

## Justice eludes acid attack victims

What are the loopholes to enforcing the law?

WHILE the rate of acid attacks has been decreasing across the country, as per the government and other sources, the conviction rate in such cases filed in the last 19 years is very low. According to Acid Survivors Foundation (ASF), although 3,782 people fell victim to acid attacks during this period, the number of the accused convicted is only 343.

And as per the statistics of the home ministry, only in nine percent of the cases were the accused convicted. This is very frustrating.

Although several laws have been enacted to control acid crimes, there seems to be a huge gap when it comes to enforcing the laws. For instance, although the Acid Control Act 2002 was formulated to control the import, production, transportation, hoarding, sale and use of acid, and prevent misuse of acid as corrosive inflammatory substance, the fact is that acid is still easily available to people at a cheap price and so we still come across news of acid attacks. And the low conviction rate in these cases makes it evident that the Acid Offence Prevention Act, enacted in 2002, to control acid crimes, has not been enforced properly. Although the trial process of such cases must be completed within 90 days of filing of the cases, as the law says, this is hardly being implemented.

Under these circumstances, the victims of acid attack and their families are feeling unsafe as the accused are roaming around freely. We fear that a lack of implementation of the relevant laws may increase the cases of acid violence in future.

## Rice price hike baffling

Take actions against dishonest millers

THE domestic production of rice has increased substantially, while the price in global market has been stable, if not reduced. Yet, the domestic market has experienced an unexplained hike in the price of rice. Apparently, a report also found that the price hike occurred in the wake of and in the aftermath of the recently concluded election. Although the big millers have slightly reduced the price for the wholesale market after a meeting with the commerce ministry, the price cut hasn't impacted the retail market.

This, therefore, points to the only remaining culprit: a coordinated collusion among big mill owners. This sort of collusion severely hurts consumers and market competitiveness. The only way to maintain a stable rice market is to clamp down on such collusion heavily.

According to official statistics, the production of rice has increased by seven percent in the 2017-18 fiscal year, during which as much as 42 tonnes of rice was imported—a volume that dwarfs the previous year's import. Yet, the price of rice during the election season increased by more or less 5-8 percent.

Such a hike does not support our farmers at all. But it surely does hurt consumers—especially low-income families, a large percentage of whose income is spent on food.

The government must have a rigid market monitoring apparatus in place so that the price of rice remains stable and no artificial crisis is created by the millers and hoarders. Strident actions should be taken against unscrupulous traders and importers whose greed and lust for profit deeply troubles the poor portion of our population. To mitigate the situation, the government should also provide rice to these people at a subsidised price through open market sale.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### Tackling serious financial crimes

We have grown accustomed to seeing news reports detailing serious financial crimes such as money laundering and gross irregularities in the sanctioning of loans. *The Daily Star* recently published a report titled "Crescent curse over Janata," detailing how the Crescent Group allegedly laundered about Tk 1,297 crore against 657 fake export bills.

This is not an isolated case. A Bangladesh Bank report showed that at present, 7 percent of all Letters of Credit (LCs) remain mysteriously unsettled with no bill of entry submitted. In addition to that, as the Global Financial Integrity reported, illicit financial transaction or financial outflow stood at 12-17 percent of Bangladesh's total trade from 2005 to 2014.

This is one of the many problems our banking sector has been plagued with for years. Yet, we haven't seen any of the really powerful individuals accused of being involved in these irregularities being brought to justice.

In the abovementioned case, Janata Bank was repeatedly warned and served with a show-cause notice—for making advanced payment against the LCs of certain firms—by the Bangladesh Bank. The bank, however, did not care to pay heed to the warning, and it didn't have to face any consequences either.

If the banking sector is regulated in such a way, we are afraid that these financial crimes will continue unabated.

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# ROHINGYA

## A people not wanted anywhere

ABU AFSARUL HAIDER

ACCORDING to media reports, the Indian Border Security Force (BSF) took back 31 stranded Rohingyas from the no-man's land in the India-Bangladesh border near Brahmanbaria after a five-day impasse, which ensued after a BSF attempt to push them into Bangladesh was met with stiff resistance from the Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB). Since the beginning of the year, no less than 1,300 Rohingya Muslims crossed the border into Bangladesh from India, where many of them had been living for years. (*The Daily Star*, January 20, 2019) Before this, on January 3, 2019, India deported a family of five Rohingyas, and last year, seven Rohingya Muslims were deported to Myanmar by the Indian government despite appeals from the United Nations not to do so. In recent times, Saudi Arabia also deported undocumented Rohingya migrants who had gone there with illegally obtained travel documents.

The Rohingyas are a Muslim ethnic-minority group based in Myanmar's Rakhine State. According to many historians, they are descendants of Arab traders and other groups who, in the 15th century, migrated to Rakhine, previously called the Kingdom of Arakan. Despite their considerable numbers and established local roots, successive governments in Myanmar have rejected the Rohingyas' historical claims and denied them recognition as one of the country's 135 official ethnic groups, claiming they are illegal immigrants. They are denied basic human rights and treated like animals with no access to education, medicine, or other government services. They are not even allowed to move freely or leave their settlements in Rakhine without government approval. Many are internally displaced in their own birthplace, living like refugees.

Things got worse when militants attacked security forces in northern Rakhine State on August 25, 2017. In response, the Myanmar army launched a ruthless campaign against the Rohingyas fashioned in the style of the Japanese war tactic—"burn all, kill all, destroy all". The army and its collaborators slaughtered thousands of civilians, raped girls and women while family members

were tortured and killed, and burned their houses, forcing hundreds of thousands to flee their homes. Since then, the Rohingyas have been trying to escape by sea to Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand but unfortunately, none of these countries allowed them to enter their territory, claiming they are financially unable to accept or host them and so their boats were turned away.

In a world where so many borders are closed, Bangladesh, itself a poor country and one of the world's most densely populated, welcomed the Rohingyas by opening its border. Since August 2017, over 750,000 Rohingyas have crossed into Bangladesh. For Bangladesh, the Rohingya refugee influx is not a new

long endured severe discrimination in the Buddhist-majority Myanmar, and were targets of communal violence. In 1982, the Myanmar government effectively institutionalised discrimination against the Rohingyas by introducing a citizenship law. Under the law, Rohingyas were not recognised as one of the country's 135 ethnic groups. Restrictions was imposed on their rights to study, marriage, employment, education, religious choice, and freedom of movement, leaving them vulnerable to abuse. For years, they have been living a miserable life, suffered considerable trauma as a result of the widespread campaign of murder, rape, and arson tantamount to crimes against humanity.



Rohingya refugees queue for food at the Kutupalong refugee camp in Bangladesh.

phenomenon. Different media reports confirm that between 1974 and 2016, more than 260,000 Rohingyas fled Rakhine thanks to human rights abuses committed by the Myanmar military, including the confiscation of land, forced labour, rape, and torture. Bangladesh has continued to take in another 11,432 Rohingyas since the beginning of 2018 through the end of June 2018. Currently, more than a million Rohingya refugees are living in mostly makeshift camps in Cox's Bazar.

It should be noted that the degree of violence endured by the Rohingyas since August 25, 2017 was new, but their experience of oppression was not. Since the 1970s, the Rohingyas have faced state-sponsored persecution and have

As such, seeing no other options, they have been crowded on boats and ping-ponged between nations that don't want them.

Bangladesh and its people have shown the best of humanity and saved many thousands of lives by providing shelter to the Rohingya community. The country has allocated 5,000 acres of land for temporary shelters, provided food, deployed mobile medical teams, and carried out large-scale immunisation campaigns. While there is now enough food and shelter to keep these Rohingyas alive, and while there are more than enough water points and sanitation facilities to accommodate them, one must not forget the limitation of this poor country, already struggling to cope

with extreme poverty, high population density, high unemployment rate and the effects of regular natural disasters and climate change. So far, Bangladesh has managed to reconcile the two conflicting demands, with the assistance of the United Nations and other humanitarian agencies, supplying humanitarian aid to the Rohingyas while ensuring the stability and security within Bangladesh. But if the repatriation process doesn't start soon, not only will it have a negative impact on our economy and environment; the regional and global security and stability will be affected as well.

Today, the Rohingyas are often described as "the world's most persecuted minority." They deserve a home where they can live peacefully without the fear of persecution. And that home must be in their original motherland, Arakan/Rakhine State. The repatriation deal signed in November 2017 between Bangladesh and Myanmar has stalled largely because, among other reasons, the Rohingyas fear returning to Rakhine without their safety and rights guaranteed. Rohingya Muslims now face an uncertain future. Therefore, Bangladesh should continue to make its case on the world stage. It cannot let the world think that the issue is only ours to solve. As the World Bank Group President Jim Yong Kim said, "The refugee situation around the world is everybody's problem. It's not just a problem for host countries, or just a problem for the refugees—this is everybody's problem."

There needs to be a paradigm shift in how to deal with the crisis. Rather than just pledging money and humanitarian aid, it is time for the international community to demonstrate the political will and moral authority to step up and offer a bold package of support that meets the needs of Rohingya refugees and addresses the root causes of the crisis, including recognition of Rohingya citizenship in Myanmar and of the basic rights of the Rohingya people. The failure to do so will worsen what is already one of the great tragedies of our time.

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## Priyanka in the Congress poll gambit

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THE biggest political news in India on January 23 was the formal induction of Priyanka Gandhi Vadra in politics and her appointment in the key post of general secretary of the main opposition Congress Party just about three months ahead of parliamentary elections in the main battleground state of Uttar Pradesh. She thus becomes the latest member of the Nehru-Gandhi clan—11th to be precise since Priyanka's great grandfather Motilal Nehru became the Congress President a century ago—to make way into politics.

But curiously, the press release issued by the party buried the announcement of her appointment in the third paragraph as part of a reshuffle of office-bearers Congress President Rahul Gandhi unveiled in the run up to the polls. Why? Did the Congress try to pass off Priyanka's appointment as just another routine

decision-making backroom, where she has been close to two decades, and positions her in an important space on the front stage. It also may have done the spade work for the future of the Congress top leadership—that it cannot go outside what has been the party's first family since long. Congress circles view Priyanka as a trump card and fulfilment of the slogan "Priyanka lao Congress bachao" (bring Priyanka save Congress) that has been carefully orchestrated in the party for long.

As general secretary, Priyanka will be in charge of the party's affairs in the economically-impovertised eastern region of Uttar Pradesh that is significant for three primary political reasons: i) it covers half of the state's total of 80 parliamentary constituencies including those of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and saffron-robed Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath, the two most prominent mascots of the BJP's Hindutva plank,

change the political arithmetic in Uttar Pradesh and act as not only a crowd-puller, which she in any case is, but also help them translate them into votes so desperately needed for the Congress if it wants to regain power in India after stumbling to its worst defeat (just 44 seats) in parliamentary elections five years ago. Many in the party believe that Priyanka's striking resemblance to her grandmother Indira Gandhi makes her a natural crowd-puller and revive the Nehru-Gandhi family's appeal of yesteryears. What complicates the task for Priyanka is that her party has been steadily on the decline in Uttar Pradesh over the years—a steep fall from once being a natural party of governance to join the bandwagon of "also ran" in the electoral race. The Congress has increasingly found its vote banks shrinking in the face of the growing clouts of the Samajwadi Party and Bahujan Samaj Party and the BJP on the back of caste and religious identity politics since late 1980s. Secondly, the Congress organisational structure in the state is in a shambles.

However, Rahul Gandhi, by appointing his sibling as general secretary in eastern Uttar Pradesh, has made his intention firm and clear: that he is not going to throw down the towel easily in the state, especially after being squeezed out of the recent electoral alliance forged by the SP and the BSP. In fact, making Priyanka an office-bearer in the state is a powerful message sent by the Congress President to BSP supremo Mayawati who has been sceptical of the Congress' ability to transfer votes to its allies in the event of a poll pact and seat-sharing. By having Priyanka as the general secretary in charge of eastern part of the state and another promising young Turk Jyotiraditya Scindia heading the party's organisation in western part of Uttar Pradesh, the Congress leaves none in doubt about its eagerness to attract the sizable youthful voters.

The debate will go on in political circles if drafting Priyanka into the party set-up as general secretary was justified by her track record so far. True, she did successfully helm the party's campaign in 1999 to regain the Rae Bareilly constituency, won by her relative Arun Nehru during the polls in 1998, for Sonia. But on the other hand, Priyanka's reported key role in firming up an alliance between the Congress and the SP for the 2017 assembly polls in Uttar Pradesh failed to bring the desired results for her party.

The Congress may look at Priyanka as the inheritor of Indira Gandhi. No doubt, the Nehru-Gandhi family has been the anchor of the factional feud-riven Congress Party. The question is: whether the party's first family has ensured a consistent success rate in elections for the party. Besides, the party must also wake up to the reality that politics in India has undergone substantial changes since the days of the late prime minister. With the major demographic change bringing in a whole new set of young and aspirational voters, not many are beholden to the Nehru-Gandhi family or its charisma any more. Given that, the two main yardsticks of Priyanka's success will be how much the Congress can eat into the vote bases of its rivals in Uttar Pradesh. That is what matters at the end of the day.

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Priyanka Gandhi and Congress Party President Rahul Gandhi.

PHOTO: AFP

organisational exercise? It is surely not. Or was the party reticent in mentioning her name in the opening paragraph thinking it might give critics another chance to accuse it of promoting "parivaarvad" (family rule)? Then again, the question is: why should Congress be defensive? Dynasty is no longer a dirty or cuss word in Indian politics. Many parties other than the Congress have family lineage in their rank and file and the Bharatiya Janata Party is not excluded from the list. After all, the Congress has won several elections notwithstanding critics' attacks on the issues of dynastic rule and the foreign origin of Rahul-Priyanka's mother Sonia Gandhi. To harp on those issues may be akin to flogging a dead horse.

Whatever be the reasoning behind the mention of Priyanka in the third paragraph, the one view that is undisputed is that her appointment as the party general secretary only formalises her role in the Congress affairs and brings herself out of the Congress' strategy and

besides a dozen of Modi's ministerial colleagues; ii) it has a sizable presence of upper castes and Muslims which the Congress hopes to win back from the BJP and Samajwadi Party and Bahujan Samaj Party; and iii) it allows Priyanka to continue to nurse the constituencies Amethi and Rae Bareilly of her brother Rahul and mother Sonia Gandhi respectively, a job she has been doing since 1999.

This is the first time Priyanka will occupy an organisational position and consequently the challenges facing her becomes much tougher than the previous one that saw her being confined to be the Congress' rock-star campaigner in Amethi and Rae Bareilly. Being the general secretary gives her a much bigger space in the party set-up and an expansive theatre of activities in a state where caste equations and religion have traditionally played a key role in shaping the results of successive parliamentary and assembly elections.

Among the daunting tasks Priyanka faces is to