

UN report on Myanmar alarming

Immediate international intervention required

THE recent revelation in a report by a UN fact-finding mission that said, the 600,00 Rohingya remaining in Myanmar's Rakhine state face "serious risk of genocide" and that repatriation of the ones who have been driven out of the country by its military remain "impossible", is disturbing. The UN investigators further said that Myanmar is confiscating and building on land of the displaced Rohingya. The fact-finding mission also called for top Myanmar military generals, including its army chief, Min Aung Hlaing, to be put on trial for the crimes committed against the Rohingya. These are alarming developments with the potential to trigger further exodus of the minority community into Bangladesh.

Myanmar's actions, its tendency to shield the perpetrators from trial and reluctance to create a conducive environment—both preconditions of the Rohingya for their return to their homeland—reflect negatively on its intentions, and added to that the revelation of this report make repatriation of the Rohingya difficult.

Bangladesh has been providing shelter and security to the helpless Rohingya even with waning donor support; however, this should not be Bangladesh's concern alone. The reluctance or failure of the international community to exert enough pressure on Myanmar to take back their people has added to Bangladesh's troubles, where it is becoming increasingly difficult to host more than one million people for such a protracted period of time.

As an outcome of this report, the UN must now take stronger measures and gear up support to end the plight of the Rohingya. Countries, especially the ones with closer ties with Myanmar, should play a more proactive role to settle this issue. The genocide of the Rohingya—as suggested by the UN investigators themselves—is an international problem, and the world community must now come forward to stop this persecution and facilitate the Rohingya's return to their country. Otherwise, the world will be responsible for the systematic ethnic cleansing of a minority community in front of their very own eyes.

One doctor for every 10,000 prisoners

Their health is the state's responsibility

THE prisons in the country have an estimated 90,000 prisoners and only nine doctors to look after them. We know that some 23 inmates are dying every month because it is not just doctors that are missing from the prison healthcare system—there's a huge dearth of nurses and ambulances. Prisoners suffering from serious ailments like tuberculosis, diabetes, kidney and liver issues are at most risk. A report in this paper has unearthed these disturbing facts and figures.

One inmate had to pay for these inadequacies with his life because there was no ambulance to take him to the hospital when experiencing chest pains. Apparently, prison authorities decided to have him transferred to Dhaka Medical College Hospital and put him on a rickshaw. This incident came to light when the deceased's wife came to the media with the story. We wonder how many more stories have not been heard or reported. Prison authorities tell us that they have, over the course of many years, been asking authorities to fill the 141 doctors' positions but nothing much has happened. Doctors for their part are least interested in taking up positions because they view it as a "punishment" posting, one which hurt their careers with little scope of promotion. That explains why there are no doctors posted in 60 prisons nationwide. Pharmacists, apparently, fill the roles of doctors, but they are hardly qualified to give professional help to patients. Authorities can, for starters, set up full-fledged medical facilities in prisons so that prisoners not suffering life threatening diseases can at least, be treated. The state has a moral responsibility to look after the healthcare of the prison population. They may be prisoners but they are still citizens of this country and are entitled to healthcare like anyone else.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Lack of knowledge or dedication?

There are two types of bills present in our legislation—a bill raised by ministers known as Government Bill and a bill raised by other than ministers known as Private Member's Bill.

During a recent parliamentary session, a respectable MP proposed a Private Member's motion on definite tax structure on tobacco-based products instead of the current ad valorem tax structure. He stated that in FY2017-18, the economic loss was Tk 305.6 billion due to tobacco usage, which is less than the tax that was earned from tobacco in the same year. He also mentioned that the ad valorem tax is vague and only used by 6 countries in the whole world.

Certain ministers put the motion on rest, replying that they are considering implementing fixed tax on tobacco products. When the MP still wanted to retain its motion, the speaker put that motion on voice vote. Most of the members of the house didn't understand the question and accidentally supported the proposal.

So the speaker once again had to slowly raise the motion into question. This time they didn't make the same mistake like they did before.

This scenario is really unsettling for people. MPs who implement different laws in our country should understand the rules regarding the making of laws. And if they don't, shouldn't their dedication be questioned?

Md Zahidul Huq, University of Dhaka

NO STRINGS ATTACHED



AASHA MEHREEN AMIN

are allowed to go scot free with the help of colluding law enforcers. In this particular case the rape survivor, a woman who has a husband and three children, had filed a case accusing five persons who had on several occasions confined her and gang-raped her. It is horrifying that the victim was first taken to a house and gang raped by two of the accused and then, when she sought justice through arbitration, she was again confined by two other people and raped by them several times.

But another ordeal was waiting for her at the police station where she went to seek justice. The OC of Pabna police station along with a sub inspector forced the woman to sign divorce papers and marry one of the rapists! We can only imagine the kind of threats that were hurled at the woman when she became victim of such blatant violation of human rights. So how much power did these rapists yield to make an OC abandon his responsibility as a protector of the public and turn him into an abettor of a crime? One cannot help but be grateful that the Pabna district administration formed a probe body to investigate the incident which eventually established the fact that indeed the police officials had committed this terrible crime. The three-member committee was led by Additional District Magistrate and also confirmed that the

woman was raped several times.

We are grateful because the way things normally go, it could easily have ended with the rapists going scot free after the marriage of the victim with one of the accused was established. What would have happened to this woman who had gone through such horrific sexual violence and then be forcefully separated from her family, her children, and made to call one of the rapists her husband? Would she



be further humiliated by the perpetrators who would state that she had lied about being raped by these men?

Not that we know how she is faring after such unbelievable physical and psychological torture. But at least the rapists have been arrested, the OC has been "closed" and the sub inspector has been "suspended". We certainly hope this is not going to be the end of this case. Is it really enough for a police officer

to be "closed" when he has obstructed justice by burying evidence and instead of helping a rape victim, subjected her to further mental trauma and pushed her back into the clutches of her attackers? If any ordinary citizen did this he would of course be arrested and punished under law. But here a high-ranking law enforcer has committed a crime. Surely it cannot warrant merely being "closed" which only suspends him from work during the

set alight by a group of people assigned by the madrasa principal. The video clip of the interview in which Nusrat was asked humiliating questions was leaked on social media in a bid to discredit her. But Nusrat showed incredible courage by not withdrawing her case against the principal who had sexually harassed her. Unfortunately for her, she paid a heavy price for this bravery and died on April 10 after fighting for her life for four days.

The public outrage expressed on the streets and social media as well as publicity in the mainstream media, no doubt, helped in the culprits being arrested. The OC was sent to jail (although after 20 days of the arrest warrant being issued) in a case filed by the family under the Digital Security Act for recording the interview on his phone and releasing it on social media without her consent. Similarly, the fact that in the Pabna gang-rape case, the cabinet division sent a directive to the district administration to form a probe body and investigate the case leading to the confirmation of the involvement of police officers in covering up the crime, gives hope that justice will be served. Such decisive action against police officers should give out the right message to members of the police force. It should be made clear that no matter how powerful their position is in the law enforcement agencies or in political circles, everyone is accountable for a crime as dishonourable and despicable as colluding with murderers and rapists. We fervently hope that the police officers are tried and punished under law and that the administrative diligence with which the Pabna case has been handled, will not be an exception but the rule from now on.

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India-Russia bonhomie in a changing world



PALLAB BHATTACHARYA

demonetisation in a shock move in November, 2016 and in August this year, he abolished the special status of Jammu and Kashmir. On the external front in the first week of September this year, Modi became the first Indian prime minister to visit Russia's Far East, a strategic and resource-rich region. It is not just the geography, but inextricably linked with it is a new economic-commercial dimension of India's relations with Russia.

True, there was no big-ticket deals or announcements during Modi's 36-hour visit to Vladivostok on September 4-5. But it brought out a firm and clear intent on the part of India and Russia to move beyond cooperation on defence hardware and civil nuclear sectors, that have shaped their bilateral relations for long during the Cold War decades and till the early 1990s. In the past, India had had relatively limited economic and commercial contacts with the Russian Far East because New Delhi's focus has either been Europe, or the European part of Russia, or the area just north of the Central Asian Republics.

For New Delhi, Modi's visit shows the importance it attaches to the Russian Far East as an area of geo-political importance in the context of the Indo-Pacific. The Russian Far East is an area India has ignored for the last seven decades. But it is an area which has now acquired a much greater salience primarily for two reasons: strategic and economic. Keeping these in mind, India loosened its purse strings as Modi announced a one billion dollar line of credit for the development of Russia's Far East, making New Delhi aid-giver to Russia for the first time, reversing a long trend in the past when it had to depend on Moscow's financial assistance between 1956 and early 1990s.

It is for the first time India announced a soft loan for a particular region of a country, a region which is twice the size of India with about a population of six to seven million. The sheer size of Russia's Far East and its oil, gas and minerals like diamond, farming, timber and coking coal and the sparse population size are being eyed by India, including for manpower export, because the region has a serious shortage of manpower. Many of the mineral and non-mineral resources of the region are something India needs in the near future. Also, India is looking at the opening provided by Russian Far East to the Northern Sea route, the Arctic route, to Europe, because of climate change and global warming, which has made the route now much easily accessed

in comparison to three decades ago. There is also the possibility of oil and gas supplies from the Arctic region. If the Northern Sea route opens, shipping will go via Vladivostok to Europe, providing an alternative access to Europe. That is the reason a MoU for a shipping service between Chennai and Vladivostok was signed between India and Russia during Modi's visit.

One or two Indian companies have invested in Russia's Far Eastern diamond industry and the idea now is to get into it in a bigger way because India has a large diamond processing industry. India is also exploring the possibility of sending people with some skills in areas wherever there is manpower shortage. India is an attractive manpower source for the Far East and Modi flagged this issue before

state-owned Coal India and its Russian counterpart for export of coking coal and for cooperation in the mining sector between the Steel Authority of India Limited and the Russian counterpart for import of metallurgical coal.

An oil pipeline between India and Russia was also discussed but it is a project entailing complexity because of other countries and because of the issue of US sanctions on Iran, as well as India's present relations with Pakistan, as the pipeline traverses both these regions. A MoU was signed between Russian entity Novatek and state-owned Indian company Petronet LNG for joint development of downstream LNG business and supplies. LNG assumes critical importance at a time of turbulence in different parts of the world and risks

Mohan, Moscow and Beijing "see the Indo-Pacific as an effort to contain China", while "the Americans believe the promotion of Euroasia is about Sino-Russian design to marginalise the US in the continental space." It is in this big picture that India has waded into at a time when President Donald Trump has disrupted the long-established status quo in international relations, forcing many of his traditional allies to hedge their bets and diversifying their options. This applies equally to India, Russia, China and Japan, whose Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, too was present in Vladivostok and is keen to make Russia a part of its Indo-Pacific policy.

The economic content of India-Russia relationship as brought out by Modi's visit to Vladivostok, underlines that



Russia's President Vladimir Putin speaks with India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi during a visit to the shipyard Zvezda, outside the far-eastern Russian port of Vladivostok on September 4, 2019.

PHOTO: ALEXANDER NEMENOV/AFP

Putin during his visit and the Russian president has supported the move.

A five-year roadmap was laid out by stating and laying out the potential of cooperation between the two countries in oil and gas sectors, both in terms of exploration and exploitation and in terms of purchase in the five-year timeframe of 2019-2024, as India seeks to diversify its energy supplies beyond complete dependency in the Persian Gulf, where US-Iran tensions have clouded the prospects for ramping up oil and gas from there. Specific letters of intent were inked between Indian public sector companies and Russian entities for development of oil and gas fields. A MoU was also signed between

associated with pipeline, and LNG is a major form of energy supplied by Russia. Clearly, India is scouting for diversifying its sources of oil and gas to power the world's fifth largest economy to grow at 7-8 percent and to fulfil Modi's dream of turning the country into a five-trillion-dollar economy.

On the strategic front of India-Russia ties, Modi, in his speech at the plenary session of the Eastern Economic Forum in Vladivostok, pointed to this aspect when he recalled how India has shifted its focus from European part of Russia to the Russian Far East, which he described as a "confluence of Euroasia and the Pacific". According to Singapore-based Indian strategic affairs expert, C Raja

both countries have moved away from the tight mutual embrace of the Cold War era when the then Soviet Union was India's biggest weapon systems and civil nuclear power supplier. That is a status still enjoyed by Russia, although on a reduced scale. India's purchase of defence hardware in the future could attract American sanctions and affect New Delhi's growing proximity to Washington, and both India and Russia are aware of this. So, the best option for India and Russia is to go for low-hanging fruits like economic cooperation in energy and connectivity sectors.

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