

'Development' shouldn't trump environment

Sundarbans, now a 'World Heritage in Danger'

WE are not in the least bit surprised that the World Heritage Centre of Unesco has declared the Sundarbans to be a "World Heritage in Danger". The longstanding calls by environmentalists and organisations urging the government to take measures to protect the ecologically critical area seem to have gone completely unheeded. Although the Rampal power plant is the most well-known, there are around 300 projects in total, both ongoing and planned, to be undertaken near the forest.

The rigour with which industrial projects are being pursued in the area—despite numerous scientific studies showing the detrimental effects they will have on the mangrove forest—only goes to show that we have failed to strike a balance between development projects and protection of the environment. The Unesco has rightly pointed out that construction of Rampal is ongoing without having completed a Structural Environment Assessment (SEA), which is critical for identifying the threats posed to the biodiversity and flora and fauna of the Sundarbans.

The government must speed up progress on the SEA without which it will not be possible to identify the risks or to take steps to mitigate them. Such assessments are also necessary for ensuring transparency so that relevant organisations and the citizens are fully aware of the risks associated with development projects in parts of the country. This applies for every project being undertaken in the Sundarbans.

It is a matter of travesty that calls to protect the Sundarbans have so far fallen on deaf ears as we seem to be oblivious to the significance of the mangrove forest—both in terms of heritage and ecology—for Bangladesh in particular and the world at large.

Formulate the guidelines immediately

Controlling the movement of slow-moving vehicles

WE appreciate the Road Transport and Bridges Ministry's decision to formulate a guideline to control the movement of slow-moving vehicles on our roads and highways. As per the government's decision, the Road Transport and Highways Division will have to prepare a draft of the guidelines within one month after taking opinions from Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA) and transport experts. Given the unusually long time it usually takes for any government plan to be materialised, we are not very sure whether the set deadline can be met, but still, the initiative is timely.

According to the Accident Research Institute of BUET, about 15 percent of all road accidents involve low-speed vehicles which do not have registration or fitness certificates. Amid such a situation, making the guidelines is absolutely necessary, because this will bring the nearly 10 lakh slow-moving vehicles, currently operating across the country, under regulation. We know that the government's previous ban on three-wheelers, including those made locally, and other slow vehicles on 22 national highways in 2015 could not be enforced for many reasons, including pressure from the local lawmakers.

While the government should talk with all the stakeholders, including the transport experts, before formulating the law, taking suggestions from the local people and those who drive these vehicles should also be considered. Banning the vehicles outright might not work, as the livelihood of many depends on them. The guidelines should be made in a way that benefit all. Determining which vehicles should be allowed to operate on highways and which vehicles should not will be a big challenge. But if separate lanes can be created for the slow-speed vehicles on the major highways, the problem can be solved to some extent. We hope that once the guidelines are made and enforced, the number of road accidents involving slow-moving vehicles will come down.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Save our rivers

It is a matter of great concern that the once mighty Titas River flowing over Brahmanbaria has turned into a narrow canal due to ongoing illegal grabbing. People living on Titas River's banks have indiscriminately occupied the river banks and its adjacent land by building structures in different spots. Sediment and sand have filled up the river.

We have to save our rivers and other water bodies which are extremely important for aquatic life to flourish. The very survival of fish in many rivers, including Titas, is being threatened due to the grabbing of wetlands by a section of local influential people with political clout.

Now is the time to take immediate action to rescue and protect our rivers and water bodies. Unplanned urbanisation has taken a severe toll on the rivers which is tragic, to say the least. River pollution is another menace that is wreaking havoc. Industrial waste, household garbage and toxic chemicals are being released directly into these rivers. Many rivers have already dried up due to negligence both on the part of the government and the people.

The authorities should ensure that the rivers are regularly dredged, and that encroachment of rivers is put to a halt. The existing laws must be enforced to prevent the destruction of our waterways.

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AN OPEN DIALOGUE



ABDULLAH SHIBLI

20,000. Ominously, a recently leaked report commissioned by ASEAN suggests that Myanmar is willing to accept only 500,000 of them. This report, entitled "Preliminary Needs Assessment for Repatriation in Rakhine State, Myanmar", prepared by ASEAN's Emergency Response and Assessment Team, indicates that Myanmar is prepared for only half a million of the returnees. That is the official number of refugees provided by Myanmar to this team, according to AFP.

Since the Rohingya repatriation programme is at a standstill, it is time for Bangladesh government and civil society to take a fresh look at the ongoing negotiations between the parties involved and use a very potent tool utilised in economics and other disciplines, viz. "game theory". This theory forms the core of models utilised in trade negotiations, international diplomacy, and global treaties involving two or more parties, uncertain outcomes, and strategic behaviour. Unlike a game of chess, game theory is amenable to cooperative as well as competitive behaviours and provides insights to understand and guide negotiations between nations.

The essence of game theory is captured in a paradigm known as the "Prisoner's Dilemma". For instance, two friends, Karim and Rahim, are arrested by police on suspicion of bank robbery. To force a confession from them, the friends are isolated from each other and offered a deal. If either Karim or Rahim confesses but the other does not, then the confessor gets a reduced sentence of one year for cooperating with the police. The other gets a life sentence. If, on the other hand, neither confesses, they each get two years. Now, imagine Bangladesh and Myanmar are engaged in a game similar to the Prisoner's Dilemma. In the following paragraphs, I will lay out some of the threads needed to build a complete model for the current situation.

The key issues are not in dispute. There

THE Rohingya population in Bangladesh continues to grow. There are now over one million Rohingyas living in Bangladesh, and with each passing year, their number is increasing by approximately

are three parties: Bangladesh, Myanmar, and the Rohingyas. The Rohingyas would like to go back, Myanmar has expressed its intention to facilitate the repatriation, and Bangladesh is eager to go to any length to help with the process.

At this point, it appears that the two countries are engaged in a "game" with some limited options and a few possible outcomes. Bangladesh has been hosting the refugees for over two years and is shouldering the entire responsibility for their care. The cost is financial as well as the possibility of alienating the residents of the Cox's Bazar district. The status quo

repatriation. To take an extreme case, are we ready to use force to advance our goals? No, according to Major General Abdur Rashid (Ret.) of the Institute of Conflict Law Development Studies in Dhaka. "Myanmar remains our neighbour," he said, emphasising the economic benefits of an understanding with Myanmar. "There is no point in fighting them and we need to maintain a good relationship. We need dialogue."

The government has so far taken only conciliatory steps including harnessing international diplomatic support, marshalling financial commitments from

Mahmud Hasan, it is the latter, and we need to develop a strategy for that.

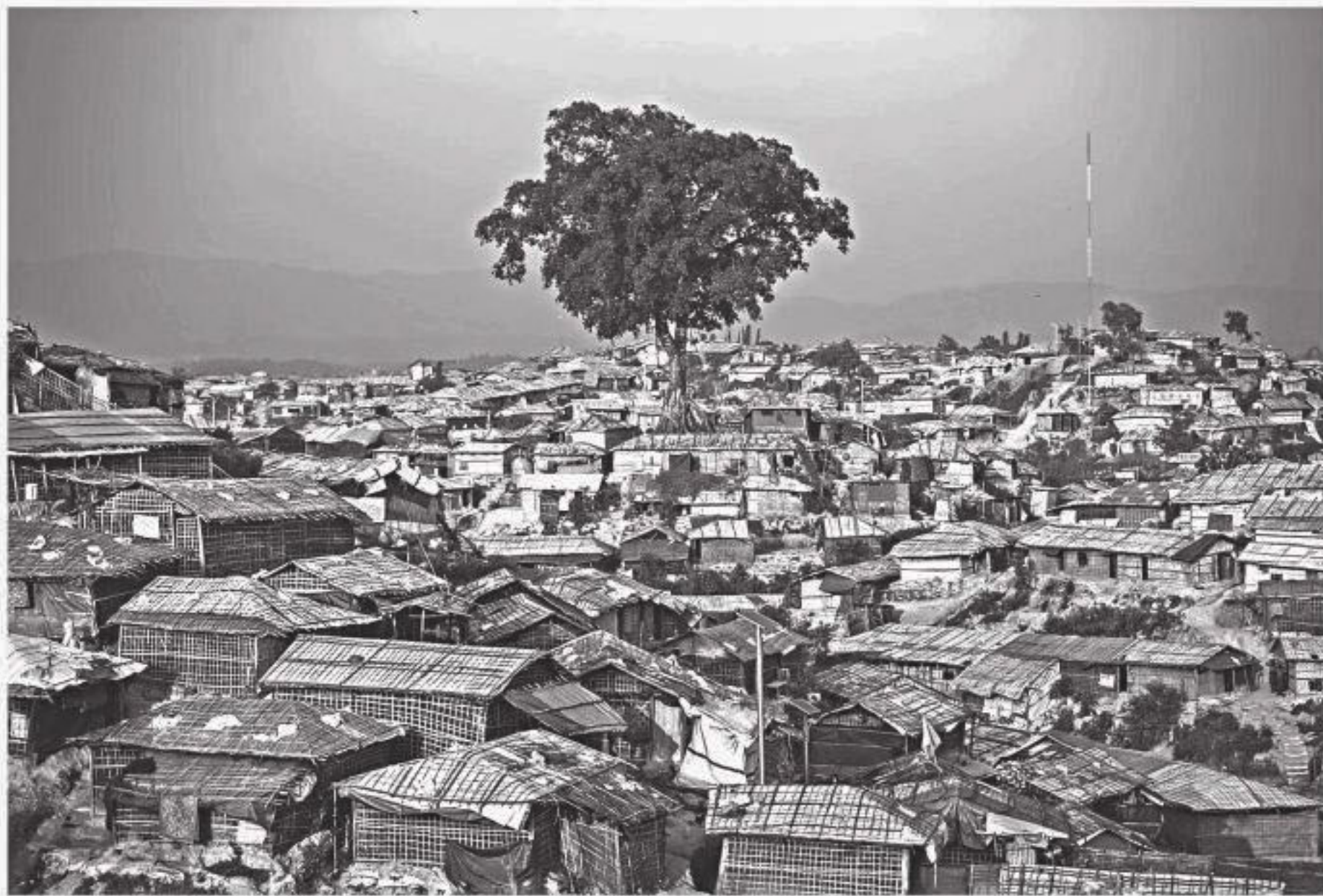
Taking all of the above into consideration, let us look at an outline of a simple model through the lens of the game theory which will provide us with an idea of how many Rohingyas Myanmar will take back and the modality, including the number of refugees who will be eligible. Each country has two or more strategies available to them, but the outcome is influenced not only by the strategy chosen but also by what the other does. For example, if Bangladesh resorts to aggressive diplomacy (S1), Myanmar might react by either taking a more conciliatory approach (T1) or refuse to engage in any meaningful negotiations and seek assistance from its friends, if it has any (T2). On the other hand, Bangladesh could play hardball: stop any further negotiations with Myanmar and mobilise international opinion to pressure Myanmar. This is S2. In response, Naypyidaw may decide to adopt T2 and ignore the rest of the world.

Each of these strategies has possible consequences or outcomes, both for Bangladesh and Myanmar. To follow up on our hypothetical example above, if Bangladesh adopts S1, and Myanmar goes for T2, the international community might help with more money for the refugees while Myanmar could find itself facing some international sanctions. However, there is a downside for Bangladesh too with S1 and T2. Bangladesh faces many hurdles which it needs to overcome, and we have to factor in Myanmar's underestimation of Rohingyas, endless delays, acting in bad faith, and denial of citizenship and equal rights.

Unlike a zero-sum game or situations where one party can gain only if the other party loses, it's not so in most game-theory applications. Our goal—to repatriate the Rohingyas back to their homeland—can be turned into a win-win outcome. Given the lengthy and uncertain time frame, Bangladesh government must address a pertinent question: what are the strategies available to exert pressure on the government of Myanmar to provide a timetable to take the Rohingyas back? As with any negotiations, Bangladesh government must be willing to ramp up the pressure and declare, or subtly imply, that "no options are off the table!"

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Rohingya negotiations through the lens of 'game theory'



Balukhali camp in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, November 16, 2018.

PHOTO: REUTERS/MOHAMMAD PONIR HOSSAIN

has several other risks. The longer the Rohingyas stay in the overcrowded camps, the more likely the camps will become a liability and be a permanent financial drain on our resources. The international pressure will also mount to allow the Rohingyas to work and to provide better services. But for how long?

There is another aspect related to it. According to a report published online, "If other refugee crises around the world are a reasonable guide, it is rare for people who flee the conflict to return home very quickly." A UNHCR study done in 2004 concludes that the average refugee could stay in exile for 17 years, although that number has recently been disputed by the World Bank.

So, Bangladesh needs to reassess what resources it has available to expedite the

UN and international agencies, and the Middle East. However, other options are: a Security Council (UNSC) vote, threats of economic sanctions, support for insurgents in Rakhine, Shan, and other states, etc.

Unfortunately, the UNSC has failed to take any action fearful of Russia and China's use of their veto powers. Could we work with our allies to persuade Russia and China to relent on their insistence that it is a matter of the two countries only? What leverage do we have with them?

Another issue: what is the next move from Myanmar? Procrastinating on the Rohingya problem is favouring Myanmar. Clearly, Bangladesh has to consider whether it is playing a two-party or multi-party game. According to columnist

Unsatisfactory ranking: What can universities do to improve their performance?

AHMED ABDULLAH AZAD

IT came as a shock to many that no Bangladeshi university made it to the top 417 in Asia in the latest Times Higher Education ranking. This, however, should not have come as a surprise as international competitiveness of Bangladesh's best universities has been declining over the years as reflected in previous rankings. While some aspects of the criteria used may not be strictly applicable to conditions prevailing in Bangladesh, the rankings do offer a measure of a university's international competitiveness. Local and foreign students have started to take rankings into consideration in their university destination choices. Rankings also influence international funding and competitive research grants. A fall in comparative ranking is not necessarily because the standards of top Bangladeshi universities have fallen but more likely because other countries have been performing much better in research and innovation. Universities should seriously try to identify genuine shortcomings and rectify them. Because of the high cost of quality higher education, serious rethinking is also required about the burden of supporting huge numbers of tertiary students at present, and about the perceived usefulness of four-year Bachelor's degrees and the Master's degrees as minimum requirements for entry into the higher rungs of the workforce.

About 3.8 million students are enrolled in tertiary institutions in Bangladesh, one of the highest in the world. Unfortunately, the unemployment rate among graduates is more than 30 percent. In spite of such a high unemployment rate among local graduates, the private sector cannot find employees with the right skills. This suggests a mismatch between the skills required and the reality. There is a small but healthy trend observed in recent years towards technical and vocational education which should be encouraged, and the sector is strongly supported and adequately financed. A majority of post-secondary students could be encouraged to choose this route by offering graduates a decent salary, job security and social status, and incentives for working in non-metropolitan areas.

While bigger enrolments in technical and vocational education will take the pressure off higher education placements, hundreds of thousands of students will seek places in universities and colleges without the guarantee of a desired job upon graduation. The government should initiate a serious study to determine the number of graduates required in

different professions, now and over time. Besides providing information on the actual numbers of different types of professionals required, such a study will also suggest ways to restructure universities and colleges. Of the 160 or so universities, not more than 20 could be considered as institutions with some research capability, and more could join them in future. The remaining universities could take on a bigger responsibility for teaching and play a very crucial role in the training of large numbers of highly qualified teachers for all levels of education, and also required numbers of professionals in health, agriculture, technology, and other economic sectors.



PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

Students wait in queues to enter the Central Library of Dhaka University.

Looking at a series of recent rankings, and the criteria used to determine these, it appears Bangladeshi universities are performing reasonably well in teaching, but fall awfully short in research and innovation. Experimental scientists could plead lack of adequate R&D funding and instrumentation for low research productivity, but what excuse is there for the academics in the humanities and social sciences? Research productivity remains a low priority as it plays only a marginal role in the appointment, tenure and promotion of university academics. Those who carry out research under such adverse conditions do so at their own initiative and often with highly competitive overseas grants. They should be accorded proper recognition, adequately supported and directly rewarded for demonstrated research productivity.

Money, without attitudinal changes, will not bring about the desired results. Huge amounts of funds have been pumped into Bangladeshi universities by the UGC through three rounds of the WB-funded HEQEP project, but any perceptible improvement in performance or ranking is yet to be seen. Funding strategies may need to be better targeted and coordinated.

Technological proficiency, needed for Bangladesh's ambitious economic goals, requires higher education to be underpinned by a very robust science and technology base, with a major emphasis on research and innovation and multisectoral collaborations supported by a vibrant postgraduate research culture and world-class research facilities. The combined national R&D budget adds up to about 0.4 percent of GDP, of which the bulk is used up on overhead

expenses. To be effective, and to make up some lost ground, the R&D budget should be increased to at least 2 percent of GDP. Even this would be too small to adequately support the full range of postgraduate and other research activities in Bangladesh. Considering the cost of world-class research, and the paucity of available funds, publicly-funded research should be largely goal-oriented and aimed at product or process development with the support of industry.

Funding for goal-oriented research of national importance should be preferentially directed to a small number of multidisciplinary projects in areas of highest national priority and existing strength. To maximise the impact of available manpower and technological resources, collaborations are required between multi-institutional researchers possessing complementary expertise and facilities. Such collaborations would involve not only universities (mainly fulltime PhD and postdoctoral researchers) and industry, but also government research laboratories (such as BCSIR) to support development research and technology transfer, and proactive support from government research councils and regulatory authorities. This would be a novel concept for Bangladesh but perhaps the only way to ensure that the fruits of publicly-funded research flow on to the common man.

The different components of a national collaborative project are likely to fall under the jurisdiction of different ministries. Getting all components to work in unison would be a challenge that can be met by coordination and targeted funding at the highest level through a National Research and Innovation Council, consisting of internationally-recognised local and NRB experts and senior representatives of relevant ministries. The new leadership in the Ministry of Education and UGC could consider setting up a new section—within UGC or the proposed Higher Education Commission (HEC)—to support postgraduate research and innovation especially in the science-oriented universities, and to also establish a National Core Facility for cutting-edge technologies critical for international competitiveness. They could also take the initiative in establishing the proposed National Research and Innovation Council, which could also assist the government and UGC/HEC in developing S&T-related strategies and policies.

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