



A silent yet unsettling change around us

SAMAMA RAHMAN

Having been born and brought up in Lalmatia, the community there has been one that I grew to love over the past 24 years.

There was always a sense of harmony, religious and otherwise. But quietly, as a wave of fanaticism has swept through the country and the locality grown, Lalmatia is not like it once was.

I have never had the luxury of owning my own home. Instead, I moved around the neighbourhood thrice, renting different homes. Because my family became well-known over the years, I have never had a problem getting a house.

But development in the area has given rise to multiple modern apartment complexes, leading to an influx of people that has seen the close-knit community disappear. What once was a community of familiar faces has now become a concrete block where people no longer greet each other on the streets.

That came to the fore as my mother went house-hunting over the past few weeks and met with a landlord and a lady who were nothing like the ones we came to know over the years.

The first was a man, perhaps in his fifties and dressed in a thawb (an ankle-length Arab garment with long sleeves). He and members of his family occupy seven of the 10 apartments in his building, with the other two rented by long-term occupants.

Unlike most landlords he

provided a very professional contract, undoubtedly drawn up by a lawyer. The stipulations were nothing out of the ordinary, and it even mentioned that the rent would be increased by six percent after two years, a welcome addition.

However, things took a strange turn when he commented on my brother and me.

Saying that children without a

his nephew, also dressed in a thawb, who had returned from abroad after completing his higher education, commenting that he was a prime example for the sons of tenants he wanted.

Refusing to let a stranger "take responsibility" for her two children she raised quite well for the past 10 years, my mother remarked that she had not seen such an extremely religious family since she last visited Pakistan and moved on to the next house, owned by a single mother with one son.

It was there that she was in for the shock of her life.

After discussing all the finer details and coming to an agreement, it was the final condition from the landlady that astonished my mother.

After confirming that my mother was a Muslim, the landlady in her mid-forties very casually said: "Non-Muslims cannot enter my building."

Flabbergasted, my mother asked the lady to repeat herself and upon confirmation that she had heard her right the first time, my mother gathered her belongings to make a quick exit.

We are still on the lookout for a new house, preferably one without either a covertly or overtly bigoted owner.

This is in no way to say that piety can be negative. But for one who is truly pious, they ought to know that there is no compulsion in religion.



father -- ours passed away in 2007 -- usually grow up to be rowdy, he would have to meet us and speak to us to ensure whether we were suitable for his environment.

The gentleman added that his entire family was quite religious and that he wanted like-minded individuals as his tenants, even insinuating that he will be willing to provide guidance by taking us to the mosque for prayers.

He introduced my mother to

Gomez, the rights group's director for Southeast Asia and the Pacific. "The Myanmar military claim they have done nothing wrong during the past months. If so, the authorities should have nothing to hide -- why are they denying access for independent and impartial investigators?" he said in a statement.

Lee, who has visited Myanmar six times since 2014, has consistently sounded the alarm over the persecution of the Rohingya.

Myanmar's government spokesman Zaw Htay said Lee had been barred because she was not unbiased.

"She is not impartial and objective while conducting her work. There is no trust on her," the spokesman said.

But Amnesty International described the ban as "outrageous".

"It is a further indication that authorities will do anything they can to avoid international scrutiny of their human rights record," said James

"An investigation is being carried out to uncover the truth behind the grave," said a statement published on the army chief's Facebook page, alongside blurred photos of skeletal bodies being dug out of a pit.

"Action will be taken according to the law if security members are found to be involved in the case," the statement added.

One member of the team that unearthed the corpses told AFP, on condition of anonymity, that the bodies' state of decay suggested they had not been killed recently.

"We cannot differentiate who the dead bodies were because we only saw their skeletons and bones," he said.

The discovery of the mass grave comes one week after the arrest of two Reuters journalists who have closely covered the crisis in Rakhine.

Ensure safe return of Rohingyas

FROM PAGE 1

Rohingyas demanded granting citizenship to them before sending them back to Myanmar under the repatriation agreement signed between Bangladesh and Myanmar.

The Turkish PM assured Rohingyas of ensuring all facilities in Myanmar before repatriation.

Later, he distributed food at Kutupalong camp and left the camp around 1:30pm. Foreign Minister AH Mahmood Ali accompanied the

Turkish PM.

Yildirim left for home from Cox's Bazar at 2:43pm. The foreign minister saw him off at the airport.

On Tuesday, the Turkish leader highly appreciated Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's diplomacy over the Rohingya issue and Bangladesh's support to the displaced people.

He hoped the bilateral document, signed between Bangladesh and Myanmar on November 23, would

make Rohingyas' return to their home possible soon.

Some 655,000 Rohingyas have crossed into Bangladesh from Myanmar since August 25.

On September 7, Turkish First Lady Emine Erdogan visited Rohingya camps and said what was happening in Myanmar's Rakhine State was "tantamount to genocide" and solution to the Rohingya crisis lies with Myanmar only.

'Abduction' for money?

FROM PAGE 1

between 2:00pm and 2:30pm on October 10 when he was in front of Star Kebab in Dhanmondi.

The relative asked him to get a job done and Utpal said it would require Tk 5 lakh, he told The Daily Star at his village home in Narsingdi's Raipura yesterday.

"Soon a white microbus stopped before me. Four to five people got down from the vehicle and blindfolded and gagged me with black cloths. They then whisked me away," said Utpal.

In the microbus, they slapped him twice in the head and demanded money, he said.

"Give us money, you have a lot," he quoted his kidnapers as telling him.

But they never said how much they wanted, he added.

After about three hours' drive, he was taken to a tin-shed house in a secluded place where he was kept confined for 71 days.

"I had to sleep on a mat on the floor. It had an attached toilet. There was no cot or any other furniture," he said.

His captors slipped food under the door in a platter regularly, he said.

Periodically -- sometimes after four to five days and sometimes after about 10 days -- someone would ask him from behind the closed door if he managed the ransom.

In reply, he would say he was a mere journalist and did not have much money.

"At times they would rebuke or even threaten me, but they never entered the room," he said.

Just two days before he was freed, some people came again and asked for ransom from behind the door. Moments later they whispered that Rab and police came to know about the incident, Utpal said.

Finally on Tuesday evening, a group of masked men entered the room, blindfolded him and forced him into a microbus.

After three to four hours, they stopped the microbus in an isolated place, and said, "We are letting you go. They also gave my cell phone back and asked me to uncover my eyes only after they honk the horn, or else they will kill me."

As the abductors left, he went to a shop near a CNG filling station and came to know that the place is called Bhulta in Rugganj. He then had his



Journalist Utpal Das with his arm around his mother at the Bhulta police outpost in the wee hours of yesterday.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

phone charged from the shop and made the first call to his mother.

IS IT FOR MONEY?

In a conventional case of abduction for money, kidnapers usually demand ransoms immediately after the incident.

But Utpal's father Chitta Ronjan Das said he first got a call from his son's cell phone 13 days after the abduction.

"Without identifying himself, the caller demanded Tk 1 lakh for our son's release," said Chitta Ronjan, principal at a kindergarten in Narsingdi.

The next day, the man called again, making the same demand, he said.

"When I told him that I want to talk to my son and asked him how and where to pay the money, he hung up."

"They did not make any call ever since and we found my son's phone switched off," said Chitta, who retired from a government primary school in 2010.

The abductors' assertion that Utpal has a "lot of money" is also puzzling.

The family lives in a tin-shed rented house in Narsingdi. With his father's income from teaching far from ade-

quate, Utpal, who lives and works in Dhaka, sends money home every month.

RAY OF HOPE FOR OTHERS

Following the return of Utpal and before him businessman Aniruddah Roy, family members of other missing people now hope that their loved ones too will come back home.

"We still have hope of getting my son back like journalist Utpal and businessman Aniruddah who returned to their families. We are waiting for his safe return," said Jamal Uddin Ahmed, father of missing Ishrak Ahmed Fahim, 19, a student at McGill University in Canada.

Ishrak went missing from Dhanmondi area on August 26.

Motaher Hossain, father of missing NSU teacher Mubashar Hasan, told this newspaper yesterday that he became hopeful about his son's return after he heard the news of Utpal.

"We cannot sleep at night as nightmares haunt us," he said.

[Our Narsingdi correspondent Benazir Ahmed Benu contributed to this report]

Relief turns into worry

FROM PAGE 1

Farhana Tofail, head of communications at Sanofi Bangladesh, said during clinical trials, the vaccine had proved to be very effective on those who had dengue once. But in light of the new observations, the vaccine could be marketed bringing changes to the accompanying literature.

"It has not been launched in Bangladesh yet. We will not import the vaccine until we get a clear message from the Sanofi headquarters," she added.

Dengvaxia is the first dengue vaccine to obtain a licence and has been approved by 19 regulatory authorities around the world, according to the WHO.

A nearly two-year national immunisation programme of the Philippines, targeting 8.3 lakh children, was halted recently after the latest analysis.

"If we find a genuine ground, we will de-register it [the vaccine]," said Md Salauddin, assistant director of the

Directorate General of Drug Administration (DGDA).

The risk-benefit ratio is evaluated before any drug or vaccine is approved. Dengvaxia is registered in France, which is why it was approved here as Bangladesh's law requires developed nations' approval of a drug or vaccine for importing it, he added.

"Before making a further move, we will seek suggestions from the WHO and research organisations like the International Vaccine Institute," he said.

Sanofi proposes that the national regulatory agencies update the vaccine's "prescribing information" and request healthcare professionals to assess the likelihood of prior dengue infection in an individual before vaccinating.

However, Muniruddin Ahmed, a teacher of clinical pharmacy and pharmacology at Dhaka University, said the government should not allow marketing of the vaccine until enough clinical data is collected.

"Otherwise, a disaster is imminent.

The country lacks a strong regulatory authority and a mechanism to punish drug companies for any wrongdoing."

Every year an estimated 390 million dengue infections are reported worldwide. People can be infected up to four times in their lifetime, but the highest risk of severe form of infection has been seen in people getting the fever for the second time from a different strain of the virus, according to a Sanofi statement.

As many as 2,588 dengue cases have been reported across the country so far this year. Five of them died, according to the Directorate General of Health Services.

The number of those affected last year was 6,060, the highest since 2002, and the death toll was 14.

Most of the dengue cases were reported between June and October as intermittent rain, high temperature and humidity create the ideal breeding condition for Aedes mosquitoes that transmit the virus.

Khaleda sends legal notice

FROM PAGE 1

BNP Secretary General Mirza Fakhru Islam Alamgir disclosed the issuance of the notice while briefing the media at the party's Nayapaltan office yesterday.

Earlier at a press conference at the Gono Bhaban on December 7, Hasina, also president of the ruling Awami League, expressed displeasure that the mainstream media did not run any report on the BNP chief and her family members' reported assets and investments in Saudi Arabia and other countries.

Some media outlets ran reports that an anti-corruption probe in Saudi Arabia revealed that Khaleda and her family members have assets in that country, attributing those to "Global Intelligence Network" and "Canadian TV channel The National".

On December 8, the BNP secretary general formally protested the PM's remarks and threatened to take legal action if she does not withdraw her remarks and apologise.

Yesterday, BNP Joint Secretary General and Khaleda's counsel Mahbubuddin Khokon sent the notice to the Prime Minister's Office by post, party's Senior Joint Secretary General Ruhul Kabir Rizvi told this newspaper.

"The allegations you [the PM] brought against Begum Khaleda Zia and her sons are fabricated and motivated," reads the legal notice.

It describes the PM's comments as "malicious, defamatory, deceitful and insidious", and says those have caused "a serious damage" to Khaleda's repu-

tation and image.

"We are urging you [the PM] through the notice to offer an unconditional apology to Begum Khaleda Zia."

The notice alleges that Hasina made the "malicious" comments to tarnish the BNP chief's social and political image and reputation at home and abroad.

"As per the law, you [the PM] are responsible for the irreparable losses and damages caused by the defamatory comments," it mentions.

Meanwhile, Hasan Mahmud, AL publicity and publication affairs secretary, said the legal notice was issued to divert people's attention from Zia family's corruption.

He also threatened to take counter legal action if Khaleda does not withdraw the legal notice.

"If they [the BNP] don't withdraw the legal notice, we will take legal action against them," he said hours after the BNP disclosed the issuance of the legal notice.

Hasan was speaking at a press conference at the AL president's political office in Dhanmondi.

The AL leader said the fact that Khaleda's sons were involved in corruption during the BNP-led government's tenure has been proved through the verdicts of several courts.

AL Presidium Member Matia Chowdhury, who was present there, questioned how Khaleda's son Tarique Rahman is leading a life of luxury in the UK.

"What is the source of the money?" she asked.

India, Myanmar

FROM PAGE 20

official visit to Myanmar in September this year during which he pledged financial assistance for socioeconomic prosperity of Rakhine.

The MEA statement did not mention the word "Rohingya" but said the MoU "is intended to help the Government of Myanmar achieve its objective of restoration of normalcy in Rakhine State and enable the return of displaced persons."

At least 6,55,000 Rohingyas fled Myanmar to Bangladesh since August this year and the influx continues.

The MoU is the first government-to-government agreement signed by the Ministry of Social Welfare, Relief and Resettlement of Myanmar with a cooperation partner focussed on socioeconomic development and livelihood initiatives in Rakhine.

During the visit, Jaishankar called on Myanmar's State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi, Union Minister in State Counsellor's Office U Kyaw Tint Swe and Union Minister for Social Welfare, Relief and Resettlement Dr Win Myat Aye.

"All matters relating to bilateral cooperation, including follow-up on decisions taken during recent visit of the prime minister of India to Myanmar, as well as matters pertaining to Rakhine State were discussed during these meetings," the MEA statement said.

The Indian foreign secretary also called on Commander in Chief of the Myanmar Defence Services Senior General Min Aung Hlaing and discussed all matters relating to security, bilateral cooperation as well as the situation in Rakhine, the statement added.