

Rohingya repatriation: Another futile attempt

Conditions in Myanmar have
not changed

DESPITE all the preparations for the second repatriation attempt, not a single Rohingya turned up on August 22 to be voluntarily returned to Rakhine. It is a repetition of what happened in the first attempt in 2017. This is hardly a surprise since the people who are the candidates for this “voluntary” repatriation do not feel confident about the conditions they will go back to. Their basic demands—of trying those who killed and tortured Rohingyas and drove them out of their land, ensuring citizenship and security of Rohingyas, giving back their land and properties, and protecting all fundamental rights of Rohingyas in Myanmar’s Rakhine state—have not been guaranteed by Myanmar.

First of all, comes the question: before setting another date for repatriation, were there any attempts to ask the Rohingya refugees whether they were willing to go back as is understood when we use the term “voluntary repatriation”? Apparently not, since when UNHR asked the refugees, they were very categorical about not wanting to go without having their demands met. Thus while Bangladesh has prepared lists after verification, unless the Rohingya refugees are willing to go back, such repatriation attempts will be futile.

Meanwhile, Myanmar has not held up its side of the bargain. Even after Bangladesh handed over a list of 55,000 Rohingyas, Myanmar only cleared 3,450 of them. It has also illogically cited Bangladesh as the main reason why repatriation has not been successful.

There is little reason to believe that Myanmar will meet the demands of the Rohingya which would result in voluntary repatriation. Yet, Bangladesh is hardly in a position to keep on bearing the burden of close to a million refugees. Thus unless the international community puts pressure on Myanmar and makes sure it complies with the basic demands of the Rohingya, there is little chance of any solution to the crisis which has been solely created by Myanmar.

Need for entomologists to fight dengue

Recruit them without further delay

IT is simply astounding to learn that none of the 12 city corporations have entomologists on their payroll with the posts for such specialists in Dhaka city corporations lying vacant. Without entomologists, whose job is to research vector-borne diseases, we question the efficacy of the plans being undertaken by city authorities to contain the nationwide outbreak of dengue that has seen a rise of infected persons. The hospitals can no longer cope with the estimated 60,000 people who have fallen sick and unfortunately, as it has turned out, it is not only the city corporations that have no entomologists. The Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS) that is engaged in studying different species of mosquitoes, has vacant posts for entomologist, assistant entomologist and entomology technician—these have been vacant for the last 25 years.

In the midst of all this, we understand that the DGHS promoted 11 entomology technicians to the posts of entomologists despite the fact that they are unqualified for the positions! Experts state that technicians do not have a master’s degree on entomology and hence lack both the education and the requisite training to do the job of an entomologist. These so-called quick fixes will do little to improve the public health hazard that has gripped the nation. It is hard to understand why there is such indifference to something as vital as fighting deadly diseases like dengue.

Unless health policymakers wake up to ground realities that we require scientists, like entomologists, to be recruited and staffed in our city corporations and DGHS to study the disease and its vectors to find the best way to fight them, the dengue situation will only get worse. The disease is out of control and we need action now and every day we waste mulling over the next course of action, more people are getting sick and some are dying.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Revive the tourism sector

There is no doubt that Bangladesh’s scenic beauty is one of its defining features and also a major attraction to tourists around the world. Tourism, therefore, can be a game changer for our economy. Unfortunately, due to lack of maintenance and proper policy to protect local tourist spots, the industry is failing to attract foreign visitors. Local visitors, among other influences, are largely to blame for the deteriorating condition of many tourist spots; they randomly dump trash such as poly bags, plastic bottles, water cans and other packaging materials to the detriment of the environment.

It is perhaps no wonder that such a thing should happen because we, as a nation, have a pathetic track record of breaking laws as well as a poor understanding of individual responsibility to preserve the environment. In Cox’s Bazar and surrounding regions, the huge presence of Rohingya refugees has led to the destruction of forests and caused an ecological imbalance the effects of which are already being felt. Some tourist spots face the triple whammy of lack of accommodation, security and communication. The government, along with the private sector, should come forward and utilise the potential of tourism by creating the right environment so that tourists may visit the places without causing any harm to them.

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Blessings and beatings: The cost of being a Ducsu VP



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catching up to do as a new phase begins under a different sky and far different circumstances. But for some, as Ducsu VP Nurul Huq Nur might be tempted to say, starting over after a prolonged wait also means both blessings and beatings packaged as one.

Welcome to Ducsu 2.0—the second phase of Dhaka University’s central student union, once hailed as the ground zero for all progressive movements of the students in this country. The platform, after a hiatus of 28 years, is now alive—and shall we say, kicking?—with a largely pro-government executive committee formed after a controversial election earlier in the year. Because it had been so eagerly awaited, so heavily idolised by so many people, and its memory so passionately passed through entire generations, the frustration that it has ended up creating among its advocates and the general students is that much heart-rending.

There cannot be a more egregious example of our times than this farcical excuse of a union—a patchwork of strange, incompatible bedfellows better known for their fragility than their strength. It is a microcosm of the larger stage on which we live, and shows the crumbling foundations of our electoral democracy and the deepening chasm between public interests and political will. Leading this union is its maverick vice-president, Nurul Huq Nur, who is also the joint convener of Bangladesh Sadharan Chhatra Adhikar Sangrakkhan Parishad, which spearheaded the quota reform movement. Nur is at once the current Ducsu’s cross to bear and its only redeeming feature. He is one of only two non-partisan candidates to have been elected to the 25-member Ducsu executive committee, while the remaining 23 posts have been occupied by students affiliated with Bangladesh Chhatra League, the student wing of the ruling Awami League.

However, since his ascension to the top spot, it’s been quite a whirlwind for Nur so far. He has been the subject of a coordinated smear campaign by his opponents from Chhatra League. He

has been constantly berated, ridiculed, humiliated and threatened. On one occasion, he was confined in a room and had eggs thrown at him. On other occasions, he was subjected to grievous bodily harm. According to a report by *The Daily Star*, Nur has claimed to have been physically assaulted a total of eight times since winning the election.

The latest assault occurred on August 14, when he and a group of his associates were beaten up in Patuakhali’s Galachipa Upazila allegedly by local Chhatra League and Jubo League activists. They were attacked with rods, steel pipes, and machetes as they were on their way to his sister’s house in a neighbouring upazila. After the assault, the attackers allegedly



Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina greets Nurul Haque Nur, then vice president-elect of Ducsu, at the Gono Bhaban on March 16, 2019. Pictured behind them is Golam Rabbani, then general secretary-elect of Ducsu.

PHOTO: PMO

confined them to a shop for some time and even prevented him from seeking treatment. Nur has accused the local MP, who happens to be the nephew of the chief election commissioner of Bangladesh, of orchestrating the attack—an allegation that the latter denied. Interestingly, none of the attacks on Nur drew so much as a perfunctory condemnation from the Ducsu executive committee, nor did the denials by the accused come across as too convincing, given the evidence suggesting the involvement of influential backers.

It is hard not to sympathise with Nur after all that he had to go through, both before and after the March 11 election.

It is hard not to see in him a reflection of the common folks who also live at the mercy of street thugs, corrupt police and public officials, barely holding on to their lives. It is also hard not to imagine the fate of critics and activists like him who refuse to toe the line. There appears to be a conspiracy of silence on these attacks on Nur, physical or otherwise, and a lack of initiative to address that. It suits the purpose of those who would have benefitted from him not being in the picture. With their action or lack thereof, the DU administration and Chhatra League have made it clear that a cloud of danger would continue to hang over the VP title like an axe as long as it is held by Nur, or anyone who challenges the

twenty-first century? More importantly, are we to presume that there is a disconnect between top officials who set policies and those who operate on the ground? If that is the case, then it is not just unfortunate, it is also quite frightening.

After his successful bid in the Ducsu election, Nur had said that he was “happy” and “sad” at the same time: “I am happy as well as saddened because while I am sitting on the chair, my brothers and sisters are staging demonstrations demanding re-election.” (*The Daily Star*) I wonder if “outraged” has been added to his mix of emotions in the ensuing months. It will be a justified outrage; his opponents have made sure of that.

Meanwhile, amidst all the chaos

establishment. They might find it convenient to forget that, after the Ducsu election, it was Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina who had congratulated the new committee and urged its members to work together to maintain a peaceful atmosphere on the campus. Nur began his stint with the blessings of the prime minister in whom, he later remarked, with a fair bit of emotion, he saw the image of his mother. In return, she also assured him to extend to him all necessary assistance. It puzzles us that Nur-bashing didn’t taper off in the slightest even after that. Is this how the fabled Ducsu magic will play out in the

surrounding the attacks on Nur, news has emerged that preparations are under way to hold the election of Jucsu, Jahangirnagar University’s equivalent of Ducsu, after a hiatus of 27 years. As I predicted in a column on March 24, the Ducsu election had set a corrupting precedent by creating a model of election that would soon be embraced by the administrations of other universities to hold elections for their own student unions. The dice has been rolled and there is no way we can turn it back now.

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Asean should guarantee safe return of Rohingyas to Myanmar

(This article was written before the August 22 attempt to repatriate Rohingya refugees)



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Rakhine state. The authority in Myanmar’s capital Nay Pyi Taw had announced last week that Myanmar would accept 3,450 refugees from the list of 22,000 provided by Bangladesh earlier this month, as the first batch of people to resettle in Myanmar.

It is not known publicly how the list was made and on what ground their names were submitted to the Myanmar authority. The repatriation of nearly one million refugees, who fled from difficulties and conflict at home since 1990s to shelters in Bangladesh, will be an uphill task, due to scarred memories of all involved.

Of the 911,000 people sheltered in Bangladesh’s Cox’s Bazar, nearly 740,000 left Rakhine state following brutal violence in August 2017. This saw Myanmar’s military (Tatmadaw) reacting in a heavy-handed manner to the series of attacks by militants working under the banner of the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA).

The so-called clearance operation caused atrocities including arson, torture, gang rape, murder and massacre, acts that the United Nations considered ethnic cleansing. The UN even suggested that genocide charges be raised against those responsible from the Tatmadaw.

As the first attempt to send the Rohingyas back failed in the middle of November last year, the Asean, then under chairmanship of Singapore, agreed to take part in the repatriation process for two reasons—saving Rohingyas as well as enhancing the regional grouping’s role and visibility in the Rakhine crisis.

Thailand, which took the chairmanship since January, fully supported Asean Secretary General Lim Jock Hoi and the Asean Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on Disaster

Management (AHA Centre) in their effort to take part in the repatriation process and to explore sustainable solution for the crisis.

But the regional grouping faced an uphill task when it began to work on the issue last December. The Asean Emergency Response and Assessment Team (ERAT) couldn’t enter the Rakhine state when Rakhine ethnic insurgents under the Arakan Army (AA) brandished weapons against the authorities and made the situation more complicated. The insurgents are fighting for autonomy in the Rakhine state.

The ERAT team was finally allowed to enter the state, for primary assessment, during the first half of March and it completed its first report a month later. In the meantime, Thai Foreign Minister Don

was ready to welcome Rohingya, who are regarded as “aliens” in the country, and will consider issuance of the National Verification Cards (NVC) for Rohingya refugees that wish to voluntarily return from Bangladesh.

The NVC is not Myanmar’s national ID, and many Rohingya said they do not trust it.

Although the Asean Ministerial Meeting joint communiqué, issued after the meeting last month (July), painted a rosy road for the repatriation and rehabilitation of Rohingyas, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Myanmar, Prof Yanghee Lee, who was in Thailand early July on a fact-finding mission, said the violation of human rights in Myanmar, notably in Rakhine state, was rising.

She said she would report the alarming



A Rohingya baby on the shoulder of her father at a refugee camp in Cox’s Bazar, on August 22, 2019.

PHOTO: STAR/ ANISUR RAHMAN

Pramudwinai, representing the Asean as its chair, conducted his quiet shuttle diplomacy between Bangkok, Jakarta, Nay Pyi Taw and Dhaka to explore possibilities for early repatriation and rehabilitation of the ousted refugees in Rakhine.

Don discussed the Asean plan for the Rakhine crisis with his colleagues in Bangkok in June and July when they gathered at the Asean summit and ministerial meeting respectively. The discussion produced positive outcomes. As Don told media in June, Myanmar

situation to the UN Human Right Council next month (September) and the General Assembly in October. She said Myanmar is grossly violating people’s rights and had blocked her access to the country since late 2017.

Clashes have continued since 2017, and the conflict between the Tatmadaw and the militant group AA is still raging, with reports indicating that human-rights violations and abuse against the civilian population is worsening, she said.

Given that information flow is not easy,



it is challenging to get information on what is happening on the ground and how the outside world can assess that it is safe for the Rohingyas to return, she noted.

Sources say the blockage of internet in nine townships in northern Rakhine since July has not yet been lifted. The Asean, in its joint communiqué in July, stressed the need for the Asean Secretary General and the AHA Center to conduct further work on the matter, including dissemination of information and accurate assessment of the situation to guarantee the safe return of Rohingyas.

With good cooperation from Nay Pyi Taw as a member, the Asean has adequate mechanisms and ability to get access to the troublesome areas as well as reach out to the local residents in Rakhine. If the Rakhine crisis really mattered for the regional grouping, it is time for Asean to connect and coordinate with all stakeholders including Bangladesh, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, and Myanmar to guarantee that the first batch of Rohingyas return home safe and sound, and more importantly, that they would be welcomed as full citizens of Myanmar.

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