

UN SECURITY COUNCIL AND THE ROHINGYA

Yet another charade?

Let the media do its job

Muzzling press freedom is counterproductive

WORLD Press Freedom Day, observed yesterday across the globe, has given a grim report of the various onslaughts that journalists face today. It also underscores the importance of press freedom and reminds governments of their duty to respect peoples' right to freedom of expression. In Bangladesh, restrictions on the right to freedom of expression have become more pronounced in the last five years, according to Article 19, a British rights organisation. In this year's World Press Freedom Index by Reporters Sans Frontières, Bangladesh's position remains unchanged: 146th among 180 countries. This indicates the worrying state of freedom of press, speech and expression in our country. In addition, the enactment of repressive laws, rise in extremism, and intimidation from intelligence agencies pose serious threats to freedom of expression and independent journalism. Although in Bangladesh, there has been a proliferation of media—both print and electronic—resulting in quality of journalism sometimes suffering, this does not justify the growing intolerance of the authorities and severe restrictions on the freedom of the media. The government should allow the press to function freely for its own interest, because an independent press can best detect flaws and mistakes in the governing process, thus, help the government run the country better. In Bangladesh's context, the challenges for the government in achieving the status of the middle-income country can best be faced with independent and responsible journalism, which was rapidly growing since the early 90s but is now severely constrained. We hope the government will allow the media to do its job in safeguarding people's interests, rights and freedoms, and holding those in power accountable.

Why can't we handle our cargo imports?

Local expertise could save crores

THE Chittagong Customs House (CCH) has given the job of scanning import cargo to a foreign company (SGS) at a cost of Tk 29 crore. While the CCH is claiming it could do the job itself for a mere Tk 4 crore a year, the fact remains that it failed to set up a permanent scanning department since 2012. We find it perplexing as to why the CCH personnel, who got trained as part of the original contract signed with SGS, got transferred by the time the initial contract ended in 2015. It appears that we are more at ease at giving out contracts to outside parties rather than handling the job ourselves by building up human resources. It is also perplexing to note that the proposal by CCH on January 2 to establish a permanent scanning department with a 185-strong workforce that would entail establishing 12 scanners (as opposed to the current 4 in operation), was not looked into. But why would the CCH only put in such a proposal when the SGS contract was coming to a close? The fact that the SGS was given contracts in two phases over so many years and that the authorities failed to build up a local department capable of handling increasing cargo shipments highlight the indifference to our national security and management inefficiencies. The relevant authorities should prioritise the issue of handling import cargo by a local authority and steps need to be taken to make necessary budgetary allocations to build up a dedicated department to that end.



C R ABRAR

THIS week has experienced a flurry of diplomatic activities centring the Rohingya issue. Principal among those was what has been dubbed a "historic and highly unusual" visit of an important delegation of the UN Security Council (UNSC) to Bangladesh and Burma. Quite understandably, the visit drew attention of various quarters—states, international agencies, refugee and rights organisations, and most importantly, the hapless Rohingyas who have been "living in mud and shacks, with no hope and no future, no nation and no identity, no past and no future."

During its visit, the delegation should have experienced two contrasting scenarios. On the one hand, in Kutupalong refugee camp and in the no-man's land, they heard heart-wrenching testimonies of scores of survivors of the ongoing genocide—horrifying tales of mass murder, rape, torture, tossing of children in raging fire, torching of homes and hearths and systematic expulsion of an ethnic community whose identity and claims to citizenship have been meticulously dismantled over the last four decades by a state that has little regard for human rights, which the world body so fervently champions (at least in theory). The delegation also heard how a resource-poor and one of the most densely populated countries of the world, has lived up to its commitment to uphold the UN Charter and the lofty principles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in sheltering more than a million of refugees in distress. While UN diplomats heap massive praise on Bangladesh for its generosity and compassion, the organisation has so far failed to do the heavy-lifting in mobilising resources and garnering political will in addressing the root cause of Burma's genocide.

On the other hand, the delegation met representatives of a regime that not only perpetrated perhaps the most gruesome crime against humanity this century has ever witnessed, in fulfilling its long-term genocidal agenda to free Arakan of ethnic Rohingyas, but also blatantly flouted the UN Charter and UDHR, and since the outbreak of current crisis in August 2017, repeatedly hoodwinked the security council that called for bringing an end to the current humanitarian crisis.

By now the authorities in Naypyidaw have established themselves as masters

of the art of deception. Time and again they have promised the UNSC that effective action would be taken to create an enabling environment for the return of Rohingyas who are languishing in refugee settlements in Bangladesh. The delegation does not need reminding that till date not a single case of repatriation has taken place, save the staged repatriation of five Rohingya individuals out of a million who have been deported.

Befitting the adage "giving the devil its due", the astute policy planners of Burma have been immensely successful in manipulating the UNSC. As early as September 2017, Burma informed the UNSC that it was prepared to start the repatriation at any time. The country's National Security Advisor U Thawng Tun assured the UNSC that repatriation would take place by using the framework worked out jointly by Bangladesh and Burma in 1992. However, despite such a pledge, seven months have passed with

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no sign of repatriation. Under the memorandum of understanding with Bangladesh, Burma promised to stem the flow of refugees. In less than two weeks after signing the document, more than 100,000 Rohingyas crossed the border into Bangladesh. Anticipating the security council's displeasure over its inaction, Naypyidaw was smart enough to cook up yet another scheme—the Union Enterprise Mechanism, with the purported aim to extend humanitarian assistance and resettlement of repatriated Rohingyas. The UNSC fell into the trap and in a presidential statement it "welcomed" the signing of the memorandum with Bangladesh and the formation of the Union Enterprise Mechanism.

Despite its explicit commitment to UNSC to cooperate with Bangladesh in expediting the repatriation process, in contrast to 1992 accord, Burma further tightened the eligibility criteria for the

Rohingyas' return and the verification process, thwarting any substantive effort for repatriation. In essence, it rebuffed the calls made by the UNSC in its two meetings held in September and November 2017.

The Burmese swindlers made best use of November 23 agreement with Bangladesh to stave off UNSC criticism for not progressing with repatriation. In a December UNSC meeting, Burma's envoy to UN informed the council that repatriation would begin within the next two months. While the gullible world body appeared to have fallen for the hoax, true to its colour, a week before the commencement of repatriation (on 22 January), Burma demanded family-wise list of Rohingyas—a demand that Bangladesh subsequently complied with.

Even though the Burmese threw in a spanner in the latest effort of repatriation, its minister for international cooperation, Kyaw Tin, claimed that his country was ready to welcome refugees and held Bangladesh responsible for the delay. One hopes while assessing the sequence of stalled repatriation, eminent members of the UNSC delegation would bear in mind the subterfuges that the Burmese resorted to in undermining the repatriation effort.

In their meeting with the UNSC delegation, Rohingya refugees handed over a 13-point demand which they had earlier passed on to the visiting Burmese minister for social welfare. Included in the list were demands for restoration of their citizenship rights, bringing the perpetrators of heinous crimes to justice, ensuring international presence in Arakan, return of ancestral land confiscated by the authorities, payment of compensation for losses, presence of international media and human rights groups in Arakan, release of all political prisoners and closure of internally displaced camps. In other words, the refugee community demanded ensuring "protected return to protected homeland"—a plan that was floated in the February 2018 Rohingya conference in Berlin that has gained near unanimous acceptance of the global Rohingya community.

While briefing the press in Bangladesh, a member of the UNSC delegation noted "We don't have any magic solution in the Security Council". May he be reminded that maintaining "world peace and security" forms the core function of the security council and the council is duty bound to deliver on both counts? All states that are members of the council are meant to act on what is good for international community and not be guided by their own selfish political, strategic and economic interests. Any departure from this would tantamount to violation of the UN Charter. Rohingyas do not want UNSC delegation to whisk around a magic wand in its search for solution. They want the UNSC to adhere

to the UN Charter, in word and spirit, to ensure their protected return to protected homeland and bring the perpetrators to justice.

The influential UK permanent representative Karen Pierce observed "...it is not the Security Council's fault that there is a crisis." Well, not quite so. For decades, the Burmese state has pursued a policy of annihilation of ethnic Rohingya considered as "the most persecuted minority in the world" by the United Nations. As the community was gradually stripped of their citizenship and other associated rights, being subjected to methodical discrimination and unleashing of spikes of violence periodically triggering massive refugee flows, the international community opted to look the other way. Rohingyas were also considered a dispensable lot as western countries raced to exploit the resources and engage in trade with the genocidal regime under the rubric of supporting democratic transition. Every veto wielder in the security council is guilty of complicity in the four decade long slow genocide. The difference in complicity among them is in degree and not in kind.

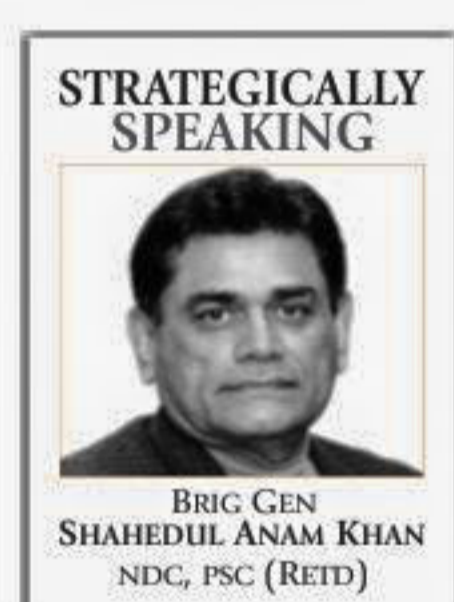
This charade is exposed when UK representative in the delegation Pierce told BBC in Burma on May 1 that there is no difference between Burma's domestic investigation and international investigation as long as Aung San Suu Kyi accepts and launches the investigation with the help of the security council. What could be crueller for the victims of genocide than the security council openly lending its collective assistance to the genocidal government to conduct such investigation into its own crimes?

Over the last four decades, the UN has failed to stop genocide and other atrocious crimes that led to death and displacement of millions (Rwanda, Bosnia, Sudan and now Burma). The onus lies on the permanent members of the security council to make the institution functional and relevant. The Rohingya case provides an opportunity for the UN's redemption. Ensuring protected return to protected homeland and bringing the perpetrators to justice is the first step in that direction.

While members of the UNSC delegation return to New York and deliberate on their whirlwind mission, one hopes they bear in mind that for the first time in the history of the august body that is tasked to maintain global peace and security, they had the rare opportunity of visiting the sites where genocide was perpetrated by a murderous regime.

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Korean reconciliation Between cynics and optimists



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THE optimists see the historic events of April 27, 2018 in the Peace Village in the demilitarised zone at Panmunjom, which happens to be the only contact point between two countries but one nation, as the foundation for a permanent reconciliation and enduring peace. The skeptics would like to agree but attach a rider of uncertainty. They wonder at Kim's climb down from the high horse and willingness to engage, and would rather wait to see more details spelt out and eventual delivery of the commitments, particularly from the part of North Korea, since they fear that there may yet be more between the mouth and the morsel than the optimists might admit.

Extreme views apart, nothing should detract from the historic importance of the event. Whatever may have been the causative factors that led to the historic summit, both Moon and Kim must be credited for being able to come out of the old mind frame and pounce on the sliver of opportunity opened up by an international sporting event in the form of the PyeongChang Winter Olympics. North Korea had not been willing to sit with the leaders of the South before 2000, since it considered the South an occupied territory under the US and thus had no political locus standi. Thus Kim agreeing not only to meet, but also, unlike the other two previous occasions which did not produce anything positive (except provide a temporary breathing space for the North Korean ruler), agreeing on substantive actions that promise a lot on its part—this is remarkable indeed. The optimists feel that the April meeting holds out hope for the two peoples and for the entire region and the world. At least one less point on the globe in a state of constant

simmer. And one hopes that Moon's very firm affirmation that the Peninsula would see no more war would be a permanent reality.

The reason for waiting to taste the pudding before delivering a judgment is North Korea's past record. Since it had waseled out of the commitment it made in the past to denuclearise, there is every reason for the skeptics not to take him at his words. Also, many of the doables that the Koreans have laid out in the joint

carried out more ballistics and nuke tests during his short tenure than did his father and grandfather combined (nearly 90 ballistic missiles and four of North Korea's six nuclear tests). The fate of those with nuclear ambitions like Gaddafi and Saddam is only too recent to be erased from one's memory, least of all a dictator whose only survival is in creating a retaliatory nuclear strike capability. He has attained that and he has let Trump know that if the US

Pacific policy, the North-East Asia, a concept that stems from a significant reorientation of its Asia-Pacific focus. It will bring the matter of nearly 20,000 troops in South Korea and its raison d'être to be there after a final agreement between the two is reached for permanent peace and denuclearisation and end of a state of war between the two Koreas. And by the same token, what would the US position be regarding North Korea's nuclear arsenal? Halting testing does not mean that Kim would allow its nuclear capabilities to be neutered without a full guarantee of no aggression from the US.

Furthermore, would a nuclear umbrella over North Korea be necessary at all under the changed circumstances? In any case, South Korea can be a target of North Korean nukes if Kim wants to destroy his country too, not from US retaliation but from the natural consequences of a fallout that his bombs would create. Nuclear clouds know no international boundaries neither do they recognise armistices.

The forthcoming Trump-Kim summit should more than just offer diplomatic mileage to Kim. And for that the US has to offer substantive grounds for Kim to induce him to dispose off his weapons of mass destruction. But that depends on the degree of trust that can be created between two countries which were only recently trading in unpalatable rhetoric. And how much can Kim depend on any agreement with US, given Trump's propensity to renege on international and multilateral treaties? Iran nuclear deal stands to be rescinded; therefore, can one guarantee that such would not be the fate of future agreements between the current US administration and any other country?

We hope that the commitments made by the two leaders in the DMZ to shed the baggage of history would be followed through with actions that would prove the pessimists wrong.

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People watch a television screen showing live footage of the inter-Korea summit between South Korean President Moon Jae-in and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, at a railway station in Seoul on April 27, 2018. PHOTO: JUNG YEON-JE/AFP

statement would need active contribution of the other stakeholders—they being also the major parties to the conflict and signatories to the armistice, the US and China.

There are good reasons why Kim's grandfather had reneged on his promise to get rid of the nuclear weapons, and there are good reasons too for the remarkable turnaround on the part of Kim, apart from the pains of sanctions and choosing to do so having till recently traded rhetoric with Trump and

president has a finger on the nuclear button, so has he. Therefore, if Kim has preferred discretion to valour because of what the US calls constant US pressure, it could be said too that Trump's change in attitude towards Kim and willingness to meet him, unconditionally, has been caused by North Korea acquiring an apparent nuclear deterrent.

On the other hand, the Korean reconciliation has created a new kind of dynamics for the US insofar as it concerns a major component of its Indo-

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Compensation for victims of road accidents

On average, 20-25 people are killed and even more are injured every day from road accidents. The victims are often the sole bread earners of their respective families. Therefore, it is essential that the victim's families are compensated so that they can survive in case of such misfortunes.

As we have seen in the case of the accident that killed Tareque Masuk and Mishuk Munier, owners, drivers, insurance companies and bus associations should be ordered to pay fair compensation to the victim's families. Biplob Biswas, Faridpur

Protect our trees

Recently, I had paid a visit to Benapole with a few friends along the fabulous Jashore road, the same road described in Allen Ginsberg's poem "September on Jessore Road." I knew about the hundreds of gigantic, centuries-old trees that were on both sides of the road, but it was an amazing experience to see them first hand.

It was disappointing to know that many of these trees may be cut down for the purpose of road expansion. If the authorities want to expand the road, they can still do that without cutting them down.

I urge the authorities to safeguard our trees and find a way to work around them. Shamir Sarkar, Dhaka University