

## ASEAN's clean chit to Myanmar

*A fig leaf to hide the truth*

A leaked report prepared by the regional body's Emergency Response and Assessment Team (ASEAN-ERAT) on the Rohingya issue exposes a preposterous attempt to hide the facts about the brutality committed by the Myanmar army in Rakhine. In certain instances, the report echoes the position of the Myanmar government. Predictably and deservedly, the said document has been trashed by the international human rights groups. Giving a clean chit to Myanmar through the report, which not only disregards the reality but also prevaricates facts, amounts to validating and legalising acts that have been internationally accepted as ethnic cleansing, and many have described the atrocities perpetrated on the Rohingya ethnic minority as genocide and war crimes.

One wonders why the report fails to make any mention of the killings in the name of going after the insurgents, and what forced the Rohingyas to leave their own country to seek a safe sanctuary across the border. It dilutes the gravity of the crisis, by overlooking the underlying cause of the crisis, preferring to identify the Rohingyas on the basis of religion and not ethnicity, and mentioning a completely wrong figure of the number of refugees in Bangladesh, but insisted waxed eloquent about the efforts taken by the Myanmar government to induce the Rohingyas to return, and predicting return of half a million refugees in the next two years. These claims have been completely belied by very recent reports of renewed atrocities in Rakhine. The report mendaciously blamed Bangladesh for the delay in start of repatriation.

Disregarding realities cannot change facts; on the contrary it breeds impunity and helps perpetuate a regime of violence on a minority, whose consequences will have very wide and grave implications. Malaysia has broken away with the tradition among the ASEAN members not to interfere in the internal affairs of another member country and described the issue for what it is. We would hope that other member states would do likewise and bring to bear their influence on Myanmar to create conditions that would help a permanent resolution of the problem by addressing the underlying causes of the crisis of which safe return, and guaranteeing the rights of the Rohingyas like any other Myanmar citizen, are two important elements.

## Good govt initiative, if implemented well

*Make sure aid reaches the right hands*

WE welcome the government's plan to allocate Tk 100 crore for the rehabilitation of victims of river erosion which annually leaves around 50,000 people—who comprise around 30 to 40 percent of the homeless in the country—without a home. It is about time the government took this initiative, as this problem is expected to be just as serious in future and estimates suggest may leave some 45,000 people homeless again next year.

People who are affected by river erosion make up a substantial portion of our large internal migrant population, which is a major cause for the overpopulating of cities such as Dhaka—putting severe pressure on their environment and infrastructure. And it is also causing poverty.

However, benefits from the initiative taken by the government can only be reaped with its proper utilisation. And the government must ensure that the funds set aside go to actual victims of river erosion, instead of ending up in the pockets of others that government aid so often does. This means the government must come up with a mechanism that will make allocation transparent and efficient—and prevent it from becoming politicised at all cost. As otherwise, the whole initiative will be a waste and the entire Tk 100 crore of taxpayer's money will go down the drain.

Moreover, since many victims of river erosion are farmers, the government should consider helping them with alternate means of earning. Yes the fund may help them temporarily, but in the long run, they will need permanent sources of income and the government can play a big role in assisting with that.

# 'Clash of civilisation' or crash: Environmental doomsday?

KAUTILYAN  
KRONICLES

IMTIAZ A HUSSAIN

WHAT do the following civilisations have in common: Mesopotamia four millennia ago; the 8th-century Viking Greenland settlement; Mayas from the 10th century; and the Khmer empire in the 15th century? All were victims of climate change, caused by multiple factors, indicating the scourge's outreaching tentacles. Respectively, these were drought and desertification; a deep-freeze prohibiting farming; over-population producing drought; and drought alternating with quick but violent monsoon rains (Sean Fleming, World Economic Forum, *Newsletter*, March 29, 2019).

Whether the 21st-century civilisations follow the same pathways will depend as much on what we do about reducing emissions, adjusting to rising ocean water consequences (like coastal erosion, social dislocations, and economic disruptions), and effectively waging the green campaign of planting more trees, as it will on population controls, resource distribution, and ending conflicts. None of the above cases of collapsed civilisations happened suddenly, but the point of no-return was crossed most likely unnoticed, as reversing gears to return to normalcy became rapidly impossible.

That, however, is not the case for the most modern civilisations we have today, yet the human instinct of postponing corrections to concurrent malaises, like consumption, eventually takes us to our own Rubicon. Every day we keep having mind-boggling information of more coal being mined in the wrong places, for the wrong customers, clothes getting manufactured because we simply cannot do without fashion to show us off and keep us one step ahead of our neighbours style-wise, plastic being produced until fishes choke and get slowly dwarfed by polypropylene (of which cups, coolers, and utensils get made), and chopping trees down for cattle-breeding, with both deforestations and meat production taxing the earth's vital resources elsewhere: one million of the earth's eight million species have become extinct, so much so that in "10 years [we] will have a quarter less, in 50 years only half left and in 100 years [we] will have none" (Damian Carrington, "Plummeting insect numbers," *The Guardian*, February 10, 2019).

Even when campaigns get launched to correct part of this mess (no one individual or institution, campaign



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or country can literally tackle the entire problem), they run out of steam or succumb to an increasingly materialistically-driven social media pressure accenting the vices more than the virtues. Greta Thunberg began something exceptional to mitigate these lapses, losses, and laggard responses. Fed up of her adults being so hypocritical, she began a school movement in her own locality in Sweden that turned since into a global movement. Whether this drive peters out or not, what is striking is how, once begun in the youthful years, habits like this protest can turn into a far more deterring consequence: repeating an instinctual youthful action carries a greater probability of replication than her previous generation's indulgences in material acquisitions offset by token corrective campaigns.

A Thunberg beacon of hope is embedded in Britain's pledge to purify the air completely by 2050, just as it drove French President Emmanuel Macron to propose a CCS technology for all of West Europe (and finding support from nine others). This is a "carbon capture and storage" facility which would then be pumped into an empty gas-field, as the Netherlands already practices. This does not eliminate the carbon, and requires expensive, almost constant governmental support, subsidy, and steering. At the other extreme of reforestation, there are not many places left on earth that will pick up remediation formulas like this:

poverty eliminates sustainability attempts, just as conflict ignores them entirely (one might recall how Saddam Hussein's 1989 invasion of tiny Kuwait resulted in oil-fields being left ablaze, causing enormous visible and residual losses).

Yet, these might be precisely the areas where civilisations would be increasingly vulnerable. As a perpetual cauldron of conflict, the Middle East leads the road towards long-term extinction as an inhabited region. Migration to adjoining regions would then carry the food-security pressures, eliciting populist reactions, as we currently see across Europe: these are so noisy and blind, but behind their extremist my-country-right-or-wrong thrust, the environment, ultimately the ecology, changes beyond retrievable points. Europe may conceivably be at such a tipping point under pressures from the Middle East and Africa.

Another could be China's Belt and Road Initiative. Created to access markets and extract raw materials in the construction phase, China completely ignored environmental safeguards; yet as it nears completion, China's environmental about-turn exposes an inherent duplicitous approach, building energy-producing facilities—mostly fossil fuel-driven—along the BRI tracks, mostly in the South East, South, Middle East Asia, and eastern Africa through festering conflict, feeds into the unfolding human migration problem, and breeds environmental damage, and abandonment. China cannot shield itself

from that. China's growing power has induced a fearful Japan to recruit overseas workers (though a demographic ghost may be a more urgent reason). Just as BRI transit countries complain of the debt-burden entailed, those working in China-constructed special economic zones have begun standing up to complain about fossil-fuel being shoved down their nostrils (even though their routine lifestyles may have produced the same effects).

One more type illustrates how the "crashing civilisation" phenomenon is not just an Asian and African curse. Industrialised countries have themselves released more carbon into the air as to begin melting Arctic ice. As the fabled northern route to Asia from Europe begins to take shape, the loss of ice may inflict severe damage across North America and Europe.

Of course, these have already started changing weather patterns: colder winter, at times meshed with spiralling temperatures on a more regular basis, with forest-fires to lace the catastrophes, and earthquakes from depleting water tables worldwide.

As a civilisation, none may be done as yet. There are counter-forces. Yet, without concerted and extensive action, à la Thunberg, we might envision the whole doomsday *enchilada* consuming us without proper actions today.

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PROJECT ■ SYNDICATE

## Europe's silent majority speaks out



GEORGE SOROS

LAST month's elections to the European Parliament produced better results than one could have expected, and for a simple reason: the silent pro-European majority has spoken. What they said is that they want to preserve the values on which the European Union was founded, but that they also want radical changes in the way the EU functions. Their main concern is climate change.

This favours the pro-European parties, especially the Greens. The anti-European parties, which cannot be expected to do anything constructive, failed to make the gains that they expected. Nor can they form the united front that they would need in order to become more influential.

One of the institutions that needs to be changed is the *Spitzenkandidat* system. It is supposed to provide a form of indirect selection of the EU leadership. In fact,

as Franklin Dehoussé explained in a brilliant but pessimistic article in the *EU Observer*, it is worse than no democratic selection at all. Each member-state has real political parties, but their trans-European combination produces artificial constructs that serve no purpose other than to promote the personal ambitions of their leaders.

This can best be seen in the European People's Party (EPP), which has managed to capture the presidency of the Commission since 2004. The EPP's current leader, Manfred Weber, who has no experience in a national government, appears willing to enter into practically any compromise in order to remain in the parliamentary majority. That includes embracing Hungary's autocratic prime minister, Viktor Orbán.

Orbán has posed a serious problem for Weber, because Orbán has openly flouted European norms and established what amounts to a mafia state. Nearly half the national parties constituting the EPP wanted to expel Orbán's party, Fidesz. Instead of following through, however, Weber managed to convince the EPP to

make a relatively easy demand on Fidesz: allow the Central European University (CEU, which I founded) to continue functioning freely in Hungary as an American university.

Fidesz failed to comply. Even so, the EPP did not expel Fidesz, but merely suspended it so that it could be counted as part of the EPP when the president of the Commission is chosen. Orbán is now trying to re-establish Fidesz as a *bona fide* member of the EPP. It will be interesting to see if Weber finds a way to accommodate him.

The *Spitzenkandidat* system is not based on an intergovernmental agreement, so it could easily be changed. It would be much better if the president of the European Commission were directly elected from a carefully selected list of qualified candidates, but that would require treaty changes. The President of the European Council could continue to be elected by a qualified majority of the member states, as the Treaty of Lisbon prescribes.

The reform that would require treaty changes is justified by the increased democratic legitimacy conferred by

the European Parliamentary elections. Turnout in the recent election surpassed 50 percent, up sharply from 42.6 percent in 2014. This is the first time that turnout has increased at all since the first election in 1979, when 62 percent of eligible voters participated.

Strangely enough, on this occasion, the *Spitzenkandidat* system promises to produce a dream team. French President Emmanuel Macron, who is opposed to the *Spitzenkandidat* system as a matter of principle, is largely responsible for this development. At a dinner with Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez, the winner of Spain's national general election, which preceded the European Parliament vote, the two leaders agreed to support two *Spitzenkandidaten* who would be ideal for the Commission and for the Council.

Germany is the main supporter of the *Spitzenkandidat* system. If Weber loses out, Germany will be pushing for Jens Weidmann, president of the Bundesbank, to become president of the ECB. He would hardly be ideal. In fact, he is disqualified by the fact that he testified before Germany's Federal Constitutional Court against the ECB in a case seeking to invalidate the Bank's so-called outright monetary transactions, a policy that was crucial to overcoming the eurozone crisis earlier this decade. I hope this fact will become more widely known.

Any other qualified candidate would be preferable to Weidmann as ECB president. As things stand now, France will not have any of the top jobs. It would be a good thing if Germany didn't have one either, because it would leave more room for other countries.

There are many EU institutions aside from the *Spitzenkandidat* system that require radical reform. But that can wait until we find out whether, and to what extent, the promise held out by the parliamentary election results is realised. This is not yet the time to declare victory, relax, and celebrate. There is a lot of work to be done to turn the EU into a well-functioning organisation that fulfils its great potential.

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(Exclusive to The Daily Star)

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### Is Golden A+ overrated?

A+ is the highest GPA status, only awarded to students who receive at least 80 percent marks in every subject up to the intermediate level. Informally called "Golden A+," this GPA is the most honourable academic achievement—a source of pride and glory in today's society. A flawless GPA is undeniably commendable, but this widespread obsession with it comes at a cost: A+ recipients are applauded, but students who don't receive top grades are lambasted by their parents and belittled in society. They feel discouraged from these, which eventually takes a toll on their mental health—and we should note that young lives have been tragically cut short from this in the past.

This essentially pollutes the atmosphere in our educational institutions by harnessing crude competition that pits students against each other, and in turn, fails to teach students the importance of friendship and empathy. Adolescents forget about the world outside the confines of their classrooms, and avoid learning anything valuable in the real-world.

The harm in all this is not the students' mindsets, but rather a systemic, social problem—parents and teachers condition students to chase grades as though it is the ultimate goal in life. It seems they often forget that a Golden A+ doesn't make one a "golden human being," but kindness and integrity does.

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