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No refugee camp—certainly not the camps in Cox's Bazar—can be a substitute for home. Why should one expect the Rohingyas to go back to the place where they endured and witnessed unimaginable horror and destruction—simply on a promise by their oppressors?

Not a single organisation, be it intergovernmental in nature or a credible human rights body, is convinced that the situation in Rakhine is conducive to proper repatriation. The verification criteria set by Myanmar will not make even a fairly large group of Rohingyas eligible for return.

The government in Rakhine has only built (or is planning to build) several hundred congregated housing units, which are not only insufficient but also mean Rohingyas would not get back their lost land.

More importantly, Myanmar has failed to ensure whether returned Rohingyas would be granted full rights as citizens, nor has it been able to credibly assure that Rohingyas would not be subjected to similar treatment which led to their expulsion in the first place. The demands to investigate countless claims of gross human rights abuses against military and security personnel are still rejected outright by the Myanmar government.

Therefore, if one blames Rohingyas for refusing to go back under current circumstances, they would be blaming the

victims, and inadvertently or willingly, doing Myanmar's bids.

The fact that the Rohingya crisis has put enormous pressure on a resource-strapped country like ours is undisputable. And it is understandable that, as citizens, we are concerned about it. But unsubstantiated and exaggerated figures are invented to exacerbate anger.

Last week, for example, a leading news portal cited unknown officials to claim that the government spent Tk 72,000 crores for Rohingyas in two years, excluding the substantial amount of foreign assistance. In reality, the government in the 2018-19 budget allocated only Tk 400 crores for the

Other xenophobic insinuations include notions that Rohingyas are illiterate and thus breed like rabbits—ironically, coming from the people of the world's most densely populated country. Some also claim that Rohingyas are ungrateful towards host communities and are about to expel and replace the locals. An opinion piece run by a leading news portal compared Rohingyas with "abscess" that needed to be removed. Does this sound familiar?

Sadly, many on social media are influenced by these fear-mongering, hateful posts. People who welcomed Rohingyas with open arms are turning against them, although they have never met a Rohingya before. This is a textbook example of how the media could turn people's humane instincts into hate.

There is no denying that local residents around the refugee camps are genuinely frustrated. They feel threatened as they are now outnumbered by refugees. When Rohingyas first arrived in small numbers, some locals were sympathetic enough to allow them to live temporarily on their agricultural lands. But many of the guests are unable or refusing to leave now.

The crisis also attracted a large number of NGOs and humanitarian organisations. The locals resent the fact that they are not properly recruited by these organisations. Moreover, the price of primary commodities, rent and the cost of living, in general, have shot up, affecting local livelihoods.

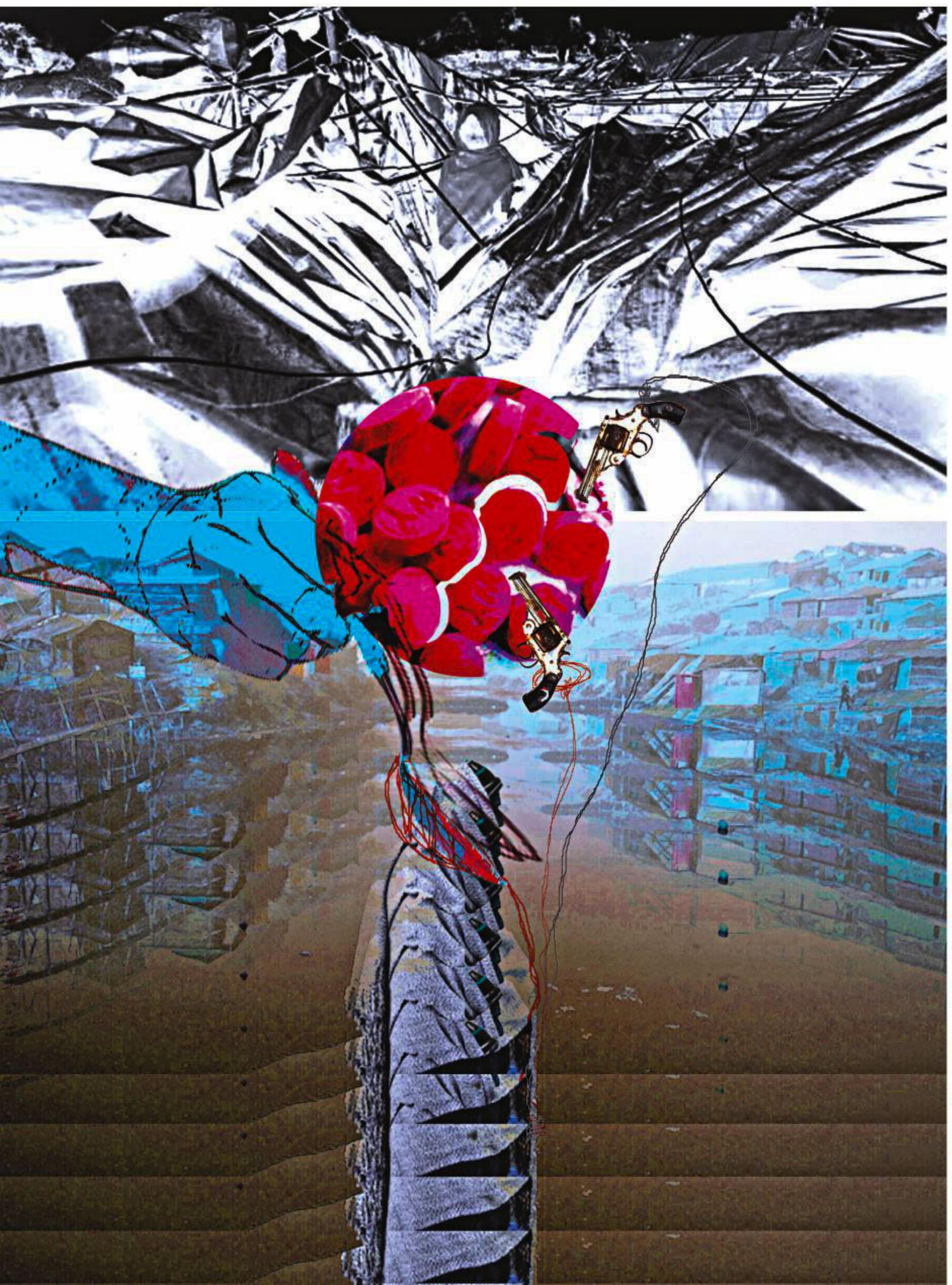
The best ways to alleviate these concerns would be to include local representatives in the decision-making process—especially in issues that directly impact them. Both the government and the NGOs should make it a policy to recruit locals on a preferential basis in appropriate positions and prefer local sources in their procurements. The authorities should also engage with the Rohingyas occupying the private lands of the locals to accommodate them in the camp.

No one disputes the need to repatriate the refugees as soon as possible—not even Rohingyas themselves. But again, it is not the Rohingyas who are pulling the strings. Therefore, provoking the domestic population against the refugees can only have serious ramifications—ones that may not be controllable.

What disturbs me the most is that we are behaving with the Rohingyas the same way as racist politicians do with immigrants like us in the West. When far-right Western politicians or hate-spewing newspapers embark on awful immigrant-bashing rants, we're astonished. When our desperate people were caught or treated inhumanely in foreign jails or camps in Thailand and Libya, or died trying to cross the Mediterranean or Bay of Bengal, we were mournful. After all, we are a country whose economy is vastly supported by millions of migrants scattered around the world, legally or illegally.

But when it is us having to host desperate people, we are not hesitating to switch to the oppressor's role. Let us not ruin the spirit with which we greeted "the most persecuted minority in the world" and set an example for the rest of the world as to how to stand in solidarity with an oppressed people.

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Rohingya.

Clearly, those who came up with these fictitious figures did not do the math, but judging by the number of shares and reactions the story attracted on social media, many got misinformed and, in the process, agitated by the presence of the Rohingyas.

Then there is the insinuation of Rohingyas being criminals. This is a classic xenophobic trope about refugees and migrants. Even respected media outlets cannot seem to delve into the Rohingya issue without focusing on the supposed "degradation of law and order situation" in the refugee camps.

The other day another journalist friend of mine posted a status on Facebook. Citing local police statistics, he wrote that over the last two years, roughly 38-43 murders were committed in the camps. That is well below the typical per-million murder rate in Bangladesh.

The notion that Rohingyas are involved in drug offenses is often exaggerated, as the whole debate surrounding drug trade generally is. Sure, Rohingyas are involved in the drug trade, but so are Bangladeshis—the most serious yaba offenders listed by several government agencies are actually powerful locals in Cox's Bazar.

Admittedly, Rohingyas have been drug mules, as have the locals. But to blame Rohingyas for the proliferation of yaba is unfair, because they are simply a small linkage of a more complicated and very large chain. Blaming Rohingyas also ignores the role of more serious enabling factors such as the geographical proximity of Cox's Bazar to Myanmar, the demand of drugs near the border, failure of law enforcement and border forces, and a lack of employment in the refugee camps.