

## River-grabbing must stop

*Can we save our rivers before it's too late?*

THE Daily Star yesterday revealed how a 158-acre area of Karnaphuli River in Chattogram was grabbed by individuals linked to the ruling party. The occupied area was then rented out to low-income families. But the local administration has failed to reclaim the land, let alone prevent fresh attempts to grab land. The day before yesterday, we also reported on how a mighty river in Nilphamari turned into a drain because of rampant grabbing.

Both the cases highlight the blatant failure of the authorities concerned to prevent our rivers from being occupied by powerful individuals—that too, in spite of the longstanding concerns of environmentalists and urban planners. The problem is so severe in Dhaka that 60 percent of wetlands in the city have disappeared in just 30 years.

Rivers are critically important to our environment and livelihood, as they transport water, provide habitat, support economic activities and enable transportation.

Had we been able to preserve our rivers, canals and wetlands, many of our urban woes would never have emerged. For instance, the grabbing of rivers and canals is widely blamed for the extreme waterlogging problem prevalent in big cities like Dhaka and Chattogram. Had our old waterways survived, our traffic congestion might not have been intolerable, as it is now, as the waterways could have served as an alternative route.

We ignore the danger of river-grabbing at our own peril. Unless we take this issue seriously, we risk more of our rivers, a lifeline for a sustainable city, being gradually occupied by influential individuals and, as such, inviting more troubles. For the sake of the environment and our very wellbeing, we need to take care of our rivers.

## Jhenidah's ghost of a station!

*Did the authorities forget to recruit the staff?*

IT is a mystery how a brand new fire station in Maheshpur, Jhenidah, inaugurated in December last year, should be fully equipped in terms of infrastructure and machinery but devoid of the staff required for it to operate. According to our correspondent in Jhenidah, the two lakh people in the upazila still have to call on the fire station from another upazila during emergencies like fire or road accidents. This even though there is a newly inaugurated fire station for the last 11 months!

The station had been built at a cost of Tk 95 lakh and includes a fire truck, rescue pick-up and two water pumps but the expensive equipment is lying idle as there is no one to operate it. So far around 14 fires and 11 road accidents have taken place in Maheshpur, according to official records, and all of them were handled by Kotchandpur upazila fire service instead of the one in Maheshpur. How logical is that? The sub-assistant director at Jhenidah Fire Service and Civil Defence says that he has requested the concerned ministry to appoint the necessary personnel to get the station up and running but so far nothing has happened.

Even the contractor has said that although he completed the project on time, the authorities are yet to take over the station and pay him his dues.

We are baffled by the apparent apathy towards such a vital infrastructure as a fire station that provides a service that saves lives and property. Having a brand new station so close by and not being able to get any service for it seems like a cruel joke on the people of Maheshpur. We hope the authorities will take note of this bizarre oversight and immediately recruit people so that the station can start operating.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### The devastating ecological impact of Rohingya crisis

It is quite unfortunate that global and regional powers have done very little to resolve the Rohingya crisis. The monumental contribution that Bangladesh has made to the humanitarian crisis by helping and allowing persecuted Rohingya refugees to stay in the country needs to be globally appreciated.

While the crisis has been turning from bad to worse, its impact on the ecology has been equally devastating in terms of magnitude.

The temporary shelters for Rohingya refugees were established by clearing forest lands in Ukhia and Teknaf, close to the border with Myanmar—an area that traditionally represents the last sanctuary for Asiatic elephants in Bangladesh. The area is also situated across the Bangladesh-Myanmar elephant migration corridors.

The Rohingya communities, being heavily dependent on the scant forest resources for their daily sustenance, have come into direct conflict with elephant herds travelling between Bangladesh and Myanmar. Several deaths of refugees have been attributed to conflicts with the elephants.

The anthropogenic footprints of refugees on the local forests are growing larger day by day. If Bangladesh fails to develop comprehensive conservation strategies immediately, the local forests, wildlife and biodiversity will be irreversibly damaged.

Saikat Kumar Basu, Canada

# A stalled repatriation bid and some lessons for the future



MOHAMMAD ZAMAN

IN mid-November, the world was watching with apprehension the unfolding drama surrounding the repatriation of the first batch of Rohingya refugees to Myanmar. All arrangements were completed at both ends of the Gumdhum border point, with buses ready at Unchirang Camp in Teknaf to load the refugees with necessary provisions and supplies. Instead of boarding the buses, the refugees came out in hundreds against the repatriation attempt and emphatically refused to return to their homeland for fear of fresh persecution and confinement in the camps in Rakhine.

The refugees were given voluntary choices, thanks to the Refugee Relief and Repatriation Commissioner (RRRC) and the government of Bangladesh. No one was forced to return to Myanmar. The repatriation plan was abandoned, and now rescheduled for 2019.

Meanwhile, all available reports indicate that the Rohingya crisis continues in the Rakhine state. Faced with discrimination and persecution in the largely Buddhist state, many Rohingyas have been fleeing the country since 1986 to countries in the region. Of an estimated 3.5 million Rohingyas in Rakhine, close to 2.0 million now live as refugees or migrants in countries like Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, the United Arab Emirates, India, Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, and not to mention, Bangladesh.

Since August 2017, around 800,000 Rohingyas have crossed the border into Bangladesh to escape military crackdown and genocide. Another 300,000 Rohingyas, who fled earlier waves of violence in 1982 and 1990, are already living in camps in Cox's Bazar. The rest—an estimated 150,000 who live in Rakhine state—are currently confined to camps, having been displaced during the violence in 2012. In a nutshell, the military has been successful in forcing out Rohingyas from Myanmar; those still living inside the country are completely at the mercy of the army in the detention camps.

Clearly, there is no environment for the repatriation of Rohingyas to Myanmar at the moment. The United Nations and other international agencies and relief organisations have repeatedly stated that existing conditions for the Rohingyas to return are inadequate and may prove risky. The refugees must not be repatriated to Myanmar without addressing the causes of gross violations of human rights, abuses, and violence against the Rohingyas.

This would obviously require bringing some of the senior military officers of Myanmar to justice and ensuring accountability for the gravest of atrocities perpetrated against the Rohingyas. A recent UN report detailed their crackdown and gang-rapes and mass killings “with genocidal intent” and urged prosecution of the army’s commander-in-chief and five generals under the international law. This should be the absolute minimum to establish a sense of justice among the survivors and the international community as well. Accountability would also be crucial for the

voluntary return of Rohingyas and serve as an important confidence-building measure.

The denial by the Myanmar military and government of the atrocities committed against the Rohingyas, coupled with a lack of access to Myanmar for the UN bodies and other international observers to assess and monitor preparations for any future repatriation efforts, can only suggest that Myanmar is not serious about repatriation. This was further manifested by their so-called “verification” process that allows the military to divide the refugees and treat some as foreigners, meaning migrants from Bangladesh. Myanmar has consistently refused to acknowledge the Rohingya ethnicity or recognise them as citizens.

To date, the Myanmar government has said or done nothing to suggest that the Rohingyas will be safe upon repatriation. The squalid, prison-like houses built near

be guaranteed to all Rohingyas. Fourthly, the Rohingya refugees must be allowed to return to their lands and homes with full support for construction of houses, resettlement and economic rehabilitation of the affected communities. Finally, Myanmar should ensure their freedom of movement and equal rights as citizens.

These are not easy to achieve, particularly given the responses from the military and the government of Aung San Suu Kyi. The international community should put pressure on Myanmar to create the right conditions for repatriation. Canada has already revoked Suu Kyi's honorary citizenship. Many world leaders strongly rebuked her over the persecution of the Rohingyas. Suu Kyi is not taking—or is unable to take—any action against her own military. Both China and India can, and should, do more in creating the right conditions for repatriation and at the same time support in reconstruction and rebuilding the lives of



PHOTO: MOHAMMAD PONIR HOSSAIN/ REUTERS

Kutupalang Unregistered Refugee Camp in Bangladesh, where a large number of Rohingya refugees live.

the border with the help of India and China to house the returning refugees demonstrate the attitudes of the government to the Rohingyas. The refugees don't want to return to camp life in Rakhine. They want to return to their lands, homes and villages. The houses should be built in their villages, which were burned down by the army. They would further need schools, clinics and other necessary social services and support to rebuild their communities should they decide to return.

A key lesson learned from this month's failed attempt at repatriation is that the conditions must improve in Myanmar. A long list of issues must be addressed to make it right and safe for the refugees to return. Firstly, Myanmar must allow international investigations into the allegations of crimes against humanity. Secondly, Myanmar should recognise the Rohingyas as an ethnic group. Thirdly, citizenship must

the Rohingyas.

The Bangladesh government should now work aggressively with its allies and the international bodies and focus more on negotiations with Myanmar on the rights issues to create a safer environment for their voluntary return. Bangladesh has earned international acclaim for providing refuge and assistance to over a million Rohingya refugees. However, there should not be any illusions about a quick solution to this refugee crisis. Global refugee repatriation experiences dealing with such a massive number of displaced people suggest that a much longer timeline, resources and diplomacy would be required to resolve the crisis. There are no easy answers and resolutions to such a human tragedy.

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# An unfolding political drama in Jammu and Kashmir

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA

THE militancy-wracked Jammu and Kashmir appears set for a fresh round of elections to the state assembly after Governor Satya Pal Malik dissolved the House on Wednesday night. The dissolution of the legislature capped an intense day-long political drama that featured jockeying for power to the extent that one saw two arch rivals in the state's politics—Mehbooba Mufti-led Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) and National Conference (NC) headed by Omar Abdullah—readying to join hands to thwart attempts by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to regain power in alliance with a small, Kashmir Valley-centric party, People's Conference, spearheaded by Sajjad Gani Lone.

rammed home the perils of the tour-de-force alliance-making caused by the badly-fractured mandate thrown up by the previous assembly polls in the state in 2014, when Mehbooba's party emerged as the largest single group followed by the BJP.

No less untenable would have been the coming together of the PDP and the NC along with the Congress party just to keep the BJP and Lone from having a go at the formation of a new government. While the Congress party had shared power in the state in alliance with both the PDP and the NC on separate occasions, Mehbooba and Omar have traditionally been on the opposite sides of the political spectrum in Jammu and Kashmir. Interestingly, the PDP and the

state getting back a stable, elected government especially at a time when the security situation has deteriorated. But the dissolution of the assembly has clearly jeopardised chances of all possible forms of political permutations and combinations to cobble an alliance and form a government. In fact, political circles in New Delhi are abuzz with the speculation that given the hostility between the PDP and the NC, the two parties had just enacted a drama of coming together to form a coalition with the twin objectives of scuttling any move by the BJP to return to power in the state and forcing the Governor's hand in dissolving the assembly.

The Governor cited four main grounds for why he assessed dissolution of the assembly as the best course of action: a) no party or alliance would have been able to provide a stable government through the joining of hands by political parties traditionally hostile to each other, b) serious doubts over the longevity of any such coalition, c) reports of extensive horse-trading and the possibility of money power in enlisting the support of legislators, and d) the fragile security situation which needed a stable state government backing anti-militancy operations. Implicit in Malik's fourth reason for dissolution of the assembly is an assessment that any coalition government would not have been able to go for a robust anti-militancy drive because of contradictory pulls and pressures guided by political considerations.

It remains debatable whether this assessment of the Governor was fair and whether he should have not given any alliance an opportunity to prove majority on the floor of the assembly. Should a Governor, who is supposed to be non-political, assess the longevity of a coalition which is essentially a political issue? Should he not have satisfied himself by looking just at the legislative arithmetic of a majority on paper and leave the trial of strength to the assembly? There are instances of coalitions with robust majority falling apart after assuming power.

However, there was a sense of relief among the major political players after

the assembly dissolution. For the PDP, the party seems to have averted a possibility of desertion by its legislators and a split in the party as there had been rumblings of revolt among some of its leaders, including Muzaffar Hussain Baig and Haseeb Drabu, who had in the recent past dropped enough hints of leaving the flock. Baig was considered a close aide of Mehbooba while Drabu was said to be sulking ever since she had removed him as finance minister. Just a few days ago, Baig, a founder of the PDP and a parliamentarian, was quoted by the media as having expressed his readiness to back the “third front” led by Sajjad Lone. Three other legislators were reportedly warming up to the idea of such a front. In fact, Mehbooba herself lent credibility to the threat of a split in her party when she went on record accusing the BJP of trying to engineer a split in her party and installing a “minority” government with the backing of the saffron party from outside.

The National Conference may have cemented its anti-BJP credentials by showing that it was even ready to bury the hatchet with the PDP in order to counter the saffron party. Besides, the party would not have liked to join a coalition government with just two years left for the dissolved assembly's term to end. The thinking in the party was that a coalition set-up with the PDP would have exposed it to the anti-incumbency risk without enough time to work effectively in a short time.

The reading in the Congress party of Wednesday's political developments is that its show of readiness to align itself with the PDP and the NC may send a positive signal about its efforts to emerge as the anchor of a pan-India opposition alliance to take on the BJP in the coming parliamentary polls. The Congress hopes that if sworn rivals like the PDP and the NC, the main regional parties in Jammu and Kashmir, were willing to set aside their differences in its company, this strategy could be replicated in other Indian states where powerful regional parties have fought turf battles with the Congress.

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The Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir has been plagued for decades by political instability and an armed insurgency that has left tens of thousands dead, mostly civilians.

PHOTO: AFP

Mehbooba Mufti has been sulking ever since the BJP quit the alliance with the PDP in June this year, leading to the fall of the two and a half years of the coalition government of the two parties and a premature end to the term of Jammu and Kashmir's first woman chief minister. The unravelling of the PDP-BJP coalition arrangement, which was predictable because of their incompatible ideologies, once again

NC had a few days ago demanded the dissolution of the assembly paving the way for fresh elections.

Jammu and Kashmir was brought under the federal Indian government's rule after the collapse of the PDP-BJP alliance. But the state assembly had been kept in suspended animation for the last five months in order to explore the possibility of new political alignments and re-alignments taking shape and the