

UNSC fails to deliver Lack of consensus only emboldens Myanmar

THE UN Security Council meeting on the Rohingya issue has seen all recommendations without any substantive action proposal to halt their continued persecution. We are deeply disappointed and disturbed that at a time when the entire world seems to be on common ground about the ethnic cleansing of the Rohingyas, China and Russia's position has prevented the Security Council to act decisively on the matter. And the longer the UN dithers, the longer Myanmar will carry on with its genocide of the ethnic minority.

The positions of the two countries which are very good friends of Bangladesh is troubling. Is in geopolitical interests dictating whether the UN will act to stop the decimation of an entire ethnic group? It is reminiscent of the double veto of the UNSC's first draft resolution on Myanmar eleven years earlier—in a decade the persecution of the Rohingyas has only increased and along with it the refugee population that Bangladesh hosts. If China and Russia had acted then, the present tragedy may not have happened.

We have seen how this lack of consensus in the UN has emboldened Myanmar, to the point that last week the authorities cancelled the planned visit of UN representatives to Rakhine State. If China and Russia are not convinced of the need for immediate action, delay in which could lead to severe crisis for the entire region, they could send their own investigative teams to verify the reports. Their act not only makes the mandate and goal of the UN futile, but is at the cost of lives that could have been saved. The world has no duty to stop the ethnic cleansing of the Rohingyas, and we urge that China and Russia do their part. Truth and a moral duty demand a consensus on stringent actions to stop the atrocities against the Rohingyas.

Finally, we feel that the level of representation in a forum like the Security Council is extremely important to add weight to a country's statements on a particular issue. When Myanmar was represented by its national security advisor we should have been represented by someone of ministerial level too.

Dhaka, Asia's most stressful city

Make it a bit more liveable

It is interesting how Zippiet, a UK-based firm, measured a city's collective stressfulness. From known indicators like density and traffic congestion to unlikely factors such as sunshine hours and light pollution, Zippiet researchers took all these into consideration.

Therefore, it took us by little surprise that Dhaka, topped the list of the most stressful Asian cities. The areas in which Dhaka performed badly include density, traffic congestion, perception of security, family purchase power, and physical and mental health.

Dhaka being the centre of all economic activity undergoes a regular influx of economic and environmental migrants from all over the country, making it the most densely populated city in the world. And all the while its expansion projects have barely improved, if not stagnated.

With a small number of public transports, traffic rules rarely adhered to, and infrastructure projects lingering forever, our traffic congestion has garnered worldwide notoriety. Severe air and water pollution coupled with extremely poor drainage system and civic facilities have made the city suffocating. Residents' perception of security is also expectedly not reassuring. A public health structure needed to address the physical and mental health concerns of millions is almost non-existent.

All of these are amongst Dhaka's longstanding problems—and ones that are of our own making and within our capacity to resolve. We must expand the city and redistribute government establishments across the country. There must also be a comprehensive effort to tackle Dhaka's persistent problems to make this city a bit more liveable.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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More polytechnic institutions needed

The number of regular graduates is increasing at a progressive rate but many remain unemployed for long periods of time. Industrialists, on the other hand, complain about the lack of skilled technicians in the domestic market.

In Bangladesh, scores of young people are going to join the workforce within 10 to 15 years, and by then, the shortage of a technically educated workforce will be more acute. As the private sector hasn't shown much interest in this regard, the government must come forward to bridge the gap.

A part of the effort could be establishing polytechnic institutions across the country, which the successive governments did in some districts. However, Sunamganj, is a district that does not have a full-fledged technical education institution. I seek the government's kind attention in this regard.

Md Ashraf Hossain, Sunamganj

Ease university entrance process

We have heard that Rajshahi University has made a large amount of money from undergraduate candidates, as have other public universities. Around 4,00,000 students applied for only 2,000 seats in Jahangirnagar University, for example, and many applied for more than one unit to increase their chance. Rajshahi University took more than Tk 800 per application.

Such profit-making schemes by authorities should be brought to an end. For the sake of students, we urge concerned authorities to develop an admission system that considers students' SSC and HSC results or introduce a unified admission test for all universities.

Sheuly Haque, Sirajganj

SAGOR AND RAJON

Murder as public spectacle



NAHELA NOWSHIN

I still remember the sickening feeling in the pit of my stomach when the news of the brutal killing of 13-year-old Rajon broke on social media two years ago. Is this real? How could they do this to a child? Why did the onlookers simply stand there? Why did no one try to stop it? I tried, like many others, to make sense of it all, of the inhumanity. But then it dawned on me that this had really happened. The killers had suspected Rajon of stealing a rickshaw. And a mere suspicion sealed his fate—a group of sadistic grown-ups tortured a child to death in broad daylight as others looked on, as if this was nothing out of the ordinary. As if this was normal.

And then last week, I went through the exact same range of emotions once again. The spine-chilling photo of a teenage boy named Sagor—suspected of a petty theft, just like Rajon—tied to a pole, beaten, his expression as if asking for mercy, splashed on the front page of newspapers evoked the familiar notions of normalised brutality in my country. Only this time there was no national outcry demanding “Justice for Sagor”.

No, Bangladesh isn't unique when it comes to the most brutal forms of violence against children. But the Rajon and Sagor killings were much more than a murder. It was a public spectacle. It required an audience, reminiscent of Roman gladiatorial games.

Where lawlessness prevails, people will always take it upon themselves to mete out their form of “justice”. In a country where custodial deaths and enforced disappearances at the hands of law enforcement agencies are rampant, the line between justice and violence will surely blur.

Onlookers who stood by, watching the slow deaths of Rajon and Sagor play by play, are an integral part of the story. The public nature of Rajon and Sagor's murders appealed to the basest human instincts of the killers, and curiosity, and fascination, even of the bystanders—is this what death looks like?

There is a difference between a private murder and a public killing—the latter seeking to enforce authority by indirectly telling the victim “I cannot protect you”. And when you think of it that way, the Rajon-Sagor killings begin to make sense. This is an amalgam of factors that have made the conditions ripe for public killings in modern-day Bangladesh. Lawlessness,



The public nature of the Rajon-Sagor killings is symptomatic of a much larger societal problem.

widespread illiteracy, mass poverty and a culture of impunity combine to create a powder keg ready to erupt anytime into disorder and violence.

It is only when these incidents attract the attention of the urbanites and the media—thanks to the advent of smartphones and social media—that the perpetrators are captured and “justice” meted out. Meanwhile, the roots of the disease go unaddressed and the cycle repeats itself.

Michel Foucault, in his book *Discipline and Punish*, wrote, “A secret punishment is a punishment half wasted.” Foucault was talking about the Ancien Régime before the eighteenth century when public executions were a key form of punishment. In this seminal piece of literature, Foucault's analysis of the theoretical and social mechanisms that led to the evolution of the modern-day penal system provides much-needed insight. According to Foucault, as punishment shifted from public executions to the carceral system after the eighteenth century i.e. from exhibition (public) to confinement (prison), the justice system transformed from a spectacle to surveillance. Public killings, unlike a penitentiary, as a form of punishment are about the *demonstration of power*. This is not to say that Foucault thought the prison system to be the opposite; he didn't. In fact, he argued that the prison system, in turning away public gaze and using new technological tools, was about continued subjugation of the body. Under the carceral system, the body of the offender was now at the mercy of technological powers which sought to modify his behaviour through repetition (strict timetables, military drills, etc.) It was no longer a

means to reassert the power of the king or the ruler, which is what public executions sought to achieve.

Public killings are not about numbers. Unlike terrorism—particularly of the breed based on religious-oriented ideologies and motivations—which seeks to maximise the casualty rate and provoke a response, public executions rely on the grisly nature of the act itself. The former seeks to obtain local or international recognition of a cause by attracting media attention and deems the loss of lives as irrelevant (or even a moral duty)—and creating disorder is the point. The latter, on the other hand, seeks to establish authority through the body of the offended to “reinstatate order”—turning punishment into a theatrical affair. In both cases though, generating widespread fear is a common goal.

The Rajon-Sagor killings not only point to a penchant for violence against children, but are also a symptom of a society stricken with the disease of lawlessness and disorder where individuals strive to restore order through the assertion of power and violence. Where lawlessness prevails, people will always take it upon themselves to mete out their form of “justice”. In a country where custodial deaths and enforced disappearances at the hands of law enforcement agencies are rampant, the line between justice and violence will surely blur. Medieval forms of punishment by self-styled crusaders for justice will continue to kill many more Rajons and Sagors—and things will go on as normal.

Nahela Nowshin is a member of the editorial team of The Daily Star.

UNSC FAILS TO CENSURE MYANMAR

Can Rohingyas return to their homeland?



MAHMOOD HASAN

ON September 28, the UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres briefed members of the Security Council in an open session on the ongoing violence in Rakhine which had forced 500,000 Rohingyas to take refuge in Bangladesh. The meeting was held at the request of 7 members of the Security Council. No statement was issued by the President of the Council—currently held by Bangladesh.

At the briefing, Secretary General Guterres said that “the situation has spiralled into the world's fastest developing refugee emergency, a humanitarian and human rights nightmare... We have received bone-chilling accounts from those who fled.” Testimonies pointed to serious human rights violations, noted Guterres. “This is unacceptable and must end immediately,” demanded the Secretary General.

Myanmar's representative U Thaung Tun, echoing Aung San Suu Kyi, denied all allegations of ethnic cleansing and genocide. Bangladesh's Ambassador Masud Bin Momen reflected on Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's plan, calling for the creation of safe zones inside Myanmar and repatriation of the displaced Rohingyas. US Ambassador Nikki Haley said, “We must consider action against Burmese security forces who are implicated in abuses and stoking hatred.” US, Britain and France, all permanent members, were joined by other members demanding immediate end to the ongoing violence and a strong UNSC response. Japan condemned the attack on civilians. But Chinese deputy Ambassador Wu Haitao said that the situation in Rakhine was stabilising and that all parties should work constructively. Russian Ambassador Vasily Nebenzya warned that “excessive pressure” on Myanmar's government “could only aggravate the situation in the country and around it.” China and Russia, both permanent members, were against issuing any statement.

Bangladesh wanted a consensus leading to a strong statement from the UNSC calling upon the Myanmar authorities to stop the ethnic cleansing and create a situation that would facilitate the return of the Rohingyas from Bangladesh. When the current inflow of over 500,000 Rohingyas, the total number of Rohingyas refugee presently living in Bangladesh is now nearly one million—an untenable economic burden on Bangladesh. Clearly, the permanent members were divided—a serious setback for Bangladesh.

The crux of the crisis lies in the Myanmar authorities' refusal to grant citizenship to the Rohingyas and the systemic discrimination against them that has continued since the promulgation of the 1982 Citizenship Law. The narrative that follows is all too familiar for repatriation.



With the current inflow of over 500,000 Rohingyas, the total number of Rohingyas refugees presently living in Bangladesh is now nearly one million.

PHOTO: STAR

The Annan report also mentioned the citizenship issue very cursorily. There are serious lacunae in the recommendations—it does not use the term “Rohingya” but “Muslims of Rakhine”; it does not call upon Myanmar to restore citizenship and basic rights of the Rohingyas, but only calls on the Myanmar government to quicken the verification process and revisit (not change) the 1982 Citizenship Law.

Suu Kyi in her speech to the Myanmar parliament on September 19 mentioned that all Rohingyas (she did not use the term) would be able to return after a process of verification. This is a clear trap; as the verification process would drag on for years, if not decades. Primarily because the majority of Rohingyas do not possess any document issued by the Myanmar authorities. It would be a herculean task for international organisations—IOU, OCHA, UNHCR, etc.—to prove that these are displaced Rohingyas, who fled Rakhine following brutal persecution.

The Annan report is clearly a tailored document that fits in with the Rohingya expulsion plan of the

Myanmar junta. The Commission was set up by Suu Kyi, presumably at the junta's advice, to defuse world opinion. It neither had any international mandate nor was Bangladesh involved in setting it up.

The junta has been planning for decades to change the demographic composition of Rakhine. It had planned to expel the Rohingyas Muslims and Hindus from Rakhine and establish Buddhist majority in the state. That policy led to repeated violence against the Rohingyas since 1978 and forced these people to repeatedly take refuge in Bangladesh.

After the current spate of ethnic cleansing, the junta is determined not to allow the displaced Rohingyas to return to Myanmar. The junta's policy towards Rohingyas was made abundantly clear by Myanmar's Army Chief General Min Aung Hlaing when he said, “They have demanded recognition as Rohingyas, which has never been an ethnic group in Myanmar.” The Myanmar military has planted landmines along the border with Bangladesh. According to reports, it has mobilised 70 battalions of troops with heavy artillery and equipment to crush ARSA insurgency and thwart the Rohingyas from returning to Rakhine.

Referring to the process of repatriation of Rohingyas, Guterres said that the 1993 Joint Statement by the Foreign Ministers of Bangladesh and Myanmar was not sufficient in the present circumstances. “The Muslims of Rakhine state should be granted nationality,” the Secretary General insisted. If Suu Kyi's offer for the verification process is taken along with the Annan recommendations, only a handful of Rohingyas will be able to go back to Myanmar—much less than those of 1978 and 1993. General Hlaing, it seems, will certainly not agree to take back all the Rohingyas.

The Rohingya issue is an internal issue for Myanmar; but has become an international issue because of the exodus of Rohingyas into Bangladesh. Therefore, Bangladesh must keep the UN Security Council fully involved in the repatriation of these people and in resolving the problem permanently. It would be a folly if Bangladesh tries to resolve this problem bilaterally with Myanmar.

Bangladesh has to convince China and Russia and get the UNSC to adopt a binding resolution with the following provisions: i) the Myanmar government to take action on Myanmar; for as long as this crisis is not permanently resolved; ii) repatriation of all Rohingyas within a fixed timeframe, under UN supervision; and, iii) grant full citizenship to all Rohingyas with their human rights fully recognised.

Unless the UNSC comes forward with a stringent resolution under Chapter VII of its Charter, it appears that Bangladesh is doomed to host these hapless Rohingyas for a long time.

Mahmood Hasan is former ambassador and secretary.