

It staves off strong Congress challenge

What is Myanmar trying to hide?

The world must ask in a united voice

THE Myanmar government's decision to ban UN Special Rapporteur Yanghee Lee from visiting the country to assess the state of human rights across Myanmar, including in Rakhine, is outrageous. Lee said, this "can only be viewed as a strong indication that there must be something 'terrible' happening in Rakhine, as well as in the rest of the country." And there is every reason for us to suspect the same also, particularly given Myanmar's long record of denials and smokescreens on top of this decision.

It is worth recalling that it was Lee who had sounded the alarm-bells in January this year, at a news briefing in Yangon, which suggested that things were taking a turn for the worse in Myanmar. And that has proven correct, as evident by the mass exodus of Rohingyas from Myanmar, following the brutal military crackdown by the Myanmar armed forces since late August. Moreover, it was Lee who had initially warned Myanmar that its increasingly defensive position in response to allegations of persistent human rights violations against Rohingyas made it

"appear less and less credible."
 Unfortunately, despite all the evidence to the contrary that has come out against Myanmar's claims of innocence since then, nothing seems to have changed. Including its refusal to be transparent with the rest of the world—further confirmed by its recent arrest of two journalists working for Reuters. And this, again, must lead us to question Myanmar's sincerity when it comes to implementing the terms of the Memorandum of Understanding it signed with Bangladesh according to which, Myanmar is to ensure peaceful conditions for Rohingyas to return to.

This in particular now seems highly unrealistic. Why else would Myanmar authorities refuse entry to the UN envoy? The international community must unanimously demand an end to this question and call for greater transparency from Myanmar.

Question paper leaks

"Not guilty" does not equal "not responsible"

THE number of instances of question paper leaks in this month alone, that too of primary school examinations, is staggering. In this context, the ACC's recent letter to the cabinet about the sources of these leaks and recommendations to stop them is timely, and was an excellent opportunity to tackle the issue head on. Instead, it seems the authorities are even reluctant to accept responsibility. On Wednesday the parliamentary standing committee on primary and mass education declared after a meeting at the Jatiya Sangsad Bhavan that the government or the ministry cannot be blamed for the question leaks.

The reason it gave for its statement is that since the government or the ministry does not prepare the questions, they are responsible for the leaks. It is the job of these committees to be monitoring bodies for policy-management issues. This follows a remark by our education minister who declared recently that some immoral teachers are behind such leaks. It is true that primary school questions are prepared at the upazila level. But, using that excuse to absolve all responsibility to turn a blind eye to the problem and refuse to acknowledge its deeper roots.

The recent leaks are not novelties. A culture of leaking question papers has permeated the education sector of the country, be it the SSC, SSC or HSC exams or university admission tests. What has been done to stop this? The ACC letter pointed out that these leaks happen through government officials involved in the process or through the supply chain of question paper preparation. And it is the role of the government and the ministry to figure out what is behind this phenomena and what can be done to tackle this. The responsibility is primarily theirs, despite what the standing committee claims.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Questions about the Rohingya repatriation deal

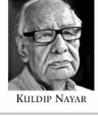
According to the Rohingya repatriation agreement signed between Bangladesh and Myanmar, the latter is to take back its citizens from Bangladesh within an agreed time period. But even if Myanmar takes back hundreds of Rohingyas a day, it will take years for the process to be complete.

There is a high chance that Myanmar may stop taking back its nationals under some vague pretence, such as blaming a section of the minority group for carrying out terrorist attacks. The military has already destroyed thousands of Rohingya houses, schools, mosques and crop lands. If repatriated, they may again be faced with privations, which could eventually lead to a famine like situation for them, especially if aid agencies are not allowed to enter Rakhine State.

Additionally, Rohingya refugees seem to not have much confidence that they will be able to go back home in peace. And who can blame them, when the repatriation agreement does not involve other regional countries and not even the UN?

Most importantly, will those responsible for committing the horrendous crimes against the Rohingyas ever be held accountable? **Muhammad Bin Abdullah, By e-mail**

BETWEEN THE LINES



KULLIDIP NAYYAR

IN the rumble-tumble of election, the role of Congress President Sonia Gandhi has not been recognised. No doubt, the contest was between Narendra Modi and Rahul

Gandhi but the real rivalry was between the Congress and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). And here Sonia Gandhi was relevant.

All pollsters predicted victory for the BJP in Gujarat and Himachal Pradesh. And this has come true. The Congress won 80 seats and BJP 99. There has been no surprise except the margin of victory. What has been noted is the improvement in the Congress tally. The party which has been in the wilderness for the last few years has come to be relevant again. The gap between the two has narrowed. It seems that Rahul Gandhi will give Prime Minister Narendra Modi a meaningful fight. The credit for this should go to Sonia Gandhi, who once again put life into the party.

I vividly remember the scene in the Central Hall of Parliament after she won the general election in 2004. Members unanimously wanted her to head the government. But she was reluctant to do so. Probably, in her mind was the pernicious propaganda that she hailed from Italy. On her part, she was conscious that the tag of being Italian might adversely affect her son, Rahul.

She deliberately put Dr Manmohan Singh in the chair of prime ministership because he had no politics and no ambition. His tenure of prime ministership for 10 years was eventless. Important files of the Government of India would go to her place for processing and then to Manmohan Singh for mere signatures. Her political adviser Ahmad Patel took all the decisions. Sanjaya Baru, Media Advisor confirms this in his book "The Accidental Prime Minister".

Sonia Gandhi knew the charge which was made against her. But if she had to keep the seat warm for her son, Rahul Gandhi, there was no other way. Manmohan Singh does not, however, accept the allegation. Even when asked to comment on the criticism, he merely said: "Posterity will judge."



Indian Prime Minister and BJP President Narendra Modi at the party headquarters in Delhi, after securing victories in Himachal Pradesh and Gujarat elections.

True today's Congress Party has the stamp of her mother-in-law, Indira Gandhi. But Sonia Gandhi is the one who kept the party united. Otherwise it would have split into many groups. To her credit, she had come to be recognised by all the groups as the leader of the party. She was, in fact, the meeting point for all the segments. There was no challenge to her in the party.

The ease with which she has put her son, Rahul Gandhi in her seat shows that she is in fact the party. Rahul is conscious of dynastic change. He has said openly that there should be a better way to select a person for Congress presidency. In any case, the dynastic rule ends with Rahul Gandhi.

The problem with the Congress Party today is that it has not gone beyond the dynastic dependence. And, somehow, the people are not enamoured of the dynasty anymore. Rahul Gandhi doesn't sell although he passionately and honestly pursues the Congress principles. They should be regarded as a warning. The industry couldn't be trusted in the past, and it shouldn't be trusted to do the

same thing in the future.

Even today, the same tobacco companies are marketing new products that they claim are less harmful—like "heat-not-burn" devices, which vaporise tobacco to produce a nicotine-containing aerosol—and funding front groups purporting to work for a smoke-free world. The world has witnessed similar tactics elsewhere: from Uruguay to Australia, where tobacco companies launch costly legal challenges against legitimate regulation of its deadly products. Despite such losses, it will no doubt continue looking for new ways to oppose tobacco restrictions.

To be sure, the court-ordered airing of "corporate statements" in American media does represent a victory for truth. It brings closure to an important US Justice Department lawsuit, filed in 1999 that cigarettes are "intentionally" manipulated to "maximise the ingestion of nicotine."

Even cigarette manufacturers admit that their products contribute to 1,200 US deaths each day. Around the world, tobacco use kills more than seven million people annually.

Enough is enough; at this critical moment, we must not let the momentum slip. Governments and health organisations like ours are at war with the tobacco industry, and we will continue fighting until we beat Big Tobacco.

If national leaders, health ministers, and finance chiefs ever wondered how far they should go to regulate tobacco products, Big Tobacco's admissions, together with investors' second thoughts, have provided an answer: as far as necessary. Governments face a moral and

entrenching itself and the Congress is losing the importance it once had.

During the election, Rahul Gandhi went all over the country and faced the crowds all by himself. Sonia Gandhi was not there. This means that the people have accepted Rahul Gandhi as a representative of the Congress. He too has gained confidence and addresses the people as if he has arrived. Sonia Gandhi can congratulate herself that when she put him in the *gadi* of president, there was general acceptance. True, the badge of dynasty was there but the decision did not look dictatorial. Rahul Gandhi had worked with the party's card. He went to many places in the country where he sat on the ground with the ordinary members to discuss the challenges that the party faced.

Rahul may not have faced privations which the party men do, but he has got the feel of the values that the party has preserved for the last 150 years. This will stand him in good stead when he directs the Congress as its president. It is an arduous journey but he will have to cover it if he has to make it to the top.

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PROJECT SANJICATE

Seeing through big tobacco's smokescreen

TEDROS ADHANOM GHEBREYESUS and TABARÉ RAMÓN VÁZQUEZ

WE all know how bad tobacco is. It kills millions of people every year, and that it harms many more. We also know that tobacco companies have consistently lied about how much damage their products cause.

But now, even Big Tobacco has been forced to state the facts publicly. After losing a string of appeals following a 2006 US federal court ruling, four companies have been forced to reveal the truth behind years of deceptive marketing, by publishing advertisements containing "corrective statements" in US newspapers and on television. These public statements acknowledge that the companies—Philip Morris USA, RJ Reynolds Tobacco, Lorillard, and Altria—knew the damage their products cause but kept selling them anyway.

And it is not just courts that are taking action against the tobacco industry. The recent decision by French bank BNP Paribas to stop financing and investing in tobacco companies—including producers, wholesalers, and traders—is just the latest sign that public health is finally being put ahead of commercial interests.

Still, we must not be lulled into

believing that these overdue confessions reflect an industry undergoing altruistic catharsis. They resulted from the combined pressure of the US justice system, tobacco-control advocates, and the sheer weight of evidence against the industry's misleading marketing of "light" and "mild" tobacco products.

They should be regarded as a warning: The industry couldn't be trusted in the past, and it shouldn't be trusted to do the

same thing in the future.

Even today, the same tobacco companies are marketing new products that they claim are less harmful—like "heat-not-burn" devices, which vaporise tobacco to produce a nicotine-containing aerosol—and funding front groups purporting to work for a smoke-free world. The world has witnessed similar tactics elsewhere: from Uruguay to Australia, where tobacco companies launch costly legal challenges against legitimate regulation of its deadly products. Despite such losses, it will no doubt continue looking for new ways to oppose tobacco restrictions.

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If national leaders, health ministers, and finance chiefs ever wondered how far they should go to regulate tobacco products, Big Tobacco's admissions, together with investors' second thoughts, have provided an answer: as far as necessary. Governments face a moral and

legal imperative to use the strongest possible measures to protect their citizens from tobacco.

One way forward would be for more governments to implement commitments enshrined in the World Health Organization's Framework Convention on Tobacco Control. The WHO FCTC provides guidelines on topics such as tobacco taxation, public awareness and education, and package warnings. These measures have helped save millions of lives in the last decade, but to mention hundreds of billions of dollars in health costs.

But more can be done, which is why we are calling on governments around the world to strengthen implementation of the WHO FCTC by accelerating action on the "MPower" tobacco control policies—measures intended to strengthen country-level implementation of the WHO FCTC. Together, these frameworks represent the strongest defence countries have against the tobacco industry.

Moreover, governments should endorse the Protocol to Eliminate the Illicit Trade in Tobacco Products, which aims to prevent illicit trade, such as smuggling. While 33 countries and the European Union have signed the protocol, it needs the support of seven more governments before it can enter into force.

And, finally, looking ahead to the UN's High-level Meeting on Non-communicable Diseases in 2018, government leaders must be prepared to demonstrate their commitment to protecting people from heart and lung disease, cancer, and diabetes, by supporting stronger tobacco controls.

With its recent admissions, Big Tobacco has been forced to reveal its true nature. However reluctantly, these companies have called on all of us to reject their products. We think it is time to take them up on the offer.

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