

Take action against the attackers

Ducsu VP attacked for the eighth time!

WE condemn the attack on Ducsu Vice President Nurul Haque Nur by the ruling party men during Eid vacation. Reportedly, Nur along with his friends were attacked with rods, steel pipes, and machetes allegedly by local Chhatra League and Jubo League activists in Patuakhali's Galachipa while they were going to Nur's sister's house. According to Nur, after the assault, the attackers confined them to a shop for some time and even prevented him from getting treatment at local hospitals. Sadly, this is not an isolated case. Since being elected Ducsu VP on June 30 last year, Nur has been attacked eight times by activists of Chhatra League and other ruling party affiliated organisations. He was even beaten up for joining an event as innocuous as an iftar party last Ramadan.

What's more, he had been threatened by the ruling party men and members of law enforcement agencies several times. Nur alleged all this in a recent press conference. The question that naturally arises: Is he being targeted for being a leader of the Bangladesh Sadharan Chhatra Adhikar Sangrakkhan Parishad, the platform that spearheaded the quota reform movement? This platform has earned a reputation for standing up for the general students' rights during many past student movements. Nur's claim that he and activists of his organisation face the wrath of the ruling party men for protesting their wrongdoings must have some ground. The government must look into such allegations.

Frequent attacks on an elected vice president of Ducsu only goes to show the lack of tolerance of the ruling party men towards dissenting voices. This is not acceptable in a democracy. The government must ensure a democratic environment where dissenting voices are not met with repression by those in power. In this particular case, the law enforcement agencies must play their due role and take action against those who attacked Nur and others. We also hope that those who previously attacked Nur would also be brought to justice. Nur must be protected from what appears to be targeted attacks by members of the ruling party. We appeal to the prime minister to intervene and stop these senseless acts of political vengeance by members of her party.

Business as usual at Chawkbazar

The chemical warehouses are back!

IT has been six months since the devastating fire that ripped through Chawkbazar. We are silent witnesses to the lives lost and the empty promises made by authorities that things would change and chemical warehouses would not be allowed to store their ware in the residential area. Unfortunately, this is a classic case of avoiding responsibility. As the public gaze moved away from the Chawkbazar tragedy, the warehouses have returned silently. To apply salt to injury, the families of those injured or those who became casualties in the fire have not received any financial compensation from the State.

The infamous Haji Wahed Mansion, where the fire had originally started, stands like a ghost mansion. Of the thirty or so businesses that sustained damage in the fire that spread, a mere five establishments have been able to recuperate their losses and start all over again. The people who live in the neighbourhood of Haji Wahed Mansion continue to live in fear of their lives because the danger remains omnipresent. We would like to know why authorities refuse to take action against the hundreds of warehouses storing flammable material which continue to operate in the area with impunity.

While local community pressure has desisted the infamous Haji Wahed Mansion from opening shop again, precisely what is to stop yet another disaster to strike again in Chawkbazar, or, Mitford, Armanitola, Kayettuili, Agamasi Lane, Islambagh, Bongshal, and other areas—which are “residential” and yet are used for the storage of chemicals to make body spray and cigarette lighters? The first major fire claimed 124 lives in Old Dhaka's Nimtoli area. The Chawkbazar incident took another 70 or so lives and yet nothing changes. No relocation for chemical warehouses and no compensation for families who lost loved ones, because it appears that making profits is more important than safeguarding people's lives!

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Businesses need a change in perception

Finding a job these days takes considerable effort, whether it be at a private or government institution. On top of that, a number of companies are apparently reluctant to hire graduates from certain universities which makes things more problematic. Because companies are mainly looking to hire graduates from only a handful of universities, students coming out of universities that are considered mediocre have fewer options available to them.

Shortlisting candidates for a job should extend beyond which university they graduate from. Companies should consider how qualified a candidate is based on their individual abilities, not just the universities they attend. Sadly, however, this does not seem to be the case. Applicants are often overlooked because of such discriminatory practices.

Although many top businesspeople propagate the need for creative thinking, it seems the companies they lead haven't succeeded in getting out of such traditional thinking. The perception that creative people deserve a chance to prove themselves is yet to be truly established in Bangladesh. Which is why, our perception regarding this matter must change first.

Abu Hasnat Evna Mostafa, Corporate HR Executive, Ananta Companies

Repatriation of Rohingyas: Evidence of Myanmar's lack of preparedness

AN OPEN DIALOGUE



ABDULLAH SHIBLI

THE Rohingya repatriation is now rumoured to start in a few days, on August 22 to be specific. “Repatriation [of Rohingyas] is always on the table. It can start anytime,” the Bangladeshi foreign secretary announced to journalists following a seminar at BISS in the capital this week. Unfortunately, the optimism expressed by the official is not shared by everyone. Only a few days ago, Bangladesh's Foreign Minister Dr Abdul Momen spoke at Harvard University about the status of Bangladesh's negotiations with Myanmar over Rohingya repatriation. He was the keynote speaker at the “International Rohingya Awareness Conference” at the Kennedy School of Government. During this presentation, the foreign minister emphasised once again that the Rohingyas will return voluntarily only when they feel that the conditions on the ground in Myanmar's Rakhine State are appropriate and favourable. It is clear from all independent accounts that the ground conditions are not yet ripe for repatriation.

As I see it, there are three elements essential for what the Vatican News termed as “conducive environment and conditions for repatriation”. First, the Rohingyas must be given some form of reassurance regarding their most fundamental demand, i.e. recognition and citizenship. Secondly, the Rohingya refugees now living in Bangladesh need to feel a sense of security about the camps set up by the Myanmar authorities. Finally, the Rohingyas require assurance and guarantees that they will be received well by the local communities and provided all the support and material assistance they need to get back to where they had left off two years ago, before being driven out by the marauding armed forces and their henchmen in Myanmar.

It is not difficult to see that every Rohingya who is living temporarily in Bangladesh has one question on their mind: Are we better off in the camps in Bangladesh or at the camps set up by Myanmar in the so-called “Transit Centre”? They want to know if they will have freedom of mobility and equal treatment before the law should they go back. Can they expect citizenship and recognition as an ethnic community like the others?

They also wonder if they can hope to return to their abandoned homes and villages in Northern Rakhine State. And, what about the property they left behind, the homestead, the fruit-bearing trees, means of livelihood, farmland, fishing boats, and all other equipment?

A recently published analysis by an Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) shows that Myanmar has so far initiated minimal preparation for a return of more than half a million refugees, contrary to its proclaimed announcement. During the recent visit

to Cox's Bazar by a 10-member Myanmar delegation, led by Permanent Foreign Secretary Myint Thu, Rohingyas leaders articulated the conditions necessary for their return, including the ability to go back to their original villages and lands. The ASPI report backed up by new satellite imagery conclusively shows that the Rohingya settlements in Rakhine, which were burned, damaged or destroyed in 2017, are still uninhabitable and inhospitable. Some of the settlements have been taken over by the armed forces and converted into administrative and military facilities.

The Australian Institute's International Cyber Policy Centre has combined open-source data with the collection and analysis of new satellite imagery to assess the current status of settlements in Myanmar's northern Rakhine State abandoned by the Rohingyas in August 2017. The report also critically assessed the readiness of several “repatriation sites” or “relocation sites” proposed

Rohingya settlements that were burned, damaged, or destroyed during the 2017 crisis. Of these, more than 320 show no signs of reconstruction, and least of all, residential construction needed for the returnees to feel “at home” once they go back. At least 40 percent of the affected settlements have been razed. In addition to the UNOSAT data, the study identified at least 58 settlements which have been subject to new demolition in 2018. Separate to these 58 settlements, satellite imagery shows demolition has occurred in other settlements in 2019.

Secondly, the process of repatriation planned by Myanmar, and revealed in an Asean mission report, has raised grave concerns. The returning refugees are expected to stay at Hla Pho Kaung Transit Centre for a maximum of 30 days under draconian conditions. Refugees will have to sign in and out to leave the centre and adhere to a curfew. Camp security will be maintained by the Border Guard Police (BGP), an agency which had previously

military camp for practical purposes.

Finally, the government in Myanmar has taken many actions—legislative, judicial, and administrative—to make the life of Rohingyas difficult. On June 22, 2019, the central government ordered telecommunications companies to shut down the internet in parts of Rakhine and neighbouring Chin State. UN Special Rapporteur Yanghee Lee said in early July that the “information blackout is imperilling villagers, further obstructing the humanitarian response and shielding the military operations from scrutiny.”

The Vacant, Fallow and Virgin Lands Management Law was amended in 2018. In September, the parliament passed amendments requiring anyone occupying land classified as “vacant, fallow, or virgin” to apply for permits or face up to two years in prison. The government issued a March 2019 deadline for permit applications. The purpose of this amendment is to claim control over lands which have been left fallow.



Rohingya refugees carry bricks to a construction site at the Balukhali camp in Cox's Bazar, on April 8, 2019.

PHOTO: MOHAMMAD PONIR HOSSAIN/REUTERS

by Myanmar to house the returning Rohingyas.

The research team collaborated with UNOSAT, a UN organisation. UNOSAT is a technology-intensive programme delivering imagery analysis and satellite solutions to relief and development organisations.

The study used that data, and their own satellite imagery collection and analysis, to make an updated assessment of the status of these settlements. The findings are very discouraging and do not bode well for the prospect of Rohingya repatriation and resettlement. If they could read the ASPI report, every Rohingya would have asked: “What do we go back to?”

Three key findings of the ASPI should raise grave concerns and give Bangladesh some issues to discuss in future negotiations with Myanmar.

First, UNOSAT data identified 392

been accused of torturing Rohingya refugees.

Knowledgeable sources have expressed reservations about the chances of the Rohingyas being successful in this venture within this short time. They may then be sent to Taung Pyo Letwe Repatriation Centre, one of the two identified in the Asean Emergency Response and Action Team (ERAT) report. Satellite imagery of this and other repatriation sites contradict claims by Myanmar that preparations are being made for a “dignified and safe return” of the refugees. Many of these designated repatriation areas appear to be highly securitised camps more akin to detention facilities.

If they cannot return to their original home, which is highly unlikely given the current condition of their homestead, they may be sent to “relocation sites” such as Kyein Chaung. This site is built on the site of a burned Rohingya village, and is a

This applies most immediately to any land owned by Rohingyas who are either away in Bangladesh or face restrictions in movement in Myanmar. In either case, they will be unable to appeal any adverse decisions against them.

The end result of all these hostile actions against the Rohingyas has diminished the chances that they will return either on August 22 or in the immediate future. The ASPI report appears to be more relevant than the optimistic forecasts coming out of Dhaka. “The ongoing instability, violence, interruptions to communications technologies, and lack of information about the security situation in Rakhine further complicate conditions on the ground for a safe return of the Rohingya refugees.”

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PROJECT ■ SYNDICATE

Remembering the miracle of 1989



CARL BILD

THIS month marks 30 years since Europe—and human civilisation generally—began to undergo a miraculous transformation that is now etched in the world's memory. By the summer of 1989, the Soviet Union was already in terminal decline. The only question was whether communism would disintegrate peacefully, or amid an explosion of violence and devastation.

In the Soviet Union itself, Mikhail Gorbachev's policies of *glasnost* and *perestroika* had opened the floodgates of change, but Gorbachev still seemed to believe that the communist system could be salvaged through reform. Meanwhile, on the periphery of the Soviet empire, many feared that a potential collapse of the system would bring Red Army tanks back into streets and city squares. Memories of Soviet crackdowns in Berlin in 1953, Budapest in 1956, and Prague in 1968 remained vivid, as did the severe repression of the Baltic states in the run-up to World War II.

Born in terror, the Soviet Union had been sustained by jackboots and secret police. Nobody knew if it could survive without resorting to brute force once again. It was a nervous time for Europe.

But it was also a time of change. Efforts to suppress Poland's independent trade union, Solidarity (*Solidarnosc*), had failed. Forced to compromise, the Polish communist regime held semi-free elections in June 1989, in which Solidarity won all but one of the freely contested seats. Meanwhile, in the three Baltic republics (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania), broad-based “people's fronts” had already been calling for more autonomy from the Soviet Union, and soon began demanding full independence.

On August 23, two million people formed a human chain stretching 372 miles (600 kilometres) through

Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, calling for independence. The timing of the so-called Baltic Way was no accident. Exactly 50 years earlier, Hitler and Stalin had entered into a secret non-aggression pact, whereby Eastern Europe was to be divided between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. That paved the way for World War II, and immediately spelled the end of freedom and independence in the Baltics.

But the central, potentially explosive arena in 1989 was the so-called German Democratic Republic (GDR)—that is, communist East Germany. This was essentially a garrison state, built for the protection of five Soviet armies—spanning 19 divisions and comprising 500,000 soldiers—that had been

the barbed wire near Sopron, a small Hungarian town on the border with Austria. What became known as the Pan-European Picnic was the largest escape from behind the Iron Curtain since the building of the Berlin Wall. More to the point, it had been carefully planned to test the reaction of the Soviet authorities.

In the Kremlin, the Soviet leadership—or Gorbachev, at least—continued to believe that the empire was safe and could be reformed. The Baltic Way was tolerated, and the Pan-European Picnic was simply ignored. But the latent potential of those demonstrations soon became apparent. People began to flee the GDR by the thousands. Soon enough, the Hungarian authorities had no alternative



People in Lithuania on August 23, 1989, participating in the “The Baltic Way”, a human chain that extended more than 400 miles across three countries to demand freedom from the USSR.

PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

stationed there ever since 1945. Although the Berlin Wall became a powerful symbol of Europe's bifurcation after August 1961, it is worth remembering why it was needed in the first place: to prevent the collapse of the GDR, and thus of the Soviet outer empire in Europe.

A few days before the human chain formed in the Baltics, some 600-700 East German citizens had held a peaceful demonstration during which they crossed

but to open the border. Drove of East Germans flooded into Czechoslovakia in search of a route to the West. On November 9, fumbling GDR leaders even opened the Berlin Wall itself.

The East German state would be gone in less than a year. Following democratic elections in March 1990, East Germans decided to merge with the Federal Republic of Germany. With the GDR gone, the collapse of the Soviet empire

was all but complete.

Some think that the momentous change that began in 1989 was inevitable. They would do well to remember that in June of the same year, China's elderly rulers had deployed tanks to crush (literally) the peaceful freedom movement in Tiananmen Square. And there were plenty of communist leaders urging a “Chinese solution” for the demonstrations of 1989. In fact, at the Soviet command post just south of Berlin (which had served as command centre for the German Army during World War II, and which had been seized from Hitler decades earlier), Red Army marshals were awaiting orders to march in and save the empire by whatever means necessary.

No one can know what would have happened if more conservative forces within the Kremlin had prevailed. Most likely, there would have been widespread disorder and violence across much of the region, which would have put the west under substantial pressure to intervene. Open war would have been a distinct possibility. After all, large empires throughout history have generally gone out with a bang. If anything, the Soviet experience was an exception.

Thankfully, that order to the Red Army was never issued. Part of the reason was that Soviet leaders believed, mistakenly, that a crackdown was unnecessary, and that the system would survive. But it was also because democratic forces were starting to assert themselves within Russia itself. The rising leader in Moscow was Boris Yeltsin, who held no attachment to the nostalgia of an overextended and unsustainable empire.

Thirty years ago, Europe experienced a truly miraculous few months. Today, we should honour not only those who fought for change, but also those who refused to send out the tanks. Blood could have flowed through the streets of Europe once again, but it did not.

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