his vicious genocidal campaign against Rohingyas and crimes against humanity harks back to the policy of appeasement of the western alliance on Nazi Germany. The above reality explains the palpable reticence of western liberal states in holding the Burmese generals accountable for genocide and crimes against humanity. Their duplicity becomes brazen when they leave no stone unturned to prosecute the likes of Robert Mugabe and Omar Al Bashir for similar charges.

Thus, it is not only the Burmese generals who are to be made accountable for genocide of the Rohingyas and crimes against humanity perpetrated against other nationalities in Burma, their liberal external patrons also have a case to answer. After all, it is the latter's relentless pursuit of resources, strategic and commercial interests, including that of arms trade, bereft of human rights considerations, that has shored up this brutal regime. With impunity it unleashed the demon of destruction in this 21st-century Burma. Sadly, the much-celebrated corpus of human rights declarations, covenants and conventions lies in tatters as do the books of nursery rhymes of Rohingya children in burnt-out villages of Arakan.

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Humanitarian aid must be planned better



MY WhatsApp has been pinged.

"I am at Balukhali camp in Ukhia, the situation is far, far worse than what I have seen on the media, I just talked to a woman who is 9 months pregnant, no idea where her husband is, had not one thing to eat today. There's no food, water and no sanitation facilities so people are openly defecating. Thousands of tiny infants, thousands of young girls that may just be trafficked, sold off to dalals in Cox's Bazar.

Miles and miles of desperate people, tiny infants, are standing on the road side waiting for somebody to drop some food.

If someone gets raped, no one will even know."

"They get assaulted twice. Once in Myanmar and once when they cross the border." Galiba adds.

"I feel so small here. It will take decades to help."

Rima echoes the bitter taste of guilt that comes with privilege and settles on my tongue, ever so often. She recently started working with an international NGO and one that is working with Rohingyas in Cox's Bazar.

The next evening, my phone pings again and a picture of a woman comes up.

Eyes glazed. Shoulders slumped. Mouth grim.

"See this lady. Two of her sons were killed by the army as they tried to escape, she had a miscarriage simultaneously, and after coming to the refugee camp, her other son has disappeared 10 days ago."

"Kudos to you for having it together," we said.

"I don't have it together at all," she replied.

These are my friends. Humanitarians, Empaths. People who are too quick to feel and respond to the pain of others, often times, at the risk of their own sanity.

We serve as support systems for each other when it feels like the sky is collapsing and we are the ones responsible for seeing that the earth does not crumble beneath its weight.

When things happen, we are overridden by guilt at having it better than others. My friends are working at organisations with decades of experience in relief work. And some of us have years of experience in working in crisis. But we still struggle.



Private donation and relief distribution efforts add to chaos at the Kutapalong Refugee Camp.

PHOTO: UMER AIMAN KHAN

Rima and her colleagues have been going deep inside the camps where no one has been able to get food properly. The food distribution is being done so haphazardly that people by the roadside are grabbing whatever is being thrown out of trucks. Women aren't physically strong enough to push through the crowds, which makes women-headed households worse off. With so many men killed, there are plenty of women-headed households. Every house has three to eight kids who may well die of common diseases like cold.

The camps are makeshift housing with no toilets, medical support and very basic supplies. The medical camps that are there close at 5 pm. The language barrier between Bengalis and Rohingyas, barring those who speak Chittagonian, is deterring communication and further complicating matters.

The International Organization for Migration (IOM) hosts the Inter Sector Coordination Group (ISCG), which publishes

a daily report summarising the emergency response in sectors including shelter and essential non-food items; water, sanitation and hygiene; health; safety, dignity and human rights; education; and nutrition.

According to the ISCG, in June, there were already over 100,000 people hosted in the three major makeshift settlements: Kutapalong and Balukhali in Ukhia and Leda in Teknaf, and around 50,000 Undocumented Myanmar Nationals (UMNs) are residing in host communities of Ukhia and Teknaf of Cox's Bazar district. There have been successive waves of displacement of the Rohingya population from Rakhine state, Myanmar to Bangladesh since the 1990s. As of August 2017, there were an estimated 190,000 Rohingya in Bangladesh, concentrated in two upazilas in Cox's Bazar.

On 25 August, violence once again broke out in Rakhine state, triggering a massive influx of approximately 400,000 people across the border. As a result, as of 16 September, there are now almost 600,000 Rohingya in Cox's Bazar.

Were we prepared for this?

This is one of those times when I am rightfully proud of my nation. It is one of those times when, once again, my people are outdoing each other in their effort to stand by the Rohingya community. People are taking time out from their jobs, and their own families to stand by those who have been pushed out of their country. This is one of those times when it feels good to be on the right side of the history that is being made, when an overpopulated, under-resourced nation did not shrink away from the responsibility of caring for what is often referred to as the most persecuted

community in the world.

It is also an emotional time. So, much like our nature, our passionate hearts are unable to control the surge of emotion and we rush to offer whatever help we can.

But we have to recognise that this is a crisis that is far beyond our understanding. It has security and geopolitical implications that we have yet to wrap our heads around. The humanitarian crisis is so deep it is hard to know where to begin. We don't even know what people on the ground need. So those of us who are empaths, well-meaning, kind-hearted individuals who want to do something to help, let us start by finding out what is needed.

Going to the refugee camps to help is only adding to the confusion. Donating old clothes will further add to waste. According to those working on the ground, immediate needs include mobile latrines, water purification tablets and food. Also what they need are flashlights and dignity kits for women who have to go to the toilet and take a shower at night so men don't see them. With over two lakh children in the camps, they could also use food for infants. Experts from the IOM and other NGOs are doing a needs-assessment and should be coordinated with before you take relief to the camps. The ISCG is coordinating efforts between the UN, the government, and NGOs. Most NGOs are operating through local NGOs like Coast or Pulse but there are hundreds of others.

Over the last few weeks, when crisis after crisis has taken over our lives, we choose to display over and over again what we are really made of. Strength, resilience and hope. And hearts big enough to hold the world. But this is a time when we must balance passion with reason, a time when before we jump at our heart's calling, we must let our minds reason with it.

Shagufe Hossain is the founder of Leaping Boundaries and a member of the editorial team at *The Daily Star*.

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CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS**
- 1 Rosters of candidates
 - 7 Time in office
 - 11 Tropical fruit
 - 12 Creative germ
 - 13 Conjured up
 - 14 Go by
 - 15 Piano parts
 - 16 Rosters
 - 17 Hardens
 - 18 Friend of Piglet
 - 19 Jazz, for one
 - 21 Conclude
 - 22 Six-time French Open champ
 - 25 Old hand
 - 26 Pop star
 - 27 Contemptible ones
 - 29 Made a sketch
 - 33 Field units
 - 34 Barrel piece
 - 35 "Peter Pan" pooch
 - 36 Alligator's cousin
 - 37 Wax-coated cheese
 - 38 Candy bar nut
 - 39 Depend
 - 40 Wee
- DOWN**
- 5 Peepers
 - 6 Down
 - 7 Easy two-pointer
 - 8 "Lou Grant" star
 - 9 Taking it easy
 - 10 Accumulated
 - 16 Low dance
 - 18 Hogwarts props
 - 20 Great Lakes tribe
 - 22 Fancy fabric
 - 23 Dairy's kin
 - 24 Out-of-fashion
 - 25 Sawmill machine
 - 28 Sordid
 - 30 Catcher Castro
 - 31 Singer Faith
 - 32 Friend of Peter
 - 34 Store event
 - 36 Manx, e.g.
 - 1 Gushes forth
 - 2 "C'est--!"
 - 3 Left at sea
 - 4 Begins to like



YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

C	A	P	E	R	H	A	Y	E	S	
A	R	O	S	E	A	D	O	R	E	
R	A	S	P	S	L	O	G	A	N	
A	R	T	I	R	E	A	S	A		
T	A	P	D	A	V	P	E	T		
S	T	O	P	I	P	T	O	R	E	
S	I	E	S	T	A	S				
S	K	I	T	T	R	I	U	I	S	M
H	I	T	M	A	I	T	O			
A	M	I	O	R	B	I	L	L		
M	O	O	D	S	U	B	O	A	T	
A	N	N	I	E	N	O	N	C	E	
N	O	S	E	S	E	B	S	E	N	

Successfully handed over 3 projects ahead of time in the Month of August

- **CASAFLORA 2 MONTHS AHEAD**
@ BASHUNDHARA R/A, DHAKA
- **THE ROYAL GARDENIA 2 MONTHS AHEAD**
@ BANANI, DHAKA
- **ORCHARD PLACE 7 MONTHS AHEAD**
@ UTTARA, SECTOR # 3, DHAKA

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