

Not a single dispute resolved in two decades

CHT Land Dispute Resolution Commission practically non-functional

FOLLOWING the signing of the CHT Peace Accord in 1997 between the then government and Parbatya Chattogram Jana Sanghati Samiti, the CHT Land Dispute Resolution Commission was formed in 1999 in line with the accord. However, it is extremely unfortunate that two decades after its formation, the commission has not been able to solve a single land dispute, even as the complaints keep piling up. Around 22,000 complaints have been filed with the commission since 1999, but the commission remains ineffective due to a variety of reasons—primary among them being the lack of a set of rules and regulations needed for the commission to do its job.

Why, after two decades, the government has not framed the rules (under the amended CHT Land Disputes Resolution Commission Act 2001) necessary for the commission to begin hearings of land disputes is the question. It is a well-known fact that the resolution of land disputes is central for peace and prosperity in the hill districts which have endured a decades-long ethnic conflict arising out of the indigenous peoples' desire to secure land rights. Although the peace accord brought an end to the armed conflict, indigenous people in the region are far from realising their land rights. The livelihood and wellbeing of thousands of indigenous people depend on their successful reclamation of land. Many of them became internally displaced due to the ethnic conflict and many who had fled to India returned in the 1990s, and the commission, had it been functional, could have helped these indigenous families get back their ancestral land.

This is yet another classic case of good intentions that have no bearing on reality. Although the commission has significant powers on paper (for instance, the judgment by the commission is to be deemed as a decree of a civil court as per the 2001 Act), the absence of rules and shortage of manpower mean that the body is effectively toothless.

We fail to understand the point of having a commission in place that does not have the means to carry out its duties, particularly when something as critical as land rights of indigenous people is concerned. This clearly shows a lack of political will. It is high time the government framed the rules needed for the commission to function and addressed the manpower crisis.

Facing the challenges of technological revolution

Skills development is the answer

A RECENT study has revealed that some 53.8 lakh jobs will be lost within the next two decades because of the "Fourth Industrial Revolution". According to the study, five specialised industries—garment, food and agriculture, furniture, tourism and hospitality, and leather and footwear—will be at risk because of the adoption of new technologies. And of the five sectors, garment will be the worst hit, with as many as 27 lakh jobs likely vanishing by 2041. Such predictions are worrying since we do not seem to be prepared to face the challenges of technological advancement. So determining how we would respond to these new challenges is of crucial importance.

We have to face the fact that despite a satisfactory economic growth, we could not lower the growing unemployment rate in the country. According to Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS), of the total 63.5-million-strong labour force in the country, 2.7 million are unemployed. Apparently, the unemployment rate would further increase because we lack a skilled workforce. At present, there are lakhs of jobs that are held by foreign nationals because we do not have the trained workforce to compete with them. The picture is, no doubt, worrying.

However, we can change the trend by taking an integrated and comprehensive approach involving all the stakeholders. We need to provide skills development trainings to our workers so that they do not lose jobs because of automation, among other things.

Most importantly, we need to overhaul our education system to face the challenges of the fourth industrial revolution. While upgrading the curriculum at the school and college levels is of vital importance, incorporating technology-based education, including robotics, should be considered at the higher level. At the same time, students should be encouraged to have vocational education so that they become skilled for particular jobs. The bottom line is, there is no alternative to a skilled and trained manpower to cope with the jobs of the current world.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Take effective steps to tackle dengue

A record number of patients have been admitted in many hospitals across the country. The country is now in dire straits with both the city corporations of the capital city failing to act effectively to revert this situation. The medicines that have been used so far to kill the Aedes mosquitoes in Dhaka have proven to be fruitless, with dozens of lives lost already.

While there is evidently a massive outbreak of panic, the authorities have failed to show the required level of concern that this state demands. The authorities need to own up to the situation and start taking serious measures. Holding press conferences, providing aerosol sprays, etc. are clearly not being sufficient to tackle the situation. More useful medicines should be brought in as the existing ones are failing to deliver desired results. Hospitals should be well-equipped to treat the rising number of dengue patients so that people do not have to lose their lives anymore.

Foysof Alam, by email

Socio-economic impacts of the Rohingya influx



communities and how it has affected the long-term development needs of Bangladeshis living in the affected areas.

The immediate effect of Bangladesh hosting about a million people on its soil, as pointed out in the report, is that prices of daily essentials have risen by about 50 percent, wages of day labourers have decreased, some 2,500 households fell below the poverty line, about 5,500 acres of reserve forests have been decimated and 1,500 hectares of wildlife habitat destroyed. "The study has used a mix of primary survey data, secondary data from traditional sources and occasionally perceptions based on the researchers' understanding. Key Government of Bangladesh (GoB) agencies engaged in the provision of services to the Rohingya and the host population are identified and their current personnel strength assessed."

That poverty has increased by nearly three percent in the host community is something that is not talked about much. We also learn that about 75,000 people in the host community have become more vulnerable in poverty terms due to the refugee crisis. Day labourers are bearing the brunt of the refugee influx since cheap labour is available from the Rohingya community and a ban on fishing on the Naf River along the Bangladesh-Myanmar border is causing hardship and threatening livelihoods of some 35,000 fishermen and their dependents. These fisher folk families each had, according to the study, an annual income of around Tk 70,000 per annum which has now all but dried up.

The damaging effects of hosting so many people in the areas of some hill districts has had an adverse effect on the local economy. We are informed that the road infrastructure has sustained damage to the tune of about USD 200 million. The study also looks at repatriation costs and here the figures become astronomical! It's estimated that USD 3.2 billion will be required for refugees to return to their home country under the best-case scenario and if we are looking at 600 refugees returning on a daily basis, the process will take five years to complete. The study states, however, that if the number of returnees drops to 200 people a day, the cost will escalate to USD 11.6 billion and the number of years it will take to repatriate the entire refugee population will be 13 years.

In the first three weeks of the influx (in August 2017), Bangladesh received more refugees than all of Europe did in 2016 at the height of the Syrian crisis. Putting that into perspective, Bangladesh which has less than 0.31 percent of the global population, hosts 4.7 percent of its total refugees. Only now has the data become available to gauge the socio-economic burden of this foreign population living on Bangladeshi soil. The researchers used both qualitative and quantitative tools to gather data and information on community perceptions "in order to be able to assess the impacts, as well as secondary sources."

The arrival of the Rohingyas (in three phases) from the Rakhine state started in 1978. The latest wave in 2017 was by far the largest, and the refugee population is estimated

at 882,676 or 203,137 families. Children make up more than half the population. The government, with support from the international community, set up temporary settlements for refugees. The political process for their repatriation has been dragging on for the last two years and in the meantime, we have seen its adverse impact on host communities.

Price of rice has increased significantly because rice is also the staple food for Rohingyas. The survey found rice prices in Teknaf and Ukhiya post-influx to be Tk 38 per kg during May-June 2018, lower on average than the national price by Tk 6 per kg (Tk 44 in April 2018).

Survey data shows that mean wages of all labourers declined from Tk 417 pre-influx to Tk 357 post-influx, or a decline of 14 percent in Teknaf (in Ukhiya it was 6 percent). The agricultural wage in Ukhiya is said to have



This photo taken last year shows Rohingyas carrying logs on a hill slope in Ukhiya. Researchers say the main reasons for deforestation in Cox's Bazar include cutting down of trees to make space for Rohingya camps, build homes and to use wood as fuel.

PHOTO: MOKAMMEL SHUVO

fallen at a much higher rate. Agricultural wage in Teknaf has apparently fallen by 11 percent. These figures tell us that there is now an abundant pool of agro-labourers and they are coming from the refugee population, who are mostly working close to their camp area (in Teknaf and Ukhiya).

Overall, the impact of nearly a million new people living in the two hill districts has taken a toll on agriculture production. According to data from the Department of Agriculture Extension (DoAE), between August 2017 and March 2018, at least 100 hectares (ha) of cropland in the Teknaf/Ukhiya area was damaged due to refugee presence. "An additional 76 ha of arable land has been occupied by refugee settlements and humanitarian agencies. Around 5,000 acres of land have been rendered useless because of sandy soil flowing down from the mountain slopes, which are being used for refugee housing purposes. Grazing lands have been destroyed."

The environment is perhaps the worst casualty. Six thousand acres of government land that were forest and hilly areas were initially used to house the refugee population. These forest areas have been levelled to

make room for temporary housing and we know from the Forest Department data (Cox's Bazar) that the refugee influx has destroyed approximately 4,818 acres of forest reserve worth about USD 555 million. Every day, nearly three quarters of a million kg of timber, vegetation and roots are collected from the reserve forest to be used as cooking fuel (equivalent to the surface area of four football fields).

The report goes on to discuss, in detail, what effects the Rohingya crisis has had on the rise in cost of housing, damage to physical and business infrastructure, increase in poverty levels, health services, education and social protection on host communities, etc. It also deals with the rising tension between the host communities and refugees. The fact that refugees now outnumber the local populace is not helping matters, primarily because

finite resources are now being shared and depleted at an alarming rate and there is little that government agencies can do about it. As the refugee crisis drags on from months to now years, security issues are creeping in.

While local community members are generally sympathetic to the plight of the newcomers, there is growing anxiety of being "outnumbered" by foreigners in one's own land. This sense of vulnerability is going to become more and more complex as time goes by. These are the issues that the government will have to deal with sooner than later. And the international community will have to do more than just pay lip service about what a grand job the Bangladesh government is doing to host such a huge refugee populace. It is not merely a question of cents and dollars. Rather, the longer the Rohingyas stay on Bangladeshi soil, the greater will be the dangers of conflict erupting between Bangladeshis and Rohingyas. This must be avoided at all costs and the time has come to up the ante on the military junta in Myanmar to start repatriation of its people or face charges of genocide at The Hague.

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on the ethnic Chinese of the region. Though the older English-speaking generation is on the wane, the young English-speaking millennials seem to be spearheading a political movement for democracy and social justice.

After months of escalating protests against the extradition bill to China that Hong Kong's Chief Executive Carrie Lam wanted to pass through the Legislative Council (Legco), it appears that a shaken Beijing is now sitting up and contemplating to govern Hong Kong rather than administering the region. As the trust gap between the protesters and the Carrie Lam administration grew wider, demands for the chief executive's resignation also came up forcefully from the demonstrators.

Actually, the protests have a background that goes well into the British period. In the early 1980s, Britain and China prepared for the transfer of the territory to Chinese sovereignty and signed the Joint Declaration in 1984. The Joint Declaration ensured "one country, two systems" for Hong Kong after transfer of sovereignty in 1997. Hong Kong, known as a special administrative region (SAR), was to retain for the next 50 years all its Basic Law (mini-constitution of Hong Kong) features—capitalistic economic system, its own currency, legal system, and so on, except foreign policy, defence and interpretation of Basic Law; three subjects which were under Beijing's control.

Under the Basic Law, Hong Kong has a distinct autonomous identity but is subordinated to Chinese sovereignty. The Chinese renminbi is not legal tender in Hong Kong, as Hong Kong dollar is not

accepted in mainland Chinese shops. Residents of Hong Kong do not hold Chinese passports but Hong Kong SAR passports. The official languages in Hong Kong are English and Cantonese while in the mainland, it is Mandarin. Ethnic Chinese in Hong Kong refuse to identify themselves as Chinese, according to a study by Hong Kong University.

Britain, which prides itself on its democracy, never allowed direct election in the territory. It appointed the governor and also Hong Kong's 70-member Legco. Fearing monolithic Chinese Communist Party rule after 1997, there were agitations in 1986 in Hong Kong for universal suffrage. The demand for a directly elected Legco and governor/

the remaining 35 from the "functional group" of lawyers, bankers, trade union leaders, etc. The pro-China group of members currently has majority in the Legco. The chief executive is still appointed by Beijing. In 2014, the Umbrella Movement—also known as Occupy Movement—was born when thousands of protesters used yellow umbrellas to fend off pepper spray from police. Demonstrators wanted Beijing to desist from vetting the candidates for the chief executive post. Many young student leaders were arrested by the police at that time.

But the undaunted millennials have continued with their agitation for democracy. What is happening now is a



PHOTO: THOMAS PETER/REUTERS

A demonstrator holds up a sign during a protest in Hong Kong, 2019.

chief executive grew successively larger over the years. However, in an astute move, Britain allowed direct election for the Legco in 1995, just two years before the hand-over of the port city to China. Hong Kong residents were elated that the system would continue under Beijing's rule and they would enjoy more freedom and social justice. That hope was dashed when, on the night of the transfer of sovereignty on July 1, 1997, Beijing dissolved the Legco.

However, since 2000, Beijing gradually allowed direct election to 35 seats of the Legco, but continues to appoint

sequel to the movement that was born in the mid-1980s. They fear that the principles of the Basic Law would be tampered with by Beijing. Since early February 2019, young school and college students descended onto the streets to protest against the extradition law, which, if passed by Legco, would allow the Hong Kong administration to extradite anyone charged with any offence to mainland China to face trial in Chinese courts. Carrie Lam has declared that the bill is now "dead".

Actually, the resistance by the protesters is to deny Beijing its powers of

sovereignty over Hong Kong. They do not want Beijing to dilute Hong Kong's legal system and civil liberties. The protests involving tens of thousands of young millennials have been growing with each passing week, and are becoming increasingly violent. Clashes with police and arrests are a regular development now. On July 1, a group of protesters entered the Legco building and vandalised it. There have also been attacks on the protesters recently at an underground metro station, meaning that the territory is definitely divided between the protesting millennials and the pro-China population. However, there has been no death in police action so far.

Beijing seems to be in a dilemma—whether to allow more freedom and democracy in Hong Kong or let the army move in, as it did in 1989 at the Tiananmen Square, and brutally crush the movement. Allowing Western-style democracy in Hong Kong can trigger off similar demands in mainland China.

Hong Kong grew in importance in the 1950s when it gradually became a manufacturing hub and the international financial centre of the Asia-Pacific region, because of its geographic location and business-friendly atmosphere. It is extremely important to both China and the business houses around the world. Beijing is aware that Hong Kong attracts international attention because of its importance.

China has accused Britain of inciting violence in Hong Kong and exchanged vitriol with London. Beijing is unlikely to buckle under pressure but it also does not want any bloodshed. The coming weeks may see a hardening of Beijing's stand and Carrie Lam making more arrests of young leaders.

The movement in Hong Kong is a personal challenge to Xi Jinping. Maintaining law and order and peace in the territory and keeping the wheels of Hong Kong's financial hub churning is Xi Jinping's primary objective. Any bloodshed will drive off international businesses and make the territory an unsafe place.

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