

How 'humanitarian technology' can help deal with Rohingya crisis

Upcoming mayoral elections

Litmus test for the EC

THE upcoming mayoral polls in six important city corporations will be the first major test for the current Election Commission (EC). Historically, our record of holding polls unmarred by dissension and violence has been poor resulting in the sapping of public confidence in our democratic system and institutions. The country is expecting to hold what is arguably one of the most important parliamentary elections in its history next year, especially given that the previous one in 2014 was sullied by controversy. Thus, for the EC and the various parties that will be contesting the polls, the mayoral election could be taken as a preparatory test before that.

How the EC handles its responsibilities will play a big role in restoring the confidence of the people in the system. We hope that the EC would prioritise the holding of free and fair elections, and be able to fend off extraneous pressure, while sticking to the laws and bylaws of election. The political parties also have a major role to play in holding a good election. This includes shunning violence and leaving the final choice to the people and not deciding or compelling the voters to choose according to the wishes of the political parties.

For our democracy to survive, people's confidence in the electoral system must be restored. This is why next year's parliamentary election will be so crucial, this being the chance before that for all the stakeholders to demonstrate that they are up to the election in the right spirit. We hope all stakeholders will make the most of it.

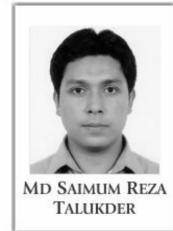
Yes, responsibility lies with Myanmar

But it has to be compelled to fulfil it

WHAT we heard from the acting US assistant secretary of state was the restatement of the obvious. The world knows that the responsibility for the unprecedented humanitarian disaster resulting from a well-planned state-conducted ethnic cleansing which meets all the definitions of genocide, is on the shoulders of the government and the military of Myanmar. But the question is, will Myanmar roll back its actions and forgo a strategic objective in Rakhine—to empty it of an ethnic minority community that is an integral part of the country—on mere strictures? Admittedly, the US government has done substantively more than the rest of the world to compel Myanmar to desist from perpetrating violence on the Rohingyas. But it should have been clear to the US and the rest of the international community that Naypyidaw is inured to all kinds of criticisms and palliative measures—most of which it can circumvent because of the support it continues to get from three powerful countries.

That Myanmar is not sincere in its bid for resolution of the problem or about taking back the Rohingyas, despite expressing its intention to do so, is very clear. It had continued to persecute the Rohingyas while seeking dialogue with Bangladesh. Its devious intentions were made even more transparent when it put the 1992 agreement as the benchmark for repatriation. And its slyness was confirmed by Suu Kyi's comment that it was Bangladesh which was deliberately delaying the return of the Rohingyas because it wanted to draw more international aid.

The matter has gone beyond expression of mere pious hopes. More substantive actions must be taken. We reiterate the prime minister's call to the Commonwealth countries to exert pressure on the Myanmar government to stop persecution on its Rohingya citizens and take them back at the earliest.



MD SAIMUM REZA TALUKDER

SINCE August 25, 2017, the world has experienced one of the most brutal and fastest-growing humanitarian crises that led to the "textbook example of ethnic cleansing" involving the Rohingya community in Myanmar. Being a neighbouring country and respectful of their human rights, Bangladesh has since provided shelter to more than 600,000 Rohingyas who fled persecution by the Myanmar army and their local cohorts. Most of these refugees (although Bangladesh doesn't give them the refugee status, and instead considers them as displaced Myanmar citizens) are women and children.

We would not have realised the actual level of devastation on the ground had it not been for the satellite images and drone footage showing burnt villages and houses as frightened people, with whatever left of their belongings, crossed over into Bangladesh to save their lives. We also had audio-video clips and still pictures shared on social media by the victims, journalists and human rights activists. These digital technologies have revealed the gravity of the situation, mobilised popular opinion and played a crucial role to make the international community and governments listen and respond.

The role of information and communications technology in bringing up real stories about the humanitarian crises unfolding in different parts of the world has been the subject of much discussion in recent times. These technologies, besides collecting evidence, are also being used to coordinate distribution of humanitarian aids in remote areas and conflict zones.

A new term coined to address this emergent field of technology—"humanitarian technology"—is now being used by the rights activists, aid workers, social and political activists, scientists and researchers, and applied to a broadly defined context of crises, including humanitarian disasters. They are using the technologies to collect, process and disseminate information from the conflict and crisis zones worldwide.

According to an article published by the International Committee of the Red Cross, humanitarian technologies have fundamentally altered how humanitarian crises are detected and addressed, and how information is collected, analysed and disseminated. These developments are changing the possibilities for prevention, response and resource mobilisation for the



Aerial view of a burned Rohingya village near Maungdaw, north of Rakhine state, Myanmar on September 27, 2017.

humanitarian actors and the affected communities alike. They have been helping us to understand the gravity and impact of the situation on which short- and long-term policies for action are being made by the state and non-state actors. Also, these humanitarian technologies can help in evidence documentation during a crisis or conflict, which can later be used to find its root cause(s) or punish the offenders.

But using humanitarian technology can also compromise the objective of the humanitarian action and obscure issues of accountability towards the victims. Therefore, how technological innovation affects humanitarian action needs a critical enquiry. For example, Bangladesh government is collecting biometric data of the Rohingya refugees although it does not have any data protection law. It has purchased software from Tiger IT (*The Daily Star*, September 11), a private company, and we do not know under which policy this software company will ensure the protection of the personal data of the Rohingyas.

There is also the risk that the data might somehow be leaked to an adversary group (through hacking, for example) which will put the Rohingyas in danger during future repatriation. Moreover, international organisations like the UNHCR are also collecting baseline data of the Rohingyas through a data-gathering smartphone app. If there is no coordination among Bangladesh government and international

humanitarian organisations on this matter, any difference between the databases might create an opportunity for the Myanmar authorities to discredit and delay the repatriation process.

Meanwhile, the Rohingyas are contacting their relatives inside Myanmar through WhatsApp, Viber and other social media services (*Dhaka Tribune*, October 26). As the mainstream media has largely failed to provide real-time information, victims are finding alternative ways (new media) to communicate inside Myanmar. For example, Rohingya refugees are reportedly receiving various video clips, text messages and still pictures of atrocities through dozens of WhatsApp groups to fill the information gap. But often the source of information is untraceable, and some of them are found to be fake news. This also raises the possibility of politically motivated disinformation which might be spread by adversary parties like ARSA and the Myanmar military junta. It also raises security concerns for the governments of Bangladesh, India and Myanmar.

But there is also the concern that over-securitisation might curtail the freedom of expression and the right to information of the Rohingyas as well. Any restriction on using humanitarian technologies might hamper the re-unification and repatriation initiatives for the Rohingyas in the long run. For example, without the humanitarian technology, Kamal and his younger

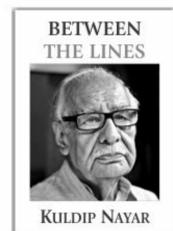
brother Nazir would not have been able to reunite lost Rohingya refugees with their family members through "lost and found" booth in Kutupalong Refugee Camp (Al Jazeera, September 27; *Dhaka Tribune*, October 17).

It's important that the human rights of Rohingyas, despite being a stateless community, are respected and protected by all the government and non-government actors. I think there should not be any limit on the use of humanitarian technologies. Rather, the victims, governments and humanitarian aid agencies should be allowed to use them as per the "Responsible Data Principle," according to which the collection, storage, and use of data should be carefully planned; and data should be collected for a specific purpose and deleted once that purpose has been fulfilled.

Any surveillance on the Rohingyas or restriction against the spread of fake news and politically motivated propaganda should be strictly targeted and duly authorised by a judicial authority. Also, there should be greater coordination on the use of humanitarian technologies, supported by a multi-stakeholder right-based approach which will include the victims, local people, government and non-government organisations involved in the process.

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Reopening the Gandhi assassination case was long overdue



KULDIP NAYAR

I think the Supreme Court's order to appoint an amicus curiae in Mahatma Gandhi's assassination case is important. More about how it happened and why are two points

which need to be pursued. The plea filed by Dr Pankaj Phadnis, a trustee of Abhinav Bharat, however, suggests a foreign hand. But that remains to be proven.

I recall that the assassination was the biggest security lapse. I was working in the news desk of *Anjam*, an Urdu daily, when PTI teleprinter rang the bell which a news agency would do only in rare cases. I jumped from the desk to see the story. It said, "Mahatma Gandhi shot." There was no other detail. I asked my colleague, who had a motorbike, to drop me at the Birla House where there was practically no security. One person manned an apology for a door.

Today, when Mahatma Gandhi's assassination is recalled with a sense of loss and sorrow, the point forgotten is that it was the biggest lapse of security. The government had ample evidence to infer that a radical Hindu group was out to kill Mahatma. Yet very little security was provided to counter the plot.

Only 48 hours earlier had Madan Lal of the radical group placed a bomb at the back wall of Gandhiji's prayer meeting platform. I used to attend the prayer meeting. I was there on the day the blast took place. The Mahatma showed no concern and conducted prayers as if nothing had happened. I too thought that it must be a cracker. Only when I read the following day's newspapers did I realise how close Gandhiji was to death. Sardar Patel was then the home

minister. He submitted his resignation to admit his failure. But Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru told him that the Mahatma wanted both of them to build a modern India. Even the ban on the RSS was lifted.

The home ministry at that time should have probed more to understand how deep the Hindu right had spread. Even Sardar Patel had remarked at that time that the RSS had created an "atmosphere" where something like this

yet gotten from the home ministry the papers on the Transfer of Power, a title which the British used to bring out a three-volume book within two or three years of their departure to tell their side of the story.

Soon after the Mahatma's assassination, when I reached the Birla House, I did not see anybody guarding the place where Gandhiji fell after having been shot dead. Some blood was on the path leading to the prayer platform.



It's strange that no police officer of that time has left a plausible account of the events leading up to Gandhi's assassination.

could happen. When I joined the ministry in 1955 as information officer and served there for nearly 10 years, I tried to find some leads. There was not a shred of evidence to make me infer that the case was thoroughly probed. Or, maybe, there is something incriminating involving some persons in the government that the latter does not wish to disclose. The Archives of India has not

There was no policeman around to ensure the preservation of blood—important evidence.

Why has no government gone back to those days to reconstruct events? I can understand the BJP's diffidence because its mentor, the RSS, did not even want a probe to begin with. But the Congress governments should have perhaps dug deeper.

The only piece of information is the trial and judgment delivered by the then Punjab High Court at Simla. It is an open secret that some ladies of the civil society knitted pullovers for Godse. The government, for reasons known to it, has been reticent on these things.

The 132-year history of the Congress hardly brings out what the followers of Gandhiji went through after his assassination and what they are going through today. The government looks at them with suspicion as if they are trying to oust the government. The power which the BJP wields is unchecked. In a democratic set up, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has cornered all the power and rules the country by himself. The party pays lip sympathy and puts up his photo at meetings because it attracts votes. Even otherwise, the Mahatma hardly fits into the free market economy and the inequitable growth.

No doubt, the law and order machinery at that time bungled. But it is strange that no police officer of that time has left a plausible account of the events leading up to the assassination. It is true that a few Hindu extremists were arrested. Yet I believe that the plot was larger, involving scores of people at high places. The confession of Swami Aseemanand, connected with the Malegaon bomb blasts, has shown that the network of Hindu ultras was quite wide. So must have been the case when Gandhiji was shot dead.

Tushar Gandhi, who moved for the first time in the apex court, said he can explain his locus in the case and opposed the plea, saying there was no point in reopening the case. The apex court, which has appointed a senior advocate as an amicus curiae in the matter, said it would wait for his report before going ahead with the case.

Kuldip Nayar is an eminent Indian columnist.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Allegations of anomalies in results

Recently, a news report appeared in different news portals about an HSC candidate who, despite obtaining only 33 marks in English 1st paper, has ironically gotten the chance to study English in Dhaka University. Another student from Comilla Board, who obtained GPA 3.5 in English, secured the third position in the recently held BUET entrance test.

These incidents show that something went wrong with their results, particularly in English. It is mentionable that a poor GPA in English limits a student's opportunity in university entrance exams. Despite many complaints from the students and their guardians, the board authorities simply refuse to investigate whether any anomalies might have taken place while preparing the results.

The authorities concerned must look into such allegations sincerely and determine whether there were any technical faults or teachers' negligence. Otherwise, such incidents, even if sporadic, will erode students' confidence in the existing educational system.

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PHOTO: STAR