

‘Bilateral approach without powerful underwriting will not solve the Rohingya crisis’

Professor Abdur Rob Khan, Dean, School of Humanities and Social Sciences, North South University, talks to The Daily Star’s Naznin Tithi about the present state of the Rohingya crisis and whether a sustainable solution to the problem is possible.

After repeated failures in starting the repatriation process, a sustainable solution to the Rohingya crisis seems like a distant possibility. What’s your view on this? A sustainable solution to the crisis is contingent upon the voluntary repatriation of the Rohingya people to their homeland in Rakhine state in Myanmar, with their safety, security and dignity ensured. After two failed attempts to set the repatriation process on its due course, it is difficult to be optimistic about a sustainable solution in the immediate future. Key to the repatriation, as the two attempts have made it abundantly clear, is convincing the Rohingyas of their safety upon returning home.

Last July, there was a two-day international conference at North South University where different aspects of the crisis as well as the concept of a sustainable solution were discussed. More than 100 papers from 15 countries were presented at the seminar. One stumbling block to finding a sustainable solution, which was highlighted in the papers, seems to be the stubbornness in Myanmar in resisting reforms that are necessary.

Therefore, it is hard to visualise a scenario where Myanmar is going to agree to take back the Rohingyas as full citizens of the country. They have redefined their definition of citizenship rendering the Rohingyas practically stateless. It is unlikely that we will be able to persuade Myanmar to change their legal status. Considering that, the best-case scenario will be if Myanmar takes back the Rohingyas by restoring the *status quo ante*—i.e. the situation that existed before the exodus of August 2017.

Such a realisation was also reflected in the 5-point formula our prime minister presented at the 72nd UNGA session in 2017, where she called for the creation of “safezones” in Rakhine. But the reality is that Myanmar forces had destroyed and bulldozed their homes. If the Rohingyas go back now, they will be put in camps, which they don’t consider safe for living.

One might ask if UN peacekeeping forces could be deployed around the camps to ensure their safety. That possibly will be too

much to ask for, knowing the reluctance of the Myanmar regime to allow any kind of UN role in their country. The United Nations Security Council has failed to make a condemnation resolution for Myanmar’s atrocities on the Rohingyas. It is quite unlikely that Myanmar will agree to the deployment of some foreign forces on their soil.

Why do you think have our diplomatic efforts failed to end this crisis? What was lacking on our part?

The fact is that there hasn’t been any substantial pressure on the Myanmar authorities, thanks to the leniency of its allies including China, Russia and India. We are asking the international community to mobilise support and put pressure on Myanmar. We are requesting India and China to put pressure on Myanmar. But for a sustainable solution, the pressure must come from Bangladesh, first, and only then will the pressure from the international community have a multiplier effect on Myanmar. Mere requests and persuasions will not work.

We must create enough noise on the international platform so that they listen to us. When the second repatriation bid failed, we made some noises and probably that is why China has given the issue some importance, following the visit of Bangladesh prime minister to Beijing in July 2019.

There is no doubt that the three powers have entrenched interests in Myanmar. They have huge stakes in the country. But the stakes that India, China and even Myanmar have in Bangladesh are not less substantive. When our friends tell us that Myanmar should not be pressurised and that a bilateral approach should be followed, let us at least reply that “our approach is not necessarily bound by bilateralism unless backed by strong underwriting.” Such an assertion itself would send a clear-cut message. Actually, our approach should not be limited to bilateralism. A pragmatic mix of bilateralism and multilateralism should be our approach in diplomacy.

It’s mentioned that China has even cautioned Bangladesh about putting much pressure on Myanmar because Myanmar’s



Professor Abdur Rob Khan

reactions might not be favourable for us. But what’s the benefit of just being careful in dealing with Myanmar? The output has so far been nil. Therefore, in hindsight, we should not have listened to our “friends”, because they are thinking about their own interests, namely their investments in the Rakhine state. They are building deep sea port, roads and railways, etc. there. Our foreign policy, as far as the repatriation diplomacy is concerned, lacks clear signals and messages.

What will be the long-term economic impact of giving shelter to this large population for Bangladesh? With international aid organisations slowly losing interest in funding for the Rohingyas, how will Bangladesh feed them in the coming days?

About USD 120 million had been the direct cost of supporting the Rohingyas during the last fiscal year. And without foreign aid, the total burden will be on us. But sadly, the international community is losing interest in

this issue. In this planet of fleeting events, it is natural that their attention will be diverted to more recent situations. Such an eventuality is not difficult to foresee.

Already there are huge economic and environmental impacts of supporting the Rohingyas. The costs in terms of the loss of forestry, agricultural land and topsoil as well as losses in our tourism sector are enormous. However, currently the losses and damages are localised. But as time passes and the crisis continues over a long period of time, we will see the macro-impacts. Fiscal burden will multiply, environmental damage will be long-lasting, tourist inflow will dry out and we will start counting the damage and burden in national terms.

Considering the environmental impacts, how would you evaluate the decision of relocating a portion of the Rohingya population to Bhashan Char?

We are talking about shifting around one lakh of them, which is only one-tenth of the Rohingya population. I think if it is done, it will have a serious psychological effect on the whole community. These people are already organised. We saw a big gathering in August. They would certainly react to the uncertainty of going to an isolated place, since the remaining nine lakh people would remain here. I think the government should make it clear to the Rohingyas what facilities they will be getting in Bhashan Char. If they agree to go, knowing the details, then it’s fine. So far as I know, it is a pilot project and if it succeeds, more such projects can be taken. But we also have to remember that land is scarce here, so any such plan should be taken wisely.

Moreover, such a decision may also create confusion among the international community because, on the one hand, the government is talking about their safe and dignified repatriation, and on the other, it is planning to shift them to another place. The government should be transparent in any attempts to relocate the Rohingyas to another place. However, it is still not clear as to when Bhashan Char will be ready for their relocation. It is still a non-starter.

What’s your view on the restrictions imposed on the Rohingyas’ freedom of movement and access to the internet and online communications?

I do not have any direct information about how this has been implemented. But initially, there was quite a bit of uproar from the Rohingyas, the NGOs working there, and also from the international community as well as the international media. There was also a discussion about putting barbed wire around the camps. However, it looks like they have made their way out in a manner that controlling their communications has actually not been possible. They have access to phones and SIM cards either from Bangladesh or from Myanmar through various channels. But the government has probably relented a little bit in terms of a strict implementation of such restrictions. This was maybe a reaction to the Rohingyas’ recent gathering and other activities in and around the camp areas.

How would you evaluate Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina’s four-point proposal at the UN General Assembly regarding a sustainable solution to the Rohingya problem?

Three proposals in three consecutive years on the same platform might create some confusion, although the proposals are consistent and related. However, the four-point proposal made this year subsumes the recent developments on the repatriation front. Point one concerns an expression of clear political will on the part of Myanmar manifested by concrete action; point two reflects the urgent need of building trust and a sense of safety and security among the Rohingyas by means of “go and see” visits to Rakhine. Points three and four are remarkable, as they seek involvement of the international community in monitoring and investigation of the genocidal crimes committed by Myanmar army. There is a mix of bilateral and multilateral diplomacy in these points. The question is, what’s next? How will these points be put to action? Vigorous bilateral and multilateral diplomacy in the neighbourhood and at the UN is what is urgently needed.

INTERNATIONAL DAY OF OLDER PERSONS

Reimagining social protection for older people



SHEKH FARID

Journey to Age Equality”, which calls attention to increasing old-age inequalities and seeks societal and structural changes in social protection and universal health coverage schemes for older persons around the world.

Globally, the proportion of people over the age of 60 is growing faster than all other age cohorts, with the developing world likely to experience rapid ageing in the coming decades. Bangladesh’s population is also ageing: data from the UN’s “2019 Revision of World Population Prospects” shows that the population of people aged over 60 years is projected to double, from 12.62 million (7.77 percent of the total population) in 2019 to 25.24 million (13.7 percent) in 2035. People of this age group are expected to more than triple in number in 2050, reaching around 42.1 million, which will account for 21.9 percent of the total population. That means by 2050, one out of five people will be over the age of 60. This trend in population ageing will continue throughout the century.

It’s evident that demographic dynamics and age-structural transition of population will shape the key economic and developmental challenges in the foreseeable future. Moreover, the 2030 Global Agenda for Sustainable Development will remain unachievable if we fail to address the needs and challenges of people over 60. The increasing share of these people in the population estimate and the shortfalls of existing programmes meant for them also underscore the importance of a well-designed social protection system in Bangladesh.



When it comes to social insurance, only those who are in government service enjoy this benefit fully. People involved in the informal sector are deprived of any kind of public pension schemes. Even the private sector, with some exceptions, is far away from such social insurance that would ensure security for their employees during their old age. The government can make it obligatory for the private sector to introduce mandatory contributory insurance and savings plans for their employees allowing private organisations to provide pension to them. Furthermore, since most people in Bangladesh are engaged in the informal sector (85.10 percent of the employed), having little or no access to a social protection scheme for their old age, a universal social

insurance system that would not depend on people’s work situation is also required. The government can also consider introducing a non-contributory health insurance programme, especially for the poorest and most vulnerable of older people. Social assistance—transferring cash to older persons in need—is another important means of protection. This year, the government is providing an old-age allowance of Tk 500 per month to more than 4.4 million people. Though the coverage of the allowance is wide, targeting the most vulnerable among older people still

remains a challenge. The amount provided to each older person requires to be increased, while the mode of payment also needs to be reconsidered. Many of those living in the rural areas find it difficult to come to the upazila to receive the amount, spending their whole day in designated banks. Direct cash transfer through mobile banking or post office might be a better alternative to this. The necessity of such allowances will not fade away even if a universal social insurance programme is introduced. The government should undertake and regularly upgrade other progressively subsidised programmes to address the different needs of older people.

Apart from these, other social support systems meant for the older people need to be improved to

ensure effective social protection for them. While working on the ageing issues of Bangladesh, the first challenge that one encounters is shortage of data. There is no official data regarding the challenges faced by the older population. Besides, there is also a lack of scientific research work on ageing online. Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) can undertake a nation-wide survey highlighting the situation, challenges, needs, and also abuse and neglect faced by the elderly. A national foundation for the development of the elderly population is also required. To this end, the drafted Probin Unnoy Foundation Act, 2017 should be put into effect before long.

The National Policy on Older Persons, 2013 should be implemented widely and all other plans and measures should reflect the points highlighted in the policy. The 8th Five Year Plan should address the ageing issue as a special priority of the government. Given the widespread prevalence of abuse and neglect facing the elderly in Bangladesh, people are not yet aware of the Parents’ Care Act, 2013. Community legal aid services and Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) should be enhanced to ensure enforcement of the act and to protect our older population from abuse and neglect. The media can play the most important role in this regard.

In addition to social policies and legislation as a means of social protection for the older people, the Department of Social Services (DSS) should establish old homes in every district. The NGOs also need to come forward in this regard. Citizen’s platforms and older people’s networks at the community level can also be useful to ensure active ageing.

To sum up, a well-designed and efficiently managed social protection system for the older population is not only key to ensuring age equality, it can also offer our country the opportunity of a “second demographic dividend”, turning the aged population into productive members of the society. It’s high time we revisited our entire social protection system based on the issues discussed above for the sake of all of us.

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ON THIS DAY IN HISTORY



OCTOBER 1, 1946
END OF THE TRIAL OF THE MAJOR WAR CRIMINALS
12 Nazi officials were sentenced to death by the International War Crimes Tribunal in Nuremberg.

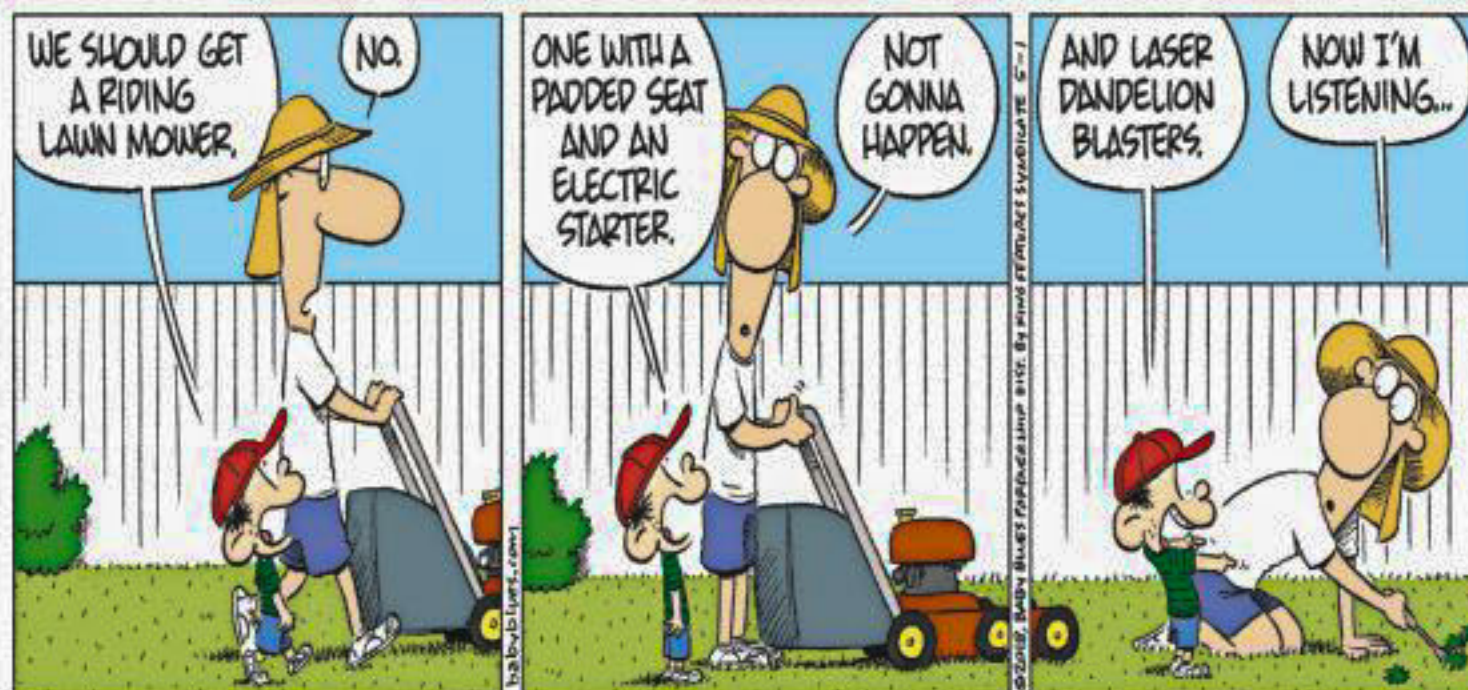
BEETLE BAILEY

by Mort Walker



BABY BLUES

by Kirkman & Scott



QUOTABLE Quote



OSCAR WILDE
(1854–1900)
Irish poet and playwright

To live is the rarest thing in the world. Most people exist, that is all.