

Can the government afford another 5th January?

ICC's probe into Rohingya genocide Perpetrators must be held to account

In a welcome move on Monday, the International Criminal Court's prosecutor launched a preliminary probe into Myanmar's crimes against its Rohingya minority, including killings, sexual violence and forced deportations. This is the first legal step taken against the persecution of Rohingyas led by the country's powerful army—after months of speculation and prodding from various quarters and peace-loving people from across the globe—and may in time lead to a formal investigation by the ICC and possible indictments. We wholeheartedly welcome this initiative and hope that justice will be allowed to take its course, no matter what the consequence.

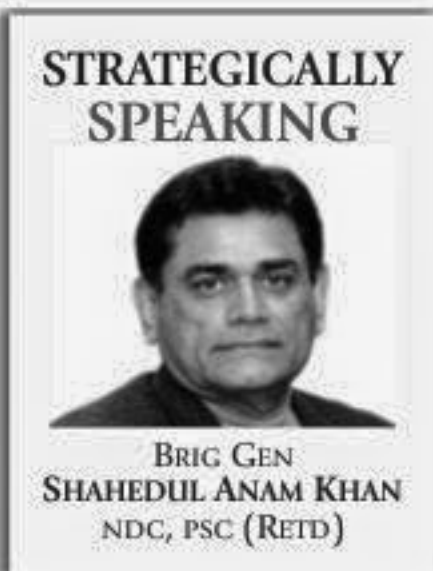
The Rohingyas deserve justice for what they had gone through, especially since August last year when the latest crackdown began resulting in the deportation of over 700,000 people. Justice is also in the interests of their future safety and reversal of Myanmar's state policy which emboldened their persecutors in the first place.

That said, on a more practical level, it is not enough to only bring to justice the military-political complex that was behind the genocide. The Rohingyas have suffered, and continue to do so, partly because the society in general grew hostile to the community because of the decades of anti-Rohingya campaign. Despite having a long history as citizens of Myanmar, the Rohingyas are generally deemed as outsiders, or infiltrators. The 2017 disaster had been in the making for a long time. The situation has been further exacerbated by some countries that wanted to advance their own geopolitical interests at the peril of the Rohingyas. The international community must address these issues and work toward creating a condition in which they can live safely and productively in their own country.

Govt. bodies not paying their electricity bills The practice is a breach of public trust

It would seem that many government, semi and non-government bodies believe that the electricity they consume is free. It is not free. The government is spending huge sums of money to generate electricity as the state minister for Power, Energy and Mineral Resources disclosed in parliament recently that various ministries and other state and non-state bodies owe Tk 1,434 crore in due bills. Indeed, the minister went ahead and furnished the names of 43 ministries and other organisations who have defaulted on payments. While we appreciate the minister's efforts to get to realise said amounts that have gone as far as disconnecting lines, the fact of the matter is that we find this practice to be unacceptable.

We understand that there is an allocation from the government to state and autonomous bodies on a yearly basis to meet electricity bills. What happens to these allocations? This should be looked into. The government is implementing the introduction of pre-paid electricity metres to the whole of Dhaka city (Chittagong too) in phases. Why can't it do the same for these institutions? Might we suggest that the government introduce pre-paid electricity metres in government, semi-government institutions and autonomous bodies? Going by historical data, the relevant authorities already know precisely which ministry or other body consumes how much electricity on an average per month. Authorities could make necessary adjustments to the annual budgetary allocations and save themselves a lot of headache. It is high time that state bodies learn to pay their bills like ordinary consumers do in Bangladesh.



BRIG GEN SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN NDC, PSC (RETD)

STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING
 ON the face of it everything looks set for the upcoming general election. The quinquennial event, which is sometimes a put-on to remind us that we are living under a democratic dispensation, is likely to be held at the end of December. But that notwithstanding, all manner of questions continues to pervade the minds of the vast majority that are truly interested in a free, fair and participatory election.

Nobody doubts that there will be an election in spite of the several conditions the BNP has laid out and the mixed signals coming from various quarters within the party. The question is what sorts. We wonder whether the dichotomy that one saw during the 2014 polls, when the elections were held without dissolution of the parliament, would be resolved. How can there be polls for seats that are not vacant? There is also uncertainty as to the type of politics one is likely to witness after the elections dates are announced. And this worry stems from the nature of politics or the lack of it that we witnessed in the last five years.

For the BNP there is no alternative but to participate in the polls. With the gradual constriction of political space in the last five years, and shorn of all political status, with its sole claim to being the largest opposition party outside the parliament to flaunt, the

party has willy-nilly become somewhat irrelevant. And for it, refraining from the election this time will risk it becoming a political non-entity altogether. This fact has ultimately dawned on the top brass of the party, at least on Khaleda Zia, who in January of this year had made her intentions about participating in the next general election very clear: that BNP will contest the seats in the parliament come hell or high water. But the absentee landlord of the party sitting in London, who for all practical purposes has rendered himself inconsequential in Bangladesh politics, continues to wield power and dictate decisions. One

fell into the AL trap, built on the strategy to keep the BNP away from the last elections. All the necessary conditions were created to ensure that the BNP took the bait, which it did, hook, line and sinker. It cannot miss even the very casual observer that the timings and the cresting of Khaleda Zia's trial process, which picked up speed in the election year, may not be coincidental. Thus boycotting election would make matters smoother for the AL. There are other political parties of little credibility who are willing to take on the role of "domesticated" opposition, as they did in 2014.

But another trial, whose verdict is due

years, the large-scale arrests of its grassroots activists in the run-up to the election, charging people with BNP connections on ludicrously trumped up charges, so that the party is left without local leaders, leave little doubt that a level playing field in the next election will be a far cry for the opposition parties.

But the ruling party's lack of tolerance for opposition is not confined to the BNP only. Even the newly formed coalition was not allowed to take oath at the Shaheed Minar. AL has steadfastly refused to countenance any opposition voice, be it the students' or primary teachers' or general public forums', seeking to ventilate their grievances. Such a stance of party claiming to be a vanguard of democracy and people's rights is perplexing.

But another disconcerting aspect is that our national election has once again been externalised. BNP has thought it fit, reportedly, to seek UN role in the next election, an abhorrent proposition if true. And it is likely to visit the EU headquarters next month. While we are used to seeing our friends demonstrating interest in our elections, it is a pity that at times the political parties have solicited their role in elections. And a few have, obliged by exerting direct influence.

Elections there will be come December 2018—what kind is the million dollar question. A re-enactment of January 5, 2014 held under the inimitable Raquibuddin Ahmed and his band of election commissioners is not something anyone would like to see imposed on the voters. The AL, who has run the country interrupted for ten years, and whose achievements in many fields are worthy of mention, would do well to allow the democratic institutions to function without interference, put an interim arrangement of government after the schedule is announced, and let the people choose freely. Otherwise a re-enactment of 2014 may be validated in the court of law eventually, but will not pass muster in the court of public opinion. And that is what gives a government the moral authority to govern.

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Election materials burn following an attack on a polling station in Bogra on January 5, 2014.

PHOTO: AFP

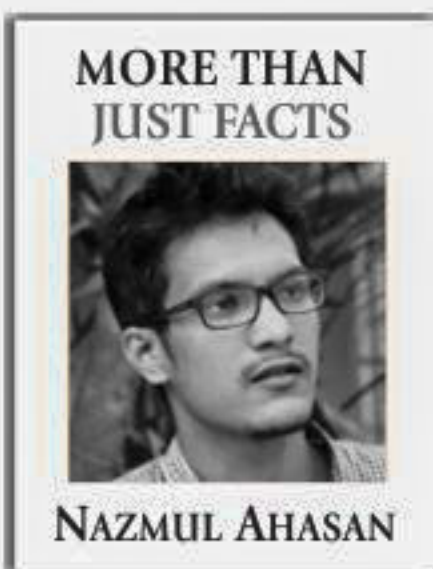
is confused as to what his stance is, with two different diametrically opposite versions appearing in the press on his stance on the next election. It would be a folly to stick to the long held position—no election without Khaleda Zia. Any tactic factored on Khaleda's fate is bound to be not only counterproductive for the party, but will also deal a severe blow to our democracy. It is only those who cannot see through the government's ploy to ensure that Khaleda Zia is out of all future political reckoning, who make BNP participation in the next election conditional on the release of Khaleda Zia.

It cannot be lost on the BNP that they

early next month, is sure to have a very severe impact, I feel, on the election as far as BNP is concerned—that for the August 21 grenade attack. BNP's handling of the case has created grounds to infer that the party had much to hide from the public. And it will have much to answer for its rather crude attempt to kill the case.

As far as politics is concerned, that AL considers BNP a substantial threat politically even after it being in the political wilderness the last five years is evident from the actions and reactions of the ruling party. Not only was the BNP deprived of its basic rights to conduct political activities during the last five

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NAZMUL AHASAN

MORE THAN JUST FACTS
 A recent report that says Bangladesh has had the highest rise in its ultra wealthy population, surpassing any other country in the world, may have taken many by surprise. The growth rate, calculated by Wealth-X, a global financial intelligence and data company, stands at a solid 17.3 percent. Despite our queries, the company hasn't revealed how many ultra-rich—those who own at least USD 3 million or BDT 2.5 billion—we have amongst us, but it measured the change in their number over the last five years in "compound annual growth rate," which gives us some hints in comparison to the average annual growth rate.

To put it in context, if Bangladesh had 100 super rich in 2012, for example, the number should stand at 219-220 by 2017. In other words, the number of super-rich more than doubled in our country in just five years.

On the face of it, this may just be a normal trend. The top 10 countries that have registered the highest growth are mostly developing nations such as Vietnam, Kenya and India except for three developed countries, namely Ireland, Israel and the United States. In plain sight, such a pattern plays into the notion that growth of countries stagnates after they become rich. Upon closer inspection, however, such a staggering growth in the number of ultra-wealthy people—especially when we are a least developed country—signals that our system is heavily exploitative.

One must view the rise of the super-rich in the context of the poorest 10 percent in Bangladesh having their share of the national income being halved in just eight years from 2 percent to 1.01 percent with wealth and income inequality widening.

There are many ultra-rich who have made their fortunes out of the readymade garment industry, for instance, which is considered to be the country's economic lifeline and accounts for more than 80 percent of its entire export earnings. But, when the government decided to fix a meagre BDT 8,000 as the minimum wage for garment workers, the disparity couldn't be more contrasting.

The economy marked an impressive growth of 7.3 percent last year, but it is

evident that the wealth it creates isn't fairly distributed. As the poor become poorer, the benefit of growth seems to be disproportionately reaped by a few hundred—or maybe a thousand or a few more—individuals. Also, the number of jobs added to the economy in recent years has been far from sufficient for the growing youth population, which gave rise to that curious economic jargon: "jobless growth."

Contrary to popular belief, the growing number of people getting rich does not necessarily mean that the economy is getting stronger because only a few of them reinvest their money. More recent data suggests an alarming rate of capital outflow through what experts term "over-invoicing" of imports.

According to Bangladesh Bank's data, the import cost is so inflated that the country has witnessed the highest trade deficit—the difference between the import cost and export earnings—in its history, amounting to BDT 800 billion, in the first seven months of this fiscal year. Some people, as the data implies, may be shifting their wealth abroad.

Over the years, capital outflow has been so tremendous that, according to Global Financial Integrity Report 2017,

Bangladesh topped the list of least-developed countries in terms of "illicit financial flows". In 2014 alone, Bangladeshis laundered USD 9.11 billion to foreign countries. At the end of 2016, the amount of money Bangladeshis deposited with Swiss Banks stood at USD 683 million—near equivalent to the amount deposited by Indians.

What's more, many of these super rich aren't really "self-made" as they may like to call themselves. "In developing countries across Asia and Africa, those who accumulate wealth do so under the state auspices. Those who receive favourable treatment from the state or maintain close connections with the state machinery are able to make a fortune," Fahmida Khatun, Executive Director at the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD), said in an interview with the BBC.

Her arguments are supported by the fact that successive governments have provided rich businessmen, industry owners and investors with massive patronage in the name of "incentives"—such as low-cost electricity and gas supply, condoning extremely low wage and poor safety for workers, little regulation and tax breaks—while

neglecting our foreign workers, who remit billions of dollars each year, and doing for the small and medium-sized enterprises.

What's so revealing about this rise of the super-rich is that it has debunked the myth of "trickle-down" effect—an economic theory, which justifies huge tax breaks for the rich, in which the poorest somehow benefit as a result of the wealth increase of the richest.

This "patronage" has often crossed a legitimate limit. Almost every few months the public comes to know of a grand loan default scheme, often involving powerful individuals swindling banks—mostly state-owned—out of billions of taka through shady means. The government has not only failed to take anyone to task for these scandals but has also funnelled taxpayers' money to rescue the banks in question.

The energy sector, especially quick rental power plants, has also become a breeding ground for the rich. One of the two reported near-billionaires of the country has made money primarily in the power and energy industry. While quick rental power plants have helped to reduce the power shortage substantially, it's hardly transparent when legal indemnity is provided to all deals that have awarded certain companies the exclusive rights to build such plants.

And, then there's this sudden infrastructure boom, which the government proudly calls "development," that may have made some people very rich. While some earned it in legitimate ways by, for example, cashing in on the increasing demand of construction materials, many big contractors may have followed a common strategy: time overruns, which can double, triple and even quadruple the initial budget by extending the deadline of the project. The fact that the cost of road construction in Bangladesh is highest in the world, despite the availability of abundant low-cost workers, speaks volumes. What's more absurd is that it's almost a given that the contractors' ridiculous demands to increase budget midway through the project will be accepted without thorough investigation.

The so-called development mantra may have helped grow the economy, but there's now overwhelming evidence to suggest that crony capitalism has allowed the rich to exploit this economic progress to become richer, while depriving the poor of their fair share.

Nazmul Ahasan is a member of the editorial team at The Daily Star.

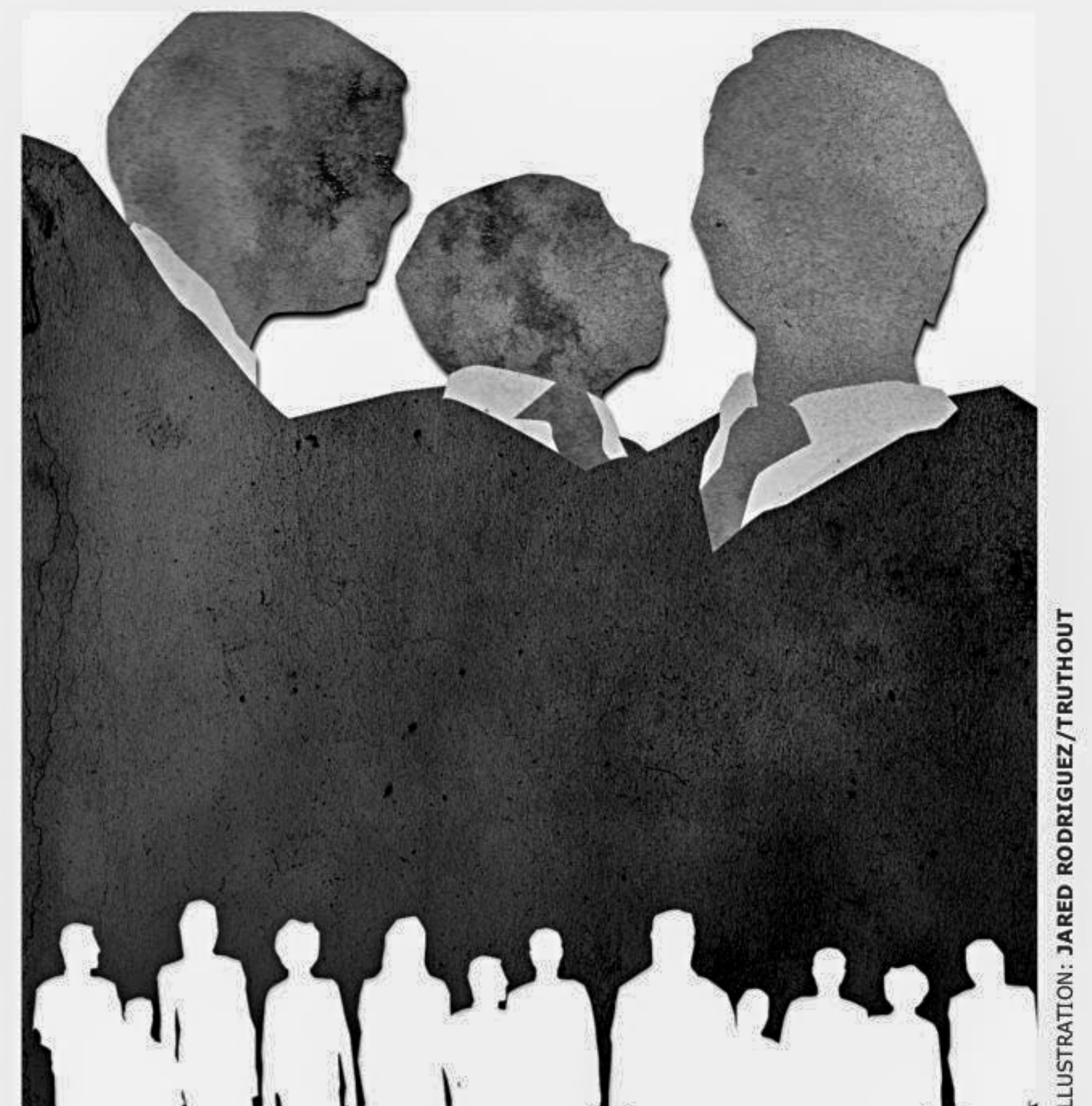


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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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The Quixotic UN

Alonso Quixote, the eponymous hero of the Spanish novel *Don Quixote*, was portrayed as riding on a donkey, fighting with air and showing bravery against imaginary enemies.

The United Nations (UN) often behaves like him. It reserves its prowess only to apply on third-world countries while being unassertive in front of super powers.

When it came to the Rohingya crisis, the UN has simply failed to prevail in the face of resistance from Myanmar's powerful allies, China and Russia. The global body is basically denied to lead the repatriation process.

In a nutshell, the UN is indeed taking actions against many countries. However, its integrity will not be defined by these fights. If it can take on powerful countries, only then will its competence be proven.

Md Nasirullah Khan, *Fakirapool*