

ROHINGYA BABIES

To which country do they belong?



ON May 18, 2008, the High Court granted citizenship to the Biharis who were brought over to Bangladesh as minors, or were born after independence. This brought an end to their statelessness, and opened up prospects of education, employment and travel to a community that had been cooped up in camps and refused repatriation.

That realisation took thirty-six years, but with one act, the government of Bangladesh gave around three lakh people and their subsequent generations basic human rights. The Rohingya refugees have been around in Bangladesh for just as long, but the question of citizenship has not seen any traction.

Some of the most poignant visuals coming out the Rohingya refugee crisis have been those of new-born babies. These infants were mostly born either in the no-man's land, or after crossing over to this side. This raises a simple question without a simple answer—to which country do these babies belong?

According to official estimates, the number of babies born to Rohingya refugee women is 475—but that's just the deliveries that happened in the government health centres. The official number is higher, and we can get a better sense of it by taking a look at the number of women who received post-partum treatment at these centres: 1,144. The accuracy of that number depends on how many women actually sought medical help after delivery—the true figure could very well be even higher.

Eye-witnesses report a staggering number of pregnant, expecting mothers. The civil surgeon's office puts the population at approximately 5,000. That means that another 5,000 more infants will be born on Bangladeshi soil.

So far the only government official to make a public statement about this issue has been



Noor Kayes, 18, smiles as she holds her 26-day-old unnamed daughter at their home in Kutupalong unregistered refugee camp in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, February 9, 2017.

PHOTO: REUTERS/MOHAMMAD PONIR HOSSAIN

the Minister of Disaster Management and Relief Mofazzal Hossain Chowdhury Maya, who told the media that newborns are being issued birth certificates as "Myanmar citizens"—a euphemism for "stateless". The legitimacy of such a piece of paper is thrown into question since Myanmar has consistently denied citizenship to this ethnic group.

Nor are recent diplomatic negotiations indicative of that status changing any time soon. Aung San Suu Kyi's office—the State Counsellor Office—declared in a statement last week that only "verified" Rohingyas will be taken back into Myanmar. Suu Kyi's definition of "verification" draws on terms set during the

Rohingya repatriation initiatives undertaken in 1992; terms which state that Myanmar will be taking back only those refugees who are "carrying Myanmar Citizenship Identity Cards/National Registration Cards" or other types of identifying documents issued by the country's government.

This paper provision is put into context by the fact that many Rohingya refugees have no identification documents at all. Journalists and aid workers reported cases of refugees who lost their papers during the exodus or whose papers were burnt up in the flames along with their homes—that is, if they had documents to begin with. Throughout history, the community has

had identification papers issued to them, only to have them revoked upon grounds of ineligibility for citizenship. This includes the National Registration Cards that Suu Kyi's office has proposed to use for verification during the repatriation process. Many could not renew their NRC, and were provided instead with Temporary Registration Certificates—several lakhs of which were revoked in 2015.

Citizenship for the new-borns provides them with access to basic rights such as being able to go to a proper school. Before the recent influx, the refugee population of 80,000 were being serviced by primary schools through UNICEF, but this was only limited to those

living in registered camps. The last month has seen the establishment of safe zones, child spaces and classrooms, so that the lakhs of Rohingya children can at least receive something akin to an education. Such work done by aid organisations for early childhood interventions is left without impact as the children grow up without any education beyond the primary. Even those who have grown up in the country cannot get employed, since they are not eligible for work permits. These interventions are also threatened by policies such as the 2015 decision by the Bangladeshi government to move the refugees to the inhospitable Thengar Char island.

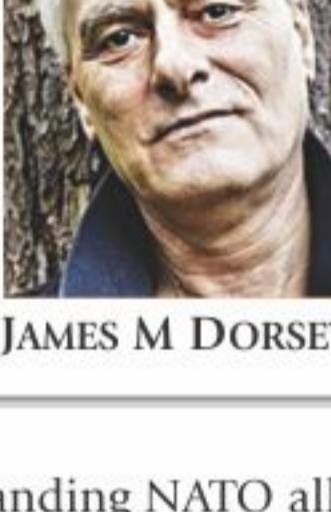
Bangladesh is also not a party to the Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness which grants nationality to stateless births. Pakistan on the other hand affords citizenship as a birthright.

In a parallel set of events, undocumented Bangladeshi children halfway across the world are in a similar fix. Just last Thursday the Trump administration started to phase out the "Dreamers" programme, an Obama-era legacy that gave some legal status to children brought over to USA by undocumented parents. The programme is no longer accepting new applications or requests for renewals, and this will invariably affect the Bangladeshi American population, a large number of whom are undocumented migrants. It is difficult to point a finger at exactly how many children will be affected as census figures vary, but all reports conclude that the Bangladeshi-American community is one of the fastest-growing. This will not affect the legal status of one group—children born to undocumented Bangladeshi parents in the United States. They were granted citizenship as a birthright, thereby giving them a very different life from their parents.

It is time for Bangladesh to formulate a policy that will address this issue of citizenship of children born in the Rohingya camps.

Zyma Islam is a member of Star Weekend, The Daily Star.

US-Turkish visa spat: A fight for basic freedoms



JAMES M DORSEY

MOVE S by the United States and Turkey that largely ban travel of their nationals between the two countries are about more than two long-

standing NATO allies having a spat amid shifting alliances in a volatile part of the world. It is a fight between two leaders, US President Donald J Trump and his Turkish counterpart, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, confronted with the limitations and fallout of their shared desire to redefine or restrict basic freedoms.

The spat erupted when the US embassy in Ankara announced this weekend that it was suspending the issuance of non-immigrant visas as part of a reassessment of the "commitment of the government of Turkey to the security of US mission facilities and personnel." The embassy stopped short of banning travel by all visa holders.

Hours later, the Turkish Embassy in Washington went a step further by declaring that it had suspended all visa operations for US citizens, effectively banning all US passport holders from travelling to the country. "This measure will apply to sticker visas as well as e-Visas and border visas," the embassy said. Turkey's currency plunged in the wake of the announcement in early morning trading on Asian markets.

The spat is the latest escalation of tensions in a relationship that has been fraying for several years as a

result of increasingly authoritarian policies adopted by Erdogan, differences over the conflict in Syria, US cooperation with Syrian Kurds, the separate indictments in the United States of an Turkish-Iranian businessman on charges of busting sanctions on Iran and 15 Turkish security guards for involvement in a street brawl, and Turkish allegations of US interference in its domestic affairs.

The latest spat highlights the risks of Mr Trump's empathy for authoritarian and autocratic leaders that contrasts starkly with a stress on basic freedoms and the rule of law adopted by his predecessors. Trump last month described relations with Turkey as "the closest we've ever been."

The spat amounts to the White House getting a taste of its own medicine of ignoring abuse of human rights by some of its closest allies. As a result, US nationals and government employees have become the victims of seemingly arbitrary crackdowns for political rather than national security reasons that violate basic freedoms and make a mockery of the rule of law.

The spat erupted after Turkey indicted in the last year two Turkish nationals working at US diplomatic missions in the country and detained at least a dozen other US nationals, including a Christian missionary, on charges of having ties to Fethullah Gulen, an aging Turkish preacher who has lived in exile in Pennsylvania for the past two decades.

Erdogan blames Gulen, the leader of one of the world's richest Islamic movements and most far-flung education systems, for having last

year engineered a failed military attempt to remove him from office. Some 250 people died in the attempt in which dissident Turkish tank commanders fired at the Turkish parliament building in Ankara.

The indictment of the Turkish nationals and arrests of Americans were part of a massive crackdown on government critics that involved the firing up to 150,000 public servants, arrest of tens of thousands, curbing of press freedoms and granting to the president wide-

anging powers. Erdogan has repeatedly justified the crackdown as a legitimate response to the failed coup.

The targeting of Turkish nationals employed by the US government appeared to be a crude attempt to persuade the Trump administration to extradite Gulen, who has denied having any association with the attempted coup.

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who ran a small Protestant church in the coastal city of Izmir, for Gulen.

"Give us the pastor back," they say.

You have one pastor (Gulen) as well.

Give him to us. Then we will try

(Brunson) and give him to you," Erdogan said.

The spat constitutes a serious

deterioration of US-Turkish relations

at a time that Turkish-backed rebels

are battling Islamic militants in

Syria's Idlib province. The fighting

aims to drive back Al-Qaeda-linked

forces and prevent the emergence of a Syrian Kurdish entity on Turkey's border in the wake of a recent Iraqi Kurdish vote for independence. It also comes as Turkey has forged closer ties with Iran to confront Kurdish moves and has stepped up co-operation with Russia in Syria.

Turkey is not the only country to detain US nationals or green card holders. Ola Al-Qaradawi, a 55-year-old research assistant and daughter of controversial Qatar-based religious scholar Yousef al-Qaradawi who has a green card, and her husband, Hossam Khalaf, have been held in solitary confinement since last year. Their only crime appears to be that she is related to a spiritual leader of the Muslim Brotherhood.

The United States has no consular obligations but Congressman Adam Smith, the top Democrat on the powerful House Armed Services Committee, has taken up their case. Erdogan also wants the release of Reza Zarab, a Turkish-Iranian businessman with ties to Turkey's ruling elite, who was arrested in Miami last year for helping Iran evade sanctions.

Erdogan last month suggested that

he would be willing to swap Andrew

Brunson, the detained missionary



IMAGE: HUGO GOODRIDGE/AL-MONITOR

a boatload of USD 23 million worth of rocket-propelled grenades shipped from North Korea and destined for Egypt. Egypt has denied that it was the intended end-user.

To be fair, the repressive policies of Erdogan and Al-Sisi as well as Trump's attitudes towards authoritarianism and autocracy and his efforts to redefine basic freedoms in the United States enjoy the support of segments of their populations.

As a result, the plight of US nationals and government employees in Turkey is unlikely to persuade Trump to return to the more assertive advocacy of basic rights and the rule of law of his predecessors. It does, however, demonstrate that tacit endorsement of authoritarian or autocratic rule is not without risk for US citizens as well as foreign nationals employed by the US government.

Moreover, it suggests that lack of respect for human rights and the rule of law constitutes a slippery slope that ultimately could put US national security interests at risk on a far larger scale. That has been evident since the 2011 popular Arab revolts that has heralded an era of often volatile and violent transition in the Middle East for which no end is in sight. It is a convoluted and bloody process of change that poses multiple, often unpredictable challenges, many of which are exacerbated rather than alleviated by autocratic and authoritarian rule.

In a rare break with apparent US neglect of abuse of human rights among its allies, Trump has cut military aid to Egypt, citing legal restrictions imposed on non-governmental organisations. The real reason was more likely Egypt's relations with North Korea.

The Trump administration has

suggested that it would review its aid

decision if Egypt breaks off

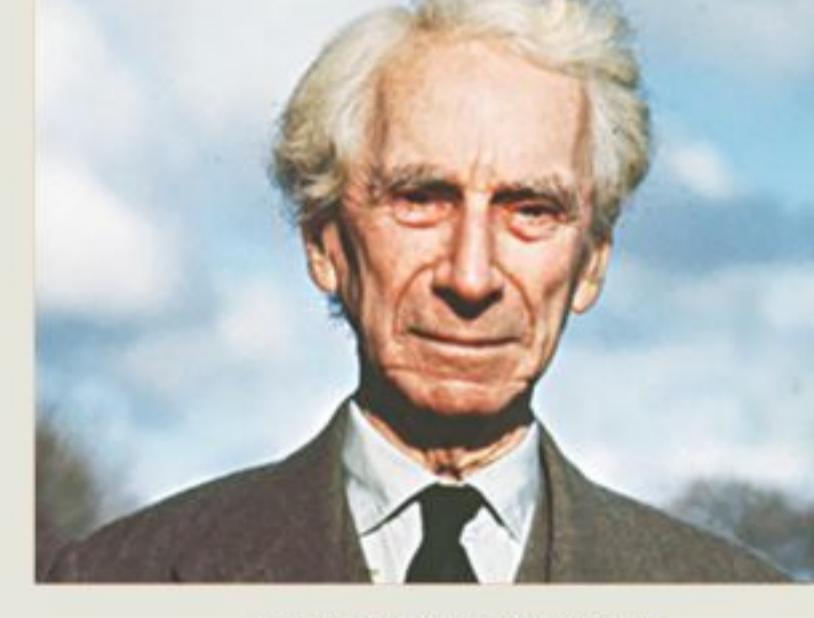
diplomatic relations with North

Korea. Acting on US intelligence,

Egyptian authorities seized in August

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QUOTABLE Quote



BERTRAND RUSSELL
BRITISH PHILOSOPHER, LOGICIAN, MATHEMATICIAN, HISTORIAN,
WRITER AND NOBEL LAUREATE

The man who only loves beautiful things is dreaming, whereas the man who knows absolute beauty is wide awake. The former has only opinion; the latter has knowledge.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS	32 Sinking signal	8 Gofer's job
1 Play part	33 Sticky stuff	9 West of music
6 Drink through a straw	34 Devious	11 Sacher torte ingredients
10 Welcoming	37 Pay tribute to	15 Imitating
11 First letter	38 Letter stroke	17 Creative skill
12 Stroll	39 Contest form	20 TV's Danson
13 Climber's spike	40 Castle of dance	21 Pitch's kin
14 Authentic	41 Egg setting	24 Calculated
15 Weapon store	42 Roof feature	25 Composer's work
16 Slalom shape	DOWN	27 Kind of milk
17 Ring great	1 Was generous	28 Brittle candy
18 Once called	2 Enters	29 Pale
19 Preoccupy	3 Diplomat's base	30 Was bright
22 Russian refusal	4 Dickens girl	31 Pub orders
23 Clumsy ones	5 Pupil's place	35 Army post
26 Ward	6 Slender	36 TV's Hatcher
29 Nile snake	7 Writer Sinclair	38 Polite address

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