

Telling off the UN

How does it serve our interest?

THE nature of the foreign minister's outburst against the UN, both abrasive and devoid of diplomatic suaveness, has shocked and surprised us. What has happened for the UN to deserve literally being shown the door, if the world body did not accede to the Bangladesh government's plan to relocate a segment of the refugees to Bhashan Char, is unknown to us.

We wonder what motivated such an abrasive comment that sounded very much like an ultimatum. Given the tone and tenor of the comment, by way of response to a question from Deutsche Welle, one cannot help but get the impression that our current relationship with the UN is indeed in a very bad shape.

There is no doubt that the UN has not quite lived up to our expectations. All of the efforts, through the UN Security Council, to address the matter was effectively blocked by China. And the other important Myanmar neighbour, India, though has been forthcoming with humanitarian aid, has done very little of substance in terms of bringing pressure on Naypyidaw.

As for the resettlement plan, we understand that the Bhashan Char project was drawn up independently without prior consultations with our development partners or the UN. But be that as it may, why does the government need a thumbs-up from the UN to go ahead with the plan if it feels that is in the best interest of the country? But we fail to understand to what extent the current situation will be ameliorated by relocating only less than ten percent of the refugees. How will we solve the problem involving the remaining 90 percent? And with whose help?

It will be well to remember that a diplomat thinks twice before saying nothing and judges all its implications before saying anything. We would like to think that our foreign minister really did not mean what he said and also remind him that in the absence of support from China, Russia and India, the UN remains our best hope to move ahead, howsoever slowly, with resolving the Rohingya problem. Let us not forget that the UN may not be the most effective world body, but it is the only one we have.

Progress on literacy goes slow

It requires long-term intervention

ALTHOUGH the literacy rate has reached 73.9 percent in 2018 (up from 48.8 percent in 2008), there is much work still to be done. The Awami League (AL) 2008 manifesto had promised to lift the country from the scourge of illiteracy by 2014, but things did not pan out as planned. According to Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) data, literacy rate for people aged 15 and above is nearly 74 percent. Experts tell us that there is absence of proper planning, lack of political will and financing coupled with capacity deficiency of the implementing agency, the Bureau of Non-Formal Education (BNFE).

In a country, where it had been the custom of one government to trash the programmes of the preceding government in power, it is not difficult to understand why non-formal education didn't go anywhere after 1997. Yet, we have had one government in power for more than a decade now, so that excuse doesn't wash. In 2009, the present government allocated Tk435 crore project under BNFE to lift 45 lakh people (aged between 15 and 45) out of illiteracy. That target was not reached because there has been a lack of foresight, at policy level, that non-formal education concerning literacy cannot be a time-bound exercise, but an ongoing process.

We have to move out of our project-based mentality. Eradication of illiteracy, as educationists contend, is a continuous process. The government has made some progress, but more needs to be done. And this requires not just guaranteed finance but manpower too. The BNFE itself is short of staff at the upazila level and unless the implementing agency is brought up to strength, one cannot expect better results any time soon.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Pedophiles must be handed strict punishment

Rape has become a major problem for us. Women, girls, boys and even men are becoming victims of this social malaise. What is alarming is that these days, even teachers and religious clergy are also taking advantage of their little pupils and victimising them.

It is high time punitive laws are enacted and enforced to bring the rapists to books. Ukrainian parliament has recently approved Forced Chemical Castration of Pedophiles. In addition to forced chemical castration, the new law in Ukraine also keeps provision of up to 15 years in prison for raping minors and up to five years in prison for indecent acts involving children. This practice to punish pedophiles is legal in many countries, including the United States, Britain, France, Germany, Canada, Norway, Denmark, and Sweden.

Bangladesh should also consider such strict measures to punish the culprits who victimise our children.

Mila Rahman, by email



BLACK, WHITE AND GREY



ALI RIAZ

THE bizarre phenomenon called updating the National Registry of Citizens (NRC) in Assam, completed under the auspices of the Indian central government with direct supervision of the Indian Supreme Court, which made 1.9 million people stateless citizens, has engendered strange events to date and indicates the likelihood of stranger episodes in the coming months. Since the culmination of a four-year process with the publication of the final list on 31 August, not only did those who have been excluded become devastated, but also the progenitors of this controversial task are now dissatisfied with the outcome but for a different reason.

Although the genesis of the crisis is well known, it is necessary to recall as many of the current features of the crisis and the possible trajectories shaped by it. The issue of updating the 1951 National Register of Citizens (NRC) came to the fore in the six-year long agitation by All Assam Students Union beginning in 1979 which demanded the "identification and deportation of illegal immigrants" from Assam. The expression "illegal immigrant" was a clear reference to Bangla speaking people, alleging that they have "migrated" from Bangladesh. The movement, initially billed as against the "outsider", was transformed into a movement against "foreigners". Massacres throughout the period, particularly in 1983, of Bangla speaking Muslims who have lived for generations, were neither spontaneous nor sporadic, but instead were well planned and brutally executed; in some cases, plans were hatched for months.

While the All Assam Students Union (AASU) and the All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP), were at the forefront, the All Assam Volunteers Force (AAVF) was a key actor in the agitation and violence. There were allegations that the AAVF was acting on behalf of or was at least connected to the RSS. Besides, by the admission of the RSS ideologues Rajat Sethi and Shubhrastha, (*The Last Battle of Saraighat: The Story of the BJP's Rise in the North-east*, 2017), the RSS had established its branches all over the Assam by 1975 and the "selfless service by swayamsevaks from all across the country" was instrumental in building the organisation. As such, the tone, tenor and contour of the agitation had the marks of RSS's long-term agenda. Therefore, it is not surprising that the BJP, as it became stronger all around the country and had its eyes set in the northeast, weaponised the issue of citizenship in the 2000s.

The Assam Accord, signed in 1985 with then Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi,

remained on paper until the Supreme Court in 2013 pushed it to the politicians' court. The BJP's initial slow move, which the BJP supporters are now trying to portray as the BJP's reluctance, was not because it was less enthusiastic, but instead it was preparing the ground for a larger gain—tying it up with its national anti-Muslim agenda and xenophobic exclusionary jingoism that has permeated the Indian society in the past decade. Day by day the ground was prepared in Assam and nationally, by the Assam Gana Parishad (AGP), the legatee of the so-called anti-foreigners' movement, and the BJP, the product of the RSS, respectively.

With the interjection of the Supreme Court, various institutional actors, such as the bureaucracy, became entangled in the politics of identity in a highly polarised society where religion has been pushed by Sangh Parivar as the principal marker. The exercise no longer remained about

and "termites"—in other words Bangladeshis—who need to be thrown out, has not been validated; even the initial list of 4 million—a figure which was close to the BJP and AGP propaganda—turned out to be grossly inaccurate. In equal measure, the expectation that the list will contain overwhelming numbers of Muslims, has not come true. Instead the majority, according to some account 60 percent, are Bangla speaking Hindus. There are also many people of Nepali origin, despite living in Assam for decades and generations, excluded. Those who are taking comfort in this information and arguing that the BJP has lost the game, should be careful as to whether this argument will feed into the BJP propaganda and eventually help similar exercises in other states. The inherent bias of the exercise against Muslims can't be ignored because the list has a smaller number of them. Throughout the process

of the NRC process, one can say without the hesitation that it has been bungled up. Assam's finance minister, Himanta Biswas Sarma, a vocal supporter of NRC has spewed anti-immigrant venom, and claimed in August 2018 that legacy papers—those which prove longstanding residency of the inhabitants—have been "managed", rendering the process of updating the NRC ineffective. But there is no reason to expect that the NRC will be scrapped altogether.

What comes next? Those who are not listed can appeal to the Foreigners Tribunal (FT) in the next 120 days, and later seek redress from the court of law. According to media reports, Assam has 100 Foreigners Tribunals, 221 more are to be set up in all districts soon, and eventually the number will be about 500. But there are reasons to be concerned about the process itself. The discrepancy between the draft list and the final list clearly points to an inefficient bureaucracy. It took almost a year for it to sort out some of the mess. Will the FTs be another example of the incompetence? Can an issue which is fraught with political overtones be addressed fairly by a state appointed institution? There are logistical questions, can such a huge number of applications be dealt with in such short time? Will the poor people have the resources to pursue the process, especially those whose appeal will fail in the FT process?

The Indian government clearly said that until the legal process is exhausted nobody will be considered as a foreigner, and that pushing them back to Bangladesh is not on the table. But there is no clear direction as to what will happen thereafter. The news that new detention centres are being built does not send a positive message to those who are to be disenfranchised. In June the press reported that the state government was preparing to build ten more detention centres in addition to six it already has. During the negotiations between the Congress-led central government and the agitators, leading to the Assam Accord in 1985, one suggestion was to resettle those who will be deemed "outsider" to other states, under the auspices of the central government. The proposal didn't make into the 1985 Accord. That seems to be not in the mind of the central government at this point.

The logistical issues aside, despite the debacles of the process, the belligerent rhetoric of the Sangh Parivar hasn't subsided. Therefore, what is most likely to happen in the coming months is the enactment of the Citizenship (amendment) Bill. The implication of this requires no elaboration—religion as the principal marker of Indian citizenship will be enshrined in the constitution, forever.

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People check their names after the publication of the final list of the National Register of Citizens (NRC) at a roadside shop in Pavakati village of Morigaoan district on August 31, 2019.

PHOTO: AFP

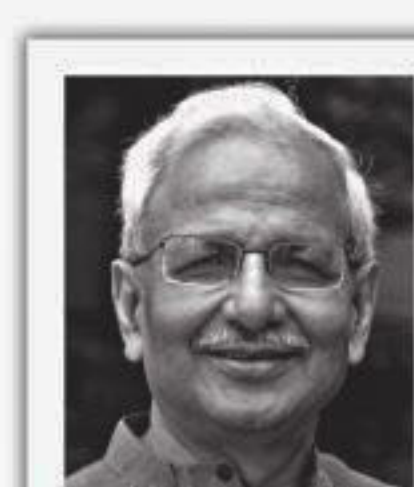
who is or who is not a citizen in the legal term, but what constitutes citizenship, who determines the citizenship and how the discourse of citizenship is framed, propagated and consumed. The implication of this exercise will neither be limited to Assam—as the BJP has already demanded NRC in other states; nor will it be restricted to the outcome of the "appeal process" in Assam, for it has already shaped the discursive terrain of citizenship. Who among the 1.9 million, now being referred to the Foreigners Tribunal, escape the disenfranchisement, is important from the humanitarian point of view and in legal terms, but how politics of religiously informed identity becomes the essential part of being Indian is the more important issue with larger ramifications. That is what the NRC debate and the list have achieved.

Of course, the BJP's claim that Assam is inundated by millions of "infiltrators"

of NRC, BJP and its ilk had made it amply clear that Muslims are the "enemy" who will be identified. This is not isolated from the lynching of Muslims in the name of cow protection, and the activities in Kashmir. Additionally, if we juxtapose this with the previously proposed 2016 Citizenship (Amendment) Bill, which promises to offer citizenship to all except the Muslims, there is no scope for doubt as to the content of the BJP agenda.

Since publication of the draft list and more so after the final list, the BJP and its ilk are crying foul and demanding rectification. The bizarre development is that one of the principal backers of the NRC in Assam has called for a general strike and threatening to launch agitations. There seems to be consensus among political parties—from the BJP to Congress to TMC—that the NRC list, which cost 1300 crore Indian rupees, is unacceptable. Notwithstanding the political objective

Will the El Paso killing be a wakeup call for America?



BADIUL ALAM MAJUMDAR

A 2009 Homeland Security Department report warned that race-based extremism would become a serious and growing threat to American national security. Since 2011, according to a recent *The Guardian* report, of the 16 major terrorist incidents perpetrated by white nationalists worldwide, killing 185 people, ten took place in America. According to the FBI director, almost half of the people arrested for terrorist activities in America this year, are domestic terrorists, presumably linked to white supremacists. Yet, the American policymakers have discounted and largely ignored these threats.

Will the mass shooting by Patrick Crusius in El Paso be a wakeup call for America?

The threat assessment from the 2009 report was rescinded on political grounds, mainly based on three pretexts: first, right-wing fear that focus on white extremist groups may lead to ignoring threats of Islamic terrorism. Second, the left-wing concern that clamping down on white nationalists may impinge upon their civil rights.

Third, the right-wing argument that violence committed by white extremists is largely due to mental illness. However, in a study involving 350 mass murderers by Professor Richard Friedman, 20 percent had a psychotic illness and the rest had no diagnosable mental illness. Similarly, an FBI study of active shooters between 2000 and 2013 found that only 25 percent ever received a psychiatric diagnosis and just five percent had a psychotic illness.

The El Paso shooting and Crusius's hate-filled manifesto make clear that the US faces a real threat of violent extremism, defined as the belief and actions of people who support or use ideologically-motivated violence against certain enemies to further political agendas. To effectively deal with this threat, it is necessary to understand what makes the

terrorists tick.

According to experts, there are pull and push factors in violent extremism. The *earthly* pull factors can be hate for and fear of others, and glory of being a hero. The *non-earthly* pull factor, in case of Islamic extremists, for example, includes all the heavenly rewards that lie in the life after.

The push factors, in contrast, cause anger and disaffection. They include: discrimination, marginalisation, victimisation, personal grievances, hopelessness and alienation. Other

extremism. They must combine with three intertwined necessary conditions to trigger the sort of extreme violence seen in El Paso: an ideology, a political agenda, and a group of enemies. Unless all three prerequisites are met, violent incidents do not qualify as violent extremism.

Extremist ideology typically provides a simplistic world view, including a set of values, usually specifying "dos" and "don'ts". It gives them a sense of purpose and community. A sense of superiority is ingrained in such ideology. White



Law enforcement agencies respond to an active shooter at a Walmart near Cielo Vista Mall in El Paso, Texas, August 3, 2019.

PHOTO: JOEL ANGEL JUAREZ/AFP

push factors include lack of rights, lack of justice, state oppression, prolonged conflict and endemic corruption which can also trigger disaffection and hence violence.

Pull and push factors more or less have been in existence in our societies from time immemorial. They are now getting stronger in western world. The rhetoric and violence perpetrated by Islamic extremists, and the seemingly endless wave of immigrants from Muslim and non-white nations are now rejuvenating fear, anger and hate within ultranationalists, neo-Nazis, and white supremacist communities.

However, the existence of pull and push factors do not necessarily lead to violent

nationalism is rooted in the idea of white supremacy. Islamic terrorism is rooted in the idea of the total superiority of the Islamic faith.

Extremist ideology is universal and, fuelled by incessant propaganda, it spreads beyond national boundaries. It is not surprising then that Patrick Crusius drew inspiration from the mass killing of 51 Muslims in Christchurch, New Zealand in March this year by Brenton Tarrant, and supported his manifesto, promoting online a white supremacist ideology subsumed as "the great replacement."

Violent extremism is driven by a political agenda which is unrealistic and unsustainable. The re-enactment of the *Khalafat* desired by Islamic extremists is no

more unattainable than the Aryan world-order desired by white supremacists.

Despite the unrealistic nature of extremists' political goals, hate, fear and animosity continue to provide daily fuel. For Islamic extremists, any "non-believer"—including other Muslims who do not believe in their narrow interpretation of Islam—are enemies. For white supremacists, non-whites practicing different cultures, speaking different languages, representing different ethnic backgrounds are enemies.

The El Paso shooter's four-page manifesto expressed fear of whites being "replaced" by foreign invaders and urged getting rid of enough immigrants to ensure a "sustainable" way of life for white Americans. He confessed that the attack in Walmart was a "response to the Hispanic invasion of Texas."

Finally, an enabling environment is required to catalyse the toxic brew of pull and push factors and necessary conditions into acts of violent extremism. Identity politics, intolerance to diversity, growing religiosity, pandering of extremists groups, existence of pro-extremist institutions and terror finance contribute to such an environment.

With the rise of acts of violent extremism committed by white extremists in America, the menace is no longer the problem of distant lands. The racist politics and anti-immigrant xenophobic rhetoric of the American leaders, especially of President Trump and the conservative media stars, are largely responsible. Their shameless bigotry on a daily basis creates an enabling environment, encouraging and emboldening their supporters to violently attack opponents.

Violent extremism, especially by the white supremacist groups, fuelled by hate, anger and fear, has now become a serious threat to the American way of life. To effectively face this threat, political leaders need to recognise domestic terrorists as perpetrators of racially motivated violent extremism are not much different from the Islamic extremist and develop appropriate strategies.

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