On the occasion of Pen International's Day of the Imprisoned Writer yesterday, celebrated author and activist Arundhati Roy penned an open letter to photojournalist Shahidul Alam. Mr Alam, whose 100th day in jail was on November 13, was granted bail yesterday by the High Court.

Shahidul Alam Champakali 2/5 Dhaka Central Jail Keraniganj, Dhaka Bangladesh November 15, 2018

Dear Shahidul,

T'S been more than a hundred days now since they took you away. Times aren't Leasy in your country or in mine, so when we first heard that unknown men had abducted you from your home, of course we feared the worst. Were you going to be "encountered" (our word in India for extrajudicial murder by security forces) or killed by "non-state actors"? Would your body be found in an alley, or floating in some shallow pond on the outskirts of Dhaka? When your arrest was announced and you

Am I really writing to you? Perhaps not. If I were, I wouldn't need to say very much beyond, "Dearest Shahidul, no matter how lonely your prison cell, know that we have our eyes on you. We are looking out for you."

surfaced alive in a police station, our first

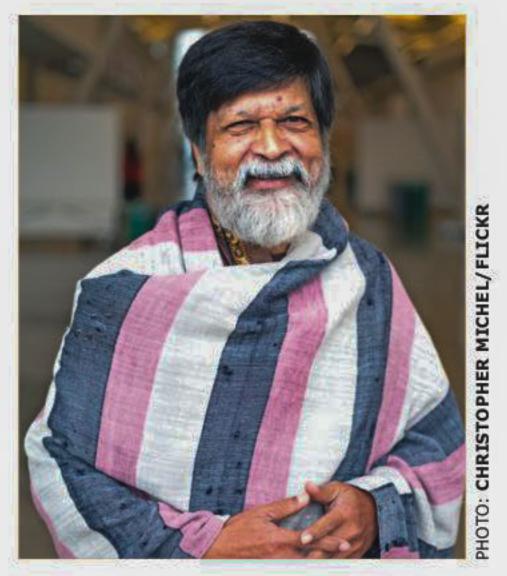
reaction was one of sheer joy.

If I were really writing to you, I wouldn't need to tell you how your work, your photographs and your words, have, over decades, inscribed a vivid map of humankind in our part of the world—its pain, its joy, its violence, its sorrow and desolation, its stupidity, its cruelty, its sheer, crazy complicatedness—onto our consciousness. Your work is lit up, made luminous, as much by love as it is by a probing, questioning anger born of witnessing at first hand the things that you have witnessed. Those who have imprisoned you have not remotely understood what it is that you do. We can only hope, for their sake, that someday they will.

Your arrest is meant to be a warning to your fellow citizens: "If we can do this to

Shahidul Alam, think of what we can do to the rest of you-all you nameless, faceless, ordinary people. Watch. And be afraid."

The formal charge against you is that you have criticised your country in your (alleged) Facebook posts. You have been arrested under the Section 57 of Bangladesh's infamous Information and Communications Technology Act (ICT) which authorises "the prosecution of any



**Shahidul Alam** 

person who publishes, in electronic form, material that is fake and obscene; defamatory; tends to deprave and corrupt its audience; causes or may cause deterioration in law and order; prejudices the image of the state or a person; or causes or may cause hurt to religious belief."

What sort of law is this, this absurd, indiscriminate, catch-all, fishing trawler type of law? What place does it have in a country that calls itself a democracy? Who has the right to decide what the correct "image of the state" is, and should be? Is there only one legally approved and acceptable image

of Bangladesh? Section 57 potentially criminalises all forms of speech except blatant sycophancy. It's an attack, not on intellectuals, but on intelligence itself. We hear that over the last five years, more than hundreds of journalists in Bangladesh have been charged under it, and that numerous trials are already underway.

In India too, this sort of attack on our intelligence is becoming normalised. Our equivalent of Bangladesh's ICT Act is the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act under which hundreds of people including students, activists, lawyers and academics are being arrested in wave after wave. The cases against them, like the one against you, are flimsy and ludicrous. Even the police know that they are likely to be acquitted by higher courts. But the hope is that by then, their spirits will have been broken by years in prison. The process is the punishment.

So, as I write this letter to you, dear Shahidul, I am tempted to add, dear Sudha, dear Saibaba, dear Surendra, dear Shoma, dear Mahesh, dear Sudhir, dear Rona, dear Arun, dear Vernon, and also, dear Tariq, dear Aijaz, dear Aamir, dear Kopa, dear Kamla, dear Madavi, dear Maase, dear Raju, dear hundreds and hundreds of others.

How is it possible for people to defend themselves against laws like these? It's like having to prove one's innocence before a panel of certified paranoics. Every argument only serves to magnify their paranoia and heighten their delusions.

As both our countries hurtle towards general elections, we know that we can expect more arrests, more lynching, more killing, more bloggers hacked to death, more orchestrated ethnic, religious and caste conflagrations-more false-flag "terrorist" strikes, more assassinations of journalists and writers. Elections, we know, mean fire in the ducts.

Here in India, our rulers have dropped all pretence of the secularism and socialism that are enshrined in our constitution. In

order to distract attention from the catastrophic failures of governance and deepening popular resentment, as institution after institution—our courts, universities, banks, intelligence agencies—is pushed into crisis, the ruling power (not the government, but its holding company, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh) is alternately cajoling and threatening the Supreme Court to pass an order clearing the decks for the construction of a giant Hindu temple on the site where the Babri Masjid once stood before it was demolished by a rampaging mob. It's amazing how politicians' piety peaks and troughs with election cycles. This is what we are up against, these neat

definitions of the perfect nation, the perfect man, the perfect citizen, the perfect Hindu, the perfect Muslim. The postscript to this is the perfect majority and the satanic minority. The people of Europe and the Soviet Union have lived through the devastation that these sorts of ideas caused. They have suffered the matchless terror of neatness. Only recently Europe marked the 80th anniversary of Kristallnacht-the event that marked the beginning of the Holocaust. There too it all began quite slowly. There too it began with elections. And there too the old murmurs have started up again.

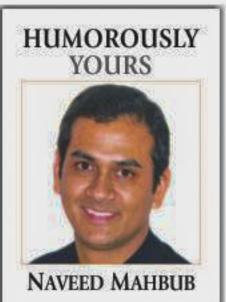
Here we're going to witness our own scorched-earth elections in the coming days. They will use their fishing-trawler laws, they will jump at shadows to decimate the opposition.

Fortunately, we are an irredeemably untidy people. And hopefully we will stand up to them in our diverse and untidy ways.

Dear Shahidul, I believe the tide will turn. It will. It must. This foolish, shortsighted cruelty will give way to something kinder and more visionary. This particular malaise, this bout of ill-health that has engulfed our planet will pass.

I hope to see you in Dhaka very soon. With love Arundhati

## **TAILS YOU** LOSE



anchor announces live on air: "Well, that was our guest Naveed Mahbub. After the news we have with us in the studio—Jeffrey Archer."

HE BBC Radio

So, I stick around a few extra minutes in the guest waiting room

Archer, assuming it is THAT Jeffrey Archer of Kane and Abel fame. An elderly gentleman walks in, accompanied by a serious looking young woman. I blurt out, "Why, if this isn't Jeffery Archer?" Of course, I don't know what he looks

so as to deliberately "bump into" Jeffrey

like, or to be precise, what he looks like now. But I can shoot first and ask questions later-I can assume it is THE Jeffrey Archer and then I carry on: "May I get an autograph?"

"What? No selfie?" He booms.

But I get the autograph and then the photograph, the latter by no means a selfie, but taken by the serious young lady, his publicist. Jeffrey goes into the studio as I leave BBC. But I hang out nearby, doing a Google Image

of "Jeffrey Archer". Yes, it is the same one. I have to be sure. As I remember taking a photo of a snooty member of the Brazilian squad at the Pontiac Silverdome in Detroit during the 1994 World Cup Football games, only to later discover he was the refreshments guy. Now that I'm sure that Bata is Bata and

not Batta or Rata, I SMS the publicist with a point-blank invitation for Jeffrey Archer to be a guest on The Naveed Mahbub Show on ATN Bangla. She agrees instantly with only a strict 30 minutes with him the following day as I leave for Dhaka the day after.

So, I hire a proper, Queen's Englishspeaking British production crew that doesn't come cheap as I multiply the currency by 109. But this is Jeffrey Archer, and I can't be penny wise, pound foolish, literally speaking and for a literary cause. Getting Jeffrey Archer was easy because the

brand-new novel, Heads You Win, has just come out. His first stand-alone novel in a decade and slated to be the next Kane and Abel. This is the time when a best-selling novelist with a new release will come down to sea level to be on a show in a country of 160 million. He is smart to tell his publicist to say yes.

timing was right. Only six days before, his

And so am I to time it right. Obama seeks out Stephen Colbert, not the other way around, during election time. That is the name of the game and that is fine.

So we show up at Jeffrey Archer's fancy penthouse on the Thames, just two buildings down from the HQ of MI6 (where I almost show up, thanks to a faulty signal on Google Maps).

"I have an appointment with Mr Jeffrey Archer."

The security guard almost faints: "You mean LORD Archer? Is his LORDSHIP expecting you?"

The elevator goes straight up to his mindblowing penthouse overlooking the Thames. "Ah Naveed! Good to see you!"

"Good to see you too Lord Archer." "Oh, just call me Jeffrey. What would you like to have?"

"Water is fine, thank you."

What follows is not 30 minutes, but 90 minutes of intimate chatting, taping, tour of the penthouse, a signed copy of his latest novel and a final, warm: "Naveed, look me up next time you're here, understand?"

Nobody is unapproachable. Gotta time it right to make sure (s)he needs you and you won't even have to toss a coin, 'cause, heads you win, tails you lose.

Armed with a reinforcement of this notion, I come back to Dhaka, call up a local celeb with a new recent big milestone, only to get a cold shoulder.

I forget, this is Bangladesh...

Naveed Mahbub is an engineer at Ford & Qualcomm USA and CEO of IBM & Nokia Siemens Networks Bangladesh turned comedian (by choice), the host of ATN Bangla's The Naveed Mahbub Show and the founder of Naveed's Comedy Club. E-mail: Naveed@NaveedMahbub.com

# Why we need a refugee assistance fund

ERINA MAHMUD

T has been said that if refugees and internally displaced peo-L ple were a nation, they would make up one of the biggest countries in the world—ranking among the top 30 countries in terms of population. Given this, and in the absence of states willing to take responsibility for them, how can costs associated with refugees be shared?

The 1951 Geneva Convention recognises that it can be overwhelming for a host-state to bear the cost and responsibility of refugees and calls for international cooperation. Although that cooperation has so far been voluntary, with the number of refugees skyrocketing, it is high time for a mandatory refugee assistance fund to be established.

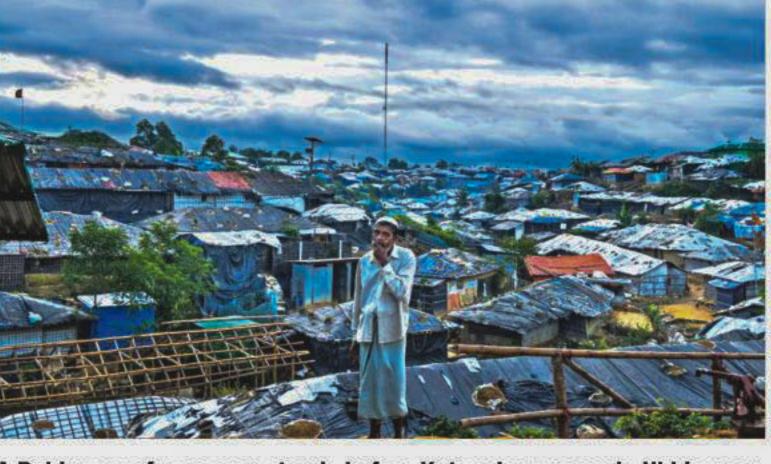
Funds for refugee management are mostly raised through appeals to states, organisations or donors. Very little of it comes from any permanent sources. For example, the United Nations High Commission for Refugees receives only two percent of funds from the UN budget—with 98 percent of it coming from voluntary donations. Voluntary funds are subjected to high fluctuations and depend on many factors.

Media exposure is one such

factor which plays a crucial role in determining the amount of funds that are given. Based on political sensitivity, intensity and expansion, some cases get better coverage and thus appeal more to people and donors than others. Once the coverage shifts, assistance for refugees often dry up. In 2018, UNHCR was able to secure only one-third of the required USD 5.6 billion for the world's largest refugee crisis taking place in Syria, which was a gradual decline from the three-fourth that was available in 2013. On the other hand, cases that get less coverage fail to even receive that.

Cynical as it may appear, voluntary assistance is heavily influenced by state interests. A state's image of offering humanitarian assistance is crucial for it to be accepted into the international community; and many would argue humanitarianism sells well. This means that the motive is often to "wisely" fund crises, to improve the image of a state on the international arena.

In addition to these, the influence of states that comes with voluntary funds often complicate operations on the ground. Hoststates and actors dealing with refugees are disturbingly familiar with donors using their contributions to change agreements however inconvenient it may be. Consequently, such restraints on host-states and



A Rohingya refugee man stands before Kutupalong camp in Ukhia near Cox's Bazar on August 13, 2018. PHOTO: CHANDAN KHANNA/AFF

actors force them to compromise on durable and quality solutions.

At present, the amount of global refugee funds available are falling tremendously short of what is needed. This year, UNHCR could manage only 45 percent of the USD 8.2 billion it required. Because of donor preferences, making distribution equitable is also becoming difficult. Countries like Afghanistan, Congo, Somalia, South Sudan and Syria have been the worst affected by this defi-

ciency. To accommodate the needs of the ever-increasing number of refugees, host-states now require more economic support-stable,

generous, and less politically restrained. Although this need for funds remains constant, no policy has been developed yet for equitable cost and "burden" sharing among states. Whereas host-states are bound by a legal obligation to protect refugees, third countries can still bypass any responsibility. In the absence of stable and predictable support, states sporadically fund crises; which has its own perils. While some basic needs are met with these funds, implementation of lasting solutions remains incomplete and inefficient. Imposing the entire cost of providing for refugee on one or a

create economic and political instability in regions—especially when developing countries host 85 percent of all displaced people in the world. In short, funding as it is cur-

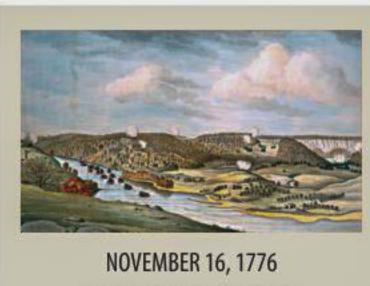
few countries in the long run can

rently given, aims to meet shortterm needs but fails to provide permanent and durable solutions. This is where the case for a mandatory refugee assistance fund comes in. Countries can be made, for example, to set aside a certain percentage of their Gross Domestic Product for the refugee assistance fund. Setting a particular percentage that is fair to all is a challenging task and requires further research. Implementing and sustaining it can also be difficult; although not impossible. These challenges, however, should not prevent us from forming a consistent financing mechanism.

But at the end of the day, ensuring a consistent flow of funds is just a stepping stone towards easing the agonies of refugees. Funds really cannot do much when identity and existence are at stake. Which is why, permanent solutions lie in the acceptance and safe living conditions of refugees in their home countries.

Erina Mahmud is Research Associate at BRAC Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD).

# IN HISTORY



THE BATTLE OF FORT WASHINGTON

British troops capture Fort Washington, the last American stronghold on Manhattan, during the American Revolutionary War between the United States and the Great Britain.

biblically

divider

24 In recent days

26 Tennis court

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH 29 Johnson also 7 Tooth layer **ACROSS** knowsn as The Rock 8 Dream up 1 Minor argument 9 Delicious 30 Part to play 5 Made fun of 31 Crumb carrier 11 Waiting room 9 Met performer 32 Shows malice 10 Sheet material 15 Pixies toward 12 Tennis star 19 Assess 34 News summary Agassi 20 Rink surface 37 Kick out 13 Depart 22 Yemen 38 Commerce 14 Hotel rooms neighbour 39 Splinter groups 16 Blend 23 Wily 40 Halt 17 Waiter's aid 24 They have titles 41 Metal sources 18 Mass leader 25 Rich backer 21 Hankering DOWN 26 Catch sight of 22 Source of 1 Prof protector 27 Votes in answers 28 Lab work 2 Delhi native 23 Clobber, 29 Pub missile 3 Winks count

4 On the house

6 Diner dessert

Write for us. Send us your opinion pieces to

dsopinion@gmail.com.

5 The whole

amount

30 Trout's place

33 Mexican coin

35 Bustle

36 Vigour

10-29 YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

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#### **BABY BLUES**



