

Burying their crime under the sand

How could they defy DOE orders?

ON February 3 this paper published a picture of hundreds of bags filled with black engine oil covering large portions of the sandy bank of the Karnaphuli river in Chittagong. According to the report unscrupulous traders were dumping discarded engine oil of ships onto the bank which would later be used in brick kilns. The act has clearly violated environmental laws and the Department of Environment's prohibitions. But from a photograph in yesterday's paper it is clear that these individuals couldn't care less what the DOE has ordered. The picture shows hundreds of bags of the noxious engine oil buried under the sand. The area is near the Chittagong airport runway.

The bags with engine oil lying on the sand, pose multiple hazards. If they spill—and most likely they will—they will pollute the soil as well as the water as they seep into the river. Engine oil, moreover, is combustible and so leakages can cause fire hazards of huge proportions.

We have learnt that the DOE has fined those individuals who had leased the land to keep their sand on and had allowed traders to dump the oil bags. The primary culprits, therefore, seem to have got away with their crime, scot-free. The DOE, moreover, had instructed those who had taken lease of the land to remove all the bags but instead, they have buried the bags under the sand. This means not only the engine oil but also the polythene will contaminate the soil.

We cannot help but ask whether the DOE has any monitoring mechanism to ensure that their orders are followed. Otherwise how could these individuals be so defiant of the law?

Oil spills have already degraded many of our rivers and water bodies. Now they are being dumped on the soil. It is the responsibility of those who lease out the land, in this case the Chittagong port authority, as well as the DOE, to make sure that such blatant acts of environmental degradation do not take place.

Why is the probe committee not working?

Question paper leaks continue

WE find it hard to drive away our frustration over the government's failure to stop the question paper leaks of this year's SSC exams, as all the question papers of SSC exams held so far have been leaked. As this daily has reported yesterday, the question paper of the maths exam, held last Saturday, was also leaked and hand-written questions were found hours before the exam started. Thus there is more to the education minister's accusation that "dishonest teachers" take photos of question papers and leak them before exams.

In the last few years, there have been constant allegations of question paper leaks in all the public examinations starting from JSC, SSC to HSC, university and medical admission tests. And after each incident of leaks, the law enforcement agencies arrest some people possessing the leaked question papers, but nothing more happens. This time also, the law enforcers have arrested at least 30 people, including teachers in connection with the leaks across the country. We wonder whether these arrests are mere eyewash as the main culprits never get caught.

What is even more alarming this time is that the leakers are declaring openly with impunity on Facebook that they would leak the questions of the next exams. We wonder why it is being so hard for the government to catch these culprits and bring them to book. We also do not understand why the probe committee, formed to investigate the allegations of leaks, has not started its work yet. Clearly, the education ministry needs to focus on coordination among the different actors involved if they want to catch the real culprits and halt this culture of question paper leaks.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Residential halls for BSMRSTU students

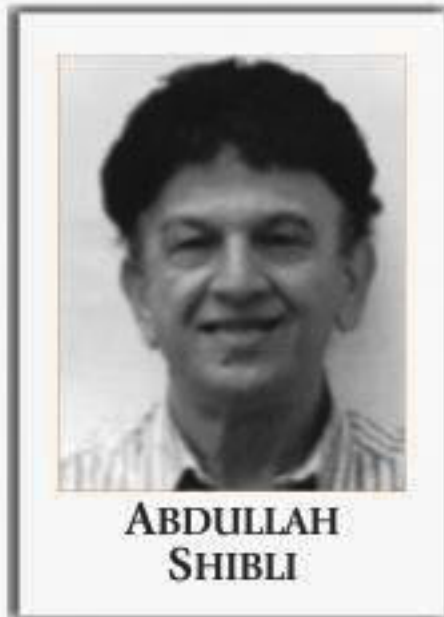
Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman Science & Technology University (BSMRSTU) is attended by approximately 9000 students, a large number of whom come from different rural areas of the country. There is no denying that the university is considerably contributing to the local economy. However, the shortage of houses, high price of commodities and poor safety records make Gopalganj inhospitable for the pupils. There are not sufficient seats in the residential halls. Unfortunately, the government has not taken any steps to address the problems. I think I speak for all when I say we badly need residential halls that can accommodate all students. The government and the local district administration should focus on our pressing needs.

Shuva Das, By e-mail



ROHINGYA REPATRIATION

Timeline and 'sustainable return'



ABDULLAH SHIBLI

THE Rohingya repatriation programme, agreed upon by Bangladesh and Myanmar, is off to a rocky start. There are still many roadblocks that must be removed before the Rohingyas voluntarily return to Myanmar. On February 9, 2018, the *Wall Street Journal* (WSJ) ran a story on the refugee camps in Cox's Bazar with a photograph of Khoutiza Begum from Ukhaia camp on the first page under the caption, "They will burn us to ashes if we go back". It is not hard for the readers to guess who she was afraid of. Bangladeshis have been very welcoming so far, but their patience is also running out. The Prime Minister (PM) in a meeting with the newly appointed Swedish Ambassador to Bangladesh expressed her grave concern regarding the presence of the 700,000 Rohingya refugees on Bangladeshi soil. It has been almost six months since this humanitarian crisis started, and with each passing month that the refugees are staying with us, Bangladesh is coping with a monumental challenge. "Rohingya presence is creating massive socio-economic pressure", the PM informed the Swedish Ambassador.

Local residents in Cox's Bazar are increasingly expressing their concerns at the turn of events, and some locals are pushing "for the eviction of the multitudes sheltering in their impoverished border area." In a sympathetic tone, WSJ wrote, "some Bangladeshis want the 700,000 people who fled Myanmar and are stranded in refugee camps in their country to leave. For now, the refugees have nowhere else to go." The existential dilemma that the Rohingyas now face has been labelled as a "lose-lose" choice: stay longer and you might face protest in Bangladesh, on the other hand if you return you face violence and death.

It is not difficult to see why the Rohingyas are wary. Imagine a completely hypothetical situation, where a million Bangladeshis have crossed over to the neighbouring state of Asylum to escape the attack of wild dyclos, a type of semiaquatic omnivores. These animals emerge from the rivers only after dark and attack men, women, and children indiscriminately, and have killed more than 6,000. However, the exact number of the dead is not accurately known since many corpses were washed away, and were dragged down to their habitat, under the water, and devoured after they died of asphyxiation. Now if the



Rohingya refugees head towards refugee camps in Palang Khali, near Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh October 19, 2017.

PHOTO: JORGE SILVA/REUTERS

government of Asylum, after six months decided to push the refugees back to their homeland, it will create a panic among the refugees.

Fortunately, the conditions that the Rohingyas face are not as dire as in the dystopian picture I painted above. They face a lot of uncertainty and are fearful of imminent death should they return. My goal is to awaken the international community from their state of somnolence and to act in unison, as it did during the Mediterranean refugee crisis, and to assist us in three areas:

1) To feed and house the refugees while they are here; 2) To ensure that the Myanmar authorities are creating the pre-conditions necessary for the Rohingyas to agree to return voluntarily; and 3) Create a future framework for the reintegration of the Rohingyas in their homeland. Admittedly, points one and two may be easier to resolve in the short-term, while three is a medium- to long-term goal and quite complicated—but all of these must be on the table.

Much has been said and written on the conditions necessary for the Rohingyas to return and resume their normal life in Rakhine. At this point, it appears that all parties, including Bangladesh, Myanmar, Rohingya leaders, and international stakeholders have a pretty good outline of the shape of things for a peaceful transition to "status quo ante". I don't say this lightly

since international organisations such as UNHCR, IOM, Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), and HRW have provided a good roadmap for the sustainable course to adopt. Let it only be pointed out that current conditions are not right for the plan of action worked out for Bangladesh and Myanmar to proceed. In the words of Yanghee Lee, UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights in Myanmar, the decision of repatriating hundreds of thousands of Rohingya refugees anytime soon was premature.

Incidentally, a World Bank report titled "Sustainable Refugee Return" examined eight case studies of large-scale refugee return, namely return to Afghanistan, Angola, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Burundi, Cambodia, Iraq, Liberia, and South Sudan. Based on the data collected from refugees, the top three factors that potential returnees consider are: security, employment, and housing. Other factors they take into account are the presence of conditions favourable for a reintegration in society including education, wider economic opportunity, social services, reliable public services, and citizenship.

Bangladesh along with Germany, Greece, Jordan, Turkey, and Lebanon has welcomed refugees who have fled from their home either due to war, political

turmoil, or government policy. Jordan, which has taken in more than 2.7 million people, was recently named as the top refugee hosting country, followed by Turkey, with over 2.5 million. However, Bangladesh stands out for one reason, and that is the economic burden of housing and feeding the refugees. In a BBC interview on December 18, 2017 with the OHCHR chief, Bangladesh's economic burden was identified due to its low per capital income and high population density.

The aim of policymakers should be to achieve a "sustainable return". There are many definitions of sustainable return—here is a useful one from the IOM. "Sustainable return should be understood either as a) successful reintegration in the country of origin, which includes the economic, social and psychological aspects and the capacity of the individual to cope with push factors, both old and new on the same level as the local population, or b) eventual legal remigration made possible by skills acquired during the reintegration process". We have now been entrusted by the international community with the responsibility to ensure safe, voluntary, dignified and sustainable return of the 700,000 souls.

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The unfolding political crisis in Maldives

Democracy versus authoritarian stability



SMRUTI S PATTANAİK

MALDIVES has plunged into a major political crisis after the Supreme Court on February 2 in a judgement ordered the government to release 12 members of the parliament who were stripped off their posts and held by the government under different charges and order retrial of the case. This unexpected judgement pushed Maldives into a new political turmoil as the government of Abdulla Yameen refused to respect the court order and announced 15 days of state emergency. The Maldives Defence Force surrounded the Supreme Court and arrested the chief justice and another judge on charges of graft while the three other judges party to this unanimous judgement declared the order null and void.

While there was international outcry against the Yameen government and its treatment of judiciary and opposition politicians, the Yameen government leaned on China to deflect the pressure while opposition leader and former president of Maldives made an appeal to India to intervene militarily to save democracy in Maldives—an option that is not on the table for New Delhi.

The tussle between the incumbent president and the Maldives United Opposition (MUO) has intensified since last year after this united political platform was established by all the leaders opposed to Abdulla Yameen's regime. The opposition movement against the regime found political momentum after the president's half-brother and former president of Maldives Maumoon Abdul Gayoom broke away from the ruling party, Progressive Party of Maldives (PPM), after a tussle for the control of the party started.

The main issue of contention was Gayoom's refusal to nominate Yameen as the presidential candidate of the party in

the 2018 election. However, the court, in June 2016, declared Abdulla Yameen as the legitimate leader of the party declaring former president and Yameen's half-brother Gayoom "incapable of attending to the duties of his job," forcing Gayoom's exit from the PPM. As a result, the party was divided between Gayoom's loyalists and Yameen's loyalists reducing the government to a minority. Yet, it was the judiciary that kept the government alive sanctifying all its decisions and joining hands to punish the political opponents.



A Maldives National Defence Force soldier walks past the president's office building after Maldives President Abdulla Yameen declared a state of emergency, on February 6, 2018.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Inside the Majlis the opposition was not allowed to move a no-confidence motion against the speaker as the government made changes to the rules of procedure that increased the signatures required from 15 to 29 to 42 MPs. Therefore, the MUO could not succeed in overthrowing the government even after some ruling party MPs joined hands. The ruling party MPs were later disqualified and lost their seat in the parliament under the anti-defection law.

The Supreme Court decision that ordered the release of the prisoners and retrial was a major challenge to the government that is preparing for the next

parliamentary election scheduled this year. Under no circumstance would the government allow its arch-rivals to contest the election which has meticulously been planned to see Yameen elected for another term.

The government defended its decision to impose emergency saying emergency is necessary for the smooth running of the state as there was no other option. It used the Maldives National Defence Force (MNDF) to arrest the Supreme Court Chief Justice, Abdulla Sayeed, and his colleague Justice Ali Hameed, and

Yameen has been keenly engaging China and Saudi Arabia though there are allegations of corruption against the regime in the manner in which important infrastructure projects were allocated to China and Saudi Arabia without competitive bidding and without taking into account the implications for the environment and economy. It was clear that Yameen courted these two countries keeping his political interest in mind. While Saudi Arabia is providing ideological recourse to the Muslim-majority country, which is evident from the fact that a large number of Maldivians were fighting alongside ISIS, China's presence was appropriately leveraged to nullify India's influence—a country that is seen sympathetic to his political rival Nasheed and is critical of Maldives' turn towards autocracy.

During his visits to India, though Yameen emphasised on Maldives' 'India first' policy, Yameen realised that the China factor would restrain India and limit various policy options it could exercise if the situation did not develop to India's liking. This is the success story of Abdulla Yameen's continuation in power. Earlier, in December 2017, three local councillors belonging to the opposition, Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP), were suspended for meeting the Indian ambassador without permission. This reflects Yameen's deep suspicion of India.

In spite of former President Nasheed's Twitter appeal to India to intervene, and China's statement that cautioned against any interference in Maldives' internal affair, the policy choices for New Delhi remain limited. It is nobody's interest if Maldives moves to an era of autocracy with democratic pretensions of a sham election this year as the opposition leaders remain technically disqualified after being convicted in criminal cases. For New Delhi, which is cautiously watching China's rise in the neighbourhood, it is its geo-political interest in the Indian Ocean that would take precedence.

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