

Crimes in Rohingya camps

Prioritise security and safe repatriation

THE lack of security and extent of violence inside the Rohingya camps as evident from an investigative report in the latest issue of *Star Weekend* ("Murder in the Camps", September 14) should be a major concern for the government and international community. It goes to show how precarious the situation is.

Thousands of Rohingya men, especially the young men are in these camps. They are unemployed, hungry, in need of cash and most of all, frustrated about their uncertain future. Some of them are getting involved in crime—drug and human trafficking, hijacking, gang robbery, rape and murder. This means that the Rohingya, after all the trauma they have suffered in their home country, are now again under threat of violence in the only place they thought they were safe—the refugee camps in Bangladesh. And many of the perpetrators are their own people.

According to the report, in the last one year, at least 22 Rohingyas have been killed in the unregistered camps. Official records also show six cases of rape, 68 narcotics related cases and 142 cases related to robbery and petty offences. Women and girls in particular, are extremely vulnerable as previous reports have shown, with many of them becoming victims of sexual violence, harassment and trafficking. Although more police camps have been set up, the complexities arising from thousands of hapless people living in such dire conditions are just too overwhelming.

It is a situation that is inevitable when thousands of desperate people are forced to stay in cramped, unhygienic conditions for months on end. While the authorities are obligated to beef up security as much as possible and catch the perpetrators especially the gangs (within and outside the camps) that are carrying out these criminal activities, a sustainable solution is crucial. This means safe repatriation of these people with full citizenship rights. The Rohingyas cannot indefinitely be kept in these refugee camps.

Maternity leave and pay

Some RMG owners continue to violate the law

IT is very disappointing to learn that many of our garment workers still do not get maternity leave with full pay and other benefits. And that working conditions in RMG factories are quite unfavourable to the female workers who are expecting. There is hardly any scope for them to sit or rest, let alone have the necessary medical check-ups done in the healthcare facilities inside the factories. Besides, the shoddy working conditions and a lack of hygiene in the factories are affecting women workers' health in general.

Although the labour law in Bangladesh entitles workers to a 16-week maternity leave with full pay, a recent study has found that only 28.7 percent of the workers get maternity leave for four months. Also, the general practice in factories is to give workers the entire 16 weeks' salary when they re-join office after childbirth which is a violation of the labour law. The recently proposed Bangladesh Labour Law entitles workers to eight-weeks of maternity leave and other benefits before they go on leave. And although re-joining work two months after childbirth is harmful for both the mother and the child, the majority of workers as well as the employers are not even aware of the need for post-natal care. Then there are also cases of terminating workers during pregnancy.

These are serious issues concerning our garment workers that need to be addressed with urgency. The owners must abide by government rules in terms of providing workers with the necessary maternity benefits and healthcare facilities, which would in effect increase their productivity.

LETTERS
TO THE EDITOR

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Is Dhaka prepared for earthquakes?

Dhaka, besides being one of the most densely populated cities in the world, is cramped with thousands of unplanned and dangerous buildings and other infrastructure built in violation of the national building code. Meanwhile, multiple studies have found that Dhaka sits on top of an active fault line, leaving it extremely vulnerable to earthquakes.

The Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief has already identified 72,000 buildings that are in harm's way. Whether we like our situation or not, we should definitely be prepared for a major disaster.

A big earthquake might result in tonnes of urban debris being scattered all across the city, severely impeding rescue and relief operations. If the Rana Plaza tragedy has taught us anything, it is that our disaster preparedness is nearly non-existent. And we do not even have sufficient equipment or trained rescue personnel. This does not bode well for the city. We must be prepared as far as debris management is concerned so that we could significantly reduce the number of casualties and extent of damage in case of an earthquake.

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DEMOCRACY IN CRISIS

What we know and what we don't

BLACK, WHITE
AND GREY
ALI RIAZ

THAT democratic values and democratic institutions are in crisis all around the world is no longer a revelation; casual observation of the current global scene is enough to bear this out. For years, empirical data provided by the Freedom House and the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) in their annual reports have been indicating that democracy is in a downward spiral. According to a Freedom House report, almost 67 percent people in the world now live under political systems which are either "not free" or "partly free", or in other words undemocratic. One-third of the global population lives in outright authoritarian regimes according to the EIU, and many Asian countries are hybrid regimes—i.e., ostensibly democratic but essentially authoritarian.

Academics with impeccable records on tracking the health of global democracy raised the red flag at the beginning of this decade. With the gradual fading of the euphoria of democracy's victory after the end of the Cold War, many researchers and activists alike warned that the path from authoritarianism does not always end in democracy.

Some called the situation a decline of democracy, others called it a reverse wave. However it was described, with increasing numbers of people around the world being under not-free status in various countries, especially in countries which were previously considered consolidated democracies, plus the growing challenges to democratic norms and values from various sources, a consensus has emerged that democracy is in crisis. A wide range of studies on the causes of and conditions for the plight of democracy have been published in the past decade. In these studies, and in public discourse, we can find answers to the questions as to what the decline looks like and how it happens. But what factors engendered the process remains an issue of contention.

We know what it looks like when democracy is in retreat, worse yet, when it is dead: citizens' fundamental rights are severely curtailed, space for dissent shrinks, institutional protection to opponents of the government disappear, freedom of expression and assembly become limited at best, media are

"bought off or bullied into self-censorship", legislative bodies become weak and ineffective, the judiciary becomes subordinate to the executive, patriotism of the opposition is questioned and above all, a demagogue ascends to the helm of power with the promise of applying simplistic solutions to all the complex problems by himself/herself. These, in various degrees, become the defining features of a polity and normalised with dubious justifications.

The dire warning of the 1970s and

principal actors of this crusade against democracy, and thus far, successfully.

Populist leaders come in different races, colours and gender. They use various garbs. They are apt in constructing enemies—domestic and foreign. For some the infamous "War on Terror" has provided the justifications, for others economic development is the mantra. They have created a pool of loyalists who are simultaneously proud (of their nation and/or country and/or religion), disgruntled (about their economic and political wellbeing) and

On the electoral road, none of these things happen. There are no tanks in the streets. Constitutions and other nominally democratic institutions remain in place. People still vote. Elected autocrats maintain a veneer of democracy while eviscerating its substance" ("This is How Democracies Die", *The Guardian*, January 21, 2018). What we see thereafter is, "despots masquerading as democrats" and their loyalists continue to insist that democracy has been saved and is flourishing.

While this is the epochal moment of the death of a democracy, there are precursors, in politics and in society. In the social arena, the progressive attenuation of empathy and tolerance, atomisation of individuals, decline of virtuous social capital, apathy towards politics, and continuous reproduction of differences are some of the precursors. In politics, "the denigration of expertise and the celebration of ignorance; scorn for consensus-builders and pragmatic compromise; the polarisation of politics towards venom-spitting extremes" are the signposts of democracy's decline (Andrew Rawnsley, "How Democracy Ends review—is people politics doomed?" *The Guardian*, May 20, 2018). A combination of these social and political microbes creates the malaise that kills democracy.

While there is very little disagreement about the state we are in, how did we arrive here is the question for which we are yet to find an answer. The most common response is that democratic institutions have failed to deliver, and therefore, democracy as a normative value is now under attack. Indeed, in the past decades both economic and political inequality have grown within countries where democracy has been practiced, and at the global level. There are reasons to be indignant towards the system. Thanks to economic globalisation, new global elites have amassed wealth and power, while a poorer class has been left behind. Politically, the institutions which promised to be inclusive and represent the will of the many have given power to a few and have become beholden to money, special interests and influence. However, whether this provides a convincing explanation to this phenomenon which is global in its scope but also has distinct particularity depending on countries is a matter of debate. This we don't know yet.

ILLUSTRATION: DEEPAK HARICHANDAN

1980s that it will be red-flag waving communists who will one day march to the capitals and bring an end to democracy didn't come to pass, neither did the fear of the 1990s that the religio-political forces, often described as fundamentalists, will succeed with their swords in executing democracy become a reality. It was not the well-trained military who trampled democracy under their boots, a familiar scene in the 1960s and the 1970s.

Of course, there are a few instances of all of the above happening; in Venezuela democracy did erode under a leftist regime; in Turkey and partly in India, democratic institutions and values have been and are being shredded by parties who advocate religion-informed ideology; in Thailand and Egypt the military has launched an assault against democracy. But, in Europe, US, in various countries of Africa and Asia, it is the right-wing populists, armed with a xenophobic and Islamophobic agenda under the veneer of nationalism and apparently against economic marginalisation, who have become the

angry (against a contrived enemy). They praise the leader's outfit, even after the proverbial child has said, "the Emperor has no clothes".

Is there a specific moment that we can identify as the pivotal moment, a moment when democracy breathes its last breath? There was not a spectacular moment of the death of democracy anywhere in the world. It was not announced in the media, a proclamation that "we are now abandoning the principles of democracy or winding down democratic institutions" never came. Instead, often that happened through a process essential to democracy—elections. Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt have aptly described the process: "Democratic backsliding today begins at the ballot box. The electoral road to breakdown is dangerously deceptive. With a classic coup d'état, as in Pinochet's Chile, the death of a democracy is immediate and evident to all. The presidential palace burns. The president is killed, imprisoned or shipped off into exile. The constitution is suspended or scrapped.

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PROJECT SYNDICATE

Trump's assault on refugees

GORDON BROWN

THE decision by US President Donald Trump's administration to stop funding the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) has politicised humanitarian aid, threatens to add yet more fuel to one of the world's most combustible conflicts, and jeopardises the futures of a half-million Palestinian children and young people.

Originally created to deliver basic assistance to refugees displaced during the creation of the Israeli state, the UNRWA has provided health care, employment, and emergency food and shelter for displaced Palestinians since 1949. Today, nearly two million refugees receive emergency food and cash assistance from the organisation, and each year millions use the 143 UNRWA-run health clinics.

But the majority of UNRWA's budget goes towards educating children and young people, half of them in Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan, and the rest in Gaza and the West Bank. UNRWA runs nearly 700 schools, serving more students than any other UN organisation. Some 75 percent of the population of the Gaza Strip receives some form of UNRWA assistance, and 60 percent of Gaza's children from first to ninth grade attend UNRWA schools.

Without aid from the US, however, UNRWA's ability to deliver its most valuable service will be severely diminished. This directly contradicts the commitment made by world leaders, as part of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), to ensure that every child is in school by 2030.

Though UNRWA has more than 100 donors, almost a quarter of its total budget—nearly USD 400 million annually—previously came from the US. In fact, for nearly 70 years the US has been UNRWA's most generous and reliable donor, with both Republican and Democratic administrations recognising the organisation's value.

Now, UNRWA's other donors—the

top 10 of which contribute some 80 percent of the body's total budget—are under pressure to bridge the funding gap. And some donors are already stepping up.

In Germany, UNRWA's third-largest funder, Foreign Minister Heiko Maas recently announced that the government is "currently preparing to provide an additional amount of significant funds" to the organisation. Similarly, the United Kingdom has just added £7 million (USD 9 million), bringing its total contribution for the current year to £45.5 million.

Sweden recently committed USD 206 million of non-earmarked funding over

more than 20 million refugees (a post-World War II record). Likewise, the Education Cannot Wait fund, established in 2016 to aid children and young people affected by wars and emergencies, now must consider 40 separate emergencies and protracted crises. As yet, the organisation, led by Yasmine Sherif, lacks the necessary funding to help close the huge financing gap.

Beyond reducing substantially the UNRWA's capacity to deliver basic services to Palestinian refugees, the shortage of resources will also threaten the already tenuous stability of the West Bank, Gaza, Syria, Lebanon, and Jordan. As Maas put it, "the loss of this



Palestinian children outside their home on the seafront promenade, at the Shatila refugee camp in Gaza City.

PHOTO: MOHAMMED ABED/AFP

the next four years. The European Union, UNRWA's second-largest donor, has provided an advance on this year's funding, and pledged to maintain its contribution in 2019 and 2020. Other donors—such as Denmark, Finland, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Russia, and Switzerland—have agreed to frontload their funding as well.

This is good news, but we will need to do more to offset the coming loss of US support at a time when budgets are already strained by the fast-increasing humanitarian needs of the world's other 60 million displaced people, including

organisation could unleash an uncontrollable chain reaction." Kids would be pushed from UNRWA classrooms onto the streets, where they would be more vulnerable to dangerous scenarios such as recruitment efforts by terrorists, who will surely jump at the chance to argue that if we can't keep our aid promises, peaceful coexistence with the West is impossible. Child marriage, child labour, and child trafficking would rise. A generation of children and young people would be lost, in a region more unstable than ever.

The Trump administration has offered a number of imaginative but unconvincing

ing justifications for its decision. For example, it claims that other countries should have been paying more for a long time. But, even if that were true, it would hardly justify the sudden elimination of all support.

The administration also asserts that UNRWA is inflating the number of Palestinian refugees, not all of whom deserve the "right to return" (a major sticking point in peace negotiations with Israel), and that the organisation has outlived its usefulness. But, again, the argument is not convincing.

To be sure, UNRWA has long been criticised by some for passing down refugee status across generations since 1948. The Trump administration is now considering a proposal to restrict the right of return from five million Palestinians to a few hundred thousand.

But, in response it is argued that the practice of defining refugees' descendants as refugees is in accordance with international conventions governing refugee rights, as well as with international human rights and humanitarian law and the approach taken by the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR).

The fact is that, since UNRWA was created, the UN General Assembly, including the US, has not only renewed its mandate every three years, but also extolled its performance. An overwhelming majority of UN member states, recognising the unique role UNRWA plays in a volatile region, have consistently recognised the need to provide it with robust financial support.

As the world continues to seek an agreement for lasting peace in the Middle East, UNRWA (under the reforming leadership of Pierre Krähenbühl) is an important stabilising influence and humanitarian force that advances the cause of peace. Palestinian refugee children are already deeply disadvantaged. If UNRWA is not given the support it needs, these children and their societies will pay an even heavier price.

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