

Rohingya repatriation

Aung San Suu Kyi misinforms the world

WE don't know exactly how to respond to State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi's claim to international media that it is Bangladesh that is holding up Rohingya repatriation. Apparently, only we can decide how quickly the disenfranchised Rohingyas can return to Myanmar! It is ironic that Ms Suu Kyi should choose to skirt the whole issue of widespread violence that forced the mass exodus of the Rohingyas from their country of residence in the first place. It is not Bangladesh that is failing to create a conducive environment in Rakhine State that is holding back Rohingyas' return. We are not a nation that will forcibly push out an unarmed people that has faced mass violation of human rights.

Peaceful repatriation depends primarily on ensuring a safe environment in Rakhine and that depends entirely on Myanmar, not Bangladesh. For many decades, the Rohingyas have been stateless and these people wish to return with some form of guarantee that they will be accorded citizenship. Here, too, we have seen Myanmar's unwillingness to address the issue. Given that these are prerequisites to a lasting solution to the Rohingya crisis, we find the explanation given by the premier Myanmar statesperson—that repatriation is not taking place because of Bangladesh—to be a travesty of truth, to put it mildly.

Although Myanmar signed a MoU with Bangladesh towards the end of last year, which stated that repatriation would commence within two months of signing, nothing tangible has materialised. We reiterate our call to the international community, particularly the UN, to investigate allegations of crimes against the Rohingya people because the Myanmar government has shown little interest in bringing those responsible for such violations of human rights to justice. It is time to tell the Rohingyas that they are not a forgotten people.

Why must justice remain elusive for women?

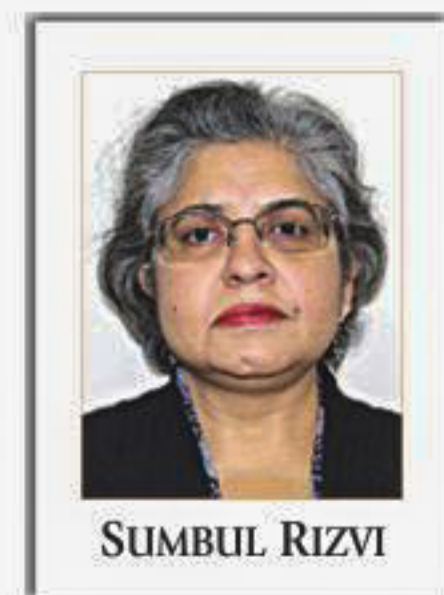
The entire legal system merits scrutiny

IT is indeed a sad commentary on our legal system that women and children still cry out for justice in Bangladesh. It is a sadder reflection that even now an affected group has to project its plight through roundtables and seminars. And one such seminar organised recently by an alliance fighting to end violence against women brings out the abject unconcern of the state towards women who constitute 50 percent of the population. A case in point here is the trial of the murder of an unfortunate girl called Rishi, a school student. And the raft of reasons for this are something that are not unknown to us.

Skewed legal procedures, disregard for orders stipulating ways to deal with cases of violence against women, incompetent public prosecutors, warped recording of cases and even more twisted investigation process—more because of money and political influence—among other shortcomings, cause a gross miscarriage of justice. Add to this the various ploys that the defense uses to hide truths and prolong trial procedures. We have commented continually on this aspect but very little progress, if at all, has been visible.

What is needed is more money to establish more courts to expediate the trial process. Errant investigating officers must be treated as an abettor of the crime and dealt with as such, and corruption in the system should be firmly curbed. That, of course, requires political will; one cannot restate more strongly that there is an abject lack of it at the moment. Does not a legal system that fails to deliver justice to women demand a complete overhaul?

The Rohingya influx: One year on



SUMBUL RIZVI

who fled horrific violence in Rakhine. Shrubs and trees gave way to settlements in Ukhiya and Teknaf Upazilas in the southernmost district of Bangladesh sitting on the edge of the tumultuous Bay of Bengal.

As the monsoons descended, rainfall triggered mudslides and floods as the soft clay collapsed in heaps, bringing down some of the flimsiest shelters that form the world's largest refugee camp—Kutupalong/KTP, or more popularly, the Mega Camp. In addition, smaller camps dot the southern tip of Teknaf between the Naf River flowing down in muddy torrents from the Arakan mountains. For a layperson, the sight of the camps in the monsoons is chilling, though experienced humanitarians will appreciate the massive effort it took to create this landscape. The UN Secretary General António Guterres has poignantly captured both sentiments when he called it “a miracle—on the edge.” Closely monitoring the Bangladesh Meteorological Department reports, we pray for the weather to be kind. While record-breaking rainfall has lashed the camps, the wind factor has been limited, though for how long? September storms and the October-November cyclone season are still to come—a daunting reality in the absence of cyclone shelters in the area.

Until it holds, the bit-by-bit efforts of building mud-track roads and bridges, digging drains, culverts and water channels, strengthening clay slopes with bamboo and sandbags have ensured some safety in a fragile environment. Shelter upgrade kits comprising ropes, bamboo and tools have been widely distributed to strengthen fragile homes. Efforts to improve safety continue, including through the Ministry of Disaster Management and Response-led Cyclone Preparedness Programme and its volunteers, training refugees on disaster response. Relocation of those at high risk continues as camps become more congested; vulnerable families uprooted from their homes and communities agonise about moving “yet again” away from their neighbours and village folk. Convincing the families of the risks of being on a 40-degree mud slope or at its bottom—sure to flood—challenges the persistent community volunteers. Latrines and water points jostle for space and, during heavy rains, merge into the other. The risk of disease is high and breaths are drawn as frequent water contamination tests determine results.

Amelioration

Amidst shoring up to survive an “emergency within an emergency”, little boys and girls play with their multi-coloured wrist strips attached to identify them in case of family-separation in a disaster. None of the prevention work would be enough on its own: in an emergency situation, it is the inspiring commitment demonstrated by government-assigned camp officials, military, United Nations staff, national and international NGOs and refugee volunteers who unhesitatingly wade through thigh-deep mud and slush to assess damage or conduct repairs even though it is pouring—this camaraderie has prevented casualties, helped move families to safety, repaired roads and bamboo bridges, as all joined hands with site maintenance teams

to fix damage as rapidly as humanly possible so that the majority of refugees could retain access to food distribution and safer shelters.

Having worked for over three decades with forcibly displaced persons, I have rarely seen a refugee population as maligned and downtrodden, yet I am repeatedly amazed by their spirit. The Rohingyas, young and old, women and men, display an inner strength. Generations of statelessness and persecution have left them proudly resilient. They have so little, yet remain community-oriented. I can now begin to comprehend how orphaned children, single women, as well as injured and disabled individuals, all managed to flee from Rakhine. An overwhelming 80 percent of refugees in the camps are women and children who are eager and impatient for opportunities to live a full life. The vulnerability of this population is astounding—as is their tenacity. They manage to survive as community networks in the camps are strong, staying together, sharing and working hard. Their spirit is the backbone of this response.

Regional context

South Asia is not new to refugees. None of the states have signed the Refugee

alongside Bangladesh, as evidenced by the rapid international response to the influx. Now, one year on, as the generosity of the local community risks being outpaced by the sheer scale of needs, the international community needs to continue their partnership and to walk the talk.

The Joint Response Plan (JRP) launched in March 2018 is a prioritised appeal for USD 951 million to assist 1.3 million individuals including 884,000 Rohingyas and 336,000 affected Bangladeshis. The JRP is just about one-third funded, at 34 percent. Urgent funding is critically required to meet life-saving humanitarian needs. More than half the appeal (54 percent) is for food, water, sanitation, hygiene, shelter and non-food items combined. Food alone is 25 percent of the overall appeal while just 18 percent of food security needs are funded. Some 850,000 refugees require food rations monthly; health care, both psychosocial and physical, as well as other basics for sustainable human life are needed. Camps remain dangerously congested, and most refugees lack adequate shelter from high winds and heavy rains. Children have lacked education for years: in Rakhine, they were denied, now we need funds and access to quality education to prevent a generation of lost children.

Rohingya community, keen to overcome the traumas that forced their escape. This work is done every day by individuals in women's groups, child-friendly spaces, as well as elderly and disabled support networks. This work is also done through more systemic changes, such as restructuring how camp representatives are elected to provide equal opportunity to the majority female population to contribute to social cohesion. But more is needed to support and mutually sustain a protection-sensitive environment.

What now?

The Rohingya crisis is the most globally compelling refugee situation in terms of the numbers of people affected. These numbers are exacerbated by location, terrain and climate, adding to the complexity of the response. The historic joint visit of the UN Secretary General and the World Bank President to Cox's Bazar in July underscored the need for collaborative humanitarian and development action. Given remarkably early on in the crisis, the World Bank Refugee Grant to Bangladesh demonstrates the flexibility of an international community in addressing an unusual situation. The nimble response by the Asian Development Bank also echoes a similar approach. Quick and visible implementation is critical.



A Rohingya refugee finds an enterprising way to carry his belongings.

PHOTO: NAYANA BOSE/ISOC

Convention, yet a strong tradition of asylum endures. The 1947 partition of India resulted in over 14 million people uprooted in the most violent manner. They could have become refugees overnight in the new dominions of India and Pakistan, if both states had not immediately absorbed them. The liberation of Bangladesh in 1971 displaced an estimated 10 million refugees to India. Like most refugees, nearly all chose to return to their liberated homeland once Bangladesh was created. It is perhaps this memory that guides the generosity of spirit in Bangladesh, despite its own constraints of population density and natural disasters.

Fulfilling basic needs

One year ago, the most recent influx of the Rohingyas began. They fled to Bangladesh at a staggering pace; some 500,000 refugees arrived within the first month. Undoubtedly, the main responder and largest donor have been the government and people of Bangladesh as the local community opened their homes and hearts. The world community has notably stood

Protection needs are significant and the impacts of funding gaps are alarming. Through no fault of their own, the Rohingyas have been forced into near-complete dependency on aid compelled by inadequate attention to self-reliance initiatives. Humanitarian responders have maximised their available resources to the extent possible, but the needs far outweigh existing capacity. Important projects remain pending and the expanse of protection activities remains limited. Multiple government departments have stretched themselves in addressing the needs of not only an underdeveloped part of the country but of a million more in an area lacking previous infrastructure. Admirable progress is being made, however, including rapid establishment of governance systems marking the assertion of state authority through Camp-in-Charge officials and the Office of the Refugee Relief and Repatriation Commissioner expanding their previous ambit.

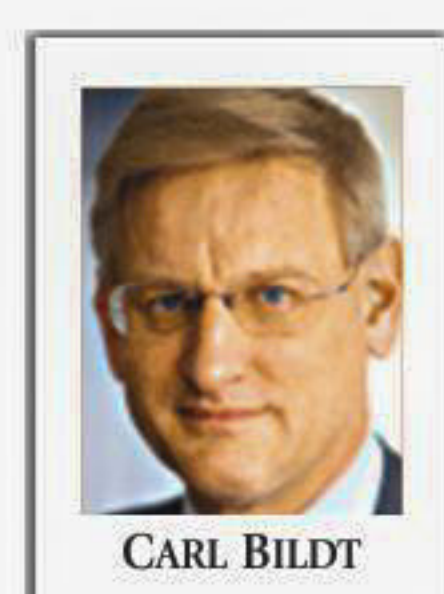
Much is being achieved through fostering the innate strength of the

One year on, as we await improvements in Rakhine, one that will allow for a voluntary repatriation process, the here-and-now is more imminent. Will we continue to manage the situation as we have this past year? Or will we seize the initiative? Can we turn around a seemingly confounding situation to mutual advantage for both refugees and the local population? A well-planned common vision can boost an underdeveloped district in a country already on the fast path to growth, one that facilitates access to opportunities for both refugees and local communities alike. Plans are being tested in Cox's Bazar to merge development opportunities with humanitarian work. These plans must deliver for the sake of the Rohingyas and for Bangladesh—a country that has bucked the global trend by demonstrating humanity in action. Their courageous leadership deserves all our support.

Sumbul Rizvi is Senior Coordinator of the Rohingya Refugee Response in Cox's Bazar.

PROJECT ■ SYNDICATE

Navigating the Syrian endgame



CARL BILDT

a recent meeting with German Chancellor Angela Merkel, Putin expressed his hope that the European Union would help to rebuild Syria so that its displaced people could start to return home. And in recent weeks, Russian diplomats have been hawking the same message across European capitals.

To be sure, now that Bashar al-Assad's regime has reclaimed most of the country's territory, Syria's civil war is clearly winding down. But that outcome was not inevitable. On the contrary, the Syrian army was very close to collapsing at one point. Only with the crucial help of Iranian-backed militias and Russian air support did Assad manage to turn things around.

Meanwhile, US efforts to establish a “moderate” armed opposition achieved little, apart from giving the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG)—an offshoot of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK)—control of the strip of northern Syria abutting the Turkish border. The only thing left to do now is to destroy Al

Nusra's remaining enclave in Idlib and broker some kind of settlement between the YPG and Assad.

Assad has survived at a horrible cost. More than half of the Syrian population has been displaced internally or forced to flee to nearby countries or to Europe. Much of Syria's infrastructure—from housing blocks to hospitals—lies in ruins. And, needless to say, the country's economy has been shattered, owing to the direct effects of the conflict and to sanctions that were imposed as part of the failed effort to force Assad into a political settlement.

No other country in the past half-century has suffered so heavy a toll in human lives and physical destruction. There can be no doubt that the responsibility for this tragedy rests with the Assad regime and its Russian and Iranian sponsors. Of course, they will say they were fighting terrorism, as if that excuses their indiscriminate methods and reckless disregard for civilian lives. But future generations will remember the true source of the terror that was visited upon the Levant over the past seven years.

The estimated cost of rebuilding Syria varies widely. While a 2017 World Bank study puts the price at around USD 225 billion, more recent assessments suggest a total closer to USD 400 billion; others expect the sum to approach USD 1 trillion. And that does not even count the human costs of the war.

It is clear from Putin's European charm

offensive that Russia has no intention of footing even a small part of the bill. Apparently, the Kremlin does not feel as though it has a duty to rebuild the cities and restore the livelihoods that its bombs destroyed.

Nor is the United States particularly eager to help. Just last week, the Trump administration cancelled USD 230 million in funding for the reconstruction of Raqqa and other areas liberated from ISIS. It is now hoping that Saudi Arabia will foot the bill instead. If there is any wisdom in that move, it remains to be seen.

With the US stepping back, it is obvious why Putin suddenly wants to talk to the Europeans about the plight of Syrian refugees. He didn't care about them when his bombs were falling on their neighbourhoods and forcing them to flee. But now that he wants Europe to bail out Assad, he has found some compassion.

But it is not clear that Assad even wants displaced Syrians to return. If anything, he seems ready to exploit the situation to reengineer the country's ethnic and political composition, making it safer for his own minority sect, the Alawites. Hence, a new law grants refugees just one year to reclaim their property before the government seizes it and other bureaucratic requirements seem designed to allow Syrian authorities to refuse re-entry to anyone they don't like.

Moreover, Assad has stated explicitly that European companies are not

welcome to help with the reconstruction, and that preference should be given to Russian firms. Clearly, the regime is preparing to profit from any rebuilding assistance that comes its way. For all of these reasons, the last thing that Europeans should do is send money directly to Assad. A far better option is to offer direct financial support to individuals and families that are willing and able to return to their country.

At the same time, the EU should not lift sanctions until a credible political settlement between the regime and opposition forces has been reached. The question is whether such a settlement is even possible. So far, every realistic proposal has been torpedoed by Assad's insistence that he remain in power.

Assad would do well to remember that he now rules over the wreckage of a country. Even when the guns fall silent, his regime will not be secure. His inability to revive Syria will leave him vulnerable in the same way that his refusal to countenance political reforms did eight years ago. Europe has no interest in saving Assad from that dilemma. Help for Syria must await a genuine political solution. After the destruction that the Assad regime has wrought, there is no other way forward.

Carl Bildt is a former prime minister and foreign minister of Sweden.
Copyright: Project Syndicate, 2018.
www.project-syndicate.org
(Exclusive to The Daily Star)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

Don't reduce interest rates on savings certificates

In recent weeks, a lot has been said and proposed to the effect that interest rates on savings certificates should be cut down. The rationale for this is that savings certificates are apparently being misused by a section of investors, corporate houses, entrepreneurs and individuals with a lot of black money and even by the public and private banks. Is the government machinery so weak or inefficient that they cannot detect these crimes? This may be the case unless, of course, those in charge are also in collusion with them. However, in the broader perspective, we also need to acknowledge the fact that a section of the low- and middle-income groups, pensioners and senior citizens are making their day-to-day living with the help of these certificates, which makes a strong case against any attempt to reduce the interest rates. I think the institutions and individuals responsible for the misuse of savings certificates should be brought to book in the greater interest of the nation.

Jamal Hussain, via email