

Sushma's message

More substantive action needed

THE Indian External Affairs Minister's comments at the end of her brief visit to Bangladesh merit reaction on two major aspects of the Rohingya issue—the humanitarian and political.

For the first, we commend India's role in providing assistance to more than half a million refugees. However, we would like India to go farther and join hands with Bangladesh to secure more international assistance to tide over a crisis of unprecedented magnitude.

For the political, we are heartened by the change in Indian position. In stressing on the fact that restoration of normalcy is solely dependent on the return of the displaced persons to Rakhine State, India has recognised both the challenges before Bangladesh and the plight of the refugees and the urgency for them to return to their homeland. We regret that India does not see the “textbook case of ethnic cleansing” yet we are happy that the case of “displaced persons” and the need for them to return home has been recognised by India.

While we understand the India-Myanmar strategic association, we would like to point out that India-Bangladesh strategic interest should also appear high in India's radar. As a country with regional influence, the security, social, economic and strategic implications of a long-term presence of Rohingya refugees in the territory of Bangladesh cannot be lost on India.

It is our hope that the “shift” in India's stance on the Rohingya crisis, as indicated by Sushma Swaraj, will go farther in our large neighbour understanding that Bangladesh needs wholehearted—as against only humanitarian—support in solving what is clearly Bangladesh's biggest refugee crisis.

Gas potential in Bhola

Double efforts to discover more

IN the midst of a chronic shortage of gas, the government disclosure of a huge reserve of gas in southern Bhola district is undoubtedly a welcome news. The reserve was claimed to have been found close to the existing Shahbazpur Gas Field. National exploration company BAPEX's managing director has estimated that the reserve has about 0.7 tcf (trillion cubic feet) of untapped natural gas, which will complement the known reserve of about 11-12 tcf.

Any gas find over 0.4 tcf is considered economically viable for exploration. That the reserve has been found in Shahbazpur is a boon because all the necessary infrastructures for exploring the natural resource are already in place. Now what we need is to add the gas from the reserve to the national gas transmission grid. To do it, BAPEX will have to construct a pipeline to the drilling site once preparatory work is done. With an annual consumption of about 1tcf, we now have a mere 12 years of the precious primary fuel supply left. Hence, BAPEX must double its efforts so that we may find other such reserves onshore. There is also a need to engage with foreign companies (like Gazprom) to fully explore our offshore areas because there is no room for complacency. The clock is ticking and it is a race against time to beef up our reserves fast.

As BAPEX managing director says it will take about seven to eight months before gas from the reserve becomes available for use. Hence, the work on preparing infrastructures for the import of LNG (liquefied natural gas) to complement the existing fuel mix must not get left behind because a big gas reserve has been discovered. We are fortunate to have found this gas reserve and hope to see more in the future.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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BCS-mania: an ominous trend

No one can dispute the need of having skilled civil servants for the proper functioning of the state. This, however, cannot outweigh the need of experts in other sectors.

Recently, an ominous trend among university students of desiring to become a BCS cadre concerns us. The students are supposed to dedicate themselves to their academic study, but they are often found studying BCS materials in the library or reading rooms even from the very early days of their university life.

Let alone research work, a large number of students focus more on BCS related studies than their respective academic study. The medical and engineering students are now running after general BCS cadre posts, leaving the professional sectors in a vulnerable condition. It is urgent to hold the rein of this unhealthy race and encourage the students to apply their expertise in their respective fields.

Md. Sadequr Rahman, Maniknagar, Dhaka

The lack of streetlights in Chittagong

Some streets in Chittagong are not equipped with the adequate number of streetlights. Those streets assume an eerie appearance after the evening. Not all the city roads have neon lights. Occasionally, the fluorescent tube lights, meant to use at home, are used as a pathetic substitute. Muggers and other criminals can take advantage of the situation.

There are some open manholes and lost slabs on the pavements that cannot be noticed due to the lack of lights on the streets exposing pedestrians to accidents. We hope the authority will take measures to install more lights on the city streets.

Zabed Wali, Chittagong

Case for a UN Interim Administration in Rakhine

FARHAAN UDDIN AHMED

THE Myanmar military's latest campaign against the Rohingyas began after the attack on multiple police posts in Rakhine on August 25, 2017. The country's military leadership, with the support of radical Buddhist elements, is perpetrating an “ethnic cleansing” campaign killing, raping, maiming, and setting ablaze one Rohingya village after another. Nearly 600,000 Rohingya refugees have crossed into Bangladesh within a span of two months. The world has not witnessed such a large exodus of people in such a

much as possible to meet their basic needs.

Of late, the governments of Bangladesh and Myanmar have been negotiating the repatriation of the Rohingyas, although it is not clear yet whether the negotiations will bear any fruit. However, mere repatriation, without addressing the causes that led to the persecution in the first place, will not guarantee the rights and safety of the returnees. After repatriation, it is quite likely that the Rohingyas will continue to suffer because of the deep-seated hatred and hostility that has been sown into the Burmese society by the radical Buddhist

recommendations made by the Advisory Commission on Rakhine State in its Final Report (Kofi Annan Report). Implementation of the Kofi Annan Report is vital to ensure that there is a possibility of lasting peace in Rakhine. The Report's recommendations deal with issues of citizenship, freedom of movement, humanitarian access, access to media, health, education, security, and justice for the Rohingyas. In time, a permanent UN Observer Mission could be established to monitor the maintenance of peace and security in the long run.

Such a mechanism is not without



PHOTO: REUTERS/ MOHAMMAD PONIR HOSSAIN

short period since the Rwandan genocide in 1994. As a result of this brutal campaign, the majority of Rohingyas are now residing in Bangladesh.

The situation has been further aggravated by the fact that host Bangladesh is itself a poor country, with a high population density, and that the country's southeast region is not the most geographically accessible area, with hilly terrains and lack of proper infrastructure. All these factors have culminated in a crisis that has potentially high political, economic, and social costs for Bangladesh. Despite that, it has continued to keep its borders open for the Rohingyas and has been doing as

elements.

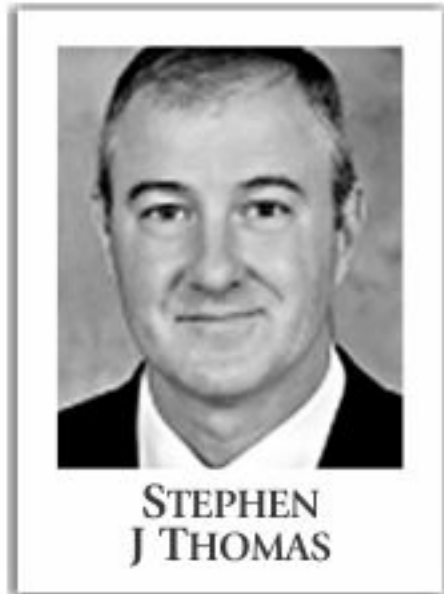
Additionally, most of their homes have been decimated; hence, for the Rohingyas, repatriation at this stage would mean being transferred from one camp (in Bangladesh) to another (in Myanmar). Therefore, the best possible way to ensure a lasting peace and reconciliation would be to establish a UN Interim Administration in the Rakhine.

A UN Interim Administration supported by a UN Peacekeeping Force could be established with a specific mandate to: a) maintain peace and security, b) support humanitarian efforts, and c) oversee the implementation of the

precedent in history. UN peacekeeping missions and interim administrations are established through UN Security Council Resolutions by the exercise of powers enunciated in Chapter VII of the UN Charter. There are numerous instances of the establishment of UN Interim Administrations to maintain security and oversee the transition to peace. UN Interim Administrations in East Timor, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo are some well-known examples. Such interventions are generally supported by a Peacekeeping Force and the Interim Administration is headed by a Special Representative of the Secretary-General (SRSG), who is endowed with legislative

PROJECT ■ SYNDICATE

Pre-empting the next pandemic



STEPHEN J THOMAS

sheer diversity, resilience, and transmissibility of deadly diseases have also highlighted, in the starkest of terms, just how difficult containment and prevention can be.

One threat to our preparedness is our connectedness. It was thanks to easy international travel that in recent years the dengue, chikungunya, and Zika viruses were all able to hitch a ride from east to west, causing massive outbreaks in the Americas and Caribbean. Another threat is more mundane: failing to agree about money. Whatever the reason, the fact is that as long as humans fail to organise a collective and comprehensive defence, infectious diseases will continue to wreak havoc—with disastrous consequences.

Building an effective prevention and containment strategy—being bio-prepared—is the best way to reduce the threat of a global contagion. Preparedness requires coordination among agencies and funders to build networks that enable quick deployment of and access to vaccines, drugs, and protocols that limit a disease's transmission. Simply stated, preparing for the next pandemic means not only building global capacity, but also paying for it.

That's the idea, at least. The reality of bio-preparedness is far more complicated. For starters, the absence of dedicated funding is impeding implementation of long-term prevention strategies in many countries; a new World Bank report finds that only six countries, including the United States, have taken the threat seriously. Meanwhile, public health officials in many parts of the world struggle to respond to disease outbreaks, owing to a dearth of labs and clinics. And many funding agencies, including governments and NGOs, typically offer only one-year commitments, which rules out long-term planning.

For years, scientists, physicians, and civil-society actors have voiced concern over the lack of reliable, meaningful, and

institutionalised investment in pandemic preparedness. These pleas have come, frustratingly, as military funding to thwart bio-attacks, consciously mounted by human actors, has remained robust. But while purposeful and nefarious infectious-disease outbreaks could do massive damage, they remain relatively unlikely. Naturally occurring outbreaks, by contrast, occur regularly and are far more costly, even if they lack the sensational “fear factor” of bioterrorism.

Not that long ago, those of us engaged in the prevention of infectious-disease outbreaks felt more secure about the availability of the resources required to prepare. But in many places, budgets are stagnating, or even declining. This is astonishingly short-sighted, given the

how available funds can be used. It is not uncommon for a grant to be restricted to specific activities, leaving major gaps in a programme's capacity to meet its objectives. A funder may, for example, allow the renovation of an existing lab but not the construction of a new one; or funds may support the purchase of a diagnostic machine but not the training of those required to operate it. In many developing countries, communities do not even have the physical buildings in which to test, monitor, or store dangerous pathogens. Myopic funding that overlooks key elements of the big picture is money poorly spent.

Add to these challenges the difficulty of paying staff or ensuring reliable

is staggering. To overcome them, we need to redefine how we think about preparedness, moving from a reactive position to a more proactive approach. Money earmarked for preparedness must be allocated at levels sufficient to have the required impact. Limitations on how it can be spent should be loosened. Funding sources must be opened to allow for multi-year commitments. Health-care providers and first responders must receive proper training. And long-term solutions such as establishing and connecting bio-surveillance systems should be expanded and strengthened, to enable public-health professionals around the world to track and report human and animal diseases and plan defences together.



relative costs of prevention versus response. For example, what would it have cost to build the clinical and laboratory infrastructure and provide the training needed to identify and prevent the recent Ebola outbreak in West Africa? Precise figures are elusive, but I have no doubt it would have been less than the billions of dollars spent on containment. Preparedness pays.

It is not only the lack of funding that is raising alarms; so are restrictions on

electricity and other essential services, and it becomes clear that preparing for disease outbreaks requires broad engagement with the international aid community. But at the moment, onerous spending rules and weak financial commitments are tying the hands of those working to prevent the next serious disease outbreak.

The number of obstacles faced by scientists and public health experts in the race to contain deadly infectious diseases

Public health is an essential element of global security. Failing to invest appropriately in prevention of infectious-disease outbreaks puts all of us at risk, whenever or wherever the next one occurs.

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