

# Deafening silence of int'l community

## Rohingya crisis sees no end

IT goes without saying that we are in agreement with Adama Dieng, UN special adviser on the prevention of genocide, who did not mince his words when he said that the international community, including the UN, has failed to protect the Rohingya people. This fact has been clear all along but now that a UN official has said it out loud, there should be no further confusion about the international community's failure to live up to its duty.

It is hugely disappointing that almost seven months into the latest round of mass influx of Rohingyas into Bangladesh, no concrete action has been taken to bring about a safe environment in Rakhine for the repatriation of the refugees. We strongly believe that the next step forward should be to refer Myanmar's atrocities to the International Criminal Court for prosecution. And here, UNSC will play the most crucial role as it has the authority to refer Myanmar to the prosecutor of the ICC. However, the prospect of China and Russia casting veto on the resolution makes it challenging.

However, as Mr Dieng has said, this is a critical time to exert pressure on Myanmar. And China and India should exert all the means available to them to bring forth justice for a minority which has been the target of a longstanding campaign of genocide. Bangladesh, which is hosting over a million Rohingya refugees, cannot continue to suffer.

If Myanmar's referral to the ICC through UNSC does not materialise, the next best thing for Bangladesh to do would be to self-refer to the ICC as an affected party. Bangladesh cannot go on shouldering such a monumental humanitarian burden. The time for rhetoric and lip service is up. All eyes should now be on robustly pursuing the agenda of delivering justice for the Rohingyas, including bringing the perpetrators of the genocide to book.

# Bank lendings crippled for a week!

## Take steps to make IT server foolproof

IT is preposterous that every bank in the country has been forced to stop credit operations because of a technical glitch in the Credit Information Bureau (CIB) server of Bangladesh Bank (BB) that was out of service for a week up to March 13! Given that no bank in the country is allowed to give out any loan if the CIB report is not generated, we would have thought that the BB management would have placed more priority on the IT server and those who operate the IT system.

Equally unacceptable is the fact that when the operation was finally restored on March 13 after a week, it broke down again, which means the banks are also offline, again. And this frequent breakdown has been attributed to the failure of requisite cooling of the server room.

How exactly is it that the banking sector has been offline with its credit operations for a week that has invariably affected millions of its clients? Why did it take a week for BB to restore the cooling system of the data centre? More importantly, why weren't client banks informed of the failure as soon as it happened? There appear to be multiple failures in management practices, which need to be addressed immediately so that there is no repeat of this experience in the future. And should there not be backup arrangements so that the banks' operations are not entirely disrupted, and that the essential transactions continue without let.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### Plant trees to save nature

On the two sides of Lakshimpur-Chandpur highway, there are thousands of large trees. At least, 700 of the trees are a hundred-years-old. However, as the road is to be widened, the trees are to be felled. At the time I'm writing this letter, already 500 trees have been cut down, and within the next two or three months, all the trees will be gone.

Many environmental activists are calling on the authorities to find other ways to expand the highway without felling the trees. Public engineers should look for options so that such development work can be done without harming nature. We should also do all we can to plant more trees than we fell.

Naeem Ariyan, Chittagong University

### In pursuit of a clean Dhaka

I live in Banasree. The area has a lake, but unfortunately, it is filled with filthy substances. The lake is dying due to the reckless dumping of garbage. The water in it has turned murky and black and has turned into a breeding ground for mosquitoes.

If the local residents took care of the lake by themselves, then the lake would get a life and the site would turn into a breathtaking place. In reality, however, the local residents are encroaching on the lake and dumping their garbage in it.

We always blame the authorities for this sorrowful state of Dhaka city. But we have our fair share of the blame. Had we been sincere about our duties as citizens, Dhaka would have been a better and cleaner city.

Mohammad Zonaed Emran, By e-mail

# The expanding phenomenon of religious and nationalist extremism

## STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING



BRIG GEN SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN NDC, PSC (RETD)

THE attack on Dr Zafar Iqbal on March 3, only proves that religiously motivated extremism of the violent type, whether manifested in individual or group actions, continues to find its practitioners in society. And we are at a loss to determine how best to combat them effectively. The scourge is not a new phenomenon, nor unique to our country, but it has gained in salience in recent times.

It would be appropriate at this point to dwell briefly on the rise of religious/nationalist extremism in order to put the issue in a broader perspective of the region.

The current spate of this phenomenon is not the exclusive preserve of the Islamists. There are other hues of this exclusivist ideology. Some term it as rabid nationalism or nativism. What has been happening without our knowledge while we have been occupied with tackling Muslim extremists is the growth of extreme nationalist fervour of another kind on both sides of our borders. Even more worrisome is that, while in Bangladesh we can take comfort in the fact that the Islamic groups here have not been allowed to morph into a politically significant force, because of the secular psyche of the majority Bengalis, in both India and Myanmar—India in particular—the liberal and secular way of life is being gradually overtaken by another form of extremism where people in saffron are calling the shots. It cannot be lost on the discerning liberals that extremists in one country take comfort in the rise of their kind in neighbouring countries. That, they think, not only justifies but reinforces their existence. In Myanmar too the "Buddhist hin Ladens" have garnered enough strength to influence the ruling junta. Government sponsorship of these groups is very evident in the fact that when political dissent of any kind is prohibited in Myanmar, thousands of Buddhist

monks openly flaunt their pathological dislike for a particular ethnic group boldly, proclaiming that any supporter of the Rohingya is their enemy. These demonstrations, when the Myanmar military is engaged in Rohingya pogrom, are significant.

But let us shift focus to our own country.

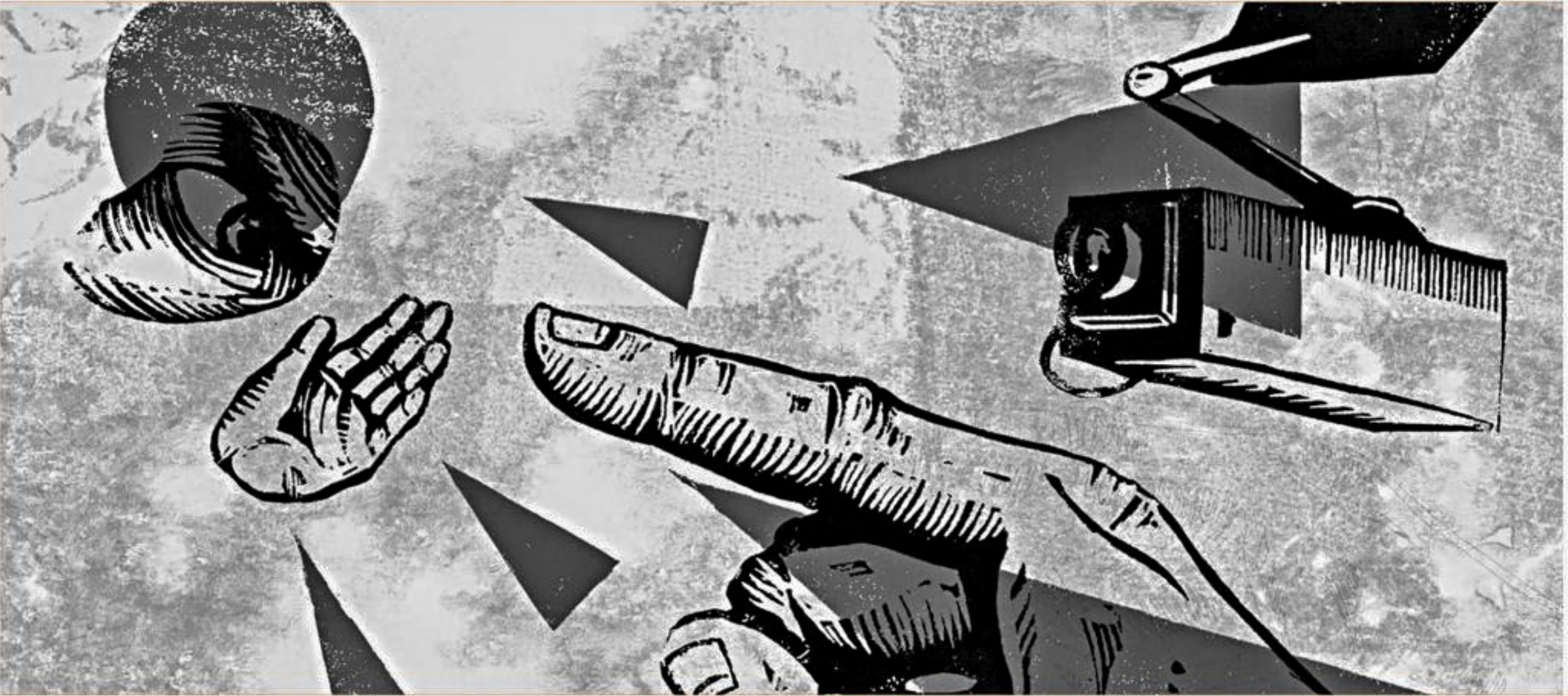
The attack on Dr Iqbal, apparently by a single individual, mimics the "lone wolf" syndrome. But in this particular case it is difficult to say with certainty if he was actually acting entirely on his own convictions. If that be so what motivated him to attempt to take another man's life and declare him "anti-Muslim"? One

distortions of truth, and projecting narratives from the scriptures totally out of context.

Ideological extremism has the uncanny capacity of self-perpetuation, fed by minds that are at best ill-educated. An uneducated or even half-educated mind is malleable particularly when religion, or misinterpretation of it, to be more exact, is used as the means to bend the mind. And that is more so in the case of individuals who may not belong to any particular extremist or jihadi organisation but is self-radicalised, motivated by what one comes across in the various media platforms and the activities of the

group, at least ideologically if not organically. But be what the nature of that link may, that individuals and groups use religion to infuse violence in the society for a political end is enough reason for us to address the issue seriously, particularly how we approach the issue of religion in the context of the phenomenon that we are seeking to neutralise.

The two issues we have to contend with in this regard is the distortion of religion by extremist groups to instigate others to perpetrate violence, and individuals who become the arbiter and the judge, jury and executioner, basing his verdict, as in this case where Dr Zafar



SOURCE: THE BRISTOL CABLE

wonders if he has read any of Dr Iqbal's writings or heard his speeches seriously enough to make his conclusion. And even if the narratives did not agree with his views, can he really seek recourse to as extreme an action like killing a man? This is the fundamental question that confronts our society, and it must be tackled immediately. But, can whatever strategy that we might devise, if we are able to put together a cogent workable plan at all, really see an end to the phenomenon completely?

The question is prompted by the fact that combating violence, is not quite the same as fighting violence motivated by ideas rooted in misperceptions and

violent radical organisations or individuals inside and outside his country. And in the age of the IT, propagation of thoughts, most often distorted to influence the minds of people like Faizur, has become so much simpler. No wonder the internet and the online platforms have added another new dimension to warfare to the already existing three. In addition to land, air and sea, the strategic planners have to factor in the online battle in their plans.

Some experts totally discount the notion of the "lone wolf". They opine that anyone who is stimulated by any group to resort to violence in the society, makes him or her a part of the

Iqbal was declared anti-Muslim by his attacker, on his own interpretation of Islam due to his poor knowledge about the religion.

The question is how we position ourselves best to face this situation. This relates to religion, and one feels that there ought to be open discourse on such matters which should not be restricted to the confines of the mosques or places of worship, or the four walls of one's home, but be a matter of discourse in other social forums also. We need more of open discussions on it, not less.

Brig Gen Shahedul Anam Khan, ndc, psc (Retd) is Associate Editor, The Daily Star.

# How RTI can help elect the best candidates

SHAMSUL BARI and RUHI NAZ

POLITICAL tension mount in most countries during election year. In Bangladesh, tension has already gripped the people and is likely to intensify before the general elections scheduled for December 2018.

A key factor amidst the excitement is the disagreement between the two main political parties on whether elections should be held under the sitting government or some form of neutral government.

This tension distracts us from the more substantive issues of election such as ensuring that the most qualified candidates are elected to parliament. On that important question, the Right to Information Act (RTI) 2009 can help.

The RTI Act entitles citizens to monitor the work of all public bodies operating under the three branches of government—executive, legislative and judiciary. Citizens can do this by seeking relevant information on them from the concerned public authorities. Our focus today will be on the legislative branch, i.e. the

properly explained. Unfortunately, voter-counselling on selection of candidates is not fully ingrained in our election culture. The RTI Act, however, makes it easier to do so. Civil society and citizen's groups have a golden opportunity to play an effective role here.

In India, an NGO named Satark Nagrik Sangathan (SNS), or Alert Citizens Group, has developed report cards on elected representatives to help people assess their performance in different fora. Using the RTI Act, activists access information from relevant public authorities on how elected representatives have performed in their respective positions. Based on the information received, a report card is established on each of them.

The report card contains objective information on the performance of individual elected representatives. These include the representative's performance in the legislature and its subsidiary committees. Did they attend, what questions and issues did they raise? Did they participate in debates relating to the functioning of the executive branch of government? How did they deliberate on laws under consideration? Did they

Order (RPO) 1972. Citizens could check the law to find out what information on the candidates are held by the EC which could be sought through RTI requests. In a related case, in 2016, the High Court had ordered the EC to provide RTI applicants with information they held on political parties under the RPO.

Political parties could themselves be a source of information for the candidates that they nominate. While there is some controversy on whether they fall within the purview of the RTI Act, this could be tested out through RTI requests to them. In India, in a 2013 decision, the Central Information Commission held that political parties are indeed covered by the RTI Act, which they jointly rejected. The matter has remained unresolved since then.

The experience of the United Kingdom, where the Freedom of Information Act (FOI) has been put to effective use for the purposes here, can also provide guidance.

In 2005, a civil society campaigner together with some journalists made FOI requests for details on claims made by MPs for the reimbursement of their travel and accommodation expenses during parliamentary sessions. This was initially denied but on appeal, the Information Commissioner ordered for its disclosure.

Subsequently, the commissioner also ruled in favour of the public's right to know broad details of MP's spending on second homes in London. This resulted in the release of detailed breakdown of expense claims made by several MP's, including the then Prime Minister Gordon Brown and his predecessor, Tony Blair.

At one stage, the House of Commons had appealed the Information Commissioner's pro-disclosure decision to the High Court, but the latter ruled against it. When several fraudulent claims and misappropriations were revealed, a series of high-profile resignations followed.

Public apologies were tendered by Prime Minister Gordon Brown and Conservative Party leader MP David Cameron. The Prime Minister announced the formation of new rules on reimbursements to MPs, including a pledge for external audits to oversee pay and allowances. Soon thereafter, the government passed the Parliamentary Standards Bill, which removed the right of MPs to set their own allowances and established a new Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority to administer the pay and expenses of MPs and investigate alleged breach of the newly formulated rules on parliamentary expense claims and allowances.

The above is a fine testimony of the intrinsic power of the RTI Act, not only to fight corruption, but also to contribute to systemic change in governance. The Bangladesh government and our MPs had the foresight and wisdom to adopt this amazing legislation nine years ago to empower citizens to promote transparency and accountability in the workings of public authorities, including many NGOs. We must put this law to effective use.

It is time that all concerned citizens, who rightly agitate for free and fair elections, learn from the experiences of other countries to use the RTI/FOI Act to ensure election of lawmakers who are qualified for the job and are themselves law abiding.

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parliament. We must first understand the diverse roles that MPs play and then go about electing the right person for the job.

According to a study, the task of parliamentarians "can be captured conceptually within four roles. The legislative role includes establishing rules for the ordering of social, political and economic activity and empowering the government to enforce these rules. Financial control includes empowering the executive to collect tax and other revenues, to spend those revenues for specific purposes and to record and report on actual expenditures and achievements. The oversight function includes those parliamentary activities to help make the actions of government transparent to the electorate and holding the executive publicly accountable. Finally, representation includes the less concrete functions of ensuring that citizens' concerns with government are addressed..."

While it is not easy to visualise the above roles of the MPs, voters can certainly relate to them, if they are

scrutinise public expenditure? How did they spend the local development fund? What is their educational background; do they have a criminal record?

In Bangladesh, we could develop similar report cards on our MPs. They would provide voters with the required knowledge on candidates seeking their support. RTI could be the basis for obtaining information based on the above criteria on candidates who are seeking re-election and on whom records are available at the Secretariat of the Jatiyo Sangsad. Additionally, it could be used to find out how they spent the Tk 20 crore development fund at their disposal.

For new candidates, where such records are not available, background checks can be made through RTI requests to public authorities who may hold relevant information on them which are disclosable, such as the police and tax authorities as well as local government bodies or other public offices they had served.

The Election Commission (EC) too holds information on candidates under the Representation of the People