

The Rohingya relocation dilemma

Easier said than done!

Bribery discourages investment, impedes growth

Come down heavily on the menace!

IN the latest Global Bribery Risk Index, Bangladesh has been identified as the “country with the highest risk” when it comes to bribery in South Asia. The 2019 “Trace Bribery Risk Matrix” is a globally recognised anti-bribery business association and it states that we have fared poorly in taking active measures to discourage bribery and enforce anti-bribery deterrence activities. This is reflected in the country being ranked 178th out of 200 countries and territories covered by the report. Indeed, we have consistently been marked as a “high risk” country on the index since 2014. That went down further in 2016 when Bangladesh was categorised as a “very high risk” country. We scored 86 in business interactions with the government, which means, there is a high regulatory burden and expectation of bribes. Then there is the question of level of media freedom and civil society engagement, where we scored 64. High instances of bribery have multifarious impacts on the economy. Domestically, it raises the cost of doing business for enterprises and acts as a hindrance for forming new small businesses. Internationally, it tarnishes the image of the country and acts to stop reputable foreign companies, with strong corporate governance practices, from investing in Bangladesh. At a time when we are trying to woo serious foreign direct investment, being perceived as a “high risk country” defeats the gains and achievements resulting from our development efforts.

Non-state actors, particularly a vibrant media can act as the eyes-and-ears of policymakers when it comes to combatting the very real threat of corruption. It is high time to reverse the damage being done to the country’s image by taking proactive measures through a constant anti-corruption crackdown.

Boosting Bangladesh’s export growth

Reforms and investments needed for better transport and logistics

A recently published World Bank report has revealed that Bangladesh could significantly boost export growth, maintain its position as a leading garment and textile manufacturer, and create more jobs by improving its transport and logistics systems. The report states that if there was no congestion on the road, transportation costs, the largest direct logistics cost in Bangladesh, would be 35 percent lower. It has also warned that these two factors combined with inadequate infrastructure and fragmented governance have been hampering manufacturing and freight and are putting the country’s robust growth path at risk.

Since efficient logistics and transportation system are two of the main drivers for achieving high export growth, the government should give serious attention to improving these sectors. Reportedly, the average cost of carrying a tonne per kilometre in Bangladesh is USD 0.095, which is higher than many developing and developed countries, including the US, France, Australia, India, and Pakistan. And the social cost of annual carbon dioxide emission from road freight transport in Bangladesh is equivalent to 1.2 percent of the GDP, with almost 60 percent of the emission caused by congestion. The average waiting time of an export container at the Chattogram Port is four days, while for an import container, it is 11 days. In order to reduce congestion on roads, our high dependency on road transport (about 84 percent) should be cut down and emphasis should be given on railway and riverine transport. The government should work on making a sustainable plan to improve all the modes of transportation.

The government has already put emphasis on infrastructure development, what it needs to do now is manage the infrastructure effectively. A greater coordination among public institutions and private sectors involved in logistics is needed. Also, the dwell time (time spent in the same position) at the Chattogram Port needs to be cut down. Improvement in these two sectors (transportation and logistics) will put the country in the right path to become a middle-income country.



TASNEEM TAYEB

THE concerns and uncertainties over the relocation of some Rohingya refugees to Bashan Char are showing no signs of easing. The donor agencies and international bodies are concerned about the sustainability of the project to move one lakh Rohingya refugees to the island on the Bay of Bengal. Their concerns are not without reason, nor are the compulsions of the host country.

One of the main concerns is that the very name of the 40 square kilometre island rings ominous—“Bashan” translating literally to “floating”. The silt-based island has emerged only over the last two decades in the estuary of the Meghna River, and Bangladesh standing at the front line in the fight against climate change—making the island more prone to extreme weather events like cyclones—doesn’t help its cause either.

But a nine-foot high embankment has been erected along the perimeter of the island to protect it from tidal surges. Pylons, gravel and sandbags have also been used to protect the island from erosion. And then there are the 120 cyclone shelters that can endure wind speed up to 260km per hour—the maximum wind speed of the Cyclone Sidr, the “Very Severe Cyclonic Storm” that hit Bangladesh in November 2007.

Another concern voiced by the international community is that moving to this island might potentially restrict the mobility of the Rohingya. The sheer distance of the island and the restrictions that have already been imposed on the Rohingya living in camps in Cox’s Bazar—out of genuine concerns—have only added to the fear of the people that once the Rohingya refugees are sent to the Bashan Char they will not be allowed to come back to the mainland.

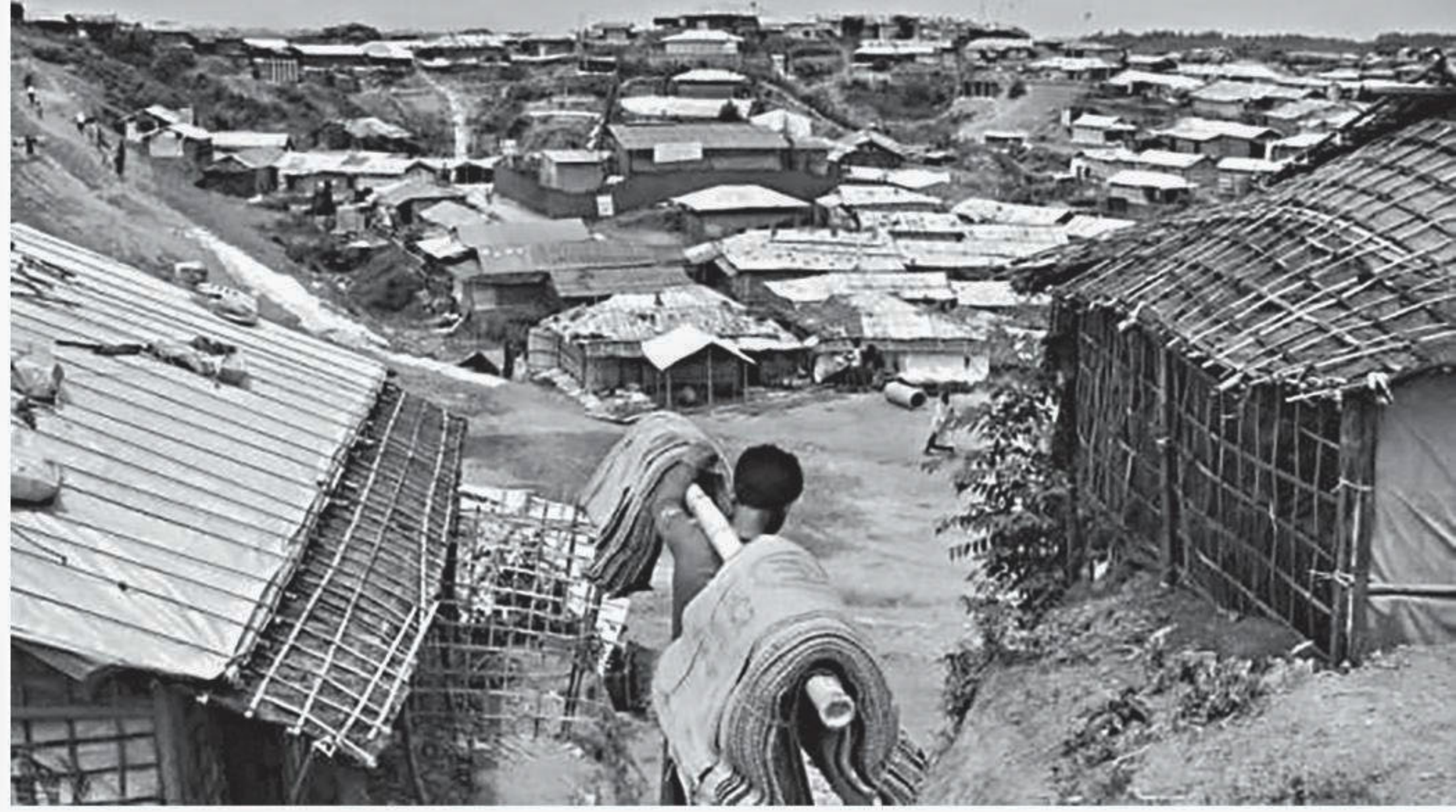
The concerns of the donors and rights groups, one must acknowledge, have partly been driven by the perceived lack of transparency surrounding the project. In order to address such concerns, the government has to make the living conditions in Bashan Char clear to the world. Building a wall of secrecy around this will only lead to further negative speculations about the project.

The government’s decision to allow UN officials to visit Bashan Char is a much welcomed one. Earlier this year, a UN team visited the island, and another visit is scheduled to take place on November 17. It is also important that the government allows local media outlets to visit the island to see for

themselves and to show the world the living conditions in Bashan Char. The government has disclosed the facilities—cyclone shelters, hospitals, educational institutions, playgrounds, rainwater harvesting system, solar power, biogas facilities, etc.—the island will offer to its inhabitants, but it is yet to make clear the issue of the rights of the Rohingya once they have been transported to the island: are they going to be afforded freedom of movement? Once relocated to Bashan Char, according to the government, the refugees will have some “economic activities”—what those activities are must be elaborated by the concerned authorities

the government’s plan to relocate the Rohingya must understand that in the face of increasing tension among the locals in Cox’s Bazar, and a steadily increasing Rohingya population—according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), around 91,000 children were born inside the Rohingya camps between August 2017-2019—it is becoming increasingly difficult for the government and local administration to accommodate the Rohingya in the camps. The country has already had to deforest land in order to shelter the refugees. According to a UNDP report, almost 4,300 acres of hills and forests were levelled in

long would Bangladesh be able to bear this expense? Under such circumstances, what alternative does Bangladesh have other than finding sustainable long-term solutions to accommodate the population of 1.1 million—especially since there is no sign that Myanmar will take them back anytime soon? While the international community is busy questioning the feasibility of the relocation plan to the “floating island”, it is Bangladesh that is having to bear the cost of providing protection to 1.1 million people from genocide, that the international community has failed to take action against.



Rohingya camp at Cox's Bazar.

PHOTO: AFP

before the relocation takes place. The government also needs to clearly outline the humanitarian aid logistics in Bashan Char—the modality of transporting humanitarian aid, the access of the international agencies to the island and its inhabitants, and so on.

The challenges ahead of the government are manifold. It will not be an easy task relocating one lakh Rohingya population to the island, with the possibility of extending the project to accommodate another 400,000 Rohingya in the future, as suggested by one of the architects involved, Ahmed Mukta. However, with transparency and collaboration, the concerns of the agencies will be addressed and it will become easier to overcome these hurdles. The international bodies questioning

Ukhia and Teknaf alone, to make room for temporary accommodation and arrange cooking fuel for the Rohingya.

And this poses another problem: such indiscriminate deforestation and exfoliation also exponentially increase the risk of landslides, making the refugees and the locals more vulnerable to large-scale disasters.

Waning donor support—Bangladesh, as of October 2019, received only 60 percent of the requested USD 920 million required to provide for the Rohingya—is also making the situation difficult for the country. The Bangladesh government is under increasing pressure to foot the bill for sheltering the helpless refugees. WFP figures suggest that it takes nearly USD 800,000 to feed over a million refugees a day. And with decreasing aid, for how

Any relocation of the Rohingya that is voluntary and done “in accordance with humanitarian principles and code of conduct” should be welcomed by all. Bashan Char certainly has its cons, but it is not devoid of pros either. More importantly, as of right now, it is the only solution on the table.

Instead of moving towards a stalemate we urge the donor agencies and the international community to take a serious and objective look at what Bangladesh is offering and simultaneously request our government to be more transparent about the whole process to gather wide support to tackle a humanitarian crisis that Bangladesh has done its utmost to handle so far.

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Diarrhoeal disease treatment: Bangladesh’s celebrated success story

FARASHA BASHIR

IT’S a blistering afternoon in the nation’s capital. Many are enjoying the change in weather from torrential downpour, but not 17-year-old Sonia Akhter (not her real name). She is hurriedly carried into the hospital by her father and elder brother. Sonia has been ill for the past three days, and she attributed her symptoms of abdominal cramps, nausea, fever, and watery stool to exam stress. But then she took a turn for the worse when her fever rose and she started

from the emergency ward to the general ward where she will continue her recovery. Sonia could have been at death’s door if she was left untreated, but was revived thanks to the IV fluids she was given, each bag containing a simple solution of water, sugar and salts (including electrolytes). This solution is called oral rehydration solution (ORS). Discovered in an attempt to meet the challenges of diarrhoeal disease globally, icddr’s life-saving development of ORS and zinc therapy alone has saved an estimated

caregivers how to make ORS at home. Oral rehydration solution was later commercially produced into packets by Social Marketing Company, the largest non-profit private social marketing company in Bangladesh, with support from USAID. The country now has the highest coverage of ORS use for treating diarrhoea, jumping from 50 percent in 1993 to more than 80 percent in 2011 for children under-five years of age. icddr’s studies have also confirmed that the use of ORS to manage dehydrating diarrhoea has had a

half the problem: prevention makes up the other half. With support from UNICEF, the government installed 10 million deep tube-wells free-of-cost in the 1970s to improve access to safe drinking water. From the 1990s, water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) became an important priority and large-scale sanitation programmes were undertaken by both the public and NGO sectors. The private sector was also engaged in the production of consumer-oriented latrines and tube-wells at affordable prices, which hastened the transition to safe drinking water consumption and hygienic sanitary practices (e.g. handwashing with soap). By 2014, the fruits of these initiatives were evident when almost every household in the country had access to safe drinking water along with a 45 percent increase in access to sanitary latrines.



Treatment of the disease only solves half the problem: prevention makes up the other half.

passing blood from her stool. By the time Sonia reached icddr’s Dhaka hospital, she was so severely dehydrated, she could barely stand.

Once inside the hospital, she was immediately attended to by the physician on call who laid her down on one of the hospital’s famous “diarrhoea cots” and given intravenous infusion fluids. Within a few hours, Sonia’s condition significantly improved. She can now talk and move around, and she is escorted

50 million lives worldwide over the last four decades—the majority of whom are children under-five. The British medical journal *The Lancet* has described ORS as “potentially the most important medical advance of this century”.

After the ground-breaking discovery of ORS in the 1970s, BRAC (the world’s largest NGO), supported by icddr, initiated a nationwide government-approved programme to raise awareness of diarrhoeal illness and teach

very substantial effect on reducing diarrhoeal mortality. In 2003, icddr initiated the Scaling Up Zinc for Young Children project based on its pioneering research on the protective effect of therapeutic zinc during childhood diarrhoea. The following year, WHO’s new recommendation on diarrhoea management introduced the supplementation of zinc in addition to ORS. Treatment of the disease only solves

In Bangladesh, the rate of under-five mortality from diarrhoea has decreased significantly from 15.1 per 1,000 live births to 6.0 between 1980 and 2015. In fact, diarrhoea killed nearly 560 per million people in the country as recently as 2003. But 10 years later, this number has been slashed to 145 per million—an impressive 95 percent reduction.

The primary factors associated with the decline in diarrhoea-related deaths for children under-five were ORS use, reduction of stunting and wasting prevalence, improving water, sanitation and handwashing with soap, and vitamin-A and zinc supplementation. This remarkable decline cannot be credited to one institution, but was achieved through concerted efforts by the Government of Bangladesh, local NGOs, private sector companies, and international partner organisations.

The success of these interventions has been made possible due to health system changes made by the government through timely adoption of evidence-based policies and programmes, as well as effective collaboration with the private sector and NGOs. If these partnerships continue to foster integrated approaches to tackling this disease, WHO’s pledge to ending cholera by 2030 can be a reality and child deaths from diarrhoea can be drastically reduced by the upcoming decade.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Three-point demand by Buet students

The students of Buet have placed a three-point demand at a press meet recently, announcing that they would resume their academic activities if the demands are met. The move came after the submission of the charge sheet in Abrar Fahad’s murder case on Wednesday. Their demands include the expulsion of the 25 accused in the murder case; punishment of students involved in previous cases of ragging; and enacting rules that prohibit ragging and organisation-based politics.

It is certainly a matter of shame that such a heinous murder of an innocent student took place in one of the most reputed educational institutions in the country. Therefore, the three-point demand put forward by the students are simply meant for the wellbeing of all. And if it proves successful, not only will it benefit the students of Buet, but it can further be implemented across other educational institutions in Bangladesh to help root out the corruption that has become far too common in recent times.

As the students have boycotted their academic activities following the murder of Abrar Fahad, I think it is of utmost necessity that the authorities take their demand into account so that the students can resume their regular studies.

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