

Rohingyas still fleeing Myanmar

Continued violence contrary to agreement

DESPITE the agreement signed between Bangladesh and Myanmar on repatriating stranded Rohingyas, we are still witnessing Rohingyas crossing the border into Bangladesh. According to a report by AFP, more than 3,000 refugees have come into Bangladesh since the two sides inked an agreement on repatriation less than week ago.

Clearly, the guiding principles of the agreement that was signed included the following: "Myanmar had agreed to take necessary steps to halt the outflow of Myanmar residents to Bangladesh, to restore normalcy in Northern Rakhine" and that the government there would help in returning these displaced people to safely return to their original places of residence. But regrettably, that Rohingyas continue to come to Bangladesh is a failure on Myanmar's part to live up to the agreement.

It is obvious that the violence that ripped through the Rakhine state over the past months has not stopped, in which case, precisely how will the agreement be implemented? Are we then to assume that the agreement signed was a ploy by the Myanmar side to ease off some of the international condemnation it had been facing due to its failure to safeguard the physical security of the Rohingya populace?

In an earlier editorial on the November 23 Agreement, we had stated clearly that the real test of Myanmar's commitment to fulfil the provisos of the agreement can only be demonstrated by Myanmar abjuring the path of violence in the Rakhine State. The continued exodus of Rohingyas doesn't reflect that.

Sexual violence rampant

Fifty raped in one district alone in 10 months

BANGLADESH Mahila Parishad has revealed that at least 50 women and children were raped in Thakurgaon district alone in the last ten months. They prepared the report based on the data from local hospitals where the victims were admitted or took treatment. We wonder how many of these cases were reported to the police. And what did the local police do to catch the perpetrators?

According to Ain o Salish Kendra, as many as 1,378 women fell victim to rape, sexual harassment and other forms of violence in the first nine months of this year. We are horrified at the increase of such crimes.

Clearly, low conviction rate in rape cases is the main reason for this rise in sexual violence against women. It is a matter of concern that less than two percent of rape cases filed in the country have ended in conviction in the last five years. Other factors behind this rise include out of court settlements, reluctance of the police to record such cases, the existence of Section 155 (4) of the Evidence Act which favours the rapists, etc.

Although we have identified the reasons behind this rise in violence against women and have repeatedly demanded that the culture of impunity must end, nothing seems to have improved. The reports of different rights bodies have revealed that violence against women has, in fact, increased in 2017 compared to the previous years.

We need a strong justice system that would ensure no rapist gets away with impunity and the victims get justice. We believe that quick disposal of rape cases and conviction would be a deterrent to future perpetrators.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Nuisance of illegally parked cars

Monday's lead news report in *The Daily Star* on illegal parking in the city should not come as a shock to anyone. I, along with millions of Dhaka residents, bear witness to this on a daily basis. Every single day, I see cars parked on both sides of Panthapath road on my commute to work and back home. Especially since Panthapath has so many hospitals, how can authorities allow cars to be illegally parked on a road which sees the regular plying of ambulances? Do they not realise that they are risking people's lives? It is sad to see that we have grown accustomed to the apathy of city authorities and seem to have resigned to such a fate. I hope the day comes when we as citizens no longer have to put up with such nuisance.

Ashutosh Talukdar, *By email*



PHOTO: STAR

ROHINGYA CRISIS

China's peace plan and where things now stand

THE OVERTON WINDOW



ERESH OMAR JAMAL

THE Rohingya crisis has been tough on Bangladesh. First, because of the sheer scale of the influx from Myanmar and its continuity and second because Bangladesh has

had to witness them from up close which always makes it more difficult.

The only exceptions to this must be those who commit such atrocities themselves, en masse, as factions within Myanmar are alleged to have done as pointed out by the UN, US, UK, France and a number of human rights organisations among countless others. Which is

influential in the region. Although even then, one cannot help but admit that this lack of support, to some extent, is of Bangladesh's own making, as its inadequacies and weaknesses over the years have left it with very little diplomatic leverage.

Nevertheless, the most positive recent development in regards to this crisis has been China's proposed peace plan, which both Bangladesh and Myanmar have formally agreed to. The first phase of this plan, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi said, "is to effect a ceasefire on the ground, to return to stability and order, so the people can enjoy peace and no longer be forced to flee." The second and third parts of the plan are to facilitate an orderly return of those who have fled to Bangladesh from Myanmar to their homeland, and "to work toward a

pose major problems moving forward as many have already pointed out, especially given the current state of relationship between the two countries and the lack of sympathy that the Myanmar government has shown towards Bangladesh, even in response to Bangladesh's immense patience in dealing with Myanmar's seemingly outright hostile activities. Such past attitude by Myanmar also puts into question its sincerity in adhering to the arrangement, which states that the two countries reiterate "their firm conviction to resolve their problems amicably and peacefully through bilateral negotiations on the basis of mutual understanding, accommodation, trust and goodwill and maintain peace and tranquillity on their borders."

While it is difficult to say that



More than three months into the latest influx of Rohingya refugees, they continue to stream out of Myanmar into Bangladesh, saying they have lost sources of livelihood such as farms and fisheries.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

why sceptics find it so hard to believe that those making the decisions in Myanmar have, or are willing to, act in good faith with Bangladesh in regards to repatriating and ending the violence against its minorities, which has harmed Bangladesh's interest in many ways, while rendering homeless more than 600,000 men, women and children now living, if it could be called that, in makeshift camps in Bangladesh.

Another reason why this crisis has been so hard on Bangladesh is the lack of substantive support it has received from many of its close partners, particularly India and China, the two most

long-term solution based on poverty alleviation."

Moreover, according to the "Arrangement on Return of Displaced Persons from Rakhine State" signed between Bangladesh and Myanmar (on November 23), the two countries also "have agreed" to outline some "general principles, policy aspects and modalities" needed "to ensure smooth conduct of return of displaced Myanmar residents from Rakhine State expeditiously and their integration into Myanmar society." These "general guiding principles" are 19 in number and seem vague at first sight.

And this lack of concretisation could

Bangladesh has shown anything other than a willingness to amicably and peacefully resolve the issues it has with Myanmar, the same cannot be said about Myanmar thus far. Although the latest agreement does provide Myanmar with the perfect opportunity to prove its critics wrong, and re-establish some of the trust and goodwill it has lost with Bangladesh.

But given Myanmar's lack of concern in the past for the interest of Bangladesh and the minorities that have fled from its own territories, how likely is it that Myanmar is willing to make the necessary compromises and take the required steps to establish permanent peace in the

region? Critics say not very. However, the truth is that only time can tell.

What is interesting though is that according to reports, Myanmar's army has replaced the general in charge of Rakhine State, Major General Maung Maung Soe—transferring him from his post as the head of Western Command in Rakhine—only a couple of weeks back. Moreover, the impetus that China has provided could also prompt a shift in its position. For example, according to Song Qingrun, a research fellow at the China Institute of Contemporary International Relations, "China's thinking is to resolve the Rohingya issue through development in Rakhine State" ("Decoding China's proposal to address Rohingya crisis", November 22, China Global Television Network).

Referring to the Chinese foreign minister's comment about China building an economic corridor with Myanmar—starting from China's southern Yunnan Province and going down to Mandalay in Myanmar, before splitting east to Yangon and west to Kyaukpyu, a town in Rakhine State—Song explained that "China will use its capital, technology and other resources to help Myanmar to develop the poor area and decrease the causes of their conflicts."

Whether the Myanmar authorities see things quite like this is difficult to say. But what is certainly true is that what Myanmar must now be aware of fully is that should Myanmar make an about-turn again—after China has tried to act as a mediator—it will also be irritating China, something which it can ill afford to do, particularly in the face of such widespread criticism from everyone else. Thus it is difficult to see how Myanmar can now afford to refuse China's request to stop the violence, and not work with Bangladesh to take back its nationals.

However, what Bangladesh (and China too, simply in the interest of regional stability) must remain insistent upon is that this time the violence against minorities in Myanmar must permanently be brought to a halt. That too should be included in the negotiations.

And lastly, on November 24 the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees reportedly said that conditions in Rakhine State "are not in place to enable safe and sustainable returns" for more than 600,000 Rohingya refugees. This the Myanmar authorities must address as it cannot expect those who have fled to return to the horrific conditions that they had escaped from in the first place. And neither should it expect that by delaying the process of addressing these issues, it would be able to pull the wool over Bangladesh's eyes this time.

Eresh Omar Jamal is a member of the editorial team at *The Daily Star*.

Easing the pressure on Dhaka

Developing climate resilient and migrant-friendly secondary cities

POLITICS OF CLIMATE CHANGE



SALEEMUL HUQ

THE second Annual National Conference on Urban Resilience was just held in Dhaka and in three days it brought together several hundred people from different sectors

including the central government, local government, mayors and town planners, as well as researchers, academics, NGOs and private sector actors to discuss the future pathways to build urban resilience in Bangladesh.

While the first annual conference, held a year ago, focused mostly on the problems of life in cities as well as urbanisation, this year the discussions moved toward solutions to those problems.

I will not go into the many issues discussed and recommendations made, but will highlight the major overarching issues and propose one possible solution.

The first of the three main overarching problematic issues for Bangladesh is the population of the country, which, despite major gains in reducing the growth rate, is still headed towards well over the 200 million mark within the next two decades. Most of these people will be young and in need of education and skills. A problem closely associated with this is the rapid rural to urban migration that is already taking place, which means that the country will have a 50 percent urban population in less than two decades.

The second overarching issue is that in Bangladesh, most of this rural-to-urban migration ends up in Dhaka, which is already the fastest growing mega-city in the world and will find it almost impossible to absorb more and more migrants.

The third and final overarching issue is climate change and its impacts, mainly in low-lying coastal areas. This will inevitably cause millions of people to eventually

ally lose their livelihoods of farming and fishing due to climate change-induced sea level rise and force them to migrate to Dhaka.

Given this three-pronged set of overarching issues, one possible approach worth exploring is presented below.

We should consider investing in at least a dozen secondary cities to enable them to become climate resilient as well as migrant-friendly at the same time. If each of these dozen cities can welcome

through initiating a competition for all secondary towns to submit proposals for developing resilient city plans as well as an initial pilot project at the same time.

The towns could be given some initial funding to develop their proposals with some guidance on topics to be included and also to make it as participatory as possible. These proposals could then be evaluated by an expert committee which would then award each town with further funding to develop their resilience



Dhaka is the destination of most rural-to-urban migration in Bangladesh and will soon find it almost impossible to absorb more migrants.

and each town is awarded Tk 5 lakh to prepare their initial proposal, this would cost around Tk 2 crore.

Then, Tk 5 crore might be awarded per town to the cities for implementing their pilot action. If 10 or 12 towns are selected, this would require Tk 50 crore or Tk 60 crore respectively.

Hence this idea may require an allocation of around Tk 50–60 crore in total. This could quite easily be funded by the Bangladesh government's own Climate Change Trust Fund for 2018/19.

Such a bottom-up competition would help unleash the talents and ideas of mayors and citizens of different towns around the country and enable the citizens of those towns to determine their own futures.

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