

## The woes of female migrant workers

*A comprehensive approach needed to address their plight*

DESPITE the immense contribution of our migrant workers to the economy in the form of remittance, among other things, we have not done enough to ensure their welfare—more so when it comes to our female migrant workers. Some of the challenges faced frequently by our female migrant workers such as language barriers and lack of skills were raised recently at a seminar on migration policy.

One of the biggest problems is that over the years, structural constraints have given rise to a migration system that condones conditions of abuse and exploitation. Private recruitment agencies and brokers in both the sending and receiving countries, who mainly control work permits, have essentially held migrants hostage, resulting in both excessively high fees and a lack of protection of migrant workers. Similarly, female migrants are heavily dependent on informal networks—which consist of *dalals*—and oftentimes end up becoming victims of fraudulence. In the absence of effective state monitoring, what all this has done is create a situation where ensuring the protection of migrant workers has become a challenging feat. It is thus no wonder that thousands of female migrants have returned from the Middle East, recounting horrific stories of abuse and torture.

We have a horde of well-intentioned laws and policies, such as the Overseas Employment and Migrants Act 2013 and the Expatriates Welfare and Overseas Employment Policy 2016, but clearly, these are not enough. Concrete action needs to be taken at the grassroots and meaningful reforms undertaken. The manpower sector has to be streamlined and monitoring increased to bring to book unscrupulous recruiting agencies and to remove the middlemen. The Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment should establish a unit dedicated to women, and local governments, which are critical for addressing issues at the grassroots, need to be sensitised to migration issues of women. Greater coordination is needed among consulates and missions in destination countries and relevant ministries in Bangladesh, and labour attachés need to be more proactive in providing protection for our female migrants. In the short- to medium-term, the government should come up with a well-rounded strategy, in consultation with all the stakeholders, to put in place standard terms of employment for our migrants. And a long-term vision is also needed to boost the skills of our migrant workers so that they do not remain trapped in the vicious cycle of poverty, low-skilled jobs and exploitation.

## Government should prioritise road maintenance work

*Budgetary allocations for repair work too little*

WE are quite surprised to learn that the government has allocated only Tk 2,550 crore for the repair and maintenance of all roads and bridges across the country, whereas the Roads and Highways Department (RHD) says that they need around Tk 10,679 crore in the current fiscal year to fix the roads that are in bad condition. An RHD survey has found that 25 percent of roads under its supervision are in "poor, bad or very bad" condition. According to them, while only minor repair work can improve the conditions of many of these roads, if done in time, the same roads would need major repair if they are left in bad conditions for long. This also means that a huge amount of money would be wasted because of the delay in the repair work.

In recent years, the government has undertaken several mega projects to improve the road networks across the country. New bridges, flyovers and overpasses are being built to ease traffic movement across the country, which is commendable. Already three new bridges on the Meghna, Gumti and Shitalakhya rivers are in operation which have mitigated the sufferings of the commuters on the Dhaka-Chattoogram highway to some extent. In 2018, the government took up five mega projects involving Tk 3,368.21 crore for developing and widening district roads in five of the eight zones in the country, the work of which is ongoing. However, from the budget allocated for road repairs in this fiscal, what we understand is that the government has not given due importance to the road maintenance work.

Thus, the government needs to make appropriate budgetary allocations for the repair and maintenance of the roads. Routine maintenance of roads has to be done properly and should get priority in budget. Otherwise, all the new bridges and overpasses, and the mega projects will fail to yield the desired result.

# Rohingya crisis: The long view



MOHAMMAD ZAMAN

faulted for a pessimistic view of the ongoing diplomatic efforts by the Bangladesh government and Myanmar's handling of the repatriation issue. Naypyidaw's initial deal for repatriation subsequently withered in early 2018 with a profound decline in interest, followed by a security blanket in the Rakhine state. There is apparently very little confidence among the Rohingyas in Cox's Bazar in the possibility of a return anytime soon due to the ongoing monk-military-led crackdown and atrocities against the remaining 300,000 Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar.

It has been already two years since some 800,000 Rohingyas fled the violence and persecution in Rakhine to join an earlier group of more than 200,000—forced out of Myanmar in the 1990s—in Bangladesh. Of them, only 50,000 have official refugee status in the country; the rest are living in Cox's Bazar camps mired in legal limbo, as forcefully displaced Myanmar nationals. A recent report based on a survey of approximately 2,100 Rohingyas focused on the plight of the displaced who are living under very difficult circumstances in the camps. The situation in camps is increasingly becoming tense, presenting both immediate and long-term challenges for the aid agencies and the host country, leaving the latter with an enormous humanitarian burden and growing social problems without any prospect for repatriation.

No matter how quickly the Bangladesh government wants the repatriation, a longer-term plan with appropriate policies is now required to support the Rohingya population. Any hope for an early crisis resolution would be misplaced, because the Rohingya crisis has many components to resolve—for example, their rights to return with citizenship, appropriate conditions in Rakhine for a safe return, readiness by the Rohingyas, geo-political power struggles among neighbouring countries, and the role of the international community. It may take years, even up to a decade, to find a just and viable solution. The current status quo surrounding the crisis indicates the need for a long view requiring simultaneous and protracted engagements on many fronts for a sustainable solution, including further support to the displaced Rohingyas in the camps. The followings are a few areas of work that Bangladesh should pay attention to for a resolution of the crisis in the long run.

### Work within and outside the UN system

While the prospect for some progress in negotiations remains elusive, the Bangladesh government should continue its current diplomatic efforts both within and outside the UN system. Unfortunately, the world body, particularly its Security Council, has failed to rise above petty politics despite the "textbook" case of genocide committed by the Myanmar military. To date, the Myanmar military and the government remain unrepentant about the atrocities committed against the Rohingyas. They are also unmoved by the international demand for justice and trial of the Myanmar generals for their war crimes in Rakhine state. Despite this,

refugees who took shelter in the country. Further, India never extended its support to Bangladesh in any international forum to solve the crisis. Indeed, Dhaka has failed to secure any support from notable Myanmar-backers such as China, Russia and India, who have economic and military ties worth billions. As a result, Bangladesh seems to have failed to prove itself as strategically more important than Myanmar. This may hopefully change with the visit of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to China in July to press the Rohingya issue for a solution.

### Work closely with Naypyidaw

There has been almost a diplomatic deadlock between Dhaka and Naypyidaw since the failed repatriation bid in November 2018. The communication

of the children as well as their education and work both in the short- and long-term contexts, including those of the host communities. This will require consultation, effective communication and engagements with the Rohingyas in all matters related to the camps and camp governance. Further, the Rohingyas should be considered stakeholders in any international dialogues for relocation and repatriation.

### Time to step up international pressure

Bangladesh and the international community should put pressure on Myanmar to create necessary conditions in Rakhine for the repatriation of the Rohingyas. There are unforeseen risks associated with delays and playing with



Can the displaced Rohingyas return to their homeland anytime soon?

PHOTO: REUTERS/DANISH SIDDIQUI

the involvement of UN agencies such as UNHCR and UNDP remains critical for the repatriation process and for creating conditions in Myanmar conducive to a voluntary and sustainable repatriation of the Rohingyas.

### Engage with friendly, powerful neighbours to find a resolution

Since the UN has failed to resolve the crisis, Bangladesh should work with the powerful regional forces such as India, China and Japan to drum up support for a durable and early solution. Japan has expressed its full support to the Rohingya repatriation issue. India has not been much supportive of Bangladesh's efforts and has rather expelled many Rohingya

channels are nearly closed with mutual accusations on many issues, including excuses for delaying repatriation of the Rohingyas. As a result, Dhaka is not in control of the Rohingya issue although it continues to pay a heavy price in many ways. Diplomacy, negotiation and regular contacts should be helpful to develop common grounds for repatriation that may break the deadlock.

### Support the Rohingyas and host population

The Rohingyas living in camps must be heard and consulted. Relief and rehabilitation are not enough; there should be ways to explore and accommodate the needs of the Rohingyas in terms of their aspirations, the future

of the Rohingya issue. Recently, Bangladesh raised the issue at an international forum in China largely to seek Chinese and other Asian nations' involvement to resolve the crisis for the sake of regional peace and stability. The international community must realise the potential security threats that a protracted crisis poses unless it is resolved by compelling Myanmar to take back its displaced nationals from Bangladesh. The Rohingya crisis requires fresh collective action by all peace-loving countries.

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# Miscarriage on the rise: Effects of climate change in coastal Bangladesh

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MOST people felt the temperature this summer was higher than previous years, and that it has become intolerable. On the other hand, this perceived rise in temperature has brought satisfaction to the salt producing farmers, who believe the salinity of water will help them produce more in the upcoming years. Since farmers in the coastal areas of Bangladesh failed to meet their production target for the last

percent of Bangladesh, covering more than 30 percent of the cultivable land in the country. Now that the land is facing the altered level of salt and minerals, people are having health issues related to excessive salt intake.

About 53 percent of the coastal areas are affected by salinity. The greatest threat to biodiversity—ecosystems on both land and water—is, in fact, from saltwater encroaching on coastal ecosystems. Excessive salt intake and the resulting outcome on health have prompted

For the last thirty years, ICDDR,B has been running a health and demographic surveillance site in and around the coastal areas. Their study related to pregnant women revealed surprising information: women inland are less likely to miscarry than those in coastal regions. Between 2012 and 2017, ICDDR,B scientists registered 12,867 pregnancies in the region they monitored, which encompasses both the hill area and the plains. The team also kept the cohort of pregnant women under surveillance.

physicians are increasingly treating patients with cardiovascular diseases like hypertension or stroke, along with pregnancy-related complications such as miscarriage, preeclampsia or eclampsia. Scientists who studied and compared pregnant women living near saltwater (Chakaria, Cox's Bazar) to those living near fresh water bodies (Matlab, Chandpur), also found a noticeable difference in miscarriage rate between the two groups. For example, in Chakaria, they found 11 percent of pregnancies ended in miscarriage, whereas in Matlab it was much lower, around 8 percent. As miscarriage is related to events induced by the effect of extra salt intake, this difference is believed to have occurred due to the amount of salt in the water the women drink. So, in other words, the increase in miscarriages in coastal regions is caused by climate change.

The rising sea level and its effects have become more prominent nowadays. With a one millibar decrease in atmosphere pressure, the sea level rises by ten millimeters. Environmental scientist Jonathan Gilligan, working on climate change in Bangladesh, believes that our geography will naturally counter sea level rise until it becomes too rapid, and therefore unwieldy, due to climate change.

The world has seen the first climate change refugees already. During the 24th United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP24) that took place late last year in Poland, the taskforce report on forced displacement due to climate change was optimised to give this issue greater prominence and importance. As a low-lying country full of flood plain land, Bangladesh is particularly susceptible to changes caused by global warming. Some scientists from the western world are arguing whether more of the adverse effects of climate are human-induced or natural. But they should know that climate change knows no border. When humans are behind it, the solution is much more straightforward—we can address our own acts. But even if the risks are inevitable and natural, we can work to counter health-related risks. The best preparation for tomorrow is doing the best today.

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While the western world is arguing whether climate change is manmade or natural, its effects are already being felt, especially in countries like Bangladesh.

PHOTO: MARUF HASAN

few years, rising salt levels are desirable to them. Although the layman's thought matches the scientist's expertise in the sense that salinity in water bodies has increased, the news is unfortunately not all good.

Rising salinity is actually destroying the fertility of the land and reaching natural reservoirs of fresh water in villages across the coastline, thereby increasing the collateral damage to those inhabiting the areas. The coastal region covers almost 29,000 square km or about 20

many research projects on the topic. Researchers from different institutions have noticed a higher rate of miscarriage and altered blood pressure level in coastal areas. An in-depth study concluded that climate change might be to blame. While miscarriages are not out of the ordinary, scientists from ICDDR,B (International Centre for Diarrhoeal Disease Research, Bangladesh), who have been following those communities for a long period of time, have noticed an unusual increase, particularly compared to other areas.

Comprehensive maps generated using Geographic Information Systems (GIS) showed that pregnant women living within 20 km of the coastline and 7m above sea level were 1.3 times more likely to miscarry than women who live inland. The difference may not seem alarming at first, but given the long study period and the large size of the population studied, the results are indeed quite significant and consequential.

This fact is also evident from the Upazilla Health Complexes where

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### A monstrous crime

I was shocked to read about the rape of a nine-month-old baby in Chattogram. Such abuse of an infant is a monstrous crime. It seems, in our society, things are only getting worse. The behaviour of the locals has also been unacceptable. Whereas the victim's family should have received sympathy and support from the community, they were shunned. From what I gathered from news reports, the victim's guardians are being treated as if they are the offenders.

The culprit in this case is now on the run, while the child is fighting for her life. Even if the offender is caught and punished, will it change the warped mentality of the perpetrators? How do they even find the audacity to commit such acts? Our tendency to blame the victims and skewed perspective towards females are the root causes of such occurrences, which are not being looked into.

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