

Grand alliance's demands

Credible election is the overarching need

THE three-point demand made by the Jatiya Oikya Prokriya should be looked at carefully by the government and not be dismissed off-hand. Although the first of their demands, which is the formation of a polls-time neutral government, is a matter that has been settled already by the Supreme Court, and the PM has talked about a poll-time government, it is important to ensure that the poll-time government is credible and acquires the trust of all stakeholders.

The second demand, which is the reconstitution of the Election Commission, however, should be made clearer. Given that the elections aren't too far away, we wonder whether tinkering with the EC would help at this point. However, what is important is for the EC to perform according to its mandate, rather than appear to be dancing to the tune of the administration, as it has been accused of doing in the recent past city corporation elections. Without a fair EC, elections will again be mired in controversy and people's right to choose their own representatives as guaranteed by the Constitution cannot be ensured.

Lastly, the third demand, dissolving the parliament before the announcement of election schedule, merits serious consideration. To contest in parliament seats that are not vacant is an unusual arrangement. And certainly a sitting MP contesting election for the seat he is holding will carry more weight and influence with the government functionaries in his constituency. That will not ensure a level playing field. And that is why parliaments are dissolved before elections in all democratic countries in the world.

In order to have credible elections, all political parties must have a say in the way elections are conducted. We hope the ruling party would recognise this and work towards holding elections that are acceptable to all parties and, most importantly, to the general public.

Canada recognises genocide of Rohingyas

Other countries should follow to keep up the pressure

WE thank the Canadian House of Commons for their recent unanimously voted declaration terming Myanmar's persecution of the Rohingya as a genocide. It is heartening to see that the country has endorsed the finding of the UN fact-finding mission which found that under the endorsement of Myanmar's top military commanders, "crimes against humanity" have been committed on this people, and that these crimes qualify as "genocide".

More than a year has passed now since Myanmar renewed its persecution of this minority people, and used tactics of murder and rape to drive them out of their historic homeland. And yet, we are nowhere close to bringing those who engineered these crimes to justice, or in repatriating the more than 700,000 Rohingyas who have fled to Bangladesh. We have continually stressed that a resolution to this would need the backing and pressure of other countries and international bodies. Yet, international efforts have been stifled by a few countries, and Myanmar has continued to deny its crimes and engage in meaningful action to restore the citizenship of these people.

Only a few days ago, the International Criminal Court launched a preliminary probe into Myanmar's crimes. At this time, continued pressure is essential, and recognition of Myanmar's crimes for what they are is crucial. We can only hope that Canada's decision in this regard will serve as an example for other countries to follow. Not only so that those responsible for committing crimes against the Rohingyas can be punished, but also to pressurise Myanmar into reforming its discriminatory state policies which have sought to marginalise and deny basic rights to this community.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Fighting river erosion

According to a report by US space agency NASA, the Padma River has devoured over 66,000 hectares of land since 1967 in Bangladesh. In the process, hundreds of thousands of people lost their homes, with critical local infrastructure such as schools, hospitals and local markets swallowed by the river. The report has come at a time when century-old villages in Naria are being wiped out by the river.

There's an ongoing debate among domestic scientific agencies as to why river erosion is taking place. It's time they conducted serious scientific studies so that the pattern can be predicted and long-term plans can be devised in order to combat the phenomenon and minimise the damage.

Jahidul Islam Nahid, Dhaka University

Power shortage in Bashabo

Over the last few years, the government has, to its credit, been able to increase power generation and expand distribution, all the while reducing power loss considerably. However, residents of Bashabo area of Dhaka experience power supply disruption too often. It's because, as we are told, the distribution sub-station in Taltola is running very inefficiently.

Being a Bashabo resident, I called on the Dhaka Power Distribution Company, which is responsible for power supply in Bashabo and adjacent areas, to do their job and fix the Taltola sub-station, and provide the residents with improved electricity service.

Md Ashraf Hossain, By email

The pros and cons of EVMs



THE recent decision by the Election Commission to introduce Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs) has raised a lot of eyebrows. At the outset, it must be pointed out that EVMs are nothing new—they have been in use in many countries around the world for nearly two decades, and even in our country, EVMs have been used in local elections for several years now. In fact, on the face of it, it all seems to be in line with the Digital Bangladesh thrust of the government in gradually transforming all citizen services into digital ones—so why not voting.

EVM technology, however, has not been found to be completely fool proof, tamper-proof or fraud-proof. From Australia to India to Norway to Venezuela, more than 20 countries in the world have canoodled with electronic voting systems in the last 20 years with varying degrees of adoption or rejection. Mechanisation of voting and counting has been around for even a longer period. In the USA, voting machines that punch holes for selected candidates on ballot cards for mechanised enumeration (machine counting) have been around for decades. But nobody forgets the "hanging chad" vote recounting affair in the 2000 presidential election in the state of Florida, which cost Al Gore

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the election, as nearly 3,000 ballots that were evidently punched for Al Gore were discarded as per a Supreme Court ruling citing that the ballot holes were not fully punched through as per election rules. In the aftermath of this bitter experience of mechanisation in voting, the USA is lagging behind most nations when it comes to adoption of any measure of mechanisation in voting or vote-counting such as the use of punch-cards, Optical Mark Readers (OMR), or EVMs.

India is one of the pioneers in EVM use and started experimenting with designing and using EVMs as early as the 1980s. In the early days of introducing the EVMs on a small scale in some local-level elections,



A man casts his vote through an electronic voting machine (EVM) at the Begum Rokeya Government College centre during Rajshahi City Corporation polls last year.

the EVMs were seen more as a novelty with few cries of fraud and tampering. However, the widespread use of EVMs on a national scale started in 2004, leading to nearly 60 percent of votes being cast and counted via EVMs in the 2009 parliamentary elections. The Election Commission of India kept the design of EVMs a closely guarded secret to prevent tampering and fraud. But since the 2009 elections, widespread accusations of tampering and fraud prompted many court cases that ultimately went to the Supreme Court which ruled in October 2013 that voter-verified paper audit trail (VVPAT) is essen-

tial to prevent the possibility of vote tampering and voter fraud when using EVMs, and the ruling ordered the Indian Election Commission to roll out VVPAT in all elections by 2019.

VVPAT is a mouthful even in an age of digital acronyms such as LOL, SMS and TBH flying about in common parlance. What this basically means is that EVMs are nominally direct-recording electronic (DRE) voting machines that voters simply have to trust in good faith as they cannot verify on their own whether their votes have been correctly marked and tallied. Bring in VVPAT—an addition to the EVM that prints a paper ballot marked with the selection made in the

EVM and that is visible through a transparent window in the machine which the voter can visually verify; and then, when the vote is confirmed on the EVM, the correctly marked paper ballot is dropped into a sealed ballot box. These voter-verified paper ballots can be optically or manually counted in case there is a doubt about the EVM tally.

EVMs are simple machines from the standpoint of electronic designing. It needs a simple processor, a tiny electrically erasable programmable read-only memory (EEPROM) and a few buttons. Most EVMs don't even use encryption in

storing data. In an ideal world, such simply designed machines would suffice, which can be set up for an election at a minimal cost and time while tallying millions of votes in a matter of minutes after closing. But we don't live in an ideal world. And the temptations for tampering, fraudulent manipulation and befooling the public are all too great when the prize is no less than the right to control multi-billion-dollar treasuries.

The trust deficit for DRE voting machines around the world is rising by the day. Even in Brazil, where a number of national elections have been conducted since 2000 using EVMs, there appears to be a huge backlash over increasing levels of complaints on tampering and fraudulent vote tallies armed with independent security assessments of Brazilian EVMs by two leading technical universities of the country, which openly questioned the infallibility of the DRE voting machines claimed by the Brazilian election authorities.

In Europe, some of the most technologically advanced nations such as Ireland, Italy, Finland, Germany, Holland and Norway have gone back to paper-based voting after brief experiments with EVMs in the 2000s. Only Estonia and Belgium remain fully committed to EVMs but with VVPAT support.

EVMs certainly can reduce the hassles of organising and conducting voting, especially in countries with large populations such as ours. However, getting people familiar with electronic voting and earning their trust for enumerating each and every vote in a transparent and tamper-proof manner requires some form of concurrent voter verifiable paper ballots, and the VVPAT is the most promising implement that can ensure hassle-free electronic voting and verifiable paper ballots to overcome the trust deficit in a black-box voting machine that the public cannot peer into.

Obviously, adding the VVPAT will increase the cost and logistical complexity of electronic voting systems but that would be a worthy enterprise considering the huge prizes at stake.

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73RD UN GENERAL ASSEMBLY

How Bangladesh should approach the Rohingya issue



IT is quite evident that Bangladesh will be playing a prominent role at the 73rd Session of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) this year since the Rohingya crisis will be one of the dominating agendas for not only Bangladesh but also many other countries.

Bangladesh has drafted proposals which aim to end the Rohingya crisis. It intends to put forward these proposals and press for their adoption by the international community during the forthcoming meetings and debates. The proposals centre on the issue of Rohingya repatriation focusing on the

Report of the Advisory Commission on Rakhine State (Annan Commission Report).

It is quite justified from Bangladesh's point of view to vie for the solitary objective of Rohingya repatriation considering the fact that sheltering the Rohingya refugees entails significant socioeconomic costs to the national exchequer and local communities. Even though international agencies and NGOs have been actively providing monetary and humanitarian assistance, there continues to be a significant shortfall which is being met by Bangladesh in addition to the non-transferable costs. One gets a clearer picture of the magnitude of the challenges Bangladesh is facing as a result of the Rohingya crisis when one is informed that Bangladesh has the world's 8th largest population occupying the 92nd largest sovereign territory by land area thus making it the

why Bangladesh should pursue this objective.

Firstly, the investigation and subsequent prosecution of the perpetrators of genocide and crimes against humanity by the ICC would go a long way in assuring the Rohingyas of their safety and security and ensuring the rule of law in Rakhine thus increasing the likelihood of their voluntary repatriation.

Secondly, the release of the Report of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar by the UN Human Rights Council on August 27, 2018 has bolstered the call for an ICC referral. The report concluded that gross human rights violations and abuses committed in Rakhine "undoubtedly amount to the gravest crimes under international law" and that "Myanmar's top military generals, including Commander-in-Chief Senior-General

Bangladesh should not only pursue the cause of repatriation of the Rohingyas but it should also ardently press for justice for the atrocities perpetrated in Rakhine through UNSC referral of Myanmar to the ICC.

deportation of the Rohingya people from Myanmar to Bangladesh and the initiation of the preliminary investigation by the Office of the Prosecutor mean that regardless of a UNSC referral, the ICC may try the perpetrators but not to the fullest extent. This makes the UNSC referral slightly less consequential. It also makes it marginally easier for Bangladesh and its allies to convince China and Russia to not veto the UNSC resolution on referral to the ICC, bearing in mind that the tide is now overwhelmingly in favour of justice.

Fourth and lastly, for years, many countries have defined their foreign policies in accordance with certain cornerstones derived from their history and collective imagination. It is high time that Bangladesh does the same. It is argued that the three cornerstones of Bangladesh's foreign policy would be: (i) the right of all peoples to self-determination; (ii) international criminal justice; and (iii) asylum and the rights of refugees. Each of the aforementioned cornerstones is intricately linked to Bangladesh's history and the collective imagination of its people. Hence, Bangladesh should uphold each of them at all times so as to remain true to its own history and founding principles. The people of Bangladesh know all too well the meaning of being a refugee, the agony of being denied justice and having to bargain it away.

Therefore, Bangladesh should not only pursue the cause of repatriation of the Rohingyas but it should also ardently press for justice for the atrocities perpetrated in Rakhine through UNSC referral of Myanmar to the ICC.

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Rohingya refugees wait for humanitarian aid to be distributed at a Cox's Bazar camp, October 5, 2017.

PHOTO: REUTERS

creation of a conducive environment in Rakhine for the voluntary repatriation of the Rohingya refugees from Bangladesh to Myanmar. It is obvious that the creation of a safe environment in Rakhine necessary for the voluntary repatriation of the Rohingyas requires ensuring their safety and security, and civil and political rights. The measures needed to achieve these objectives have been enumerated in detail in the Final

12th most densely populated sovereign territory.

Acknowledging the need to prioritise repatriation, Bangladesh should nonetheless also staunchly pursue the agenda of international criminal justice by pressing for the referral of the situation in Myanmar to the International Criminal Court (ICC) by the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). There are at least four reasons

Min Aung Hlaing, must be investigated and prosecuted for genocide in the north of Rakhine State, as well as for crimes against humanity and war crimes in Rakhine..." Canada, the United Kingdom, Asean, and the United States have all come out strongly in favour of a UNSC referral of Myanmar to the ICC.

Thirdly, the ruling of the Pre-Trial Chamber I of the ICC in favour of jurisdiction over the alleged crime of