

# ROHINGYA CRISIS

## and the China factor

### Bangladesh now in top 100!

#### Room for improvement in competitiveness

It is a laudable achievement that Bangladesh has moved up seven points to become part of the exclusive top 100 countries ranked on global competitiveness. According to the World Economic Forum's Competitiveness Report 2017-18, the country has made significant gains in the areas of macroeconomic environment as well as health and primary education that allowed for this impressive growth. We have done well in improving institutions but still trail behind other South Asian nations except Pakistan.

Problem areas remain, particularly infrastructure, and the slow movement in decision-making i.e. bureaucracy that has been cited as the third biggest problem while corruption is perceived to be a major hurdle for business. For the country to do much better, we will have to make significant efforts to improve the quality of our educated workforce and change the way we work. Indeed, "poor work ethic has emerged as a new form of constraint. Lack of dedication, hard work and commitment among a large section of the new entrants to the young labour force put constraints on business to grow."

As pointed out in the survey, infrastructure bottlenecks range from the highly congested seaport affecting timely shipments, unreliable power for industry and the need for better financial governance to check the rise of classified loans. The banking sector needs to be protected from the failure to check scams that remain a major problem in allowing access to finance by mainstream business as opposed to select clientele.

We have moved up seven steps, but it is possible to do much better. Reforms need to be undertaken at policy level that will lead to an "efficiency-driven" economy that is, where productivity is the driving force which may only come through better human resources.

### Utter waste of public money

#### Solution to coordination problem crucial

THE lack of coordination and any attempt to find a possible solution when it comes to public repair and construction jobs in our cities is baffling to say the least. A picture published in this newspaper on Wednesday illustrates the point clearly. Barely a few months after a pavement in Kazi Nazrul Islam Road was rebuilt with concrete, the Dhaka North City Corporation started digging a trench there to build a footbridge. That the newly constructed road, a Tk 8 crore project, had to be destroyed to do this, and this could have been avoided through coordination between the civil engineering and the traffic circle raises several questions.

Firstly, since this state of affairs is nothing new, and people all over the city have to bear with re-digging of roads throughout the year, why has there been no solution yet? Surely, given that the DNCC itself says there is a lack of coordination, it should not take years to fix such a simple problem. Secondly, one may wonder, is the lack of initiative intentional—is anyone making profits out of this constant spending on the same roads? These are important questions, especially since the projects are funded with public money. On top of that, irresponsible spending, without any net result, is simply ridiculous. Why are we doing the same thing, over and over, and wasting resources that could have gone towards other projects?

It is high time the city corporations act. Communication and coordination between the various authorities and bodies is crucial, of course, but equally important is investigation to see if there is corruption in the spending. Dhaka, otherwise, will remain a city of disrepair and money will continue to be wasted.



RUBY AMATULLA

IN the ongoing Rohingya crisis, Bangladesh is in a position to play a critical role in the region. Bangladesh has gained worldwide recognition for its receptiveness to the now almost half a million refugees who have poured into the country. For Bangladesh, this is a historic opportunity—albeit under tragic circumstances—for conflict resolution and peace. If Qatar could become a world player in mediation in major conflicts like those of Sudan, Afghanistan, and Israel-Palestine, and earn its place in diplomacy, Bangladesh can also play a similar role in this region for its own interest as well as that of the region. The enormous burden of the refugees, and the security threat the massive influx poses, necessitate Bangladesh to adopt a long-term strategy. The Bangladesh government, opposition and civil society should all be united and step up to the plate to respond to the call.

China, India and the US all have economic interests in Myanmar—an extremely resourceful country in a strategic location—and large investments in the country, to make matters more complicated. The Rohingya crisis, though extremely costly in human terms, may bring the world powers together to find a sustainable solution as any other alternative could have devastating consequences.

If history is any reference, the most difficult and painful periods are followed by paradigm shifts in a positive direction. WWII helped bring about the present international order; the Cold War that posed an existential threat to humanity compelled the arch enemies—America, Soviet Union, and China—to engage in the visionary diplomacy of détente that helped transform these global enemies into global partners. Similarly, the Rohingya crisis may lead to the world powers coming together in order to avoid catastrophic outcomes that could potentially destabilise the entire region.

The terrain of mountains and heavy forest regions are most suitable for long-term guerilla warfare and are a breeding ground for terrorism—a serious security threat for the region. Furthermore, the atrocities against the Rohingya have created a fertile ground for rebellion and radicalisation. Add transnational terrorist networks in the mix, and things could get much more volatile. A vicious cycle of violence may set off as state-sponsored persecution of the Rohingya continues giving way to large numbers of recruits.

China, perhaps, has the biggest stake in Myanmar. In 2004, a massive natural gas field was found in Myanmar and in 2008, the China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) secured the rights to the natural gas. The construction of two 1,200km overland pipelines—one for gas and the other for oil—was undertaken. These pipelines run from Myanmar's Rakhine state to the Yunnan province of China, carrying

gas and oil not only from Myanmar but also from the Middle East and Africa.

Considering these enormous, long-term benefits of China's strategic One Belt One Road initiative, China has an interest in addressing the discontent of Rakhine residents regarding the construction of the pipelines. That could minimise some of the consequences down the line. The vision clearly did not prevail among the Chinese leadership regarding Rakhine. The complaints and demands of Rakhine residents were simple: (i) river pollution and the decimated livelihood of local poor fishermen due to the pipeline construction; (ii) fair compensation for the properties expropriated for the project that CNPC did not compensate for as it had promised earlier; (iii) access to electricity for the areas

longer view of the future and prefers soft power diplomacy to establish its dominance in the region. Its One Belt One Road initiative is one which aims to advance the economy of the whole region in which China would remain a dominant integral part. China is readapting its policies and the last thing that China would want is a volatile region.

To salvage itself from being associated with such monstrous crimes, China may seek a way out of this quagmire by offering a process of resolution. The global outcry is not conducive to its greater goal of soft power diplomacy around the world. The distrust and cynicism among the people of the region are a hindrance to China's greater vision.

Let Bangladesh take the first step in calling for an



Bangladesh should use its opportunity to play a diplomatic role in pressurising Myanmar through China to resolve the Rohingya crisis. PHOTO: STAR

that do not have this basic utility; and (iv) more jobs for the local workers.

China can still meet these demands. Thus in all likelihood China may urge the Myanmar government to take refugees back and uphold their basic human rights and fulfill their legitimate demands. Only China is in a position to make this happen. And Bangladesh can be instrumental towards that end.

China's policy in the region is changing, and it is defining its own national interest in terms of a long-range regional development goal. As the US is taking a more short-term, reactionary, neo-conservative, inward-looking and confrontational stand under the Trump administration, China, on the other hand, is taking a

international peace conference, either in Dhaka or in Beijing, and make all diplomatic and logistical preparations on its own to move forward. It may soon find that there is no shortage of friends and helpers in this grand pursuit of peace and justice. There is a general consensus that there is no military solution to such crises. The real issues of dissent and discontentment must be addressed. To achieve sustainable solutions to the Rohingya crisis, the focus should be to foster an inclusive environment and terms based on fairness.

Ruby Amatulla is Executive Director of the US-based Muslims for Peace, Justice and Progress, and the Bangladesh-based Women for Good Governance.

# Can we make the world colour-blind?



AASHA MEHREEN AMIN

LATELY I have started feeling conscious about the colour of my skin again. It is a jolting realisation that so much depends on it—the level of attractiveness or unattractiveness I possess, the

amount of deference I may receive from people in lesser social positions, what kind of job I will get, who will love me and how much of my existence will be tolerated by others. It is mindboggling that even after centuries of activism, struggles and debunking of the white

able to brazenly flourish even in this day and age.

But let us think about the deeper consequences of shadism all over the world. Think about why 480,000 (and counting) brown-skinned refugees have flooded our shores to escape indescribable brutality of their fellow countrymen. The Rohingya are hated in their homeland because they look a certain way—Bengali: "One of the few things Rakhines and members of the ethnic Burmese majority have in common is a shared hatred of the 'Bengalis', a label they both apply to Rohingya with contempt." (*Economist*, May 2015). Kyaw Zwa Moe, managing editor of *The Irrawaddy* magazine, in a recent commentary mentions how a Burmese counsel in Hong Kong in a

Thus racism can extend from the community level to become an institutionalised, political strategy to humiliate, intimidate and eventually annihilate. Why else would an entire ethnic group be stripped of their citizenship and then treated for decades like unwanted outsiders?

The selective acceptance of refugees is ample indication of just how far skin colour, which is often a defining characteristic of ethnicity or race, can go. It is why refugees who are lighter skinned are more acceptable than those who are darker. It is why a light-skinned Muslim refugee of Arab descent is preferable to a brown-skinned or black skinned South Asian or African Muslim.

According to a study titled *The Shadow Report on Afrophobia in Europe* by European Network Against Racism, there is blatant discrimination against people of African descent and Black Europeans in all areas of life. This includes the way they are treated in school, by the police and criminal justice system as well as in the job market. Refugees, asylum seekers and regular immigrants, particularly, are treated with contempt and resentment, more so if their skin colour is dark.

According to this report, black people face obstacles at every stage of employment in Europe: "In the United Kingdom, applicants with an African sounding surname need to send twice as many job applications as those with a White British sounding name to get an interview. Statistics across EU Member States show that people with an African origin have systematically higher unemployment rates than the national average, which is due in part to racial discrimination. In Finland, unemployment rates are more than three times higher for people of African origin (41.2%) compared to the national average (8.7%)."

In the US where racism is still very much part of the African American experience and which has spread to affect other communities—Asian, Middle Eastern and South Asian—ethnicity and religion have become influencing factors but the underlying bias regarding skin tones cannot be denied. In 2007, Joni Hersch, a law and economics professor at Vanderbilt University, looked at a government survey of 2,084 legal immigrants to the United States from around the world. One of her findings was that those with the lightest skin earned an average of eight to 15 percent more than similar immigrants with much darker skin. Light-skinned immigrants in the United States made

more money on average than those with darker complexions. Her findings concluded that even for immigrants with the same ethnicity, country of origin, education, skills and English language proficiency, skin colour was a factor: the lighter-skinned individual would have a better paying job.

Another study by Mara Ostfeld, a political scientist and professor at University of Michigan, found distinct bias towards light-skinned immigrants when it came to the question of having them move into the neighbourhood or working alongside them or if someone in the family married an immigrant. Of course, in the present post-9/11 and post-Trump US, the Muslim factor may be the bigger deciding factor.

It is perhaps the greatest tragedy of this century that while technology has moved with exponential speed so that now we have information on just about anything at our fingertips, when it comes to expansion of our minds or rather our mindsets, we have regressed further than ever. We are caught in the world wide web of ultra-rightism, white supremacy, racism, bigotry and even apartheid—monsters, we naively thought, were debris of the past. Among all these monsters, prejudice based on skin tone is the most primal. It has existed from time immemorial and is entrenched in almost every corner of the globe. Disturbingly, it is the basest instinct in humans that no amount of education and knowledge-building has been able to erase.

So how do we get out of this contemptible crime of judging a human by his/her cover? Perhaps, it must start from the microcosm of family. If I can teach my children that skin colour is irrelevant in deciding who is beautiful or smart or worthy of respect, that being brown or black does not create some sort of cloak of inferiority, it is possible that this precious piece of information may reach the wider community and from the community to the nation and from the nation to the rest of the world.

At this point in time, human beings have become intolerant of just about everything and discrimination and aggression based on religion, caste, social status, race, ethnicity, nationality, political stand—you name it—are alive and multiplying. In such a minefield of breeding misery, can we not take a tiny step towards enlightenment? Can we not take out the colour of a person's skin from the equation?

Aasha Mehreen Amin is Deputy Editor, Editorial and Opinion, *The Daily Star*.



superiority myths, we are stuck in this medieval stage of judging a human being's worth by the colour of their skin.

Yet there it is—an inescapable, undesirable truth. And it goes far beyond the silly jibes of how you didn't get your mother's buttery complexion or the delicate hints by the parlour assistant that a "fair polish" is in order to "brighten" your dark, dull skin.

Yes, in a South Asian context, or rather an Asian context, skin colour determines how well a female will marry and how large or small the dowry her family will have to pay to her groom's family. Hence the obsession with skin lightening at any cost. This is old news and sadly has been

letter (in 2009) to fellow diplomats referring to Rohingya boatpeople remarked: "You will see in the photos that their complexion is dark brown," contrasting the complexion of Burmese as "fair and soft, good looking as well," and adding, "Rohingyas are as ugly as ogres".

Predominantly Muslim, their religion makes for the most hated combination—Muslims who are dark-skinned. It is not unlike the racism that drove the Pakistani army to brutally kill, maim and rape Bengalis in the then East Pakistan—they were "dark and scrawny", they were Hindu or "not pure Muslims", generally not eligible to be equal citizens.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

---

### Collect BCS fee through instalments

While applying for the Bangladesh Civil Service (BCS) exam, a candidate has to pay a registration fee of Tk 700, excluding other costs. It is the most expensive registration fee for any public recruitment exam. Bangladesh Public Service Commission (BPSC) runs other recruitment programmes without charging candidates any fee. The fee to sit for BCS is certainly a strain on unemployed candidates.

I'm not requesting BPSC authorities to minimise or withdraw the fee for BCS altogether. In my opinion, the fee should be collected through several instalments based on the three steps of the whole recruitment process.

**Hasan Ul Banna, Jatiya Kabi Kazi Nazrul Islam University**

---

### Severe water scarcity in Old Dhaka

Several parts of Old Dhaka such as Gendaria, Sutrapur, Gualghat, Lakshimbazar, Kaltabazar and Islampur have been facing an acute water crisis for days. Most of the households across these areas remain without running water for the most part of the day.

Despite repeated complaints from local inhabitants, the authorities are yet to look into the matter. We urge the WASA authorities to take necessary measures to resolve the problem and put an end to the plight of these people.

**Md Mehedi Hassan Munna, By email**