

# Deal opens up Malaysian recruitment

## Should spell an end on monopoly!

WE welcome the minister-level meeting between Dhaka and Kuala Lumpur on September 25 that paved the way for all licensed Bangladeshi recruiting agencies to start sending workers to Malaysia. This is good news for our expatriate workers who had previously been in the grip of a syndicate of 10 agents who were charging insane amounts of money from prospective workers keen on entering Malaysia. It is estimated that the racket had raked in around Tk 8,000 crore from the 200,000 expatriate workers. Now that the deal has been inked, it is hoped that recruitment charges will come down significantly.

Although the market has now been opened up, the recruitment process will follow the G2G process (government-to-government). We would like to thank the Malaysian government for taking swift action against the syndicate that had cornered the market and hope that the recruitment cost set by our ministry of expatriates' welfare of Tk 1.6 lakh will be maintained. It is imperative that our authorities are vigilant against any recruiting agency that tries to overcharge workers headed to Malaysia.

We reiterate our position on undocumented workers facing a lot of problems in Malaysia over the issue of regularising their stay in that country and hope the authorities there will take a fresh look at allegations of slow movement on issuing papers that has resulted in incarceration of thousands of Bangladeshi citizens. Now that the market has opened up, it should substantially cut down on illegal emigration of workers, which is good for both countries.

# Poor reading skills of primary students

## Devise policy to address the problem

DESPITE remarkable progress in universal primary education, poor reading skills among the primary students continue to be a blight on Bangladesh's success. According to a new study by World Vision Bangladesh, 54 percent of students in grade three do not understand what they are reading, while around 33 percent cannot read five words in 30 seconds. The importance of reading skills in the life of a student makes this statistic really troublesome.

Reading comprehension is important for the simple reason that "a child who cannot read cannot learn." It strongly impacts their future academic performance as well as their emotional and social well-being. Experts say that not having adequate reading skills may be especially troubling after the third grade because teachers in the subsequent grades tend to spend significantly less time helping the students to learn to read, with shifts in the curriculum that involve acquiring knowledge of newer subjects. Understandably, those with poor reading skills perform poorly and are at high risk of dropping out. Although primary education is free in Bangladesh and the textbooks are provided by the government, dropout rates both at primary and secondary levels are still alarmingly high.

Lack of reading skills is thus a failure not just of the parents, teachers and schools, but also of the government which tends to focus more on student enrolment, not on the quality of their education. Also, lack of reading skills as a contributor to a student's future performance or the dropout rate is seldom discussed. We think the government should pay more attention to this and devise a policy to make reading fun and an achievable skill for the preliterate students.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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PHOTO: STAR

### Let the media function independently

A critical, independent and investigative press is the lifeblood of any democracy. It is only a free press that can expose corruption and crime.

Which is why it is extremely disappointing to see our parliament enact the Digital Security Act in spite of widespread protests from various stakeholders.

Our government should realise why people trust independent media outlets that are not directly or indirectly controlled by any government. A free and independent media can also serve the government with feedback that cannot come from within the government itself.

What should be kept in mind even more importantly is that, as Nelson Mandela said, "You should be tolerant to those who have views that are different to yours, because you will win by correctness of the position that you take." It's high time the government realised that citizens do not support the attempted censorship of the press in any shape or form and acted accordingly.

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# One can't choose one's neighbours

"We make our friends; we make our enemies; but God makes our next-door neighbour."  
— Gilbert K Chesterton

STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING



BRIG GEN SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN  
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WHILE one must thank the foreign secretary (FS) for reminding us that Myanmar is our neighbour, there are a few points he is reported to have made on September 20, at a roundtable involving multiple stakeholders engaged with the response to the Rohingya crisis, that one could take issue with. Indeed, Myanmar is our neighbour, whom we have neglected in the past. Not surprisingly, we were engrossed, most of the time, in formulating policies to survive and exist with our only other neighbour, which predominates not only Bangladesh; its presence is overwhelming in the region too.

Myanmar has been treated as a peripheral concern which received the attention of the foreign office mandarins, perhaps only during their free time when they could afford to get away from their preoccupation with India. Thus, what we had in respect of Myanmar was a situation where the foreign office played it by ear instead of going by a well-defined policy, to deal with the Rohingya issue.

It is true that there is a well ingrained impression, not altogether groundless, in the minds of the public that Bangladesh has been dealing with Myanmar on the Rohingya issue with kid gloves, as if we couldn't be too cautious of stepping on Myanmar's toes. Given the foreign ministry's mindset, as evident from the FS's comments—and that dictates the policy—it is not difficult to guess why our actions in response to the Rohingya issue, where we were faced with a million refugees in 2017, have lacked the

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robustness it deserved. Having only a few countries to share our borders with can be both a boon and a bane. And Bangladesh, having two neighbours only to deal with, has been ad hoc at best in its response to its eastern neighbour. And one would not be remiss to suggest that our reactions to the Rohingya issue, which we have been faced with since 1982, hardly reflect a well-considered strategy, if there is one.

Foreign policy constitutes the first, second and third line of a country's defence, at least, that is so in our case. The military is the fourth if foreign policy fails. It cannot afford to be static; every

best, occasionally coming out with statements to show that it is aware of the issue. Given that scorecard, it would be hard to say that our strategy has been very effective.

It would be appropriate to analyse the three points that have affected the thinking of the foreign office in dealing with the Rohingya issue.

The FS is quoted as saying that our narrative was that Myanmar is our neighbour and they will continue to be so. The dilemma was how far do we go. One fails to see the dilemma here. There should not be any predicament if we did our calculations right. We must go the

demand of the Myanmar government, and urge the international community, to bring to bear on Naypyidaw, to restore all the rights, in full, to the Rohingyas that a citizen of a country enjoys. Anything short of that should be unacceptable. We would appreciate an elucidation of how the rights issue might impinge on our national interest, as the secretary had averred in his comments.

Is it our objective to see the repatriation as quickly and at any cost, even if it means acceding to the Myanmar plans to abridge the inherent rights of the Rohingyas? If that is so then the idea stems from an erroneous



Rohingya Muslim refugees who were stranded after leaving Myanmar walk towards the Balukhali refugee camp after crossing the border in Ukhia.  
PHOTO: DIBYANGSHU SARKAR/AFP

developing situation must be factored in to bring in the required dynamism to the approach that would help formulate the operational plans to fulfil the aim. Whether or not that delivers the objective and upholds the national aim and national interest, only the results would make evident. We, therefore, ask whether the plans we have adopted so far have paid off, and whether it would get the Rohingyas back home to live as equal citizens like other ethnic communities in Myanmar.

In our estimate we are still in square one, not a single refugee has gone back as of yet. Myanmar's staunchest allies, who are our good friends too, have not budged from their steadfast support of it. They have repeatedly stonewalled every effort of the international community to generate a common action plan to hold the rulers in Naypyidaw to account. And which would target not only the military but also the civilian leadership which was complicit in the genocide of the Rohingyas. The OIC has been inert at

whole hog and there should be no compromise, neighbour or not. We are seeking neither favours of Myanmar nor imposing anything illegal on it in demanding a total and complete repatriation of the Rohingya refugees immediately.

We are unable to comprehend another of his comments. He sees an even bigger predicament in figuring out what kind of rights the Rohingyas will be given and how much of that would affect our national interest. He sees it as a tricky balance. I must admit I am unaware that there are different kinds and degrees of rights. Our impression is that one has full rights or not at all—those rights are well expressed universal principles that are indivisible, and do not come in multiple denominations. It is not dished out as a manna in halves and quarters and dimes.

And as for the Rohingya rights, we are absolutely not the arbiter and are in no place to engage in any haggling with the Myanmar authorities about this except to

premise. However, that may serve our interest in the short-term, by ending the burden we are enduring. But that will be only a temporary respite. We have seen this issue incrementally increase in intensity since 1982. A temporary respite with a short-sighted solution will ensure its repetition, next time with even more intensity one fears.

The call to redraw our Myanmar strategy merits consideration. Very little that has happened since August of last year on this front for a permanent resolution of the Rohingya issue, supports the suggestion that, "the current direction taken is the right one." We must not forget that we are dealing with a crafty neighbour, who has proceeded with a long-term Rohingya plan. It is a classic example of someone creating his own problems and then exporting it to its neighbour. We need an appropriate strategy to face it.

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# Drama over Indo-Pak meeting

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA  
IT was a drama-filled 24 hours involving India and Pakistan between the afternoon of September 20 and September 21. Accepting a request of Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan, India announced its green signal to a meeting between the foreign ministers of the two countries in neutral territory—New York—in the last week of September. That would have been the first foreign ministerial-level meeting between them in three years. Many in India had seen in it a flicker of hope in the midst of gloom over India-Pakistan ties. But on September 21, India pulled the plug on the meeting citing the brutal killing of an Indian Border Security Force trooper at the border with Pakistan and the mutilation of his body and Pakistan's releasing of postage stamps glorifying

could secure majority in parliament and Modi spoke to him over the phone felicitating him for his win. Both actions had raised the prospects of a fresh thaw in India-Pakistan ties. But it was clear right from the start that a government in India facing national elections in a few months would not risk re-engaging with a new government in Pakistan treading the landmines of bilateral relations.

Even on the day, the official spokesman of India's External Affairs Ministry, while announcing the meeting in New York, repeatedly hammered home the point that the event should not be confused with resumption of comprehensive peace talks. He also played down expectations from the meeting saying not much should be read into it. With such strong caveats built along with the decision to agree to the meeting, the cancellation of the meeting

*Apart from referring to these incidents to back its decision to call off the meeting, India brought into its firing line Imran Khan with an unusually sharp attack on him by saying his "true face stands exposed."*

New York is in sync with the assessment in Delhi that both Khan and Pakistan army are putting up a veneer of a peacenik and normalisation of ties with India in order to restore the American economic aid and ward off the threat of cancellation of IMF bail-out package for getting out of its domestic economic quagmire. Nothing tangible would have come out of the meeting between the two foreign ministers given the present state of India-Pakistan relations.

India has reasons to be outraged. Pakistan has not taken any credible step to stop cross-border terror to warrant a change in India's no-talks stance. The Pakistan-based masterminds and perpetrators of the deadly terror attacks in Mumbai in November 2008, on IAF airbase in Pathankot in Punjab state and an army camp in Uri in Jammu and Kashmir that left 19 Indian soldiers dead in 2016 are yet to be brought to justice; the killings of BSF personnel in firing from across the *de facto* and *de jure* borders continue and there is no let-up in militants aided by Pakistan-based terror groups threatening and killing policemen in Jammu and Kashmir. Given all this, many in India wondered why India had on September 20 announced its decision



PHOTO: AFP

terrorists in Jammu and Kashmir state and the abduction and killing of three policemen there.

In fact, India's agreeing to a foreign ministerial-level meeting with Pakistan was baffling. True, India had congratulated Imran Khan even before he

was only expected. Just a couple of days before India's agreeing to the meeting, Minister of State for External Affairs VK Singh had termed Imran Khan as the Pakistan army's prop in dealing with India.

India's cancellation of the meeting in

to accept the meeting in New York in the first place.

No doubt, a government reserves the right to change its decision factoring in certain latest developments. But what changed on the ground to warrant the nod to the meeting? The cancellation has come under question by some in India who said most of the factors for the change of mind by India had existed even on September 20—the brutal killing of the BSF trooper on September 17, Pakistan issuing postage stamps glorifying terrorists in Kashmir (in July this year) and the abduction and killing of three policemen in Jammu and Kashmir.

Apart from referring to these incidents to back its decision to call off the meeting, India brought into its firing line Imran Khan with an unusually sharp attack on him by saying his "true face stands exposed." In fact, India's former High Commissioner to Pakistan Sharat Sabharwal, in a Twitter post, disapproved of the sharpness of the attack. Khan too responded with vitriol tweeting about "small men occupying big offices who don't have the vision to see the large picture." This has created more bad blood and stood in stark contrast to Khan's September 14 letter to Modi talking about "constructive engagement."

If anything, the whole episode rules out any step by India and Pakistan to move towards a thaw in the foreseeable future and reinforces the view that India-Pakistan relations are highly prone to fits and starts and their course remains unpredictable.

One cannot forget that former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee's bus journey to Lahore was followed by the intrusion of Pakistani forces in Kargil a few months later in 1999 and that Modi's surprise stopover in Lahore on his return home from Kabul to greet the then Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif on his birthday on December 25, 2015 was followed by terror strikes on Indian airbase and army camp in 2016 causing long disruptions in bilateral talks.

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