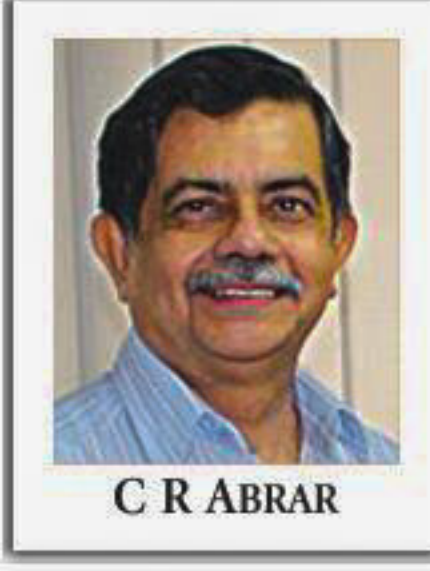


# Do the bells toll for Rohingyas?



**M** ID-November has arrived and insecurity and uncertainty have descended over Rohingya refugees in Ukha and Teknaf. The impending deadline has also elicited expressions of deep concern from UN independent experts and rights organisations.

After much foot-dragging on flimsy grounds, the Burmese authorities finally approved a list of about 2,000 Rohingyas for repatriation. On October 30, Bangladeshi and Burmese authorities agreed to begin the long-awaited repatriation process in mid-November.

The failure of the Burmese authorities to create an enabling condition for the refugees to return is the foremost factor behind the call for a halt to any repatriation at this stage. No meaningful change has occurred in the Burmese state's policy towards the Rohingya people. The demand for restoration of citizenship rights has gone unheeded; Rohingyas are still not recognised as a national ethnic group; the discriminatory legal and administrative apparatuses that were set up over the decades creating an apartheid-like situation remain intact; their land and properties remain confiscated by the state or have been given away to Buddhist Rakhines; those who committed heinous crimes against the Rohingyas continue to remain in command positions and enjoy absolute impunity; escorted by the law enforcement agencies, the ultra-nationalist Buddhist vigilantes still dominate the streets of Maungdaw, Buthidaung and Rathedaung; Rohingyas in internally displaced camps continue to perish slowly for lack of food, potable water, medicine and livelihood opportunities; and the Kofi Annan recommendations, the much-celebrated and cited panacea for Rohingya salvation, continue to gather dust.

It is no surprise that the news of impending repatriation has hit the Rohingya community in Bangladesh hard. The assurances of the Bangladesh government that no one will be forced to return against their wish and that the UN refugee agency will be engaged in ascertaining the voluntariness of returnees have



**Smoke is seen billowing on the Myanmar border as Rohingya refugees walk on the shore after crossing the Bangladesh-Myanmar border by boat through the Bay of Bengal, in Shah Porir Dwp.**

PHOTO: REUTERS

done little to assuage the concerns of these traumatised people. A Reuters report (November 9, 2018) documents the reaction of 20 of the 2,000 Rohingyas whose names have appeared in the first list for repatriation. Abdur Rahim, 47, who owned two acres of land in Arakan, emphatically says: "I'll just consume poison if I am forced to go back," and goes on to demand, "What is the guarantee that we will not be persecuted again?" His apprehension resonates in the statement of Nur Kaida, 25. She says it "would be better to die in the camps rather than go back and get killed or raped."

Last week dozens of Rohingyas were apprehended by the Bangladesh Coast Guards while attempting to go to Malaysia through the maritime route. For some the dangerous sea route would be worth the risk to avert repatriation to the killing fields of Arakan. Mohammad Wares, 75, one of those whose name appeared in the list, asserts it is better than going back. "Why are they sending us back?" he asks. Poignantly, he proposes, "They may as well throw us into the sea."

Instead of creating a congenial condition for Rohingyas' return, on November 8, the

Director General of Asean Affairs of Burma's foreign ministry claimed that 54 of 6,472 Rohingyas on a list provided by Bangladesh authorities had been identified as having been involved in "terrorism". He did not specify the type, timing or location of the alleged terrorist activities. The DG further noted that his country sent a list of terrorists to Bangladesh with a request to take action against them. If they are sent back, they would "have to take action against them according to the law," he said. Thus it is clear, on the one hand, that Burma is presenting to the world that it is serious about taking back the Rohingyas, while on the other, it has not only failed to create the minimum conditions for Rohingyas' return but is engaged in subterfuges to undermine any meaningful repatriation.

Instead of promoting inter-communal harmony to facilitate refugees' return, the Burmese government has been engaged in a relentless campaign to present Rohingyas as terrorists. On October 26, Thayninga Institute for Strategic Studies, a pro-military think tank in Yangon, hosted a seminar that was attended by Rick Heizman, a controversial American activist whose anti-Muslim views

have made him popular with the Burmese nationalists. Earlier in September, Burma's Ministry of Foreign Affairs sent United Nations agencies and at least one foreign aid group web links to a recent film by Heizman that claims Rakhine State is the target of an Islamic plot to destroy Buddhism.

In shoring up the Burmese government's implicit agenda to deny Rohingyas their rightful claims in Arakan, on November 4, in Akyab, the capital of Burma's western state of Arakan, Buddhist protesters held a rally opposing repatriation of the Rohingyas and the latter's claim to residence in the state. Earlier on October 14, the military-backed Buddhist monk Wirathu at a rally in Yangon attacked Rohingyas as "terrorists" and declared that he would take up arms to oppose any UN or international "interference". Last week leaders of Arakan National Party (ANP), the dominant political party of ethnic Rakhines, informed visiting US diplomats that returning Rohingya refugees will not be placed in the northern Maungdaw district region, their ancestral land. "This proposal was approved by the Rakhine state parliament as well," said the secretary of ANP.

The duplicity of the Burmese regime is also obvious in the case involving seven Rohingyas who were deported by India in early October. The Indian Supreme Court refused to intervene in the matter after it was convinced by the Indian central government that Burma had accepted the refugees as citizens and had agreed to take them back. However, the men were denied citizenship and the Burmese government compelled them to accept national verification cards. Thus, there is little reason to believe that Burma would treat the Rohingyas who return from Bangladesh any differently under present conditions.

Independent experts have also counselled against any repatriation at this stage. On October 24 at the Security Council, Marzuki Darusman, chair of the UN Independent International Fact Finding Mission on Burma, described the persecution and the killing of Rohingyas as "slow burning genocide" as well as "ongoing genocide". Another independent UN human rights expert, special rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Burma Yanghee Lee, on November 6 urged a halt to the "rushed plans" to repatriate Rohingya refugees on grounds of a lack of guarantee

that the refugees wouldn't face persecution if they returned home.

It is under such dismal conditions that on November 9, 42 humanitarian and civil society agencies working in Arakan and in Rohingya refugee camps in Bangladesh expressed their anxiety about the prospect of any repatriation efforts at this stage. They assert that facilitating repatriation would be premature in conditions where refugees continue to flee Burma and note that refugees' return to conditions of confinement with no freedom of movement or access to services and livelihood is likely to be permanent. The last thing the refugees want is to live in a situation of 128,000 of fellow Rohingyas and other Muslims who have been incarcerated in central Arakan state over the last six years.

Reports inform that both Bangladesh and Burma were exhorted to begin the repatriation process by some powerful states of the region who have significant interests in shielding the Burmese regime from mounting international criticism of committing mass atrocities, including crimes against humanity and genocide. A token repatriation of a few thousand Rohingyas would be a convenient excuse for them to claim that the bilateral solution is gaining traction and thus there is little role for the international community in the Rohingya affair. Surely, the scenario merits prudent consideration.

While the commitment of the international community in addressing the root cause of Rohingyas' plight has been severely wanting, Bangladesh stands tall by extending its continued support to the refugees. The prime ministerial pledge to this effort has been consistent and unequivocal. As a follow-up to her 2017 statement to the UN General Assembly session, in which Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina called for the creation of a "safe zone", in 2018 she publicly affirmed her country's commitment not to return Rohingya refugees to Burma until the conditions are conducive including "guaranteeing protection, rights, and a pathway to citizenship for all Rohingyas" (statement at the UN General Assembly on September 25, 2018). There is compelling evidence to argue such conditions do not exist now.

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# The Afghan quagmire and India's challenge

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA

**I**NDIA'S "non-official" participation in a multilateral conference in Moscow on November 9 on exploring the possibilities of a negotiated settlement of the crisis in terrorism Afghanistan has set off a flutter in New Delhi. The flutter has also raised speculations about India's future Afghan policy because this was for the first time India was present at an international meet on the issue of peace and stability in Afghanistan which also had the presence of the Taliban. This clearly marked a break from its past. India made it a point to clarify that it was not sending its officials to attend the "Moscow Format" meeting on Afghanistan but sent two retired senior diplomats who are now associated with Indian government-funded foreign policy think tanks in New Delhi.

India's decision to depute two of its former diplomats to the Moscow meeting was a well-considered one and understood to have been taken in coordination with the Afghan government which too sought to distance itself from the event by not despatching its Foreign Ministry officials but sending only a delegation of the country's High Peace Council. Clearly, both India and Afghanistan took care not to give rise to any perception that they were ready as yet to accept the Taliban as one of the parties in the Afghan peace talks.

The Indian decision to attend what is being called the Moscow Format of talks on Afghanistan followed Russian President Vladimir Putin's visit to New Delhi in October for the annual bilateral summit with Prime Minister Narendra Modi after which a joint statement had said that both India and Russia supported the Afghan government's efforts towards the realisation of an Afghan-led and Afghan-owned national peace recon-

ciliation process. Interestingly, the US, which is having separate talks with the Taliban's Doha-based office, had sent an observer to the Moscow meeting. The question that arises: is India getting caught in the vortex of competition between Washington and Moscow for a leadership role in restoring peace in Afghanistan? The spokesman for India's External Affairs Ministry maintained that India did not decide to send the two retired diplomats to the Moscow meet under any "compulsion". Is Afghan peace in danger of falling a victim to US-Russia rivalry after decades of US-Mujahideen collusion during Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in the 70s and 80s?

India has for long stayed away from any multilateral engagement on the Afghan issue involving the Taliban's presence and opposed dialogue with the insurgent group. In the past, India has also rejected suggestions by the United States to engage with the "good Taliban", maintaining that any distinction between "good Taliban" and "bad Taliban" is grossly misplaced and self-serving. So, does the presence of India at the "unofficial" level in the Moscow meeting where a Taliban team led by Sher Mohammad Abbas Stanikzai indicate a change in New Delhi's thinking?

India, no doubt, has high stakes in peace in Afghanistan for two primary reasons. First, the problem of terrorism and violence in that country have serious security implications for New Delhi. New Delhi has time and again pointed out to the international community that the Taliban leadership is operating from the territory of Pakistan, guided and aided by the Pakistani military establishment for years. This is a cause of worry for India as is Pakistan's tendency to view Afghanistan as a "strategic depth" in the event of a conflict with India. At the government levels, India



**The Indian decision to attend the Moscow Format of talks on Afghanistan followed Vladimir Putin's visit to New Delhi in October for the annual bilateral summit with Narendra Modi.**

PHOTO: AFP

and Afghanistan have repeatedly warned the world about the terrorism being sponsored from territories Pakistan across the Durand Line dividing the country from Afghanistan. What has raised further alarms in India is the presence of the Islamic State outfit in Afghanistan.

Secondly, India has over the years remained deeply invested economically and politically in Afghanistan, building several developmental projects in the latter and funding several welfare schemes that have a direct bearing on the life of the ordinary people of that country. India has so far given three billion dollars worth of assistance to Afghanistan including emergency food supplies. A number of Indian nationals had in the past been victims of the terrorists in

Afghanistan either in the form of killing or kidnapping. The Indian Embassy in Kabul and India-aided projects in Afghanistan had been targets of terror. However, India has stuck to its use of soft power of developmental assistance to that country. In fact, India has so far refused to invest militarily in Afghanistan either by sending its army or defence hardware. New Delhi has supplied only a few helicopters to the Afghan army. Understandably, India does not want to get sucked into the civil strife in Afghanistan. But has the time come for India, which has global ambitions as a regional power, to rethink and blend soft and hard power?

The 17-year-old strife in Afghanistan has two main aspects: military campaign against the forces of terror, and developmental. For

several years, it is clear that the military drive against the Taliban is not going anywhere. The security situation in Afghanistan has over the last two years worsened drastically with the areas of Taliban attacks expanding. Vast swathes of Afghanistan are slipping out of the control of Afghan security forces despite the presence of the US-led international armies, and the Taliban seems to be attacking most parts of the country at will. This has raised questions about the efficacy of the military solution to the Afghan problem.

There is a view in India that both New Delhi and Kabul should take note of the changing security situation in Afghanistan and of the growing recognition in international efforts of the need to engage with the Taliban in negotiations and perhaps give space to the latter in a future power structure in that country. Besides, the Afghan government had not too long ago made conditional talks and peace overtures to the Taliban, though it made the mistake of making those overtures not from a position of strength in the military campaign. It was, therefore, expected that the Taliban would reject the government's moves.

No one is suggesting that the Taliban's diktats on the terms of peace be accepted. The Taliban's insistence on complete withdrawal of foreign troops from Afghanistan as a pre-condition for peace talks is unacceptable because the Afghan security forces are far from equipped to deal with the situation arising out of this. India's Afghan challenge remains as complex today as it was 17 years ago when the Taliban was ousted from power in that country.

Pallab Bhattacharya is a special correspondent at The Daily Star.

**QUOTABLE Quote**

**CHARLES DE GAULLE (1890-1970)**  
Former President of France

*Patriotism is when love of your own people comes first; nationalism, when hate for people other than your own comes first.*

**CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH**

**ACROSS**

- 1 Wine barrels
- 6 Makes finer
- 11 Top story
- 12 "The Tempest" sprite
- 13 "Keen!"
- 14 Pat's TV colleague
- 15 Pitch's kin
- 16 Expert with keys
- 18 East, in Germany
- 19 Work unit
- 20 Spot
- 21 Diamond of music
- 23 Meyers and Rogen
- 25 Silent OK
- 27 Go downhill
- 28 Old market

**DOWN**

- 1 Swiss state
- 2 Relaxed
- 3 Place to begin
- 4 Young fox
- 5 Extent
- 6 Wild ones
- 7 Qom's country
- 8 Outer plaster layer
- 9 Past and present
- 10 Roofing material
- 17 Tax agcy.
- 22 Old card game
- 24 Ring win
- 26 Never seems to end
- 28 Aviator Earhart
- 29 Will Smith film
- 31 Unrefined
- 32 Water whirls
- 33 Visibly stunned
- 35 Debussy composition
- 38 Assess
- 42 "Exodus" hero

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**YESTERDAY'S ANSWER**

BASH SCUBA  
ELLA THOMAS  
AFAR REMARK  
DAY DREAM  
WAYFAER  
CAPONS FILE  
AGING POSSE  
RUT SACKED  
PAYS CALE  
HAYMAKER  
CEDARS NILE  
OVERDO ILKS  
TANKS COST

**BEETLE BAILEY BY MORT WALKER**

I TOLD YOU 100 TIMES TO GET GOING, BEETLE!

POW

I TOLD YOU TO EASE UP ON YOUR KICKING, SARGE

5-9

**BABY BLUES BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT**

WHAT'S IN THE BOX, HANMIE?

MY THERAPY SNAKE.

WOULD UP WHY DO YOU HAVE A THERAPY SNAKE?

TO SHOW ZOE.

SO SHE'LL NEED THERAPY?

YEAH, BUT IT ALL DEPENDS ON ME CATCHING HER OFF GUARD.