

First the Rohingyas, now the Muslims in Assam

Foreign ministry's reticence baffling

WE consider it a matter of grave concern that four million people in Assam have been de-registered, mostly Bengali Muslims, who have become foreigners in their own land. We are equally confounded by this move particularly at a time when Indo-Bangladesh relations is at its peak!

We would not be remiss to suggest that this is an anti-Muslim move, an example of blatant communal politics at its extreme. Bangladesh abhors such politics and feels that such a development may have its own fall-out in Bangladesh. Given the purpose behind the move, which is to identify so-called illegal migrants, one would not be misled to think that this is an attempt to create a vote bank for the ruling BJP. One does not know what to make of the statement of the Assam CM that nobody will be treated as a foreigner if his/her name is not in the list. If that be so, what is the purpose of such a list in the first place?

In this regard, we are highly curious about the stance of our foreign ministry, whose silence on what is happening across the border is extremely baffling. The argument is that it is an internal matter of India, with which we beg to differ. How can it be so when the purpose of the exercise is to identify so-called illegal migrants from Bangladesh? It would seem that we are reacting in the same inert manner as we did three decades ago when Bangladesh remained mum while the Myanmar strongman General Ne Win was disenfranchising the Rohingyas. Today, we are facing the brunt of the Rohingyas made stateless, and Bangladesh now hosts 1.1 million refugees.

Given the gravity of the situation, our government must raise the issue with Delhi at the highest level. It's a question of national security and we cannot look at this situation merely as an internal matter of India, especially when there is every chance of a mass deportation of such a massive number of people into our country.

Three city polls replicate the previous two

Precursor to national elections?

WHILE we are happy that the three city mayoral elections have come to an end with little violence, they were, as we had feared, simply the iteration of the Khulna and Gazipur polls. They bear nearly all the hallmarks—from ballot stuffing to expelling election agents—of a heavily manipulated election.

In spite of all the irregularities reported by multiple sources, the BNP-backed mayoral candidate in Sylhet, Ariful Haque Chowdhury, almost certainly pulled off a stunning victory. His triumph should serve as an important lesson to the opposition: No matter how uneven the ground is, if they field a strong and popular candidate, she or he has a viable chance to win.

The polls also represent a lost opportunity for the Election Commission to prove its credibility and competence. Since its formulation, the Commission has barely been able to preside over a single free and fair election, and thus suffered from a serious credibility deficit. With the national elections looming large, it had a chance to assert its authority and establish its integrity by organising the five city elections in a free and fair manner, which it did not.

Not just on the election day, the EC turned a blind eye to numerous election rule violations—mainly by the ruling party and the police—in the run-up to the polls. There is little indication that this election commission has the ability or willingness required to hold a national election that would be acceptable to all.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Road accidents or murders?

There has been an alarming rise in road accidents across the country, particularly in the highways and the capital city. Road accidents are claiming valuable lives almost every day. A report by the National Committee to Protect Shipping, Roads and Railways (NCPSSRR), a non-government organisation, revealed that at least 4,284 people were killed and 9,112 injured in 3,472 road accidents across the country during the last year. Some 2,471 people died in the last six months alone.

Last Sunday, a tragic accident snatched away the lives of two college students and left several others injured. But the authorities concerned are turning a blind eye to this problem. We are dumbfounded by the irresponsible speech of the shipping minister in this regard.

Reckless driving, unhealthy competition among the drivers, lack of monitoring by the authorities and unfit vehicles are mostly responsible for road accidents. Moreover, the tendency among drivers and commuters to violate traffic rules has also contributed to this situation. We want the guarantee of normal death. Can the government ensure that?

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Hundreds of students from different educational institutions block the Airport Road in Dhaka on July 30, demanding justice over the deaths of two students in a road accident.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

Tomorrow People



trapped in the car had little room to change their direction. It was a one-way traffic leading to the Airport Road. Eventually all of us ended up making a U-turn. The waves could not get to us and instead of us being washed away, they were dispersed.

The day before yesterday, I disappointed myself by being scared of the hundreds who were coming towards the car. They were only children whose rage was to be taken seriously. And then there were parents in pain who wondered whether their children were ever going to be safe in public transports, whether they would at all come back home in one piece. And then there was also Jahangir, Dia's father who has been a bus driver in the Dhaka-Rajshahi-Chapainawabganj route for the last 27 years. He has been wailing non-stop, as one of his three gems had just been crushed under the wheels of a killer bus. His two other children were Riad, a sixth-grader, and his eldest daughter

Rokeya, now preparing for her Higher Secondary exams.

In reality, the last incident has triggered the anger of the young and helplessness in us, the older generation. After all, we don't choose to send our children in public transports and we don't set the rules or decide who or how to punish every time we lose people we love to buses, rapes, guns or drugs. In the last one year, we have lost 933 students in road accidents.

In about 13 days surrounding Eid festivities, 405 people died. Over the last six months, 2,471 people lost their lives in 2,500 accidents, out of which 317 were women and 326 children, and 5,975 were injured. Most of these accidents were caused by trucks carrying goods to different places in the country.

Some time ago, I was told that a young man that I personally know has just been accused of cybercrime. His posts on Facebook have caught the attention of the authorities and thus he has been called in to explain his position. Apparently his Facebook comments are unacceptable. He has abused the police while commenting on his friend's status. His comments were all about how the police were not pro-people and how they ought to face the general wrath of the public. While the first part of his comment could be subjected to deeper scrutiny, the second part had totally self-invited the attention of the authorities. This young man is a

conscientious trainee journalist, who's loved by his colleagues. He is regular and has a perception of current affairs that, I am sure, will be polished with time and experience. In short, the chap is promising. Having a keen interest in law, he is fairly aware of the consequences he may suffer because of what he has done. But maybe, just maybe, he was careless or rather carefree one particular moment and had decided to write what he had written. Thus, perhaps an unconditional apology was the only way out...

This is what we are doing by disallowing dissent. We are wrongly encouraging unmeasured outbursts and then punishing them as we know no better. Rage has taken over the youth and the results have been severe. And I am not referring to cases of roads coming to a halt; I am more in anguish pondering over the manner we are deforming the faces of the Tomorrow People, whom we are no longer able to teach or temper.

Should this happen? No. Almost 48 percent of our current population is below 30 years of age. With this demographic advantage, we ought to optimise hope instead of despair; we ought to teach them the tongue of freedom and not one of chains. With the advancement of technology, we need to realise that they cannot be dampened by water cannons, batons, harassment, lawsuits, imprisonment or torture. If one stops, there will definitely be hundreds

more from different corners, echoing the other. Let's not forget there are mountains that host echoes and once the call is out, there's no turning back.

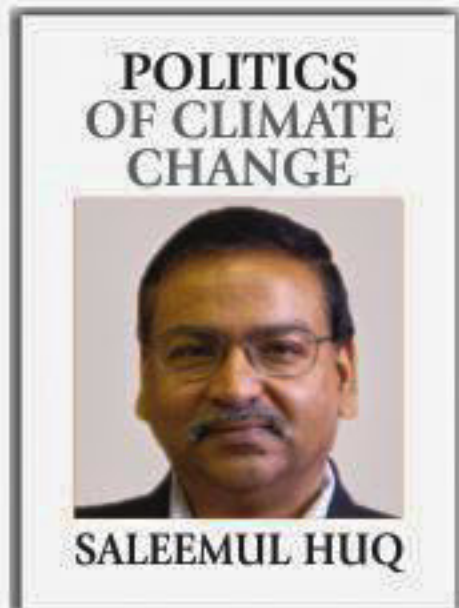
As I write the column, the news of the agitated students demonstrating in Farm Gate intersection is spreading fast. Their nine-point demand includes the resignation of the shipping minister, who had smiled and commented unwisely. If there are lessons to be learnt from history, then let's look at last century's India. Lal Bahadur Shastri, who served as the minister of railways and transport in the Central Cabinet from May 1952 to December 1956, offered his resignation in September 1956 after a railway accident took place at Mahbubnagar that led to 112 deaths. However, Nehru did not then accept his resignation. Eventually, three months later, he resigned as he accepted moral and constitutional responsibility for a railway accident at Ariyalur in Tamil Nadu in which 144 died. Nehru spoke about this in the parliament and explained that he was accepting the resignation because it would stand out as an example in constitutional propriety and not because Shastri was responsible for the accident in any way.

There are rules of propriety that we live by.

Let's not flaunt them ever.

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Tackling climate change in the Barind Tract



to climate change. The government and people of Bangladesh are now in the process of changing that narrative to making Bangladesh into the most climate resilient country in the world.

As the impacts of climate change vary from place to place, methods of adaptations to tackle the impacts must also take local conditions into account. Thus the impacts in coastal Bangladesh will be different from the Haor basin in the north east which in turn will be different from the Barind Tract in the north-west of Bangladesh.

I was recently in Rajshahi and Bogra for a meeting with researchers, government officials, NGOs and other stakeholders working on the problems of the Barind Tract, so I will focus on what I saw there.

The first point to make is to describe the particular situation of the region and how it is vulnerable to climate change.

The region consists of two types of geology, namely the High Barind and the floodplain Barind. The former is a somewhat higher land which is dissected or undulating. A long time ago, the region had lots of forests and wild animals but over the last century, it lost most of its tree cover and became very dry and almost like a desert.

However, since the eighties, there has been a massive tree planting programme together with the discovery of underground water which could be used for irrigation of high-yielding rice, and the region has been transformed for the better in recent decades.

However, with climate change, predictions are that there would be far more erratic rainfall in future and the thousands of deep tube-wells that are being used are in danger of over-extracting the available



As the impacts of climate change vary from place to place, methods of adaptations to tackle the impacts must take local conditions into account.

PHOTO: ANWAR ALI

groundwater. Hence, there clearly needs to be an emphasis on using less water requiring crops as well as more use of surface water wherever possible.

At the same time, the social and economic situation in the region has its own peculiarities with sizeable populations of Adivasis and also significant populations living in river islands called chars who are amongst the most vulnerable groups in the country.

Hence, the adaptation strategies that need to be adopted, and are already being piloted, need to both address changes in crops as well as focusing on the most vulnerable populations in the region.

Amongst the promising options being piloted are cattle rearing in the chars and mango orchards in the land which are showing positive results. However, one of the major bottlenecks is marketing the products, as seen this year with excess supply of potatoes which could not be sold. One promising option is to explore export markets for some of the

products such as mangoes.

Another bottleneck that was identified was the lack of coordination and difficulty to scale up the many successful pilot activities. One concept that is being looked at to tackle this issue is Integrated Land Management (ILM) which brings together all the relevant actors working in the same landscape and tries to ensure synergies across them.

In conclusion, it is clear that the Barind Tract in North West Bangladesh is one of the most climate vulnerable zones of the country which will need special focus in future adaptation planning to transform it into a resilient Barind Tract.

A similar approach will also be needed in other vulnerable zones such as the coastal areas, haors, Hill Tracts and flood prone zones.

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