

Demolition of Rohingya villages

Act before it's too late

THE satellite images by Human Rights Watch, an international rights group, reveal the extraordinary cover-up efforts by Myanmar to suppress the evidence of the widespread atrocities against Rohingyas that its forces have carried out. To date, at least fifty-five depopulated Rohingya villages have been razed to the ground, according to the group.

The international community must take steps to halt the ongoing demolition because the villages should be regarded as crime scenes that must be preserved until a UN fact-finding commission carries out its investigation. The demolition is not just obstruction of justice, but it also makes it difficult for Rohingyas to reclaim their lands. The world must intervene before it's too late.

In addition, Myanmar parliament has recently approved a budget to construct a fence along the border with Bangladesh. It makes perfect sense that after having pushed nearly a million Rohingyas into Bangladesh, Myanmar's authorities are building fences so that its undesirable minorities cannot go back their home the same way they fled. It reinforces the notion that Myanmar's "clearance operation" had little to with terrorists. From the very beginning, it was intended to get rid of Rohingyas.

Meanwhile, the refugee influx into Bangladesh still continues with nearly 50-100 families entering the country every day. All these events suggest that the last thing Myanmar wants is a repatriation in which all Rohingyas will be guaranteed safety and full rights. Thus, the world must not fall for Myanmar's deceptive techniques.

In this regard, we commend the joint statement by India and Canada which called for a safe and voluntary Rohingya repatriation. Both conditions, however, are for Myanmar to fulfil and ensure. It cannot be open-ended and Bangladesh cannot wait indefinitely. The world has a lot more to do.

Make public transport women friendly

Inadequacy and safety issues need to be prioritised

CURRENTLY, over 30 percent of women in Bangladesh are participating in the workforce, and according to the current rates this percentage is set to rise to above 80 within the next decade. Yet, the public transportation in the country and in the capital city, which these millions of working women need to use every day, is not only inadequate, but are also unsafe.

Yes, there are reserved seats for women and some female-passenger only buses are plying Dhaka, but these have not increased in proportion to the growing workforce. Mobility, safe and hassle free, is a crucial aspect if we want to encourage women's participation in the workforce. Yet, as a report in *The Daily Star* on Saturday highlighted, this aspect has been largely unattended. And it is not only for jobs that women have to travel, and public transport is the preferred choice for the majority. But, experiences of these travellers speak of overcrowded buses, hours of waiting in line and sexual harassment. In the rush to occupy the few seat in buses, women have to battle their way for some space every day. And if the reserved seats are filled, conductors have been known to discourage female passengers.

It is high time that mismanagement of the public transportation sector is dealt with and the demand is taken into account. Increasing the number of reserved seats and allocation of more women-only buses would be a start. But, for a long term solution, it is crucial that public transportation as a whole is overhauled. The rundown ramshackles need to be taken off the road. Most importantly, safety from unwanted advances has to be ensured—this needs not only strict penalties for those guilty but also a change in the way service is provided.

Listen to the voices of suffering Rohingya children

ORLA MURPHY, MARK PIERCE and FRED WITTEVEEN

DO you remember being a child, wide awake at night, breath drawn, every creak and whisper of breeze a monster under the bed, an intruder down the hall? Then as day breaks, childish fear evaporates and the night's terrors are forgotten.

For hundreds and thousands of Rohingya children camping in tents by the border of Bangladesh, fear does not fade when the sun rises. Each day brings a new worry.

These children are in purgatory, ripped away from the stability of their homes and treasured possessions, trying to make sense of the horrors they have seen and this strange and scary place.

In the words from just one Rohingya boy, aged 12: "We live a captive life here. There is not enough space for us to play. We cannot do anything we want to do."

Make no mistake, the Rohingya crisis is a children's emergency. More than 60 percent of new arrivals—that's 378,000—are aged under 18.

An estimated 7,000 of these children have been separated from their parents, either orphaned or lost in the chaos to flee Myanmar. And yet, their story is untold. To the world, these children are invisible.

In December, Plan International, Save the Children and World Vision International held a series of in-depth consultations with 200 children, aged between seven and 17-years-old, and 40 parents. We wanted to hear, in their own words, about their fears and hopes and what they need.

The "Childhood Interrupted: Children's Voices From The Rohingya Refugee Crisis" has been launched today to amplify the voice of the unheard Rohingya children. It's vital we hear what they have to tell us, because they are most affected by this terrible emergency.

Children told us their worlds have been torn apart. They've gone from living in a community where they know the geography, have close friends, family, a routine, good food and safe places to play, to a chaotic, overcrowded and frightening place.

They yearn for their homes, their possessions and oftentimes grieve for dead or missing relatives. They miss being warm at night and cool during the



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PHOTO: REUTERS

day. Their beds, comforts and toys: all of these things are lost.

Fear is endemic and many children spend their days on high alert. They've heard of children who have disappeared, kidnapped by frightening men who wish to harm them. There have been 17 recorded cases of child trafficking in the camps to date, with the unrecorded number likely to be much higher. History reminds us that wherever children are caught up in an emergency, traffickers are nearby.

Girls, in particular, are scared to leave their tents. They spend most of their time in tiny, unbearably hot structures, with just a straw mat for company as the long and dreary hours tick by. They only leave to use the toilet, and even then, they worry about strangers and that they will become lost in the mazes of the camps.

Children work hard. Many—particularly those who have lost family members—have no choice but to walk very long distances to collect distributions or to brave the jungle alone to find firewood to light their stoves so they can eat. They dread what awaits them on these walks, but they fear starvation more.

One 11-year-old girl told us: "It is very

difficult to collect firewood here. We cannot go to forest at night because it is very risky. There was a girl who was raped when collecting firewood at night."

And often, children get lost. Even experienced aid workers find these camps overwhelming. There are few directional signs in an endlessly sprawling labyrinth of tarp and bamboo. This is a confusing and massive place for an adult, it must feel infinitely more bewildering and enormous for a child.

Children say they feel unhealthy and worry about sickness. They commonly experience diarrhoea, coughs and colds, respiratory problems, eye problems and skin diseases. Diphtheria stalks the camps: more than 4,000 cases have been reported to date. It has already claimed the lives of 24 children.

Food is a constant worry. Families are allocated 25 kilograms of rice every 15 days and it often runs out on day 12. They eat the same meal—often only once per day—of rice and lentils, and lack the nutritional variety to have energy and to grow. Children wish they had vegetables, fish and meat they could eat back home.

Few of the children here have access

to education, putting them at risk of child labour and exploitation. Sadly, many children told us that because they cannot go to school and do not know if and when they will return home, they lack hope for the future.

For an adult, this place is tough. For a child, it is worse.

But even so, there are small comforts. The call to prayer five times a day, helps children feel safe and connected to their Muslim-Bangladeshi host community. They've come to trust and even feel comforted by the presence of the Bangladesh military and they told us the aid workers are kind to them and help them to feel safe.

Children need stability, routine and safety. As we shift into the sixth-month since this crisis began, the priority now is to ensure children are protected and feel safe to play, learn and live without fear.

It's vital that as the news coverage fades, our resolve strengthens to do more for these children. We cannot fail them. We must hear their voices.

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Could Syria ignite again?



ERESH OMAR JAMAL

FOR months it seemed like everything was quieting down on the Syrian front. The Syrian government of President Assad, backed by Hezbollah on the ground and

Russian forces on air, had almost achieved what only a few years ago had seemed nearly impossible—total victory over ISIS, and other terrorist forces in the country. But over the course of February, the sands have again shifted quickly, as they so often have all throughout this bloody conflict.

Since the beginning of the Syrian war in March 2011, Israeli fighter jets have, on multiple occasions, admittedly

again on February 6, which preceded the US bombing of SAA positions in Deir ez-Zor that reportedly killed hundreds of SAA members and, rumour has it, Russian servicemen as well (although there has been no verification of this from the Kremlin).

When Israeli jets again flew into occupied Syrian territories on February 10, the SAA finally responded, downing an Israeli F-16 and damaging another F-15, while the Russian and Syrian version of the story also includes the SAA shooting down an additional 13 out of 18 Israeli air-launched cruise missiles on top of that. This "shocked the Israeli military and political elite," says Buchanan. Because, as analyst Elias Akleh put it, "Warning sirens wailed in many Israeli towns in the north" as "Israelis hurried into shelters and Ben Gurion International Airport near Tel Aviv had temporarily halted air traffic," while

Since the beginning of the Syrian war in March 2011, Israeli fighter jets have, on multiple occasions, admittedly entered into Syria, illegally according to international law, directly attacking the Syrian military to, in its own words, defend its "national interests."



A woman gestures as she walks on rubble of damaged buildings after an airstrike in the besieged town of Douma in eastern Ghouta in Damascus, Syria.

PHOTO: BASSAM KHABIEH/REUTERS

entered into Syria, illegally according to international law, directly attacking the Syrian military to, in its own words, defend its "national interests." While the question of how Israel's national interest lies in Syria remains unanswered, one of the most dramatic events in "the politics of the region," according to political commentator and former senior advisor to numerous US presidents, Pat Buchanan, occurred on February 10, when another Israeli incursion into Syria was "confronted with devastating effect" by the Syrian Arab Army (SAA).

Israel had previously launched an attack on the outskirts of the countryside of Damascus on February 4, killing an unverified number of SAA fighters. Then

Israeli forces scrambled to "cushion the shock of Syria's successful assault on an F-16 equipped with the 'latest American defensive Electronic Counter Measures (ECM) that is supposed to defend the plane from missile attacks'."

This was particularly concerning as "the very expensive ECM failed to defend the plane against the older 1960s technology of the Russian S-200 missile that hit the planes." And its significance, according to Buchanan, was that "Israel's air superiority which is at the core of its military superiority that has enabled it to dominate West Asia," and previously annihilate the Egyptian air-force at its heyday, was for the first time successfully challenged. How this latest revelation

would affect a region already near its tipping point, and its various actors seething hitherto because of one form of grievance or another, is of great significance and concern.

Meanwhile, in another corner of Syria, just across the Turkish-Syrian border, Turkey has sent its forces to attack Afrin and President Erdogan has threatened to attack Manbij, 80 miles to the east, where US troops and generals are stationed with Kurdish forces that Turkey is determined to whip out. On being asked about the situation, Erdogan said, "(The Americans) tell us, 'Don't come to Manbij.' We will come to Manbij to hand over these territories to their rightful owners."

Again, who Erdogan is referring to when he says "rightful owners" is difficult to determine, as evidence has shown Turkey to be among those who had previously led the charge to have President Assad removed from office, despite his seemingly recent shift in position. But one thing Turkey has made clear is that it will not allow a separate Kurdish state to be carved out of the area between itself and Syria.

According to reports also in February, clashes between the Kurdish YPG and Turkish forces in Syria have led to numerous deaths already and both sides have said that they were deploying additional armaments and men in the case of bigger assaults in their respective statements. As Turkey and US-backed forces prepare for a possible assault, SAA forces too have reportedly crossed the Euphrates into territories taken from ISIS, massing troops and fortifying their

position in the Euphrates Valley, perhaps awaiting a possible three-pronged showdown.

What this shows, however, is that amidst the Machiavellian games that are being played out over Syria, where allegiances seem to shift in an instant, there are signs of clear cracks in the relationship between two key NATO members—US and Turkey—that have the two largest militaries out of all members of the alliance. What implication does this have for NATO moving forward? Is there any chance of Turkey leaving the alliance should it fail to come to an understanding with the US? For now, like every other side in this conflict, neither Turkey nor the US are showing any sign of backing down.

And this is where things get dangerous, as it increases chances of direct conflicts between countries now that most of the proxies, moderate rebels and terrorist outfits that were sent to Syria from other places, have all lost most of their influence and strength.

Moreover, it also increases chances of a direct conflict between two nuclear armed superpowers—US and Russia—whose media, by posturing along with their militaries, are doing the world no favours. For example, after a Russian SU-25 attack aircraft was shot down in Idlib Province in Syria by militants from the Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham group (formerly known as Jabhat al-Nusra) on February 3, using what the Russian military claims was an American-made portable surface-to-air missile, the media in both countries went haywire.

While the US media gloated about the US army's success of thwarting Russian and Syrian plans and hitting the SAA and, possibly, Russian servicemen, Peter Lavelle, host of Russia Today's most popular show on Youtube, *Crosstalk*, said on air that "It looks like the Pentagon is itching for some kind of a conflict and I would tell [the Pentagon] to be very careful because the Russians don't bluff." Given these developments, it looks not only like Syria could ignite once again at any minute, but that the blood-bath this time could potentially engulf much greater numbers in a war that has already seen the highest number of casualties in the 21st century.

If that is not reason enough for all sides to take a step back, then, perhaps, Syrians and indeed the world had possibly celebrated chances of peace in Syria and the region too prematurely.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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No Rohingya repatriation as it is

The Daily Star published an editorial titled "Start Rohingya repatriation soonest" on February 18. The editorial quotes Yanghee Lee, the UN Special Rapporteur on Myanmar, as saying that the violence against Rohingya refugees bears the "hallmarks of genocide." If this is so, any repatriation will be like sending them back for execution. The editorial also calls for trying Myanmar officials in an international tribunal for their conducts. It may be pointed out that the Myanmar military is deeply entrenched in power, and the International Court lacks any police or military force to arrest any officials

The Rohingyas will be at the mercy of the same brutal military officials if they are repatriated. As I have pointed out earlier, the Buddhist extremists and the military considers the Rohingyas as unwanted aliens because of their religion. As such, they will face renewed violence if they are repatriated. Let's be realistic and allow the Rohingyas to stay in Bangladesh until some safe third-countries can be found to re-settle them in, or until some more concrete guarantee of their safety once returned to Myanmar is established.

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