

Why Muslims

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conference room at the UN Headquarters.

More than a year has gone by since thousands of Rohingya Muslims fled to Bangladesh from Myanmar's Rakhine State to escape "genocide" in their homeland, Hasina mentioned.

"We cannot just ignore the plight of the forcibly evicted Rohingyas in one of the largest displacements in human history. Currently, we're hosting over 1.1 million Rohingyas in Bangladesh."

Hasina said repression on the Rohingyas is nothing new. Their exodus from Myanmar to Bangladesh had taken place in three phases -- in 1978, 1991-92 and 2017-18, and their recent exodus is the biggest one.

The repatriation of the Rohingyas to their homeland does not seem to be the only sustainable solution to the problem, she said underscoring the need for collective responsibility and ensuring the rights and privileges of the Rohingyas by Myanmar.

The PM said it is the people of Bangladesh who are bearing the brunt of the Rohingya crisis time and again.

"The government has stood by the Rohingyas by opening the border and providing emergency support, having been guided by our morale and human principles. However, our resolution to humanity should not be penalised. The prolonged presence of the Rohingyas in Bangladesh poses serious challenges to our economy, environment and security."

She mentioned that as a responsible neighbour, Bangladesh has engaged with Myanmar in finding a peaceful solution to the crisis from the very beginning.

"We have signed two instruments for repatriation of the Rohingyas ... However, persistent international pressure can complement the bilateral front to change Myanmar's well-planned political position of annihilating an entire race."

She urged the Muslim Ummah to mount pressure on Myanmar to create conducive environment for sustainable repatriation of the Rohingyas and ensuring accountability of those who committed atrocities against the Muslim minority.

Hasina also stressed the importance of the OIC member states' engagement in the UN system, including the UN General Assembly and the Human Rights Council, as well as other relevant international organisations to address the massive human rights violations against the Rohingya Muslims.

"Above all, we need to solve the issue at the earliest."

The PM also mentioned that she proposed a five-point action last September for resolving the Rohingya crisis peacefully.

"It's a matter of great regret that the repatriation process is yet to start."

"I would like to reiterate that the Rohingya crisis is a political one deeply rooted in Myanmar. Thus, its solution lies with Myanmar," she said.

OIC Secretary General Yousef bin Ahmed Al-Othaimeen was present at the programme.

Global

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General's Special Envoy on Myanmar Ambassador Christine Schraner Burgener and High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Federica Mogherini at the UN headquarters.

Shahidul said the heads of the international agencies also hoped that the next general election would be a free, fair and participatory one.

While discussing the Rohingya issue, they highly praised Hasina for her liberal policy and humane gesture in this regard.

Shahidul said the PM emphasised that the international community should create a pressure so that Rohingyas could go back to Myanmar soon.

Christine Burgener said she would be able to convince the Myanmar government to create a conducive environment in the northern Rakhine State so that the Rohingya could go back to their country.

Magistrate, cops

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On information, police rushed to the spot and rescued the victims.

Talking to The Daily Star, Saiful Alam, additional deputy commissioner of Pabna, said the victims were taking important government documents to Pabna from BG Press in the capital. Setu was leading the seven-member team.

Two navy

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added the ISPR director.

According to sources, the incident happened at Bangladesh Navy Ship -- Titas -- at the outer anchorage's firing range around 3:00pm.

After the incident, the ship reached Chattogram's Patenga area in the evening.

We're not vote bank

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election in 1991, yet again creating a communal atmosphere. And the party that came to power carried out torture and repression on the minority people for 27 straight days.

Similar incitements of communal hatred were also perpetrated before the 2001 elections. And we saw a continued repression on the minority communities during the five-year tenure of the BNP-led alliance government. There was an exception in the 2008 polls and we anticipated that such incidents will never repeat.

But that was not to be. Since 2013, there have been communal attacks over the war crimes trial. In almost all the elections -- be it national or local government -- in the last five years, we saw minority communities being attacked although most of the candidates in those elections were from the ruling Awami League. But regrettably, the state and the administration remained silent. In fact, no visible step has been taken by any political party or government against the perpetrators since 1991.

As the national election is approaching, we fear that the minority communities might again become the easy target of communal attacks.

TDS: The minority people are often considered a "vote bank" of the Awami League, a party that has been in power for about 10 years. Why does such a fear exist then?

Rana: The religious and ethnic minority communities in Bangladesh are not the vote bank of any political party. They were the victims of destruction, genocide and rape during the Liberation War in 1971. They were forced to leave the country. Most of the 1 crore refugees at that time were from the minority communities. Despite such sacrifices, they are sometimes considered to be trouble or danger in this independent Bangladesh. Still, the minorities cling to the Liberation War as the spirit of the war is something that is related with their existence.

Now in the politics dominated by two parties, the minorities think that they have no alternative except one party. When the Bangalee nationalism was replaced by Bangladeshi nationalism after the 1975 changeover, it was actually a replacement of religion-based Pakistani nationalism. So we are not the vote bank of any particular political party, they are in favour of the language-based nationalism.

The minority communities across the globe always favour comparatively democratic and secular forces. Even in India, the minorities have political alternatives. But because of the two-party political system in Bangladesh, the minorities have no alternative here.

TDS: The percentage of the minority population has declined since the country's liberation. What are the reasons behind it? Do you find any government's action to change such a trend?

Rana: In 1947, minority population constitutes 29.7 percent of the population of East Pakistan while the percentage came down to around 20 percent in 1971. It stood at 9.7 percent in 2011 as per the latest census.

The Pakistani rulers repressed the minority community and forced them to leave the country in order to turn Bangalees into minorities. After the 1975 changeover, the communities were victimised by the so-called Enemy Property Act and frequent attacks. In the name of settlement, the indigenous people were driven away from hill tracts. All such attacks and discriminations forced many minorities to leave the country. From a grand rally in December, 2015, we demanded formation of a parliamentary commission to find out the reason(s) behind the gradual decline in the minority population percentage since 1947 and recommended taking steps to stop the trend, but to no avail.

TDS: Several current MPs and ministers belong to the minority communities. How do you evaluate their roles to protect the interests of the communities?

Rana: The minority communities are utterly frustrated with the lawmakers. After the demise of veteran Awami League leader Suranjit Sengupta, the minority people find it hard to consider the 17 lawmakers from their communities to be their real friend. The minority people want that the lawmakers would speak for them in parliament. But the lawmakers are afraid of speaking out as they fear that they would fall down from the parties' good book. These lawmakers are playing the role of escapees, which is very painful.

TDS: What did the Oikya Parishad do in the last 30 years to protect the rights of the minority communities?

Rana: We are not a political party. We are a platform working with human rights issues. We have been able to make the minority people aware of their political and civic rights at the grassroots level. It is because of the Parishad that the minority issue has become a national issue and has drawn international attention. We have played key role in enacting or amending several important acts, including Vested Property Return Act and Hindu Marriage Registration Act. We can voice demands, pursue and forge unity on an issue and that is what we have been doing all these years.

Whenever such an incident takes place, cases are filed and a handful of people are arrested. But a few months later, police come up with a report admitting the occurrence of the incident but cites inadequate witnesses. The state still could not come out of the culture of impunity with regard to the minority repression. Therefore, the attackers are encouraged and the

victims feel insecure.

TDS: Hindu priests, Buddhist monks and Christians became victims of targeted attacks by militants groups in 2015 and 2016. Do you think there is a change in the situation now?

Rana: Militancy is the highest form of fundamentalism and communalism. It's an ideology which has to be replaced by a counter ideology. But some political parties are doing politics along with the fanatics while others compromising with them to gain their interests, although all of them are talking against militancy. So militants are being encouraged and waiting for a chance. It's not possible to root out militancy only by the law enforcement agencies. If the country wants to get rid of the curse of militancy, we have to forge a unity like we did in 1971 and defeat fanaticism with a counter ideology. But no such step is visible.

TDS: Following the post-polls attack on minority community in 2001, the AL-led government had formed a judicial commission which came up with a report after a long investigation. What is the update on the matter?

Rana: Following a High Court directive, the Awami League government formed a judicial commission, led by retired district judge Mohammad Sahabuddin, in 2009. We along with many other organisations submitted information and documents on 15,000 incidents of minority repression after the 2001 polls. The committee submitted a report in January 2012 after investigating 5,000 incidents. We met Sahara Khatun and MK Alamgir (two successive home ministers) and demanded that the report is published and steps are taken in line with the committee's recommendations to bring an end to the culture of impunity. But regrettably, the report was not published and no step was taken. The crimes were committed by the BNP-Jamaat men, but why did the Awami League remain tight-lipped when it came to taking actions against them? Isn't it giving an opportunity to the BNP-Jamaat? Isn't it a deal of criminalised politics?

In its report, the commission suggested taking action against many, including 25 ministers and lawmakers of the BNP-Jamaat alliance government, for their involvement. The recommendations of the committee must be implemented in order to end the culture of impunity.

TDS: The percentage of the minority population has declined since the country's liberation. What are the reasons behind it? Do you find any government's action to change such a trend?

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"We had expressed our concerns to the government over the bill before its passage. Even during the parliamentary committee meetings, the Parishad and other stakeholders had made specific objections and registered protests against certain sections of the bill.

"The opposition lawmakers too demanded that the bill is not passed in parliament. The way the government passed the bill by voice vote, ignoring all oppositions and objections, was considered regretful."

The statement further said,

"Against such a backdrop, we had no alternative but to take to the streets. As part of that, the Parishad had decided to form a human chain in front of the Jatiya Press Club on September 29. Different journalist organisations, including Dhaka Reporters Unity, also decided to stage similar protests.

"In this context, Information Minister Hasanul Haq Inu took into account the concerns of Sampadak Parishad and proposed talks with the Parishad and other stakeholders in the media on September 30 [Sunday]. We welcome this proposal and have decided to postpone the human chain scheduled for September 29.

"We are always interested to solve a problem through discussions. In the past, we responded positively whenever the minister proposed any discussion; although we can't say those were fruitful.

"This time, we expect the sections of the bill, which may gag the media, will be removed following the proposed discussion. However, we will continue to register our protest if that does not happen. We hope that the government will take initiatives to amend the bill, considering the concerns of all stakeholders of the media."

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