

Defend rights of journalists

UN chief urges in World Press Freedom Day message

UNB, Dhaka

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has called on all to defend the rights of journalists, reminding everyone that a free press is essential for peace, justice, sustainable development and human rights.

"When media workers are targeted, societies as a whole pay a price," said the UN chief in a message marking the World Press Freedom Day that falls today.

According to Unesco, he said, almost 100 journalists were killed last year and hundreds imprisoned. He said he was deeply troubled by the growing number of attacks on journalists and the culture of impunity.

Guterres pointed out that no democracy is complete without access to transparent and reliable information, according to the UN.

"It is the cornerstone for building fair and impartial institutions, holding leaders accountable and speaking truth to power," he said, adding that this is especially true during election seasons - the focus

of this year's World Press Freedom Day.

The UN chief said facts, not falsehoods, should guide people as they choose their representatives.

Technology, he said, has transformed the ways in which people receive and share information and sometimes it is used to mislead public opinion or to fuel violence and hatred.

"Civic space has been shrinking worldwide at an alarming rate and with anti-media rhetoric on the rise, so too are violence and harassment against journalists, including women," said the UN chief.

The main celebration of World Press Freedom Day 2019 will take place in Addis Ababa from May 1 to 3. It will provide a platform for multiple actors to exchange on current issues, threats and achievements concerning freedom of the press.

Some 100 national events around the world are expected to complement the main celebration, according to Unesco.

Take a tough stance now

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Myanmar military crackdown which began in August 2017.

Bangladesh has also been trying to solve the issue bilaterally but Myanmar has done little in this regard, they said.

The suggestions come before the Bangladesh-Myanmar Joint Working Group (JWG) meets for the fourth time in Naypyitaw today to discuss the Rohingya repatriation. Mahbub Uz Zaman, secretary-bilateral (Asia and Pacific) at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, will lead the Bangladesh side at the meeting, where repatriation would be the main focus, according to a foreign ministry official.

Prof Imtiaz Ahmed of international relations department at Dhaka University said Bangladesh had signed a bilateral deal in November 2017 for an amicable solution, despite the Rohingya crisis being an international issue. But there has been no real progress since then.

Myanmar, UN Refugee Agency and UNDP also signed a tripartite deal in June last year whereby UN agencies were allowed to assess the conditions in Rakhine.

The UN says the conditions there are not right for the Rohingya return. The Rohingyas too refused to return when Myanmar and Bangladesh began preparing for repatriation in November last year.

The situation in Rakhine has rather worsened now with the escalation of armed clashes between the Arakan Army, a Buddhist rebel group seeking autonomy in Rakhine, and the Myanmar army.

He said it seemed the crisis had protracted and it could not go on like this.

Imtiaz said Bangladesh had become a victim of the crisis despite not being a party to it at all, whereas Myanmar had created the problem and committed to creating conducive conditions for the Rohingya return but it had not done so.

It had not even amended its laws to guarantee citizenship to the Rohingyas and provide them with other rights, he said.

"Bangladesh should change its body language for several reasons. One is that Bangladesh's elections are now over and the government has a five-year mandate, meaning that the country is politically stable.

"Bangladesh has to tell Myanmar

that the Rohingya issue has been internationalised and it would face challenges in the international arena for the fact that a section of Myanmar military is facing accusations of genocide against the Rohingya," he said.

Some in the west, including the European Union, have already started imposing sanctions against Myanmar. If Myanmar does not change its policies in regards to the Rohingyas and is not sincere in repatriating them, its economy would face bad days ahead, Imtiaz said.

"We should tell Myanmar that the quicker it addresses the problems, the better it is for Myanmar."

If Myanmar is really sincere, it has to amend its laws, including the citizenship law, recognise the Rohingyas as an ethnic group and ensure other rights for them, including the right to movement.

"Otherwise, why should the Rohingyas return?" he said.

He said without these meetings of the joint working group would be just public shows to deceive the Rohingyas and the international community.

Migration and refugee affairs expert Asif Munir said Bangladesh had to take a strong stance while maintaining bilateral relations with Myanmar.

The meeting should stress on a clear roadmap and timeframe on repatriation because the crisis cannot continue for an indefinite period, he said.

After the meeting, the JWG has to inform the Rohingyas about its decisions as the community's problems cannot be solved without engaging them.

"I think the JWG meetings should have included representatives from the Rohingya community. Last time, the authorities were prepared to repatriate them but then the Rohingyas did not agree. We should not create such situations in the future," Asif Munir said.

Both the countries can also opt for track-two diplomacy, which means that independent experts of both the countries can hold meetings to advise the two governments, he said.

The two sides have to establish a goodwill so that the crisis is addressed and no one plays any blame-game. There should not be any provocative statements that can demean the discussions between the two countries, he added.

High levels of carbon dioxide can displace oxygen and nitrogen, potentially causing acute and chronic health effects, the report said.

Excessive levels of these gases may cause some acute and chronic health effects such as suffocation, incapacitation and unconsciousness, headaches, vertigo and double vision, inability to concentrate, tinnitus and seizures, it added.

During the survey, 61 percent of the respondents were being treated for medical conditions like wheezing, tightness of chest, rapid breathing, eczema, high fever, skin irritation, shortness of breath and burning or irritated eyes.

"And the kind of violations we are seeing, often totally unprovoked; hampers and limits the work of human right activists, communication activists, writers, artists and media workers," Faruq Faisal, the regional director of Article 19 in South Asia, said in the report.

He called upon the Bangladesh government to address the problem and ensure the end of "immunity for these violations."

"In the violation of digital rights, blocking and filtering were also observed in the online media abusing the ICT and digital security acts," the report said.

463 breaches

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published the report marking World Press Freedom Day 2019 today.

"Increased intimidation and threats to undermine freedom of expression has continued in Bangladesh... The situation for communicators in Bangladesh is dire," the report said.

Stating that the trend of violence against journalists has changed, the report mentioned that there were 31 defamation cases, 71 cases under Digital Security Act 2018, and illegal arrest warrant and 20 more different types of legal harassment against journalists last year.

Two journalists were murdered, 19 suffered severe physical assault, 156 were victims of different physical attacks and 22 were kidnapped in 2018, according to the report.

The journalists were attacked by local political leaders of the ruling party, members of the law enforcing agencies, and government officials as well," it said.

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Article 19 also recorded some 212 "threats" in 2018.

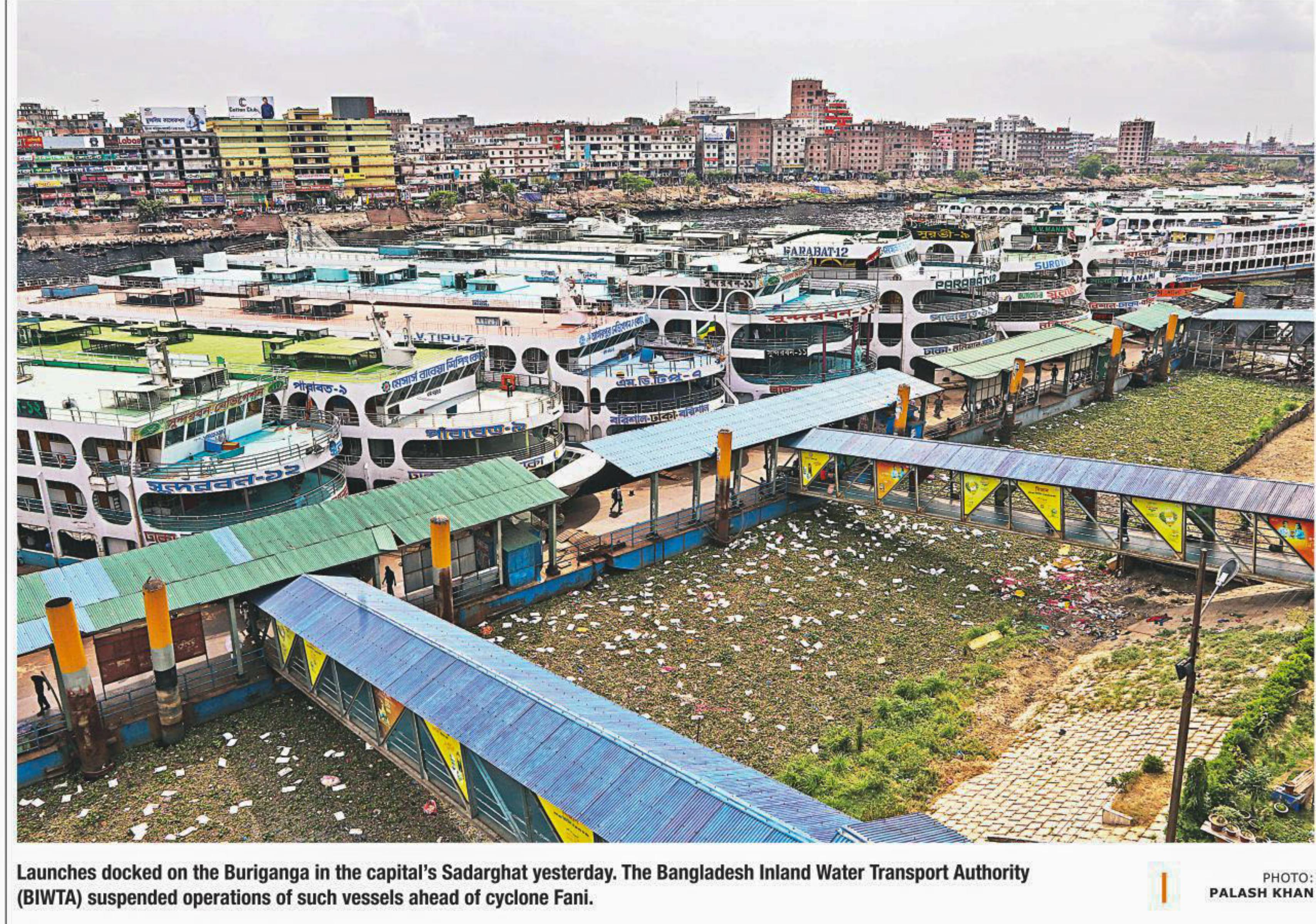
Besides, it recorded 10 cases of violations of the right to protest, including the quota reform movement, road safety movement, transport strike, movement for garment workers' salary hike, etc.

There were 37 discussions of hate speech and propaganda through online and offline media, which were mostly religious contradiction and conflict centric, the report said.

Of these violations, there was non-state involvement in 81 percent of the cases while state involvement was recorded in 19 percent cases, according to the report.

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Launches docked on the Buriganga in the capital's Sadarghat yesterday. The Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority (BIWTA) suspended operations of such vessels ahead of cyclone Fani.

PALASH KHAN

Furious 'Fani' poised to hit

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people living in risky areas across 19 coastal districts to 4,071 cyclone shelters by today.

"We will start evacuating people from risky areas at 10:00am tomorrow [today]," said Md Shah Kamal, senior secretary of the disaster management and relief ministry.

The ministry also opened a hotline (1090) for any information regarding the storm.

The government has cancelled holidays of all government officials posted in the coastal districts and also opened control rooms there to respond to emergencies.

Under the influence of Fani and the new moon phase, the low-lying areas of Chattogram, Noakhali, Laxmipur, Feni, Chandpur, Barguna, Bhola, Patuakhali, Khulna, Barishal, Pirojpur, Jhalakathi, Bagerhat, Khulna, Satkhira and their off-shore islands are likely to be inundated, the Met office said.

Nearly 26 percent of the country's people live in these districts, according to Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics.

Originating from a depression over the southeast Bay on April 29, Fani

was roosting around 735km southwest of Mongla and 910km southwest of Chittagong Port and was proceeding towards Odisha at 15kph, according to a special bulletin of the Met office issued at 12:00am today.

As the storm kept picking up speed, the sea was becoming turbulent with stronger gale-force winds.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, now in London, asked the authorities concerned to take all precautionary measures.

"The prime minister has instructed all departments concerned to take all kinds of precautionary steps and remain alert to minimise the loss of lives and property during the cyclonic storm," her Press Secretary Ihsanul Karim told BSS.

He said the PM was monitoring the situation round-the-clock.

All port authorities have already suspended the loading and offloading of goods from vessels at the outer anchorages. All fishing boats were asked to take shelter immediately.

The operations of launch and speedboat services, and many ferry services, including those from Mawa and Paturia, were suspended until

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further notice, Kazi Shakil Newaz, secretary of the Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority (BIWTA), told The Daily Star.

The BIWTA also suspended leaves of all its officials and employees, he said.

The Indian government will close Kolkata airport at 9:00pm today and open it at 6:00pm tomorrow while the authorities at Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport in Dhaka asked all carriers to ensure proper tie-down of their aircraft and equipment on the tarmac.

"All departments, including the coast guard, police, Border Guard Bangladesh, local administrations, and fire service and civil defence are on high alert," the home minister told journalists after a cabinet committee meeting.

The Inter Services Public Relations in a press release last night said the army, navy and air force were ready to face the Fani aftermath.

The Higher Secondary Certificate exams scheduled for Saturday have been rescheduled for May 14.

The Department of Agricultural Extension said crops on 3,668 hectares in the coastal districts were vulnerable as paddy was at the flowering stage.

Bangladesh named the storm Fani, according to the Bangladesh Meteorological Department website.

The BBC Bangla reported that Fani is one of the 64 names Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, Thailand, Oman, the Maldives, Sri Lanka, and Pakistan had given as names of storms in 2004. The countries make up a regional committee of the World Meteorological Organisation.

Fani means the hood of a snake, it said.

All but seven of the 64 names proposed by the regional committee has been used.

Our *Chattogram bureau office* and *correspondents* in Khulna, Bagerhat, Barishal, Patuakhali, Jhalakathi, Pirojpur, and Noakhali contributed to the story.

1m Rohingyas at severe health risk

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The study was conducted in June-December 2018 by the International Centre for Climate Change and Development (ICCCAD) with support from the International Organisation for Migration (IOM).

Istiakh Ahmed, coordinator of the study, said extensively polluted air and water create serious health risks for the refugees. "It's imperative to act swiftly to cut the risk factors," he told The Daily Star last week.

AIR QUALITY

Air quality analysis in the refugee camps showed the level of carbon dioxide (CO₂) and nitrogen dioxide (NO₂) were higher both indoors and outdoors than Bangladesh standard.

Bangladesh standard for CO₂ is 350 parts per million (ppm) but the study found it between 600 to 1,207ppm at the Rohingya camps.

The standard for NO₂ is 0.057ppm but in Rohingya camps it was up to 0.1ppm. The level of volatile organic compounds (VOC) or organic chemicals in air was also very high, the report said.

High levels of carbon dioxide can displace oxygen and nitrogen, potentially causing acute and chronic health effects, the report said.

"Breathing in high amounts of carbon dioxide can also be life threatening. Prolonged exposure to carbon dioxide may cause changes in bone calcium and body metabolism," said the report.

Excessive levels of these gases may cause some acute and chronic health effects such as suffocation, incapacitation and unconsciousness, headaches, vertigo and double vision, inability to concentrate, tinnitus and seizures, it added.

During the survey, 61 percent of the respondents were being treated for medical conditions like wheezing, tightness of chest, rapid breathing, eczema, high fever, skin irritation, shortness of breath and burning or irritated eyes.

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liquid particles suspended in air, in November last year was significantly higher than the Bangladesh standard.

Exposure to such inhalable particles can affect lungs and heart, and children and older adults may be at greater risk from exposure to those.

About volatile organic compounds, the report said higher concentrations of VOC may cause irritation of lungs as well as damage to the liver, kidney or central nervous system.

WATER

The ICCCAD analysis found all surface water samples and a significant (highest 62 percent) number of groundwater samples tested contain coliforms, a group of bacteria. One of its possible reasons could be the proximity of tube wells to latrines.

Additionally, manganese was detected in 48 percent tested samples at concentrations higher than the Bangladesh standard (0.1 mg/L), which may impede cognitive development in children.

Survey results showed that diseases and illnesses such as diarrhoea, coughing and skin diseases are major concerns in the camp area. Since 38 percent of the surveyed water supply lines are passing through the drainage system, chances of spread of diseases from waste are higher.

The report says only 17 percent respondents throw their waste in a public bin while others do it in the open space.

There is no proper drainage system in the camps -- around 30 percent of them are mud-built, 37 percent open, and only 19 percent concrete drains. The disposed waste stays for a longer period of time, polluting the atmosphere.

This inadequate drainage facility results in foul odour and spreads mosquitoes and flies. While this study could not explore if there was any connection between unmanaged solid waste and camp health issues, 623 respondents showed concerns about poor waste management in their areas.

The ICCCAD recommended creating environmental awareness within the Rohingyas and local communities, engaging them in its protection, setting up a proper drainage system and sewage treatment facilities and ensuring solid waste management.

Alternative energy sources including quality cooking stoves for all refugees would greatly reduce indoor air pollution caused by

firewood burning, it said.

Dr Azharul Islam Khan, head of hospitals at ICDDB, said he has

no idea of air pollution in Rohingya camps but water and sanitation