

An elephant walks through Kutupalong camp in the morning, in between the huts it easily dwarfs, while all around is the worried muttering of the camp inhabitants uncertain as to what to do. A crowd of Rohingya men and boys follow it at a distance, trying to shoo it away while others crouch on the roofs to watch.

Later in the video, people are screaming and running out of its path, some holding sticks, while the elephant desperately tries to maneuver its way out of the maze of huts. It tears through a hut, turning its bamboo walls and roof into rubble, along with 19 others. At least 30 were injured and a child killed in this incident in February. This was not the first fatality of a humanitarian crisis that has led to a clash of humans and wildlife in the refugee camps of Cox's Bazar.

### Human-wildlife conflict

In the last year, there have been at least 12 deaths as a result of coming into contact with elephants in the Kutupalong camp and adjacent forests. The camp, which houses at least 585,000 Rohingya refugees who fled ethnic cleansing in Myanmar, forms part of the



A training session using mock-up elephants, made of bamboo and old clothing, at Kutupalong camp.

# HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE, AT A COST

*The Rohingya camps in Cox's Bazar present long-term environmental and ecological implications, along with more immediate dangers*

MALIHA KHAN

elephants' core habitat. The last such incident of death due to an elephant in the camp happened in late March.

The Asian elephant has been labelled critically endangered in Bangladesh as their number is down to 268 due to destruction of their natural habitat in the hilly areas of Chittagong, Cox's Bazar and the CHT, among others. An estimated 35 to 45 Asian elephants currently move around the site of the camp in Ukhiya of Cox's Bazar, which falls within a corridor, or traditional migratory route, between Bangladesh and Myanmar (via Ghumdum) in which they regularly move in search of food and shelter.

"Behaviourally, elephants always follow their traditional routes and corridors for regular movement. If they find any obstacles within it, they try to break it," said the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), the global conservation agency, in a report which surveyed elephant movement in the area. With the danger posed to both the refugees and the elephants in the densely packed camps, IUCN Bangladesh and UNHCR are working together to address human-elephant conflict in the camps. IUCN is replicating mitigation methods fine-tuned in other areas of Bangladesh where elephants are concentrated, such as Sherpur, in the Rohingya camps.

"The refugees are already in an unfamiliar environment, and were unnerved on seeing elephants so near their homes," says Raquibul Amin, country representative of IUCN. Through talks with the refugees, his team learnt that the refugees had sometimes encountered wild elephants in their fields but never so close, back in Myanmar. "Their fear is understandable."

Most of the elephants approach the camp from the eastern edge trying to get to the corridor, which the



A sign saying "Warning! Route for Wild Elephants" near the Kutupalong-Balukhali refugee camp.

IUCN predicts may become more frequent now as the monsoon season approaches. Further on, the main transit camp, where refugees who cross the border initially stay before moving on to the camps, blocks the mouth of the corridor, says Amin.

In the beginning of April, a live demonstration by IUCN used mock-up elephants (bamboo structures with a colourful 'skin') to train its elephant response teams (ERTs). IUCN employed the artist Shadhin who worked with Rohingya women to stitch together the coverings out of old clothing. An experienced team was brought in from Sherpur for the training. Demonstrations are also being shown around the camps to show the refugees how to avoid conflict with wild elephants, much to the delight of the children in the grim camps.

25 ERTs, each made up of 10 Rohingya volunteers, have undergone training to corral elephants straying into the camp. The teams have already led away elephants from the camp three times successfully, using whistles and human chains. They work in shifts at night, when the elephants are usually on the move. 50 bamboo watchtowers, up in the trees, are also being

### ECOLOGY

built around the edges of the camp, where the ERTs will be on the lookout.

"Our main goal was to demystify the elephant—to show that it is not an enemy but part of the landscape here," says Amin. A long-term goal is to create a bond between the camp inhabitants and the elephants. Just like the locals, who have become used to the elephants moving about on their crop lands at certain times of the year, the refugees will adapt to their presence over time. "Coexistence is needed."

But this is only a temporary measure to address the larger environmental problem, says Amin. "This is a band-aid on the wound, it only stops the bleeding for a time." What is needed is long-term planning so that the elephants can migrate safely without the camps being in the way. Otherwise, if a group of elephants comes together to forage for food, the refugees would be caught unawares, he warns.

### Forest degradation

Though registered camps and unplanned settlements of Rohingya refugees have existed in the area since the 1990s, these only occupied around 695 acres previously. "By now, the camps occupy a total of 5,500 acres of government-owned reserved forest land," says Md Ali Kabir, officer of Cox's Bazar South Forest Division.

Since August 2017, more than 700,000 Rohingya have crossed the border into Bangladesh. At the peak of the influx, the need of the hour was providing the Rohingya refugees a place to take shelter wherever possible. Accordingly, the existing refugee camps were expanded and new ones carved out of uninhabited stretches of reserved forest land and protected areas nearby within Ukhiya.

The change since then is striking. Satellite images of Cox's Bazar from May (before the influx) and September last year reveal the drastic change the landscape has undergone—from forests and greenery to barren land dotted with tents. Forests and hillocks have been cleared to make way for the settlements and the rest stripped bare by refugees foraging for firewood.

"They need to be provided with alternative cooking fuel to save what remains of the forests," says Kabir. UN agencies and NGOs are also pressing for the distribution of more alternative fuel such as compressed rice husk briquettes and improved cooking stoves to the refugees. Government plans to provide gas supply to

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### PERSPECTIVE

The quota reform movement that exploded on to the nation's radar last week enjoyed enormous public support, especially among university students. I can't underscore enough the extent of its popularity—in a series of surprise resignations, university-level leaders of the ruling party's student wing broke ranks to join the movement.

Such rebellion has seldom happened in recent history, especially at a time

household income simultaneously?

One answer offered by sceptics is that the growth data is being exaggerated by a regime keen to prove it has kept its end of a Faustian bargain with the citizenry, i.e. they will bring economic development in exchange for curtailed civil rights. Unable to actually deliver on said promise, they've hidden behind flawed data.

Another plausible answer is mounting inequality—those at the top of the food chain are hoarding the benefits of

unlikely to be the last.

In recent history, the Arab Spring arose out of a similar milieu. Many a PhD dissertation has investigated the causes of the Arab Spring; many more are in the offing. Yet a couple of factors that have already found credence in academic literature, which Bangladeshi policymakers ought to find ominous are: the protests were preceded by high rates of youth unemployment, that left an angry population divorced from the

am, however, saying the stage is set for destabilisation, which no amount of 'benami mamlas' and Digital Security Acts can solve. This destabilisation can manifest itself in many forms, even including greater support for extremism and higher prevalence of crimes. Whatever the manifestation, the outcome will not be conducive to the peace and prosperity we all crave.

I have not said anything here that is unknown to policymakers. Since

# THE GOVERNMENT IS RIGHT TO BE AFRAID QUOTA REFORM IS JUST THE TIP OF THE ICEBERG

FAHIMA ALI

when deviating from the party line has brutal consequences for the rebels, as the dissenters at Dhaka University's Begum Sufia Kamal Hall can testify. So, it is worth understanding what makes a young person so angry that he (and very much, she) eschews personal safety for an ephemeral cause. I believe the answer lies in the crisis of unemployment we're facing.

The latest Labour Force Survey 2016-17 found that the unemployment rate of high school and university-educated job seekers are the highest among all levels of education in Bangladesh (15 percent and 11 percent respectively)—this is more than double and triple the unemployment rate of the entire population (four percent). Nearly 30 percent of Bangladeshis between 15-29 years of age are not in education, employment or training; of them, the largest share is in the age groups 25-29 (49 lakhs) and 20-24 (46 lakhs). That's nearly one crore helpless but desperate young people with ample spare time on their hands.

These alarming figures, bad as they are, do not even take into account the plight of the majority who are employed at the lower end of the salary scale. They have very little job security, no social protection and a bleak future ahead. The impact of such precarity early in their careers is usually permanent, with studies showing these workers earn less over their lifetime, have higher health risks, and greater chance of unemployment. Delayed entry into the job market also has knock-on effects on marriage and starting a family, both of which get postponed, causing enormous frustration among young people.

In this scenario, the much-touted GDP growth rate—a remarkable 7.65 percent (surpassing even China's 6.7 percent)—becomes questionable. After all, household real income actually fell by 11 percent since 2010, according to the Household Income and Expenditure Survey 2016. How can we have both soaring GDP growth as well as plunging



PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

economic growth, depriving the have-nots. The fact that the Gini coefficient, a measure of inequality, rose from 0.458 to 0.483 between 2010 to 2016 provides some evidence for this conjecture. The truth probably lies in a combination of these factors.

The quota reform movement must be understood with the above background in mind. Nearly a crore young people are being told the country's economy is at an all-time high even as they see their futures crumbling before their eyes. A dangerously malfunctioning education system provides no panacea either. Anger, you must then agree, is their only logical response. Unfair treatment in public sector job recruitment, which remains one of the few avenues through which a person can access job security and social protection in a volatile economy, may have been the first flash point of their fury. But, I suspect, it is

fruits of economic growth, along with a paucity of merit-based job recruitment, which further fuelled their resentment. No one, you see, likes being *bekar*. Especially if they think they don't deserve to be.

It is also worth remembering that the most dangerous civilian political opponent is the middle class. The rich do not need to protest; the poor do not have the time to protest. The middle class, in contrast, is quiescent until they're goaded into protesting. When they do protest though, the results are far reaching. The fact that unemployment rates are highest among the country's educated youth, that the protests were largely urban-focused, and the hubs were university campuses all point to a Bangladeshi middle class reaching the end of their tether.

I am not saying we are headed towards an Arab Spring, far from it! I

Bangladeshi policy documents are replete with mentions of our demographic dividend, the authors must surely be aware of the opposite side of the coin, i.e. what happens when the demographic dividend is misused. I was therefore supremely disappointed in the PM's angst-ridden speech in parliament in response to the quota reform movement. It ignored the entire premise of the movement, treating the justifiably angry protesters as children, who have demanded one too many lollipops before bedtime.

Destabilisation is not inevitable. But the insultingly dismissive attitude towards the protesters, coupled with the subsequent vengeance wrought upon them across campuses, indicates destabilisation may become unavoidable in the long run. We deserve better.

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