

## Attack on Rohingyas "systematic"

### UN must act

**I**N a report published in Geneva on Wednesday, the UN stated that the latest wave of violence and persecution of the Rohingyas in Myanmar was "well-organised, coordinated and systematic" and that the "clearance operations" had begun well before the insurgent attack on August 25 on police posts. The report has reconfirmed what was already known: that Myanmar's actions were a means to rid the country of the community and prevent their return. Even before this latest report, the UN had stopped short of calling the persecution a genocide. We wait on what exactly the UN will do now.

The current spate of persecution of the Rohingyas is not new; even before this, a study commissioned by the UN which provided ample warning against the situation we are witnessing today was suppressed earlier this year. What we look forward to now is how the UN will act after it has so far acknowledged the ethnic cleansing and now, the systematic, pre-planned nature of the violence. Even as the UN keeps "urging" Myanmar to stop the atrocities, Myanmar's commander-in-chief is claiming that the media reports have been "exaggerated". How far will Myanmar be allowed to go, before the UN actually acts? The earlier stalemate at the UNSC when geopolitical interests of some of its members trumped humanitarian concerns goes to show that the UN has not been able to play the role that is expected of it.

The latest report presented survivors' statements about megaphones being used to announce before and during the attacks: "You do not belong here ... go to Bangladesh. If you do not leave, we will torch your houses and kill you." Myanmar has persecuted the Rohingya community for decades, stripping them of their citizenship rights, killed their teachers and leaders, and committed the worst forms of atrocities. It is high time that the UN went beyond words.

## Girls combating early marriage

### A commendable effort that others should emulate

**E**NCOURAGING stories have started to emerge out of the fight against early marriage in Bangladesh. One such story, front-paged by *The Daily Star* on Thursday, shows how a group of girls, some of whom were victims of marriage attempts, have taken up the gauntlet and are leading the fight to eradicate early marriage in their own communities. The girls and those who inspired and enabled them to do that deserve our utmost respect.

The fight against early marriage has never been easy in Bangladesh, a country with one of the highest rates of early marriage in the world. According to UNICEF, about 52 percent of girls are married off below the age of 18—an improvement over figures from 2000 when the rate was 65 percent. Anyone expecting a quicker progress would be frustrated, however, especially after the government's regressive step earlier this year to keep a special legal provision for marriage under 18. While it's imperative that the provision is removed as quickly as possible, we need to understand the social and cultural contexts of early marriage and ensure greater community involvement for a better outcome.

If educated and empowered properly, community members, especially women and girls, can do wonders in the fight against early marriage. Appropriate legal provisions and their timely implementation are important, as are appropriately designed awareness-raising campaigns at the community level. It's important to drive home the message so appropriately captured in the words of one young anti-child-marriage activist: that a child should be born to a mother, not to another child. After all, all children have the right to education and a healthy upbringing.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### Reform the UN

Since its inception in 1945, the United Nations has played an important role in bringing an end to a number of conflicts. However, its noble goal of maintaining world peace and security has come into question because it did not undergo the required reforms in a changed political environment.

Recently, a resolution in the Security Council against Myanmar, which has unleashed a vicious military campaign against the Rohingya minority, was vetoed by Russia and China, two close allies of Myanmar. The veto has emboldened Myanmar to carry on its heinous offensive.

This can no longer continue. Either the veto system has to be abolished, or the General Assembly's two-third majority should be given the power to overturn the decision of the Security Council. Otherwise, the UN risks losing its credibility—turning into a dysfunctional organisation.

Md Sadequr Rahman, *By email*

### Errant cops should face exemplary punishment

I am shocked to read the news report published in this paper on October 10 titled "Man 'beaten to death' by policemen". According to the report, four errant members of the police force in Joypurhat beat up a man named Saidur Rahman due to his protest of their assault on some people. The man later died in the hospital after losing consciousness because of the severe beating.

While the high-ups of the local administration pledged that strict actions will be taken against the offenders, they have so far been merely suspended. This is not enough. Only exemplary punishment will put an end to this culture of impunity that allows these policemen to go scot-free. I urge the concerned authorities to take this case seriously so that no police member can dare commit the same offence again.

Md Naim Hosen, *By email*

# Insanely Stuck

## How do traffic jams affect our state of mind?



SHAGUFTA HOSSAIN

**M**Y five-year-old niece and I were practising drawing. She drew a sun and a moon and extended the rays of the sun a little further than necessary. I asked

her what the rays were falling on and she drew a street. I asked her what was on the street, she made me draw a car (because she doesn't know how to yet). When I was finished with the car, she said, "More, Phuppi! There must be traffic jam!" And it was thus that I came to the heartbreaking realisation that she will never know Dhaka streets that are traffic-free.

Unfortunately, there are consequences of traffic congestion direr than my niece's inability to imagine traffic-free roads. In fact, an aspect of traffic congestion that is often overlooked is its effect on our mental health. Research in this area focused on Dhaka seems to be scant. However, one study conducted at the University of California, reported on the Mail Online, based on data from the Midlife Development in the United States project and the National Study of Daily Experiences, from men and women aged 25-74, shows that mental health problems are not just affected by major life events, but also by seemingly minor emotional experiences. Professor Charles, in the above-mentioned study, cited two national surveys where psychologists found everyday irritations, such as waiting in traffic, can build up over time and cause mental problems later in life.

Closer to home, in Bangalore, a comparative parallel study titled "Effect of Traffic Congestion on Mental Health" was conducted by researchers S Venkatesh and G Pushpa. A 42-item questionnaire evaluating depression, anxiety and stress was administered to all subjects: 30 male city bus drivers as cases and 30 male bus conductors as controls in the age group of 20-60. The objective was to measure the emotional states of stress, anxiety and depression in city bus drivers and compare the results with non-drivers of similar working environment. The conclusion, not surprisingly, highlights that city bus drivers are more stressed compared to non-drivers working in the same environment. While Bangalore has an approximate population of 10 million, Dhaka's is 19 million. The emotional states of those who drive in Dhaka are best left to imagination.

Regardless of whether one drives or not, a report from the UK's Office of National Statistics, as quoted in *Time* magazine, finds that people who commute more than half

an hour to work each way report higher levels of stress and anxiety than people with shorter commutes or no commutes at all. The same report found that people with commutes of any length experience lower life satisfaction and happiness than people with no commutes at all. Riding a bus for 30 minutes or longer was associated with the lowest levels of life satisfaction and happiness, but even if you're lucky enough to bike to work and enjoy the beautiful outdoors, your satisfaction takes a nosedive commensurate to how long you spend doing it. Researchers from the Saint Louis University School of Medicine and the Cooper Institute in Dallas have also noted that people with commutes of at least 10 miles each way have a higher tendency toward depression, anxiety, and social

exposure to toxic agents resulting in neurocognitive symptoms and/or psychiatric disturbances. Lead exposure is one of the most common exposures that can lead to significant neuropsychological and functional decline in humans. Although lead was removed from gasoline in 1999 in Bangladesh, according to a journal article on the *Atmospheric Pollution Research*, there remains a significant background concentration of lead with occasional samples reaching 8µg/m<sup>3</sup>. Carbon monoxide poisoning (COP), in addition to affecting morbidity and mortality, has been linked to Delayed Neurologic Sequels (DNS), symptoms and signs of which include memory problems, mental retardation, facial palsy, psychosis, chronic headache, seizures, and

fact, a study published in the *Lancet* found that those who live closest to major traffic arteries were up to 12 percent more likely to be diagnosed with dementia—a small but significant increase in risk. *The Guardian* report on the study further elaborated that, while scientists have linked air pollution and traffic noise to reduced density of white matter (the brain's connective tissue) and lower cognition previously, more recently the study suggested that magnetic nanoparticles from air pollution can make their way into brain tissue.

I am not a mental health expert or a traffic expert. And I haven't really come across any research or experts who are studying the link between traffic congestion and mental health in



Sitting in traffic for hours on end leaves us exposed to toxic agents which have severe implications for our health.

isolation.

And if psychosocial problems weren't enough, there are neuropsychological problems that may arise as a result of carbon monoxide and lead emissions that are part of traffic congestion. Quite a few studies have looked at the dangers of pollution on the human mind, particularly in urban areas where there are lots of cars. Scientists have demonstrated that the fumes and particles of pollutants that we inhale while waiting in traffic can contribute to memory loss and problems with reasoning.

Neurotoxicity is a term used to describe neurophysiological changes caused by

epilepsy. This was found in a report titled "Neurological Effects of Acute Carbon Monoxide Poisoning in Children" published in 2009.

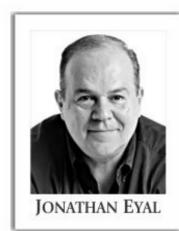
Connections have also been found between Alzheimer's disease and a lack of physical activity over the course of one's life, and since, while in traffic, we are, for the most part, just sitting, the risk of developing Alzheimer's is also not as far-fetched as it seems. The more you move your body and use your mind, the less likely you are to develop Alzheimer's. So, spending a lot of time in traffic over the course of a lifetime is very likely to contribute to the disease as you age. In

Dhaka. But I can say fairly confidently that if one does, the findings are unlikely to be elevating. Of course, we can make better use of our time spent in traffic by playing word games, making work calls (or personal calls), or even meditating (almost necessary to keep some semblance of sanity). But if we have reached the point where our children are unable to imagine traffic-free roads, I am beginning to wonder if we will indeed lose all sanity, staying stuck in traffic.

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

# Crisis averted for now as Spanish PM has upper hand

## But delay in declaring independence is just a brief lull in the situation that can only end in a stand-off



JONATHAN EYAL

**T**HE decision of Catalonia's separatist leaders to delay their unilateral declaration of independence from Spain may have averted an immediate

showdown between the regional government in the Catalan capital Barcelona, and Spain's central government in Madrid.

Ultimately, however, this is but a brief lull in a crisis that still seems set to end with the suspension of Catalan autonomy and a grave stand-off that is increasingly worrying all of Spain's European allies.

Faced with the near certainty that his regional administration will be dissolved by orders of the Spanish authorities and that both he and his closest associates may be arrested and charged with sedition, Mr Carles Puigdemont, president of the regional Catalan government, stopped short of declaring independence at an emotionally charged session of parliament on Tuesday. However, Mr Puigdemont coupled that concession with the assertion that, through a controversial referendum held earlier this month, the Catalans have already "won the right to be an independent country".

He glossed over the fact that Spain's Constitutional Court had judged the referendum illegal, turnout was just 42 percent of those entitled to vote and that the exercise lacked any basic safeguards to ensure fair participation or counting.

Nevertheless, Mr Puigdemont asserted that "the ballots say 'yes' to independence and this is the will I want to go forward with".

Separatist legislators also signed a document promising the eventual establishment of an independent Catalan republic; Mr Puigdemont merely asked for "the suspension of the effects of the declaration of independence for a few weeks, to open a period of dialogue".

Yet, calm and time are precisely the commodities the central authorities in Madrid lack.

For although Spanish Prime Minister

prepared to rule out the option of suspending Catalonia's autonomy and imposing direct rule from Madrid.

"I want to make one thing absolutely clear: as long as the threat of a declaration of independence remains on the political horizon, it's going to be very difficult for the government not to take steps," said the prime minister.

However, Mr Rajoy knows that sticking to a purely legalistic approach is

nationalists.

The snag is how to do so without accepting the claim of Catalan separatists that independence is the ultimate goal. Mr Puigdemont clearly hopes that if any dialogue starts, he could get some EU involvement, and that will work in his favour.

Still, the separatists are, for the first time in years, on the defensive. The announcement that two major Spanish banks are considering relocating their headquarters from Barcelona to Madrid has shifted the debate away from the stirring emotional abstractions of independence to the practical costs of separation.

Clear indications from the EU that should Catalonia get independence, it cannot expect to either be admitted immediately into the EU or keep the euro as its currency, have also reminded Catalan separatists that they may end up paying dearly for their adventure.

And those advocating the maintenance of Spain's unity are also mobilising in Catalonia. A pro-unity demonstration organised by the Societat Civil Catalana, a local non-governmental organisation, attracted hundreds of thousands of Catalans opposed to secession, a useful show of support for the central government.

Meanwhile, Mr Puigdemont, who has no majority in the Catalan Parliament, is coming under attack from a far-left small political movement on whose support he depends, and which wants him to move much faster on independence.

Mr Rajoy has regained, therefore, the upper hand in this crisis. But only up to a point, for all the fateful choices about the future of Spain still lie ahead of him.

Jonathan Eyal is the Europe Correspondent for *The Straits Times*. Copyright: Asia News Network/The Straits Times



Thousands gathered outside the parliament building in Barcelona on Tuesday evening, waving Catalan flags and banners screaming 'democracy' in the hope of witnessing a historic night in a region that remains deeply divided over independence.

PHOTO: AFP/JORGE GUERRERO

Mariano Rajoy is undoubtedly relieved that his government will not need to swing into action against Catalonia immediately, he has no intention of entering into dialogue with Catalan separatists, as long as they persist in their demands for independence.

The uncompromisingly anti-separatist attitude of Spain's political class and media leaves Mr Rajoy with very little room for manoeuvre.

Nor is Spain's central government

beginning to grate with Spain's EU partners, who, while offering support to Spain, do expect the Spanish government to manage the confrontation peacefully and fear that, if mishandled, a festering Catalan crisis could paralyse Spain for years to come and be "bad for the rest of Europe", as EU Council President Donald Tusk admitted earlier this week.

Mr Rajoy will, therefore, come under some pressure to win time and find a mechanism for dialogue with Catalan