

## Deceitful Myanmar military

### Shameless attempt to hide facts

THAT the military and the government of Myanmar have been spinning lies after lies about the Rohingya genocide has once again been confirmed by the falsehood that its army chief has spewed on Thursday. This time he has blamed the world media of what he calls “exaggeration” of the number of refugees that have fled their own country since the start of the brutal, systematic and pre-planned killings of the helpless ethnic minority. He even bins the recent UN report which, among other things, unequivocally says, and something that we have been stressing all along, that the persecution was aimed at clearing the Rakhine State entirely of the Rohingyas.

The reality on the ground is for the world to see. We must restate that it is the indifference of the international community that has led to the lack of empathy to the plight of the Rohingyas. The current crisis was long in the making but, regrettably, the forecast was ignored and in one instance a UN report was suppressed—for whose benefit, one wonders. And certain comments from some countries would seem to have condoned the atrocities.

The ill-intentions of the Myanmar government have become even clearer with the comment of the Myanmar army chief that Rohingyas are not Myanmar citizens. One wonders whether Myanmar is serious about its offer to Bangladesh for talks on Rohingya repatriation. If it were so, the persecution would have stopped and there would not have been continued influx of the Rohingyas.

The situation brooks no further inaction by the UN and the world community. There have been too many statements and too little action. That will not restrain the marauding Myanmar military.

## Getting slow vehicles off highways

### Put plan into action

THE Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA) has been directed by the government to keep highways clear of illegal vehicles like the Nosimon and Karimom that cannot run at 60kmph. The BRTA had issued similar bans before too. Back in August 2015, authorities banned all three-wheelers in 22 highways and the ban went nowhere because simply issuing a directive without taking into consideration the problems of enforcement is likely to fail. It is not only illegally constructed vehicles and three-wheelers which cannot meet the new speed limit being talked about, but the vast majority of vehicles, like trucks laden with goods, cannot meet this speed criteria either.

Yes, something needs to be done about the increasing number of crashes on highways. According to the non-government organisation National Committee to Protect Shipping, Roads and Railways, there were more than 2,400 crashes in the first eight months of this year resulting in at least 2,873 casualties. However, we should be realistic in our expectations.

While banning illegal vehicles like slow-speed three-wheelers Nosimon and Karimom, which are mostly used for either carrying people or goods in rural areas, is imperative, alternatives should be considered to replace them. If they cannot be replaced, then we have to consider the construction of a slow lane on either side of our highways. If 60kmph is the minimum speed limit that will be adhered to from now on, then the slow lane is where slow-moving trucks will move. These are the realities and we expect a more professional response from our authorities to stem the rising death toll due to accidents. Ad hoc measures like banning one type of vehicle or the other will not yield desired results.

# Failing our girls

India's landmark Supreme Court ruling outlawing marital rape of girls below 18 is yet another reminder of just how far behind Bangladesh is in the fight against child marriage



NAHELA NOWSHIN

IT is often said that if you want to know the truth about the world, ask a child. Perhaps, it's an unconditioned mind that lets a child see things for what they really are. And perhaps, it's this

unfiltered view of the world that helps them reduce disturbing realities into simple truths so easily. This sudden realisation dawned on me thanks to a colleague who pointed out the effortlessness with which a teenager captured the irrationality of child marriage in Bangladesh: “A child should be born to a mother, not to another child.”

These are the words of Tuli Debnath, a teenage girl from Mymensingh, who, along with five other schoolgirls, were honoured this Wednesday for their courageous efforts to prevent child marriages in their hometowns. Tuli—who works for a seven-member group called Ghas Foring to prevent child marriages—essentially reinforced the fact that a child cannot be a mother and a mother cannot be a child.

In a strange coincidence, on the same day that Tuli uttered this indisputable truth, neighbouring India marked a historic day in the fight against child marriage. The top court in India ruled that sex with an underage wife (below 18 years of age), despite consent, constitutes rape. The landmark ruling struck down Exception 2 to Section 375 of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) which says that sexual intercourse between a man and his wife—between 15 and 18 years of age—is not rape. The NGO Independent Thought had filed a Public Interest Litigation (PIL) challenging the exception clause since it violates various articles of the Indian Constitution and is directly in conflict with the age of consent which is 18. A Bench of Justices Madan B Lokur and Deepak Gupta observed, “Human rights of a girl child

are very much alive and kicking whether she is married or not and deserve recognition and acceptance.”

This is a huge victory for a country which currently has the highest number of child brides in the world. Many consider this to be an important step towards eradicating child marriage, even though it took 77 years to rewrite an abhorrent law. By criminalising sexual intercourse between a husband and an underage wife, the top court's ruling

country that has the highest rate of child marriage of girls under the age of 15. The far-reaching effects of the “special provision” clause in the Child Marriage Restraint Bill 2017 have been highlighted over and over again, one of which is the failure to recognise statutory rape within a marriage—the polar opposite of what India's Supreme Court ruling has achieved.

Apart from the major offence of essentially legitimising statutory rape, the

discriminatory and is definitely not in the interest of the girl child.”

There are two clear messages here: First, a girl child is a child regardless of whether she is married or not. The cloak of marriage does not take away from the fact that sexual intercourse between the husband and his minor wife violates her bodily integrity and amounts to rape. And Section 375(2) of the IPC which did not criminalise non-consensual sex (not that it can ever be “consensual”) between the girl child and her husband had completely failed to recognise this fact. Second, by explicitly upholding the “interest of the girl child”, the SC made it clear that the interests of a child should be given precedence over societal traditions—again, a 180-degree turnaround from the defence of the “special provisions” clause put forward by the Bangladesh government who argued that the clause would protect the “honour” of girls who have become pregnant out of wedlock, never mind whether the pregnancy is a result of rape. Instead of criminalising sexual intercourse with a girl child below the legal marriageable age (18), this legal loophole would allow rapists to marry their victims and prolong the cycle of physical and mental abuse of the girl child. The problem with the argument of the Bangladesh government boils down to the fact that far from breaking the stigma attached to a girl child being pregnant out of wedlock and addressing the more disturbing aspect of rape, it has itself fallen victim to the same victim-shaming mentality.

At the heart of this matter is how you interpret the “best interests” of the girl child. And its interpretation as the special provisions clause in Bangladesh's new child marriage bill indicates stands in stark contrast to that of India's historic SC ruling. It really makes you wonder why the Bangladesh government has failed to be in tune with the judgment of the highest court of the land in India when Tuli, a teenage girl, is intuitive enough to recognise this simple fact.

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Child Marriage Restraint Bill 2017 that allows child marriage in “special circumstances” in Bangladesh now stands in stark contrast to Indian Supreme Court's landmark ruling that bans sex with child brides.

PHOTO: AFP

killed two birds with one stone: First, by directly addressing marital rape of a child below 18 and second, by indirectly being a “trigger to declaring child marriage void ab initio”. (The Supreme Court however made it clear that it had not touched the issue of marital rape of a woman above 18.)

This is in sharp contrast to the regressive step that Bangladesh took not too long ago by passing a law that basically “reduces minimum marital age to zero”. A shocking step backward for a

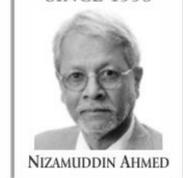
retrogressive bill's proponents in our country have put forth quite a few fallacious arguments which fall flat once juxtaposed against the observations made in India's landmark judgment.

Indian SC Justice Madan B Lokur said: “The exception carved out in the IPC creates an unnecessary and artificial distinction between a married girl child and an unmarried girl child and has no rational nexus with any unclear objective sought to be achieved. This artificial distinction is arbitrary and

# Myanmar military's murderous melodrama



CHINTITO SINCE 1995



NIZAMUDDIN AHMED

MYANMAR has based its entire brutal, shameless operation on unarmed Rohingya civilian men, women and children, on the vaunted single incident of August 25 when reportedly, and not corroborated by any independent authority or news agency, extremists attacked simultaneously more than 30 police posts and an army base in Rakhine State along the border with Bangladesh. If true, suffice to conclude that Myanmar's intelligence is in dire straits.

It befuddles the mind how many activists and how much time would have been necessary on the side of the “insurgents” to plan and execute such a wide-ranging stealth operation, stretched over several miles. According to experts, the manpower on the attacking side would have to be in the thousands, and amazingly, no Myanmar intelligence agency had an inkling of a clue. Therefore, one cannot simply blow away the conspiracy theory that indeed the attacks on army posts were carried out by the Myanmar army and/or their cohorts, so as to level the blame on the Rohingyas for the meticulously planned ethnic cleansing. The result: Over half a million innocent Rohingyas, many riddled with bullet, machete and burn wounds, seeking refuge in Bangladesh.

The Myanmar military said (on August 25 that) about 150 Rohingyas attacked an army base in Taung Bazar village in Buthidaung township. Therefore, attacking thirty installations would require about 5,000 attackers. (Myanmar) Military sources told Reuters (in Yangon) they estimate 1,000 insurgents took part in the offensive. Where were they trained? Where did they set up camp? Is it possible that none on the side of the Myanmar military or police could see any one of them? Where did the thousands of insurgents vanish? Given the gruesome attack on the civilian population they purportedly support, and the 59 insurgents they lost on day one, it was natural that the insurgents would retaliate, or try to make some noise, a *patka* here and an arson attack there, but it is baffling they went absolutely silent.

In another development, a Myanmar army online statement claimed that a mass grave with bodies of 28 Hindus

including several children, allegedly slain by Rohingya Muslim militants, had been discovered on September 24 in Myanmar's restive northern Rakhine State. The same source claimed the following day (September 25) that bodies of another 17 Hindus were discovered.

According to the Myanmar military, ARSA (Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army) elements killed the villagers a month ago on August 25, the same day the group raided police outposts. So, there would actually have to be more insurgents. The disinterred bodies were on display for the press (local and foreign). Why should month-old dead bodies be kept unburied or cremated for two days for the chaperoned press to see on September 27?

despite the country being forced to cede to international pressure in 2011, ending nearly 50 years of military rule, well almost. It took another four years to have a general election that gave the ever-silent Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) a landslide victory. Ardently certain that a *boba* has no enemy, she bizarrely took office as Nidhiram Sardar, sans sword or shield. Any other leader striving for democracy would have refused the status she has been enjoying since April last year as state counsellor (a position similar to prime minister) when it appears state power lies somewhere else in the barracks. Or, is her “helplessness” also a ploy, as she covertly carries out her hate-Rohingya schema?

upset as they are with Myanmar military's madness and its government's collusion, are closer this October to applying various economic, diplomatic and military sanctions against Myanmar. The heinous booby traps laid along the border to kill returning citizens (men, women and children) with internationally banned antipersonnel landmines should pave the way to accelerate embargoes.

According to Tirana Hassan, Amnesty International's Crisis Response Director, reacting in early September, “This is another low in what is already a horrific situation in Rakhine State. The Myanmar military's callous use of inherently indiscriminate and deadly weapons at highly trafficked paths around the border



Rohingya people run towards Bangladesh after a gunshot was heard on the Myanmar side and smoke rises in the vicinity of Rohingya villages.

PHOTO: SOE ZEYA TUN/REUTERS

They are hard to keep even for a couple of hours.

Even if it is assumed that the insurgents killed the Hindus, would it not have been easier for the so-called insurgents to set alight dead bodies rather than taking the time and trouble to dig graves for so many and bury the bodies? The entire story stinks (pun not intended) of an attempt by the ruthless Myanmar junta to fan religious sentiments among Hindus (particularly in India). Incidentally, VOA Burmese could not confirm this account, nor was it possible to verify separate allegations that the military was involved in massing the Hindus.

Myanmar's appetite for isolation and cocoon comfort has not died down

What democratic country in the world today would want to lay landmines under the supervision of a Nobel Peace Prize laureate? This concept is older than World War II, and it is hilarious (and grossly alarming) at a time when the Third is actually being fought over Tweets by Tom in Washington and Jerry in Pyongyang. There is no precedence of revoking a Nobel Prize, but hey Oslo! Would you not do so if it was revealed that a winner in say physics or chemistry or literature was post-award found to have cheated somewhere, sometime? Since we have never had a war-mongering Nobel laureate, peace at that, there is always the cause for a first time.

USA, the EU and some other countries,

is putting the lives of ordinary people at enormous risk.”

Myanmar chose to be isolated for half a century. The world watched in amusement from a distance because its military was a terror within the country, but dormant to the outside. The same military would be foolish to assume that today's united people of the world and the conscientious societies would tolerate its idiosyncrasies for long, especially after cold-blooded murder when thousands of innocents have been uprooted from their homesteads and country.

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## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### Cheating people in the name of “sit-in service”

In the name of “sit-in service”, bus owners in Dhaka are robbing people of their hard-earned money. I am a regular passenger of Bus Route No. 3 which goes from Fulbaria (Gulistan) to Abdullahpur. The local bus service that I regularly use claims to be a “sit-in service” and has increased the bus fare, but the drivers and helpers continue to fill the bus well beyond seat capacity. The situation is more or less the same across the entire city.

We hope that the authorities will focus on this issue seriously so that bus owners and drivers stop cheating ordinary people.

MA Kashem, By email



PHOTO: STAR