

Respond to ICC request

Why the dithering?

WE wonder why Bangladesh is still undecided whether to respond to a request by the International Criminal Court for its input as the court was considering an application by a prosecutor for jurisdiction over the expulsion of Rohingya Muslims from Myanmar to Bangladesh.

The government's hesitation is baffling given the fact that Bangladesh has been deeply affected by the Rohingya exodus resulting from Myanmar's brutal military campaigns against the minority group, and efforts to settle the matter bilaterally have virtually failed.

The two countries signed a repatriation agreement early this year, but Myanmar has repeatedly stonewalled the process by imposing new conditions and refusing to maintain the previous standards of repatriation. Not a single family has been repatriated so far.

What does, then, restrain Bangladesh from providing the ICC with evidence and information? Since Myanmar is not a signatory of the Rome Statute, a case against its leadership could only proceed only if the Security Council referred it to the court. But China and Russia signalled no intention to not veto any such measures.

Therefore, when a prosecutor of the international court argued that since Bangladesh, a signatory of the Rome Statute, was affected by the crisis, the court could exert its jurisdiction over the matter, Bangladesh should have enthusiastically supported the contention.

The government should realise that its experience of engaging with Myanmar bilaterally has been futile. There's little chance it would yield any surprising result in the near future. Therefore, for Bangladesh, there's no choice other than engaging with the international community and institutions to resolve the crisis.

Snail's pace of anti-terror special courts

Stifles efforts to combat the scourge

ONE of the facilitators of effective fight against terrorism and extremism is quick disposal of cases related to these. The pace at which the two special tribunals are moving can hardly be of any help to the state efforts to fight the scourge effectively. As it is, it had taken long nine years to actually set up the courts since the act that provides for such courts was passed in 2009.

Not only is there a dearth of facilities that a trial court should have to perform efficiently, like adequate human resources, the Special Tribunal in Dhaka has to share the same room with Speedy Tribunal-3 and can sit in afternoons only. It is therefore no wonder that trial in only 12 percent of the cases (out of 908 lodged under the anti-terrorism act between 1999 and 2017) have been completed so far.

The obvious and dangerous downside of this is that delay in completing the trials weakens the case and results in suspects getting out on bail. So far, 564 suspected militants have been granted bail since January 2016 and September 2017. And given that our agencies have little resources or wherewithal to keep a tab on these people, there is all the possibility that they have re-entered the terrorism cycle.

Now that there is a dedicated tribunal to try militancy cases, they should be adequately resourced to deliver. Quick trial and conviction of the alleged terrorists and extremist will go a long way in effectively fighting the problem. We hope the government would take measures to remove the inherent shortcomings immediately.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Commodity prices going out of hand

The month of Ramadan is a time of sacrifice. But what is going on in our markets? Prices of daily necessities are constantly on the rise. Vegetables, fish, meat, spices and rice are all costlier than before and have even become unaffordable for some.

And yet there are no signs of the government taking any steps to keep prices in check.

Maybe this does not bother wealthy people, but what about lower and middle-income groups that make up the majority of the country's population? Some say that there are not enough supplies in the market. But we know from past experiences that some businessmen in our country sometimes charge buyers more using such false pretences or by hoarding goods.

The government should face up to its responsibility and control the prices of essentials. I ask on the government to take immediate action for the sake of ordinary people.

Bimal Golder
Khilkhet, Dhaka



PHOTO: STAR



NAZMUL AHASAN

“WHY don't you tell the truth? You talk about extrajudicial killings but in reality, you care more about the drug traders than those whose lives are destroyed because of them,” one Facebook friend rebuked me the other day, after I disagreed with him about the modus operandi of the ongoing anti-narcotics operations in the country that have resulted in 63 deaths in just 11 days.

There is, and has always been, a massive support across the world for heavy-handed response to enforce the prohibition of drugs. Take Rodrigo Duterte of Philippines for example. He was elected in a landslide two years ago on the back of his promise to wage a war on drugs. His forces have killed well over 12,000 people since he came to power in July 2016, according to Human Rights Watch.

For all national and international outcries, Duterte has remained wildly popular with an approval rating hovering around 80 percent. And understandably, a key element of his popularity is his drug war. According to a detailed poll conducted by Social Weather Stations, 77 percent of Filipino voters approve the

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NEHGINPAO KIPGEN and SOUMYA CHATURVEDI

ASEAN marked its 50th anniversary as a regional organisation last year. Year-round events were spanned out to celebrate the functioning of an organisation that was predicted to wither away or collapse by political analysts at the time of its formation. The former Asean Secretary General, Narciso G Reyes, had once remarked that success of Asean should be quantified by imagining a “Southeast Asia minus ASEAN” which would have resulted in greater political instability, widespread economic stress and rise of expansionist propaganda by actors thriving on disunity amongst states.

The miracle of Asean lies in the politically and ideologically diverse constituent members functioning on the much talked about principle of consensus and not the method of majority. It is also committed to the principles of cooperation and pragmatism. Which is why reputed academics like Kishore Mahbubani and Jeffery Sng recommend the organisation's working as “a catalyst for peace” to be recognised for the Noble Peace Prize.

In an interesting play of geopolitical events starting from 2016, with some similarity from the events of 2012, the centrality of Asean unity has been projected in a tainted light. Amidst the emerging turmoil in the global order with distorted hegemonic picture and shifting focus of global audience towards Indo-Pacific region, the importance of a united Asean has taken the central point of discussion.

In 2016, a joint statement on the South China Sea dispute was issued by Asean expressing “serious concerns” over the disputed waters. However, the

With the continuance of the growth trajectory, a minor increase of even two percent in annual growth rate will cause Asean nations to double their income in a matter of 10 years. Thus, the centrality of Asean unity is more relevant today than ever before.

Efficacy of the ANTI-DRUG WAR

war whereas only 14 percent oppose it. While many of these supporters may deplore the loss of lives, they see them as an essential sacrifice to purge the society of a menace. Even those who find this bloody method “morally” unacceptable are praying for its success.

The death toll of Duterte's war on drugs dwarfs that of Bangladesh's, but the latter drew a comparison with the former because of their apparent dependence on extrajudicial methods. There's another commonality that not only these two but all wars on drugs share: they don't achieve their stated objectives. And that is because, as a classic economic maxim goes, when

claimed low-level foot soldiers of the drug empire. In the case of Philippines, they even killed a huge number of mere users. Many observers, therefore, called for stern action against the bigwigs and kingpins but that was precisely what the United States tried to do for decades, mostly unsuccessfully.

The US did not target addicts or just mere peddlers, but the entire supply chain—from the producers, manufacturers, local distributors to local and international financiers. It even went after international drug cartels based in foreign countries.

Its long-fought war cost the American taxpayers a staggering USD 51 billion a

years, is that extrajudicial violence resolves nothing and makes everything worse. Innocent people will be killed, and denunciations will also be used to settle scores and exploited by gangs to wipe out rivals,” observed the *Economist*.

Already in Feni and Gazipur, families of men killed in police shootouts have alleged that their killings had something to do with bribes. In Chittagong, security forces allegedly killed an innocent man based on inaccurate information provided by a source. The original man was later found and killed, so was the source. In Netrokona, the family of an alleged drug trader told the *Guardian* that the victim had no connection with the narcotics trade and that he was gunned down because he was a popular opposition activist. These dangerous developments indicate what lies ahead with the security forces given a carte blanche.

So, how do we tackle this problem? Malaysia in 1983 took an intense effort combining education, advertisement, rehabilitation, harsh mandatory penalties and even death sentence for possession of relatively small amounts of drugs. It was a mixed success but it could have been better, studies suggest, if the country had invested more in aftercare efforts.

Apparently, in the opinion of many experts, preventative measures are not better than cure in this case. They believe drug addiction should be seen as a disease rather than a crime and it should be treated as such, allocating more resources in health services.

There's no doubt that we all want the drug problem to be uprooted altogether, but our desire for quick fixes may very well lead the country to a more chaotic situation in which the line between a “drug suspect” and, say, a political rival may be blurred. No matter how well-intentioned these operations apparently are, we should unequivocally reject them because, as a Facebook user quoted by BBC put it, “Killing in crossfire is a bigger crime than trading drugs.”

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there is a demand, there will be a supply.

In a 2014 report titled “Ending the Drug Wars” by a London School of Economics think tank, such anti-drugs drives and measures reduce the availability of drugs, and hence increase prices for a short time; the price hike then provokes a new rise in supply, and finally, prices return to where they had been before. After a year of Duterte's drug war, a Reuters report found that the prices of drugs in the Philippines remained almost unchanged.

One could argue that both Bangladesh's and Philippines' wars on drugs fail or would fail to disrupt the supply chain because they mainly

year, according to Drug Policy Alliance, and in total, the country expended USD one trillion on counter-narcotics efforts as of 2012. Yet, the global drug business continues to soar, amounting to USD 300-500 billion a year. And various studies on the global war on drugs concluded that these methods were not only unsuccessful in terms of achieving their objectives but often were also counterproductive. If the global war on drugs has failed, there is little chance such a war would succeed anywhere else.

And then, there are serious concerns about the extrajudicial nature of the entire affair. “The lesson of drug wars in Latin America, and of previous dirty

The future of Asean

communique was shortly retracted quoting “urgent amendments” to be made to the statement and later an amended statement was not issued. Although the statement did not mention China, it did indirectly imply that China had a hand in tensions rising.

The two countries reported to have withdrawn their support were Cambodia and Laos. A similar play of events was witnessed in 2012 where under the chairmanship of Cambodia, the Asean summit was unable to release a joint statement mentioning the concerns over the South China Sea, despite insistence from the Philippines and Vietnam.

With the 2016 arbitration resulting in negative assertion over China's activities

move came right after excessive investment by China in Brunei when it was on the verge of an oil crisis in 2014.

Singapore, on the other hand, is the largest importer from and second-largest exporter to China. Recently, the Philippines changed its stance. President Rodrigo Duterte welcomed Chinese infrastructure investment, unlike his predecessor President Benigno Aquino, who was a staunch critic of Chinese hegemonic designs and claims over the disputed waters. With each country's self-interest at stake, forging an Asean consensus especially against the China seems highly implausible.

The economic projections for Asean in the near future appear to be bright and

centrality of Asean unity is more relevant today than ever before.

Asean today stands at a crossroads where divergence can be seen in its united appearances on the one hand and possibility of fragmented consensus in the near future on the other. In January 2018, India hosted the 10-nation community for the India-Asean summit where the communique issued spoke of a united front of Asean and India to counter regional challenges.

Another opportunity to project Asean unity was the summit held in Singapore late April this year where the issue of the South China Sea dispute was on the agenda. However, the summit concluded on April 28 with full display of



Asean leaders join hands as they pose for a photo during the opening ceremony at Association of Southeast Asian Nations leaders' summit in Manila on April 29, 2017.

PHOTO: AFP

in the disputed waters of the South China Sea, the inability of Asean to bring member states in consensus highlights the extent of Chinese inroads into the regional community of Asean.

China with its strong cheque-book diplomacy already has strong hold over the political affairs of Cambodia and Laos, by which both the countries have stayed away from commenting on the South China Sea dispute. China is now expanding its political influence over other players in the community by investing in economic diplomacy. For example, Indonesia and Myanmar have considerable exports to China.

Brunei devastated the consensus by not participating in the first Asean Claimants Working Group in 2014 which was organised by the Philippines to foster Asean consensus amongst the overlapping claims of its constituent members. This

promising. According to the World Economic Forum on Asean 2017, the overall yearly growth rate of Asean is placed at five percent. Collectively, Asean nations form the seventh largest economy in the world. It is expected to improve to fifth by 2020. At five percent, Asean countries are expected to double their income in 15 years.

With the continuance of the growth trajectory, a minor increase of even two percent in annual growth rate will cause Asean nations to double their income in a matter of 10 years. This growth rate can be achieved by the implementation of Asean Economic Community which still stands as a distant dream. Furthermore, Asean nations can reap the benefits of demographic dividend only till 2025. The probability of achieving these economic benefits is contingent on a united Asean community. Thus, the

differences among member states, including issues such as the legal and diplomatic processes and a proposal by Vietnam and the Philippines to welcome the July 2016 arbitral tribunal award.

Simultaneously, the Philippines is fostering very close ties with China where there are talks being held on potential sharing of water resources in the disputed areas of the South China Sea. China is also making strong inroads in Vietnam. It will be interesting to see if an Asean consensus can be formed or at least attempted, especially when the Philippines takes over the role of Asean country coordinator for the Asean-China dialogue in August 2018.

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