

US position on Rohingya crisis

Focus should be on resolving it soon

THE US Secretary of State's comment that whatever is happening to the Rohingyas in Myanmar is not "ethnic cleansing," despite mounting evidence to the contrary, is surprising. His views, we're constrained to say, echo Myanmar's official position in this regard, and contradict earlier reports that the US may recognise the crisis as ethnic cleansing and follow it up with punitive measures including sanctions on the country.

Mr Tillerson has called for an "independent inquiry" into the situation in Rakhine, although independent agencies, including the UN and the US' own Holocaust Memorial Museum, and traditional US allies including France and the UK, have already given their verdict. The US must understand that its latest position will only reinforce Myanmar's sense of impunity.

The fact is, more than 615,000 Rohingya refugees have fled the country since late August, and the number is rising with each passing day. There must be very compelling reasons for them to leave their own country and seek refuge in Bangladesh. And that is what must be addressed.

It doesn't really matter how the US chooses to characterise the crisis. What's important is that instead of waiting for a "credible probe" to confirm that there is indeed a systemic plan to empty Rakhine State of Rohingyas, the US, as the most powerful country in the world, should help to ameliorate their present condition. Nearly a million Rohingya refugees are living in Bangladesh now, which is putting a tremendous strain on Bangladesh. So, the US should use its influence to persuade Myanmar to end the violence immediately, to take back the Rohingyas immediately, and ensure that they are provided with all the security they deserve as citizens of that country.

Food assistance for poor hampered

Why are government stocks low?

THIS year, the ultra poor are going to have a hard time. The many safety net programmes that involve low-cost food distribution are in a state of doldrums for a number of reasons. First, we suffered devastating floods. Then there were the twin issues of farmers being unable to sell their paddy to the rice mills on the one hand, and the delay in government procurement. To top it all, the authorities decided to import non-parboiled rice in the hope that poor people would buy it. Unfortunately, this rice went to waste as there were very few takers. The revised plan was to introduce this non-traditional rice into the social safety food programmes and that didn't work either.

Flash floods notwithstanding, we have gone from one blunder to another and today the poor are paying the price. The public food distribution system (PFDS) distributed 7.28 lakh tons of food during July-October last year. This year, this distribution has fallen by nearly half to 4.53 lakh tons. We simply do not have the food and one of the most important rice distribution programmes of the government, i.e. the Tk10 per kilo rice destined for the ultra-poor is yet to start. Due to low stocks, the authorities have been forced to curtail its programmes and raise the cost of rice at the same time.

While 3.8 lakh beneficiaries in the 6 flood-hit Haor districts will be buying rice at Tk30 per kilo till January 2018, the same is not true for a major portion of other flood affected people from the 34 districts which were also affected by the floods. All in all, an unmitigated mess! And the sad part is that there is no talk of holding those responsible to account for allowing government food stocks to dwindle and letting down millions of hardcore poor in the country.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Commercial coffee farming

A number of entrepreneurs have successfully tried their luck at cultivating coffee in Madhupur and Chittagong Hill Tracts. According to multiple media reports, they increased their investment to produce larger quantities of coffee after having run successful tests.

The most useful thing about cultivating coffee is that it does not require separate land. One can grow coffee plants in the midst of an existing farming land such as tea gardens. Therefore, Bangladesh Tea Board may want to assess whether coffee can be cultivated commercially along with tea in the same field. As the number of urban middle-income families continues to increase, the demand for coffee is also growing. If we can facilitate coffee cultivation indigenously, it will have a positive impact on the economy.

Ashraf Hossain, Bashabo

CORRIGENDUM

An editorial published by this newspaper on November 16, 2017 carried the title "NTCB – a den of mismanagement." The title should have been "NCTB – a den of mismanagement." The inadvertent error is regretted.

Asean Summit and the Rohingya issue

Strategic sensitivities or eroding credibility?

MOHAMMED PARVEZ IMDAD

THIS year's Asean Summit ended on November 15 with the commitment to forge cooperation for peace, security and development. Asean and other world leaders attending the summit also pledged to boost business, investment and trade.

As regards the South China Sea dispute, the Summit called for frank understanding and further dialogue which should prevent conflict. No specific Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) was signed to reflect the process of a gradual resolution. But it was agreed that the adoption of a "code of conduct" in the South China Sea could be a "stabiliser" for the region.

Asean leaders were implicitly critical of North Korea's threats of using nuclear missiles but recognised China's proposal for consultations to reduce tension. A key outcome was the signing of a MOU on the "rights of the migrant workers", viewed as a landmark achievement, after a decade of negotiations.

All things considered, the Summit seemingly concluded on a positive note. However, it could not present focused views and concrete actions in resolving the critical Rohingya crisis. The meeting avoided any resolution that would call upon Aung San Suu Kyi and her government to undertake their required role in resolving the crisis they created.

The traditionally conservative but seemingly forward-looking Asean literally avoided taking appropriate views and recommending actions in dealing with the issue. The only exceptions were the observations by Canada's Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres. They both cautioned Asean members of the consequences of bypassing the issue and reiterated that the humanitarian crisis involving the Rohingyas may cause "regional instability and radicalisation".

However, most of the countries did not exert adequate pressure on the Myanmar leader to take back the Rohingyas and ensure peace and security in Myanmar's Rakhine province. Much to the disappointment of the international community, the Asean Summit could not even come up with a specific proposal for stopping the genocide being committed by the Myanmar military in Rakhine state.

Even a "Code of Conduct" similar to that undertaken for the South China Sea could have been visible evidence of Asean's responsiveness in mitigating the severity of the Rohingya crisis. Similarly, Asean leaders could have considered adopting another "Code of Conduct" to protect the rights and privileges of minorities in all countries. Had Asean taken these initiatives, they would have added value to the UN Human Rights covenants, contributed to firming up

new elements for a renewed global approach for "stateless and displaced" people.

Another deviation from the standard inevitable outcomes of the Summit was the deliberate oversight of issues relating to human rights and civil liberties. Regrettably, these initiatives were absent. Leaders could not visibly demonstrate adequate commitment and vision to address these issues in the near future. On the contrary, a couple of Asian economic powerhouses offered increased economic assistance to Myanmar on the sidelines of the Summit, whereas a couple of key global development financing institutions have curtailed lending to Myanmar.

Leaders of Asean would have done justice to their own agendas for peace and security had the Summit Declaration reflected how Bangladesh has responded to the Rohingya crisis. Bangladesh's response and handling of the crisis is an



Has Asean's silence on the Rohingyas been one of strategic sensitivity?

PHOTO: AFP

exemplary gesture of support to distressed individuals and extraordinary diligence in ensuring peace and stability in the region.

While Bangladesh has repeatedly called for substantive and result-oriented collaboration with Myanmar, Myanmar's response has been minimal. Asean should have noted that Myanmar is sowing the seeds of discord and destabilisation, the costs of which would be too much for the region to bear. Additionally, Myanmar's actions will adversely impact regional cooperation frameworks and potentials, both in Southeast Asia and South Asia.

Historically, Myanmar's track-record has never been compliant with basic norms of democracy and rule of law, which is why it was under sanctions for several years. Events like Myanmar's handling of their own "Saffron

is urgently called for, as relevance of the previous agreement has significantly diminished. Taking into account Myanmar's rigid and negative stance on the issue, a bilateral approach is unlikely to give any expected results. While bilateral consultations may continue, extensive multilateral understanding and offer of support to resolve the crisis could contribute to growing international consensus in resolving the issue.

Keeping in view the extent and magnitude of the crisis, it would be expedient to suggest coordination among Asean and other international organisations in regard to the following actions: (i) refer to the genocide, exodus and plight of Rohingyas as ruthless violation of human rights and emphasise

bilateral and multilateral consultations on the Rohingya issue (vii) Finally, should there be a need for "safe zones" for Rohingyas once it is possible for them to return to their homes in Myanmar, Asean may coordinate with the European Union and United Nations for the creation of such safe zones.

Has Asean's silence on the Rohingyas been one of strategic sensitivity? If so, this makes extremely limited sense, as further delays may worsen the situation and make things more difficult to solve in future. In addition, is there a chance that the silence and inaction of institutions like Asean might erode their credibility? One hopes not.

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America's grim reality of gun violence

Without stricter gun control, the spectre of mass shootings will continue to haunt the US

ON the night of October 1, 2017, Stephen Paddock, from his hotel room on the 32nd floor of the Mandalay Bay hotel in Las Vegas, sprayed bullets at 22,000 concertgoers, killing at least 59 people and injuring more than 500 in the deadliest mass shooting in US history. Twenty-three guns were found in his room and more in his house later.

A month later, on November 5, a man in black opened fire on a rural church in San Antonio, South Texas, killing 26 people including children, and wounding about 20 others. Then on November 14, a



FBI agents and police are seen outside the Rancho Tehama Elementary School in northern California after a shooting on November 14, 2017.

PHOTO: ELIJAH NOUVELAGE/AFP

gunman in northern California killed four people, and it was later found that he had fatally shot his wife and stashed her body beneath the floorboards of their home.

The US is one of the very few countries

disaster. For instance, former Louisiana Governor Bobby Jindal, a strong supporter of gun rights, criticised former President Obama for trying to score "cheap political points" when he called

for tighter gun control after a mass shooting in South Carolina. Wayne LaPierre, the CEO of the National Rifle Association (NRA), once claimed, "The only thing that stops a bad guy with a gun is a good guy with a gun." This is false. States with more guns or lax gun control have more deaths by shooting, including suicides.

The US is the largest importer and exporter of small arms and light weapons. At least 45 states in the country allow some form of "open carry" of firearms while 27 states have "stand your ground" laws that allow citizens to use guns if they feel that their lives are threatened. The highest number of firearm deaths is among African Americans, while white American children have the highest rate of accidental deaths by firearms. More gun ownership means more policemen killed or killing and more suicides.

An analysis of firearm mortality by state in 2015 was done by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). The top three states with the highest number of deaths (by firearms) per 100,000 people were found to be Texas, California and Florida, while Rhode Island, Hawaii and Vermont had the lowest. More lives have been lost in gun-related deaths in the US since 1968 than there have been deaths of American citizens in all the wars the country has fought, wrote Nicholas Kristof in *The New York Times*.

Interpretation of the Second Amendment to the US Constitution, which gives citizens the right to bear arms, has raised much controversy. It states, "A well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms shall not be infringed." It was adopted in the early years of independence when the federal system was still often a suspect. Before 1900, Supreme Court rulings held that it applied only to the federal government and not individual states. However, later the Supreme Court ruled that regardless of

laws in individual states which restricted ownership of guns by individuals (i.e. not in state militias), they did have the right to have guns for lawful self-defence in their homes. Americans with a "frontier mentality" believe that this is an inalienable right. Sadly, this belief, backed by the powerful gun lobby, has cost far too many lives.

California's Mulford Act enacted in 1967 banned the open carrying of loaded firearms in public places. The Gun Control Act of 1968 banned gun sales to most felons, drug users, and mentally ill people.

But since the 1970s the NRA has fought back, with considerable success. Just last year, the NRA reportedly spent USD 55 million in the 2016 election, although insiders claim that the total is far greater. In many states congressmen and senators know that NRA's support or opposition can be a decisive factor in their success or failure in elections.

The human mind is unpredictable. A sudden shock, a drunken rage, vicious anger or mental instability can lead to an impulsive, violent act bringing about tragic consequences if firearms are readily available. The fact is that more gun control is necessary to bring down the number of gun-related deaths.

Another scary reality is that men like Stephen Paddock who have no prior record of crime or insanity have the available means to kill. Some gun rights advocates would accept banning automatic weapons—although to simply draw the line there is not nearly good enough.

Gun control is one of many realms of polarisation in American politics. Despite much opposition to the gun lobby, especially among Democrats, the shameful fact remains that the carnage of innocent lives continues with little sign of change in the future, particularly in an America led by President Trump.

When will America see reason?

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