

Crimes in the Rohingya camps Security needs to be beefed up

THE recent discoveries by police of the bullet-hit body of a 35-year-old Rohingya man near Noyapara Rohingya refugee camp in Teknaf and the body of an 18-year-old Rohingya woman recovered from Balukhali refugee camp in Ukhia are chilling reminders of deteriorating law and order in the Rohingya refugee camps. On Wednesday, two Rohingya men, both allegedly drug traders, were killed in "shootouts" with the police in Cox's Bazar. Lack of security has become a major concern in the densely populated Rohingya camps where refugees are either becoming the victims or the perpetrators.

Last year, according to a report in this daily, 22 Rohingyas were killed in the unregistered camps. There have also been cases of rapes, drug trafficking, robberies and human trafficking. Very recently, four Rohingya women were rescued from being trafficked to Saudi Arabia.

With thousands of young men in these camps who are unemployed, hungry and with an uncertain future ahead, it is not surprising that some of them will resort to crime. Trafficking and drug rings that include Rohingya men have become notoriously active in these camps, adding to the lack of security. And it goes without saying that the most vulnerable groups in these camps are the Rohingya women and girls who fall victim to violence either inside their makeshift homes by their partners or outside by other Rohingya men.

The huge area encompassing the complicated labyrinth of the camps and the constant onslaught of trafficking and drug gangs make it logically very challenging to provide adequate security. Although there is police presence in these camps along with other officials and their associates, it is not enough to combat the crimes. We urge the authorities to beef up security in these camps to protect the refugees who have fled the worst kind of trauma in their home country. They should not have to live in fear in their place of refuge.

No longer a safe haven for deer Stop poaching in Monpura forest

VARIOUS poacher gangs are decimating the spotted deer population in Bhola's Monpura forest. The forest, spread out across 5,000 hectares of land, is supposed to be a safe haven for spotted deer. Unfortunately, locals tell us that these gangs are driven to poaching deer for its pelt and venison, which is prized as a delicacy and sells for anywhere between Tk 200 to Tk 400 per kilogram. The continued killing has had an adverse effect on the deer population, which is now estimated to have come down to about 3,500.

The Bangladesh Wildlife (Conservation and Security) Act, 2012 has provisions for up to three years' imprisonment or Tk 300,000 fine, or both, for killing deer and selling its meat. The sad reality is that without proper monitoring and enforcement of the Act to catch and punish poachers, the spotted deer will soon be on the endangered list of animals. Local influential people are also involved in diverting fresh water from the canal for commercial farming. This has created a water crisis for the local community, and could very well be driving deer from the deep forest closer to human habitats, and thus making them easy prey for poaching gangs who set up traps for the animals. This is a law and order situation and the authorities must act to protect this animal. More patrols by armed forest guards and the strict enforcement of the Act can effectively dissuade poachers from killing spotted deer in the protected forest.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Will the road safety authorities work?

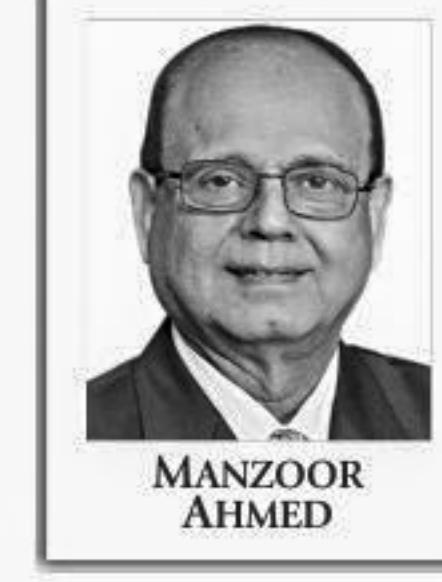
A committee headed by former shipping minister Shahjahan Khan has produced a draft report on preventing road accidents and bringing discipline in the road transport sector recently. The report contained a 111-point recommendation, which includes formation of a road safety authority under the prime minister's supervision. It said the authority would draw up plans in coordination with the agencies concerned, monitor the agencies' work as well as identify the accident-prone zones and come up with solutions. This 111-point recommendation submitted by Mr Khan seems like eyewash.

Mr Khan has been a controversial trade union leader. Like him, many high-level political leaders are patronising the transport sector labour unions across the country. They dominate the sector and are responsible for the chaos on our roads. The alleged nexus between the law enforcement agencies and the leaders of the transport sector, reinforced further by political patronage, is often held responsible for the chaotic situation. How the government deals with the labour unions and the politically powerful transport owners is what will decide the future of this sector.

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ON March 22-24, a three-day conference on visualising Bangladesh in the next 30 years was organised at Yale University by Bangladesh Development Initiative (BDI), an organisation of academics of Bangladeshi origin in North America. It was an occasion to share and debate progress and challenges of development in Bangladesh. More interesting, however, were the sub-texts voiced, often on the sidelines, about the contrary narratives and whether these could be reconciled to forge a middle ground.

With Yale University's South Asia Studies Council providing the venue, the biennial BDI conference attracted some 200 overseas Bangladeshi academics in North America and a sprinkling of academics, scholars and finance-sector leaders from Bangladesh and other countries. Senior bankers were prominent in the contingent from home.

Keynote speeches highlighted economic growth performance, development indicators that surpassed South Asian neighbours, climate change policy and planning, the young population's demographic dividend potential, and the humanitarian stand of Bangladesh in sheltering a million Rohingyas, victims of ethnic cleansing. An upbeat message was expected and appropriate.

Some 75 conference papers on diverse topics, but related to some aspect of Bangladeshi development, presented a more nuanced picture of the gaps between ambition and expression of intention on the one hand, and the deficits in commitment, good faith efforts and human capital resources on the other. Some direct references and more allusions pointed to how political culture and social values strayed far from the ideals and principles that had inspired the Liberation War and the birth of the nation.

Dr Nazrul Islam of the UN Department of Social and Economic Affairs argued for focus on the efficiency of public investment and stemming capital flight, inclusiveness and social cohesion, taking advantage of the demographic dividend, environment and climate change action, and overcoming institutional weaknesses at the local level. He advocates for proportional representation in the national parliament, unified services of acceptable quality in education and health for all,

institutions, such as the banking sector, are abused by an elite with impunity and the national agenda determined by vested interests—make future progress unsustainable? Even if GDP growth continues, can progress be measured by a narrow economic metric ignoring the high costs in disparity, unrest, insecurity, loss of trust in institutions, and undermining human rights and human dignity, they ask.

The Rohingya refugee conundrum attracted attention. To the credit of Bangladesh, a humane position has been taken, unlike most of the richer and powerful countries of the world. But are we headed for a Palestinianisation of the Rohingya refugees, with no end in sight?

Is enough being done to push through international diplomacy and by all other means to uphold the only viable

solution—a safe zone under international

and gram parishad with authority and resources for each village.

Dr Mustafizur Rahman, distinguished fellow of the Centre for Policy Dialogue, taking SDG 2030 as the frame of reference, also emphasised governance and institutions as challenges. These obstacles stand in the way of producing skills and jobs, promoting equitable growth and taking advantage of the emerging global trading scenario.

In a panel with Harry Blair of Yale, Naomi Hossain of University of Sussex and Geof Wood of University of Bath, it was observed that "the political structure of Bangladesh has deteriorated to the point of dysfunctionality, while the country has achieved truly impressive socio-economic progress" giving rise to a "Bangladesh Paradox." Do the acute governance challenges—as state

supervision for the Rohingyas in the Rakhine province of Myanmar with full citizenship rights?

Meanwhile, the refugee camps cannot be just human warehouses; basic human rights and dignity have to be maintained. There are distinct protocols about children's right to education and care, even if they are refugees, under the Convention of the Rights of the Child, which has been committed to by Bangladesh and has to be observed.

A panel comprising Sajeda Amin of the Population Council, Barrister Sara Hossain of Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust and Zaki Wahhaj of University of Kent, spoke about Bangladesh's persistent high child marriage rate despite progress in education and increased women's economic participation. Some in the



PHOTO: STAR

audience wondered if the political culture of accommodating the conservative forces remained a barrier to progress.

The panel of the Bangladesh Environment Network underscored that economic growth plans and strategy must prevent continuing environmental degradation and promote energy sources without further damage to a fragile ecosystem. It comes out against the USD 1.5 billion Rampal coal-fired power plant being built near the Sundarbans, which "risks significant damage to the world's largest mangrove forest—a UNESCO world heritage site."

It also observed that the Rooppur nuclear power plant being set up "in one of the most densely populated areas of the world poses significant radiation, health, safety and contamination risks."

It was also noted that the initial cost estimate of 3-4 billion dollars for the project has already escalated to 20 billion dollars, thus turning the project into a potential economic risk for the country.

Given the rapid progress in renewable sources including solar and artificial photosynthesis technology, Bangladesh could be a global role model of commitment to and investment in renewable energy, it was suggested.

With the discussion dominated by economic and infrastructure topics, this writer spoke on a contrarian theme of ethics and values and how these are nurtured among the next generation. The challenge clearly is how, with a general erosion of values in society, schools can help young people to create a moral compass to guide themselves. Can teachers be the role model, which they are not at present? We need to re-imagine the teaching profession and engage in out-of-the-box thinking.

Korbi Rakshand Dhrubo, founder of the Jaago Foundation, spoke in the same vein about how the youth's idealism and energy has turned into a movement of volunteerism and empathy. It provided a moral direction to the youth—those who helped and who were helped.

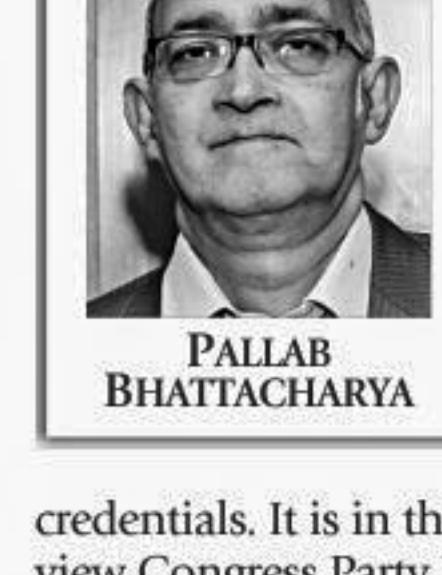
Iqbal Z Quadir, senior fellow at Harvard Kennedy School, had helped bring mobile phone to rural Bangladesh through Grameen. He explained how the economic paradigm of the dependence on foreign capital to create employment and growth may be turned on its head by mobilising the population to create value and capital for investment as has been done by the massive penetration of mobile phones in Bangladesh.

On the sidelines and away from the meeting rooms, the conversation turned to how the contrasting narratives reflected a partial truth and how a partisan view hindered real solutions. It is incumbent upon the political leadership to work with the academia, civil society and the communications media to reconcile the opposing narratives and find the middle ground.

Prof Jamilur Reza Choudhury, National Professor and Vice Chancellor of Asia Pacific University, was honoured by BDI with an award for lifetime contribution and achievement. He spoke through Skype from Dhaka about the importance of sustainable infrastructure development. Prof Choudhury represents best the middle ground finding workable solutions, taking all into account with fairness and honesty.

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From betting on the poor to helping the poor



PALLAB BHATTACHARYA

WHEN it election time, nothing pays more than populism. All parties love to woo the poorest of the poor segment of society to strengthen their welfare politics

credentials. It is in this light that one has to view Congress Party President Rahul Gandhi's promise that if his party is voted back to power in the coming parliamentary polls, its government would dole out Rs 6,000 per month as minimum income guarantee to the 20 percent of India's poorest households, which in real terms is estimated to 50 million families.

The promise has been made by Rahul at a media conference well before the Congress manifesto is unveiled; the promise is going to be a key component of the poll document which is widely expected to be pro-poor with a pronounced social welfare orientation with a rights-based approach including the right to healthcare and right to land for all the homeless people belonging to backward castes and tribes. This was an approach pursued by the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance government during its decade-long rule from 2004, with Rahul's mother as the President of the Congress and the UPA. It was in January that Rahul, fresh from his party's victory over the BJP in December state assembly elections in three heartland states of Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh, first talked about the minimum income guarantee scheme, but its broad contours emerged only on March 25 with the staggered parliamentary polling just 18 days away.

There is no mistaking the compulsions of electoral politics behind Rahul's promise mainly for three reasons: first, Rahul wanted to build on his announcement about farm loan waiver before the polls in the three heartland states late last year, which is widely believed to have contributed to the Congress victory there; secondly, it is seen as an effort to come out of the shadow of Prime Minister Narendra Modi government's sops announcement a couple of months ago to provide an annual income support of Rs 6,000 to farmers with less than five acres of land; and thirdly, the

Congress anticipates that the minimum income guarantee scheme would help wean the electoral narrative away from the national security campaign set by the BJP following the Pulwama terror attack of February 14 and Indian war planes' attack on a terror camp in Balakot in Pakistan on February 26.

It was only a matter of time that the BJP's high-octane campaign flagging the Modi government's tough-on-terror posture following the Balakot incident would lose some of its traction as India-Pakistan tensions draw down and bread-and-butter issues like employment and agriculture sector crisis return to the centre-stage of electoral discourse. For about three weeks, the national security issue dominated the



Rahul Gandhi.

electoral campaign narrative, putting on the back burner the Congress pet planks of alleged corruption in the Rafale fighter jet deal, the farm sector crisis and joblessness. So, the Congress hopes the debate on welfare politics would restore its campaign narrative to the forefront. But it remains debatable how much the promise of a minimum income guarantee scheme could help the Congress counter the Modi dispensation's sops for the farmers, for the simple reason that while the former is just an electoral promise, the latter is already in operation.

Rahul's minimum income guarantee scheme will entail Rs 3.6 lakh crore from the government exchequer, which is estimated to be around two percent of

India's Gross Domestic Product (GDP). While Rahul insists the scheme is highly implementable, critics pan it as threatening fiscal discipline and perpetuating poverty by making the poor dependent on dole-out, a criticism that Modi government's scheme for farmers had also faced. It is interesting to note that during any discussion on welfare economics, a section of economists raise hue and cry over freebies to certain segments of society in distress. It is often argued that dole-outs and loan waivers hit work and credit culture, and what needs to be done is to empower the affected sections of the population in a market economy by creating jobs and other opportunities



PHOTO: AFP

of a minimum income guarantee scheme is whether there is any condition attached to it like phasing out of some of the existing subsidies relating to supply of fertiliser, cooking gas, maternity benefits, scholarships for socially and economically backward students and power of the government aimed at specific social groups like women and farmers. According to the official Economic Survey of 2016-17, there are 950 federal government welfare schemes accounting for five percent of the GDP. Any withdrawal of these welfare schemes or phasing down of subsidies becomes politically very sensitive for any government of the day. Rahul Gandhi has not clearly spelt that out. The concept of minimum guaranteed income was experimented with in Brazil, an emerging economy like India, but with the condition of sending children to school. Jayati Ghosh, Professor of Economics in Jawaharlal Nehru University, opines in a newspaper article that the "fiscal costs of minimum income guarantee scheme are not as might be imagined... the maximum expenditure amounts to just under 2 percent of GDP. This is only one-third of the amount that is regularly given away as tax concessions to corporate and rich individuals."

Many see Rahul's minimum income guarantee in the backdrop of the idea of the universal basic income being tried out in some countries of the world including Finland. In India, the government's former Chief Economic Adviser Arvind Subramanian had started the debate on universal basic income by talking about it in the 2016-17 Economic Survey. But while the universal basic income is aimed at all sections of society, the minimum guaranteed income proposed by Rahul is not. At best, the minimum guaranteed income can help a little in reducing the burgeoning income inequality in Indian society. But its impact is likely to be limited as it keeps in mind a consumption-driven economic growth that is unlikely to have any major impact on the growth of new industrial projects. For that, large public and private investments are needed. What the poorest need in the short run is support in the form of welfare packages, and empowerment in the long run.

Pallab Bhattacharya is a special correspondent to The Daily Star.