

Public suffering on Ctg-Dhaka highway Exposes shoddy management and poor planning

THE public suffering caused by the 110km-long tailback on Chittagong-Dhaka highway, which continued on to its fifth consecutive day as of Sunday, beggars description. The intolerable gridlock was a result of a portion of the four-lane highway being shut down due to ongoing construction of a railway overpass at Fatehpur in Feni. Exacerbating the congestion was the fact that the other side of the highway in the area was already choked due to rain and vehicles.

Firstly, that something like this can happen in the busiest highway, the economic lifeline of the country, speaks of the gross mismanagement of authorities. Secondly, given the fact that more than 80 percent of vehicles carrying goods for export and import go through this highway, the never-ending gridlock has put many businesses in a tough spot. Thirdly, the whole episode goes to show the callous disregard for public suffering of the authorities as people were not made aware of likely disruption of traffic in the pre-construction phase and no alternative routes for them had been designated either. And finally, that the project still remains unfinished—even six years after the work of the railway overpass was first awarded to a construction firm—is symptomatic of the inefficiency in execution of public works. Who will answer for the inordinate time and cost overrun?

The assurance of the minister of road transport and bridges that the situation will improve is not enough. The ministry and the police should work in coordination and address the abovementioned issues in order to alleviate public suffering. Construction should be sped up and alternative routes designated. Most importantly, it ought to be ensured that such incidents do not recur in the future, and for that any construction or repair work must begin with good planning.

Prices hike yet again

When will promises be translated into action?

FOR the second time this month, prices of essential food items have shot up—the first hike came just before the Shab-e-Barat, and now again ahead of the month of Ramadan. And though we were given assurances by the commerce minister just last month that there would be no change in the prices of essentials this year, it seems that the phenomenon has taken firm root.

We fail to understand the logic behind this sudden price hikes each and every year—there has been no major natural disaster or any volatility to affect supply. As our report just yesterday showed, no stakeholder can come up with an explanation for the sudden hike in prices. Yet, prices of essentials such as onion, sugar, green chilli, eggplant, potato, garlic, ginger, tomato, cucumber and puffed rice has risen by Tk 5 to 40. Even prices of red meat and fish have increased by Tk 20 to 50 per kg, as has the price of chicken. Still managers of wholesale stores maintain there is no food crisis.

Of course, this is not new to us. The sudden price hikes every year are never justified and some artificial crisis is created by unscrupulous businessmen. This not only comes at a expense for the regular consumers, but have spill over effects for other goods, threatening to make the entire market volatile. This is not acceptable. And despite promises, the government has so far failed to take steps to stop these hikes. This unholy trend during the holy month cannot become the norm and we urge that the government step up its efforts of monitoring the market, and take necessary action. Since everyone from traders, suppliers and wholesalers keep assuring that the supply is plenty, there should be an investigation to find out at which stage of the supply chain prices are being manipulated. We hope, that at least this year, we will see the promises of regulating prices of essentials during Ramadan translated into action.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Mahathir's electoral triumph

Mahathir Mohammad's electoral triumph in the recently held Malaysian election was extraordinary. He had ruled the country for over two decades in the past and while his critics labelled it authoritarian, he is considered to be the architect of modern Malaysia.

His decision to come back to active politics at the age of 92 and take on his former protégé Najib Razak was indeed a courageous move. When everyone likes to enjoy retirement, Mahathir came to rescue his country and, as strange as it may sound, the country's ailing democracy.

His victory is not only seen as a victory for the Malaysian people, but also for all democracy-loving people around the world. Our political leaders should take a cue from Mahathir's life and serve the country with honesty and dedication.

AKM Ehsanul Haque, Dhaka

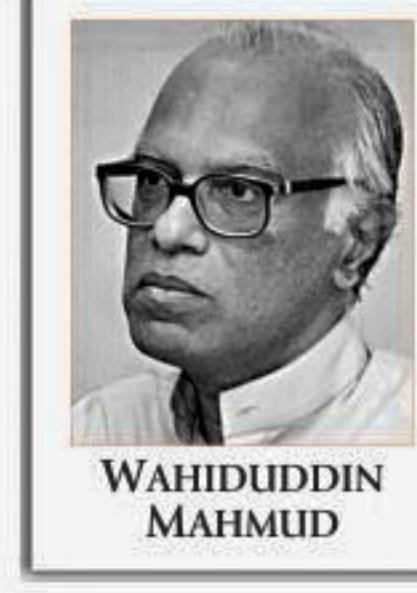
Help our farmers

It is a matter of great regret that for all our development, we haven't been able to change the plight of our farmers. They do not get fair prices and all profits still go to the pockets of middlemen.

In the absence of enough cold storages and transferring facilities, they cannot store their crops and have to incur huge losses every year. I urge the government to step in and help our farmers.

Mohib Billah, By e-mail

LEAST DEVELOPED AND DEVELOPING COUNTRIES A matter of definition?



WAHIDUDDIN MAHMUD

IN 2015, we welcomed the good news that Bangladesh had graduated from the low-income to low-middle-income status in the World Bank's classification of countries. Now we are rejoicing the news that the country has for the first time fulfilled the criteria for graduation out of the status of the Least Developed Countries (LDCs) as categorised by the United Nations and its affiliated organs like the World Trade Organization (WTO). Yet, there seems to be some confusion in the public mind, and even in the official circles, about the way countries are categorised; for example, if we are no more an LDC, what shall we be called? It will be an irony, if amidst all our rejoicing, we do not know for sure about what we are graduating into.

Let us be clear about one thing: the official country classification schemes followed by the international organisations like the WTO or the World Bank are based on precise criteria and are meant for special treatments such as in the global trade agreements or in providing concessional loans; these should not be confused with the vocabulary generally used in the popular development discourses or in the academic literature for describing countries at different stages of development. In the development literature, the typologies of countries have in fact evolved over time, as our understanding of economic development itself has evolved, and as development has been conceptualised from various perspectives.

For example, there is a simple distinction between rich and poor countries based on the average income and standards of living of the population. However, to recognise the fact that the poor countries are poor only because their resources are not yet used to the full potential, these countries were labelled "underdeveloped" or "less developed" in contrast to countries that are considered "developed". Later on, the all-embracing category of "developing" was introduced, rather euphemistically, to include all countries other than the developed ones. And the latest of all, the term "emerging" was introduced as a prefix to those economies among the developing countries that were making enough rapid progress to justify the designation of a hybrid category.

Meanwhile, there were other types of country categorisation. Since development was thought to involve industrialisation, urbanisation, and technological advancement, the countries were variously categorised, on the one hand, as industrialised, mature, modern or advanced, and, on the other hand, as agrarian, pre-industrial, or less advanced. The term "Third World" was coined to embrace all these later aspects of underdevelopment. Further, countries

were also divided into the "centre versus periphery" from the leftist perspectives related to the impact of imperialism and colonisation on economic development.

Coming back to the category of Least Developed Countries (LDCs), it was established in 1971 by the UN as a special group of developing countries characterised by a low-income level and structural impediments to growth, such as vulnerability to shocks and lack of human asset. These countries were thus considered deserving of special support as embodied in the consecutive decadal Plans of Action for LDCs adopted by the UN. Subsequently, the LDC status became more important when the WTO accepted this classification to allow special trade and other related concessions. Note that in this classification system, the LDCs are also generally considered developing

added to our achievement by calling ourselves a "non-LDC developing country", if at all we have to find a new designation. What could then be our next target in terms of country classification? It could be graduating to the high-middle-income status according to the World Bank's classification, which will mean increasing the per capita income nearly fourfold in real terms; or, it could be becoming a developed or industrialised country in the sense it is understood in the common development terminology. In the post-World War II period, only South Korea could achieve the latter distinction of graduating from a developing country to an industrialised one, excepting the small island states like Singapore, Hong Kong and Taiwan. While our official pronouncements refer to some ambitious long-term economic goals set

Bangladesh in qualifying for graduation from the LDC status, since the same method of estimating the threshold per capita income is used both by the World Bank and the UN in this regard.

Apart from these favourable factors in the estimation of per capita income, Bangladesh's prospects for graduation from the LDC status also improved because of a recent change in the way the other two criteria of graduation—namely, a human asset index and a country vulnerability index—are measured. Previously, the threshold levels in these indicators used to be revised regularly in relation to other developing countries, thus resembling rather a set of moving goal posts; but recently, the graduating criteria in these indicators have been fixed in absolute terms. This has made it possible for a number of countries to

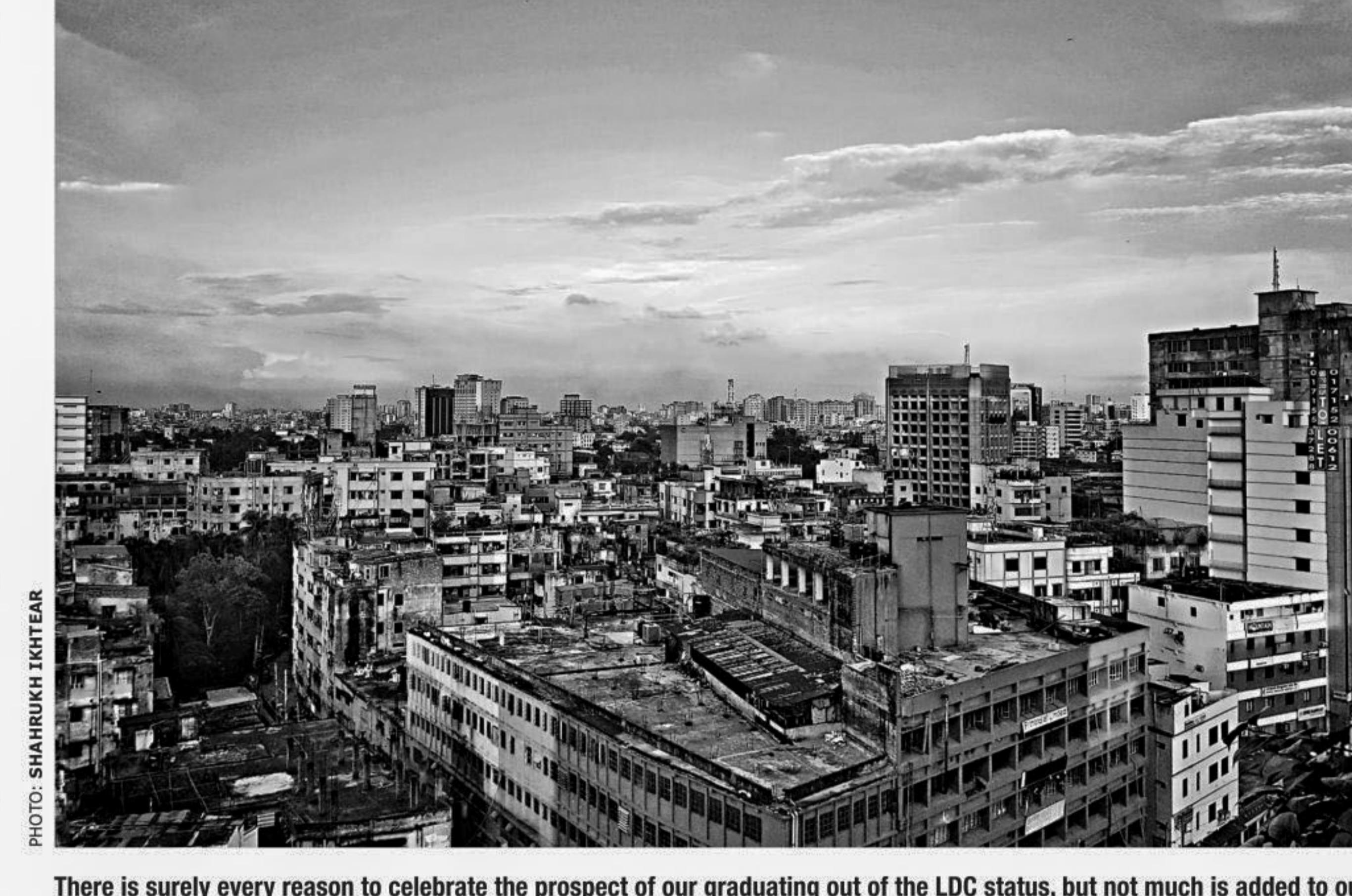


PHOTO: SHAHRUKH IKHTEAR

There is surely every reason to celebrate the prospect of our graduating out of the LDC status, but not much is added to our achievement by calling ourselves a "non-LDC developing country", if at all we have to find a new designation.

countries, but only belonging to a particularly disadvantaged sub-group that needs special support. Unlike the rigidly defined criteria for qualifying as LDCs, the definition for developing countries is rather ambiguous. In fact, the WTO has no proper country classification system beyond the LDCs; instead, countries themselves declare their status as developing countries, and consequently, their eligibility for certain trade benefits.

Thus, unlike in the case of graduating from a low-income country to a low-middle-income one in the World Bank's classification, coming out of the LDC status in the UN system does not mean our newly acquiring the status of a "developing country", which we always have been. There is surely every reason to celebrate the prospect of our graduating out of the LDC status, but not much is

for 2041, it is not entirely clear which of the above targets we are aspiring to achieve by that year.

Bangladesh achieved the status of a low-middle-income country earlier than predicted. There were two contributing factors. First, the stable foreign exchange rate in the previous years had helped in rapidly raising the per capita income in US dollar terms, even though the effect was moderated to an extent by the so-called Atlas method followed by the World Bank which is based on a three-year average taking into account the divergence in domestic and international inflation rates. Second, the long overdue revision of our national income accounts, which took place prior to the year of graduation, led to an upward shift in the annual series of per capita income by 12 to 14 percent. This has also helped

qualify for graduation, in sharp contrast to the previous few rare instances of such graduation ever since the LDC category was established. But that does not diminish the importance of Bangladesh's prospective graduation from the LDC status. Because of the sheer size of the population, which makes Bangladesh by far an outlier among the LDCs, any progress in development indicators in Bangladesh have a significant effect on the global average of such indicators. Thus, unlike in the case of the other graduating LDCs, Bangladesh's progress beyond the LDC status will be watched with particular interest by the observers of global development.

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India's evolving stand on Rohingya problem

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA

WHEN Indian External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj undertook a two-day visit to Myanmar on May 10-11, it had important implications for Bangladesh. The Rohingya repatriation issue came during Sushma's interactions with three main figures in Myanmar's power structure: President U Win Myint, State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi, and army chief Min Aung Hlaing. In itself, this is nothing new. The issue had figured in earlier interactions between the two countries, notably when Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi had undertaken his maiden visit to Myanmar in September last year. Fast forward to May this year—and nine months are a long time in international politics—and how India's position on the Rohingya problem has changed during that time! And nothing summed up that change more tellingly than what Sushma told the Myanmar leadership during her visit to Naypyidaw.

The Indian external affairs minister conveyed to the Myanmar leaders the need for a "safe, speedy, and sustainable" return of the refugees to Rakhine province in Myanmar. Her remark is a marked movement forward from what had so far been India's evolving stand on the subject. True, India is still not officially using the word "Rohingya" in referring to the refugees, and rather described them as "displaced persons". This is to keep in good humour a country that does not recognise Rohingyas as a separate ethnic group. But what should please Dhaka is that Sushma has outlined emphatically three main contours of the Rohingya repatriation issue: 1) speed, 2) safe, and 3) sustainable. In fact, the last two are inextricably related as the safety of Rohingyas in their homeland Rakhine is prerequisite to making the repatriation

sustainable. This is the most unambiguous enunciation of India's stand so far.

Besides, Sushma Swaraj welcomed what she called the Myanmar government's commitment to implementing the recommendations of the Rakhine State Advisory Commission, a joint initiative of Suu Kyi and former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan Foundation, to resolve the Rohingya problem.

Compare the latest Indian external affairs ministry statement after Sushma's

Bangladesh's diplomacy with India on the Rohingya issue seems to be yielding results, even if slowly.

visit with what was said by India during Modi's visit to Myanmar last year. The Indian prime minister had at that time referred only to the menace of "extremist violence" in Rakhine in his prepared public statement after a bilateral meeting with Suu Kyi. "We are partners in your concerns over the loss of lives of security forces and innocent people due to the extremist violence in Rakhine State," he had said. A joint statement issued after the visit said, "India condemned the recent terrorist attacks in northern Rakhine State, wherein several members

of the Myanmar security forces lost their lives."

This caused widespread anger in Bangladesh as it was read as an unsympathetic remark even as almost the entire international community denounced the persecution of Rohingyas in Myanmar. That it did not go down well with the Sheikh Hasina government was evident in the fact that just two days after Modi's visit, Bangladesh's High Commissioner to India Syed Muazzem Ali, obviously on instructions from Dhaka, met the then Indian Foreign Secretary S Jaishankar in New Delhi. And the evolution of India's stand began to take a nuanced shift. On September 9, the Indian external affairs ministry came up with a statement saying "India remains deeply concerned about the situation in Rakhine State in Myanmar and the outflow of refugees from that region." The issue later came up when Sushma Swaraj met Hasina on their way to New York and again on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly session in September.

Three to four months down the line, Jaishankar visited Myanmar and underlined the need for restoration of normalcy in Rakhine and to "enable the return of displaced persons". India went further and entered into a memorandum of understanding with Myanmar for prefabricated houses in Rakhine so as to meet the immediate needs of Rohingyas so that the repatriation could take off as early as possible. In all interactions between Bangladesh and India at different levels thereafter and even outside the bilateral forums, Dhaka has repeatedly urged New Delhi to pressure Myanmar to take back its citizens at the earliest. On the sidelines of the OIC foreign ministers' meeting in Dhaka earlier in May, Hasina had urged India, Russia, Japan and China to prevail upon Myanmar to start taking back the Rohingyas. Her choice of the countries

for the appeal is significant since these four countries have robust relations with Myanmar. Bangladesh's diplomacy with India on the Rohingya issue seems to be yielding results, even if slowly.

There are four main reasons behind Sushma Swaraj's latest articulation of India's stand on the Rohingya issue. First, general elections in Bangladesh are expected later this year and the start of Rohingya repatriation could be touted by the Hasina government as one of the successes of its foreign policy. India is conscious of the fact that the repatriation of Rohingyas has remained a non-starter even after four months since a deal was reached between Bangladesh and Myanmar. Secondly, it sets the ground for a meeting between Modi and Hasina in Santiniketan on May 25. Thirdly, India saw the risk of finding itself in a corner along with Russia and China on the Rohingya issue.

Fourth, India had seemingly missed out on an opportunity to play the leadership role in resolving an issue in its own backyard given that it had to do a delicate balancing act between its ties with Bangladesh and Myanmar. It is not without significance that a few days before Sushma's latest round of visit to Myanmar, the latest consignment of Indian relief materials meant to help Rohingya refugees cope with the coming monsoon reached Chittagong. India is the South Asian power and acts as a bridge with, and a strong link to, South East Asia. India, Myanmar and Bangladesh are among the key members of the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation. For India, dealing with the Rohingya issue is a challenge but also an opportunity to take up a leadership role in tackling a problem with international implications.

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