

UNSC visit must break the stalemate

Myanmar has to comply with conditions

THE visit of the delegation of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) to first Bangladesh and then Myanmar comes at a crucial time when Bangladesh is facing several daunting challenges as it struggles to host over one million Rohingya refugees forced to flee Myanmar's persecution. This is the biggest influx of refugees over the shortest period of time to a country that is already burdened by resource constraints. Now there is worry about providing enough food for them, how to shelter them from possible landslides during the monsoons and, most importantly, how to make Myanmar sincerely honour Bangladesh's and the international community's call for dignified, safe repatriation of the Rohingyas with proper recognition of them as citizens. These are the issues that we expect the UNSC delegation to address during its visit to the two countries—coming up with concrete solutions to the crisis.

The most immediate challenge—providing food—is of great concern as the World Food Programme has so far received donations of USD 45 million, which is only 18 percent of USD 243 million required mainly for providing food to one million Rohingyas and 200,000 locals in Cox's Bazar until December. We are worried that humanitarian aid may actually fall as aid agencies become more involved in other crises in many parts of the world. The UNSC delegation must make sure this does not happen as the lives of more than a million refugees are at stake. They include thousands of the most vulnerable—children, women, elderly and the sick. They must not be forgotten.

The bigger challenge is to focus on the repatriation of these people who are not even recognised as citizens of Myanmar where they have lived for generations and where they were once legal citizens. Even the term "Rohingya" is prohibited by Myanmar in its attempt to deny their very existence. The UNSC therefore must address the issue of safe, dignified repatriation of the Rohingya refugees to their country. This means Myanmar must seriously create a conducive environment for their safe return and official recognition of their citizenship to Myanmar. So far Myanmar has done nothing to warrant reassurance that those prerequisites have been met.

In this precarious situation, we urge the high-powered UNSC delegation to realise the immediacy of resolving the crisis by asking aid agencies to continue their humanitarian support consistently and by creating pressure on Myanmar to comply with the conditions of the repatriation agreement with Bangladesh.

Celebrating Buddha Purnima

Let the Buddha's teachings triumph

WE would like to wish a joyous Buddha Purnima to all followers of Gautama Buddha in Bangladesh and all around the world. The day, observed on the occasion of Buddha's birthday, aims to celebrate his life, teachings and the message of peace and non-violence.

Discarding the life of a prince that entailed luxury, wealth and power, Gautama Buddha sought enlightenment through meditation, fasting and self-abnegation. He was acutely aware of the sufferings of all beings and believed that the only way to live was to be compassionate to all beings.

Lord Buddha's messages are as relevant today as 25 centuries ago when they were first uttered. Buddha promotes compassion, empathy for fellow beings as well as meditation and introspection through which one can know oneself and make amends for one's transgressions. In this world plagued by violence, intolerance, materialism and self-obsession, Buddha's words can be taken as ways to remove such evils and heal ourselves. Buddha Purnima is an occasion to remind ourselves to live in harmony with people of other faiths, ethnicities and respect their beliefs, in accordance with Buddha's teachings.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

Unnecessary caesarean sections

WHO reports that caesarean sections are used in 37 percent of deliveries in Bangladesh, whereas the reasonable rate should be about 10 percent. It is a matter of great concern as a growing number of private clinics in the country, whose main intention is to earn money rather than providing quality healthcare to the patients, go for unnecessary caesarean sections.

In rural areas, some hoaxes are also at play. Many believe that babies born through C-sections become more brilliant than those born through normal deliveries. In this context, Birganj upazila Health Complex truly set an example by making people aware of the harmful effects of unnecessary caesarean sections. They deserve kudos.

Suzan Paul, By e-mail

People with mental illness deserve better

Bangladesh has a large number of people with mental illness who are either abandoned by their own families or are lost. Often we see such people wandering in the streets of Dhaka. I urge the government to employ a team to find out these people and provide them with special care and treatment. If proper care is ensured, there is a possibility that many of them may return to normal life. They are fellow human beings, and we have an obligation to treat them as such.

Sweety Akter, Dhaka University

ROHINGYA CRISIS

A lot riding on the UNSC visit



THE importance of the members of the United Nations Security Council's (UNSC) visit to Bangladesh and Myanmar regarding the Rohingya crisis cannot be overstated. The delegation team, comprised of representatives of all member states, will be in Myanmar after visiting Bangladesh. The trip and subsequent actions of the UNSC are likely to decide the fate of the 700,000 refugees who have fled Myanmar since last August. It will also serve as a test of the UNSC's

ability to address the worst humanitarian crisis of recent times and stand against a blatant act of genocide.

The visit, in some ways, has already been quite late due to the denial of the Myanmar government. The UNSC proposed a visit in February but the Myanmar government rejected the request saying it was "not the right time." Nevertheless, we can take solace in the old adage "it is better late than never."

"Crucial" is an understatement to describe the trip because there's a lot riding on it and the reactions of the UNSC members. Unfortunately, to date, the United Nations, particularly the UNSC, has not been able to play an effective role, thanks to the unqualified support of China and Russia in the UNSC to

Myanmar. Since issuing a strong statement in November last year, the Council has not taken any concrete steps. How far this trip will be able to change the UNSC's role is an open question because neither China nor Russia has indicated any shift in their position. What roles other UNSC members would play in the UN after their return may well be decided in the coming weeks.

More than six months have passed since the military operation was conducted which engendered the latest round of the refugee crisis. It is now well-documented that the claim of the Myanmar government that it only targeted the militants is far from the truth. The operation was a part of the longstanding ethnic cleansing policy of the Myanmar

the Rakhine state, at least 700,000 have now been forced out. There couldn't be more compelling evidence to a planned ethnic cleansing.

Although British Ambassador Karen Pierce commented ahead of the trip that it was "incredibly important" for the Council to see the situation on the ground, how far they will be able to see and what they will see is not clear. The Myanmar government had enough time to hide, if not eliminate, the evidence of genocide. Recent pictures of the area show that the landscape has also changed. According to sources in Myanmar, the government has agreed to the UNSC visit because it will alleviate international criticisms. The Irrawaddy has reported that, "the Security Council delegation was

strong and unassailable evidence backed up by documents to make its case. Indeed, the very presence of 700,000 refugees and their narratives of traumatic experience of terror and violence are strong evidence of persecution and well-designed ethnic cleansing, but thus far these have not persuaded the UNSC members to act robustly.

This may turn out to be the most important opportunity for Bangladesh to internationalise the refugee crisis. Without a concerted and coordinated international effort to compel Myanmar to take back the refugees with dignity and safety, Rohingya refugees may end up in Bangladesh forever and Myanmar may succeed in pushing the issue off the international agenda. The bilateral agreement between Myanmar and Bangladesh has proved to be an ineffective instrument for repatriation and has largely helped Myanmar. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has repeatedly called upon the international community for putting continued pressure on Myanmar for the safe return of Rohingya refugees, but Bangladesh has stopped short of internationalising the issue which the PM indicated in her proposal to the UN General Assembly speech on September 22. Bangladesh's efforts cannot be limited to providing information and presenting arguments to the UNSC members at Dhaka but must continue to pursue with new vigour in the UNHQ and other capitals. It is not clear what Bangladesh has done to sway China and Russia.

The failure of the UNSC in past months to act on the issue is deplorable. Its members have to find ways to go around the threats of vetoes and act. Rohingyas can't wait, neither can Bangladesh, for an indefinite period. It is positive news that UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has succeeded in appointing a special envoy to Myanmar, Christine Schraner Burgener, Switzerland's ambassador to Germany. It is equally important to note that the US government is investigating atrocities against Rohingyas which could be used to build a case at the International Criminal Court against Burmese officials. The Human Rights Watch called on Friday (April 27) for Myanmar's Rohingya crisis to be referred to the International Criminal Court.

All this indicates that the plight of Rohingyas has not been completely forgotten but we always witness a "compassion fatigue" among international actors. As such, if this trip is not followed up with actions, it would be a shame for the UNSC and devastating for almost a million ill-fated refugees.

Ali Riaz is a distinguished professor of political science at Illinois State University, USA. His recent publications include *Lived Islam and Islamism in Bangladesh* (Prothoma, 2017).



Zulkhair, a Rohingya woman, holds her 10-month-old son Mohammad, at Kutupalong refugee camp.

ability to address the worst humanitarian crisis of recent times and stand against a blatant act of genocide.

military with the support of its political leadership and a large segment of Buddhist nationalists within society. The process to drive out the Rohingyas began a long time ago and perhaps has succeeded in its entirety. According to an excellent study on the refugees by Kazi Fahmida Farzana (*Memories of Burmese Rohingya Refugees: Contested Identity and Belonging*) published in 2017, there were about "two million Rohingyas in Myanmar/Burma, approximately 800,000 of whom live in the northern Rakhine (previously Arakan) state.

About half a million have migrated to other parts of the world. An estimated 328,500 were living in Bangladesh, as documented and undocumented refugees" at the time of writing this book (page 2). Of those estimated 800,000 Rohingyas in

invited to Myanmar as China and Russia advised Myanmar to do so." This suggests a PR ploy rather than a sincere effort to work with the UNSC to address the refugee crisis, let alone acknowledge the larger issue of citizenship of the Rohingyas. As such, Myanmar's plan seems to push the issue to oblivion.

Bangladesh has a higher stake in the UNSC visit than Myanmar. It is incumbent on Bangladesh to convince the members to break the cycle of inaction while Myanmar will be happy with the status quo. Whether Bangladesh has succeeded in swaying the UNSC members will become obvious in the coming weeks. Since the crisis began, Bangladesh's diplomatic efforts have been more reactive than proactive. Bangladesh has to provide

Why abolishing the quota system is necessary



WHILE the prime minister's statement on quota abolition in public services has prevented a volcano from erupting, many are shedding crocodile tears to

keep the unfair quota system with some temporary treatments; and so the call for reform continues. The PM showed her extraordinary farsightedness by saying that this faulty system will be dismantled which means that there are bound to be debates over determining the optimal numbers on how much to keep for which group.

Keeping any sort of quota at this moment would be a disastrous move. The PM should stick to the historic decision of eliminating the unjust quota system from a society which is currently suffering from a high rate of unemployment; it would be an exemplary step in upholding meritocracy and ensuring fairness in all public-sector recruitment.

As history suggests, quotas, if allowed to survive, will spread insidiously like germs, gradually eclipsing the free space for merit-based competition. This tendency is inevitable no matter the minimum number of the quota that stays in the name of reform. The categories and numbers will expand progressively often beyond our notice. It takes decades to form a protest against a type of injustice that sneaks in slowly over time. Did our lawmakers ever think about the wellbeing of the jobless youth who finally ignited a near revolution at a time when all of their job prospects are almost choked up? How much time has the parliament spent discussing the problem of massive unemployment? Some critics have now received information that the parliamentary committee has recommended reform instead of a full-scale removal of quotas.

In fact, the members of the parliamentary committee are basically

political leaders who are likely to put short-term political interests first. It wasn't too long ago when we saw a parliamentary committee recommending more family members to be directors of a bank and their much longer terms at all private banks—defying the potential damage of corporate culture and bad banking governance. Why? Because it is politically lucrative in the short run.

The government should ensure a good marriage between political interests and long-term economic benefits. Her announcement on quota elimination was a testimony of visualising a future which will be sustainable and fair for the growing number of young jobseekers and a stronger public administration.

The same thing happened when the Congress government of India dismantled the faulty "License Raj" in the

transport more transparent and viable in the long run. Simplification has no alternative. It adds both power and fairness to the economy.

Some critics are worried about the welfare of ethnic minorities, physically challenged jobseekers and women. If we look at the statistics, the number of government jobs secured by candidates from these three categories is the highest than any other time. Various global accolades lauded the PM for uplifting people from these groups. And the PM didn't forget about them when delivering her speech on quota elimination. She promised to give them public jobs through special arrangements. Any modern recruitment system avoids the faulty and contentious quota system. Rather it supports disadvantaged groups through affirmative action (AA). This



Students clash with police during a protest against quota system in government recruitments.

PHOTO: AFP

early 1990s. No sensible person recommended for its reform although some privileged business quarters, which benefited from this unjust system since the mid-1950s, sought to protect the quota-type licenses in the name of "reform". But dismantling the license system later came to define the booming India we see today. Recently, the country demolished the state-level taxes and replaced them with GST (Goods and Services Tax) to make transactions and

value-based guideline can further be advocated as corporate responsibility once the government practises the norm by itself first. Thus, quota elimination will be a boon for developing a modern recruitment system through AA.

Some critics are now claiming that students didn't ask for complete elimination of quotas. Why? Because the students thought that it would be too much at that moment to ask for its total elimination. The essence of their

movement was to ensure fairness in merit-based recruitment. And the PM honoured the core purpose of the movement. She understood that this problematic quota system has to go today or tomorrow anyway. Then why not today? Some students proposed to bring the quotas down to 10 percent. Is there any guarantee that 10 percent is the ultimate magic number to address the grievances of the unemployed for good? Is there any guarantee that this 10 percent won't turn into 56 percent over time if history repeats itself? And in that case, there's no point of this temporary troubleshooting. We live in an emerging economy where institutions must be fixed with long-term goals of sustainability and fairness.

The quota-related references in the Constitution—which some critics are using to justify quotas—have been wrongly interpreted. The Constitution never says that we have to set aside a specific percentage of quotas for minorities. There are no numbers. Rather it gives the government the authority to use quotas if needed in order to protect the welfare of socially disadvantaged people. If history is any guide, the PM has done it in the past and has also committed to continue her efforts to support jobseekers in the future under different arrangements. Quota is a tool that the government has the right to use—it is not a mandatory exercise. Unlike religious superscripts, the Constitution is subject to change based on the need and realities of the time.

As economist Nicholas Kaldor argues, no change can make everyone better off. But the change is welcome if the gainers can more than compensate the losers in terms of welfare. If there was a referendum right now on "abolishing quotas" versus "reforming quota," the former would win in a landslide. It would be a win-win situation if the government remains considerate towards disadvantaged groups through affirmative action and eliminates unfair quotas entirely, as committed to by the PM.

Biru Paksha Paul is associate professor of economics at the State University of New York at Cortland. Email: birupakshapaul@gmail.com