

# Rohingya repatriation: No more dancing around key issues

## Nab the Bhola perpetrators

*There should be no delay in the investigative process*

IT'S worrying that there should have been a need to state something as obvious as the importance of a quick—and fair—investigation into the deadly clashes in Bhola's Borhanuddin upazila. The October 20 clashes between an angry crowd and the police, sparked by a concocted hate post against Islam on Facebook, left four people dead and more than a hundred others, including policemen, injured. Some 12 Hindu houses and a temple were also vandalised in this connection. Unfortunately, one month into that brutal incident, police have made little headway in their probe into who had orchestrated the whole Facebook episode and the subsequent attacks on police and Hindu properties. The lack of progress means that local Hindu residents continue to live in fear, haunted by their memories of the October 20 mayhem.

It is also a testament to the lack of urgency within the responsible quarters to bring the perpetrators to book. We understand that sensitive cases like this require caution on the part of the investigating officers. But that is all the more reason why the culprits should be identified quickly. Our past experience with police probes into similar incidents leaves room for frustration, however. One may recall that none of the cases filed in connection with incidents of communal violence in Ramu, Cox's Bazar (2012), Ataikula, Pabna (2013), Nasirnagar, Brahmanbaria (2016) and Horkoli Thakurpara, Rangpur (2017)—all of which were triggered by Facebook posts—have been completed. The police must be careful so that things don't head in the same direction this time.

The lack of progress in the Bhola case has also brought forth some questions: why are the authorities failing to catch criminals spreading hate posts through social media despite all the digital technologies added to the system in recent years? What is to stop criminals from igniting a similar unrest in the future? What is the government doing to rehabilitate the Bhola victims and to ensure security for the religious minorities in the country? It has been reported that leaders of an Islamist outfit are planning to stage a meeting on November 23 in Bhola to commemorate those who lost their lives in the clashes. The authorities must be careful to deal with any such development and do all that is necessary to enforce law and order in the troubled territory and ensure justice for the victims.



MOHAMMAD ZAMAN

IN the last two weeks, the world has witnessed a renewed interest in the Rohingya's struggles for justice and persecution of Myanmar officials for the Rohingya genocide. The Rohingya now see a ray of hope—thanks to the tiny West African country Gambia—for taking Myanmar and its generals before the International Court of Justice (ICJ) for atrocities against the Rohingya, as violating the United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. The legal action by Gambia is critically important as it sends a clear message to Myanmar and the rest of the international community that the world must not stand by and do nothing in the face of the terrible atrocities while genocide is unfolding before our own eyes. The legal action also triggers a judicial process that could determine whether Myanmar's atrocities against Rohingya Muslims violate the Genocide Convention.

The UN Genocide Convention, adopted in 1948 and entered into force in January 1951, defines genocide in legal terms and includes acts committed with the intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national/ethnic, racial/religious group, including the killing of its members, causing serious bodily or mental harm, deliberately imposing living conditions that seek to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part. The atrocities and the Myanmar military's ethnic cleansing, and forced deportation and displacement of over 750,000 Rohingya, who crossed the border to Bangladesh in 2017 to escape crackdown in Rakhine state, by all accounts constitute a "text-book" example of genocide. Myanmar has always denied its involvement in atrocities against the Rohingya; rather the military and the government justified their actions against deadly attacks on police outposts by militant Rohingya groups, who indeed have been fighting for their rights in Myanmar for generations. Even now, the military continues to commit serious violations, including war crimes, against civilians in conflict-affected areas in Rakhine state.

The move by Gambia is perhaps the first in the history that a country, without any connection to the crimes, has brought this case to the world court to hold Myanmar's government to account, purely based on its membership in the Genocide Convention and backed by strong support from the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). The Gambian action also led to new breaking

development globally. A group of Rohingya and several Latin American rights bodies filed a criminal case—using the principle of "universal jurisdiction" that allows all states to address crimes against humanity—in an Argentine court against Myanmar's top military and civilian leaders, including Aung San Suu Kyi, for crimes committed in Rakhine state. The International Criminal Court (ICC) at The Hague approved a full investigation into Myanmar's crimes and records of abuse, campaign of murder and destruction of the Rohingya minority. The three separate cases that were filed against Myanmar for atrocities against Rohingya people represent the first international legal attempt to bring justice to the persecuted Muslim minority and draw on the dramatic conditions of the Rohingya in Rakhine state and in exiles in refugee camps in Bangladesh and other countries.

last several decades. Today, out of an estimated three million Rohingya, only 300,000 currently live in Rakhine state, mostly in concentration camps under strict security and restrictions on free movement. Over a million, including those who fled in 1990s, live in refugee camps in Bangladesh; the rest are in exile in countries like Saudi Arabia, Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand. The Rohingya diaspora has also moved to other countries in Europe and North America.

The repatriation of the Rohingya refugees dominated the 2019 summit of the Association of the South East Asian Nations (Asean) held in Bangkok, Thailand. There was high hope that the Asean leaders would push Myanmar on Rohingya repatriation. Instead, the Asean leaders danced around the key issue—citizenship for the Rohingya—and expressed their support for repatriation

has already rejected the ICC investigation. Myanmar's close allies—China, Russia and India—had in the past either vetoed UN resolution or refrained from voting against Myanmar. The UN Special Envoy Yanghee Lee recently said that Myanmar should face prosecution at the ICC and that conditions on the ground remain too dangerous for those in Rakhine state and the million Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh. What is then the importance of Gambia invoking genocide convention against Myanmar? First, the move by Gambia marks a significant development in the Rohingya's struggle for justice. Second, it will help advance accountability for the genocide triggering the establishment of the largest refugee camp in Bangladesh. Third, as pointed out by Bob Rae, the Canadian Special Envoy to Myanmar, it will end impunity for those accused of committing the



The crisis of the Rohingya is one of identity and existence.

PHOTO: WA LONE/REUTERS

As an ethnic/religious minority, the Rohingya have historically suffered discrimination by the Myanmar Buddhist state. The discrimination and deprivations have been stepped up over the last four decades since the adoption of the 1982 citizenship law, which considers them illegal migrants from Bangladesh and other Asian countries, stripping them off their rights as Myanmar citizens. This has effectively deprived them of their basic rights, including freedom of movement, access to health services and government jobs. The discrimination and concerted violence against the Rohingya in Rakhine state have forced hundreds and thousands of Rohingya to flee to other countries over the

by forming an ad hoc support team to carry out the recommendation of preliminary needs as adopted in the 2018 Asean meeting in Singapore and pledged to go further with consultation, communication, capacity building and provisions for basic services for repatriation. Such approaches can only be called callous and unconcerned with protecting the rights of the Rohingya. However, some Asean member countries, notably Indonesia and Malaysia, called for the perpetrators of the Rohingya genocide to be brought to justice and that repatriation process must include citizenship of the Rohingya.

Will cases brought against Myanmar deliver justice to the Rohingya? Myanmar

gravest crimes under international law. Gambia has turned the tables for justice. Now, support from other countries would be critical. The ICC can hold individuals responsible, not state; while ICJ can hold Myanmar responsible as a state. Therefore, no more dancing around the Rohingya's rights and citizenship. As such, there is hope for future and hope for the Rohingya too. This is a significant development, sending a positive signal to the victims of atrocities crimes in Myanmar and elsewhere.

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## A sheer waste of public money

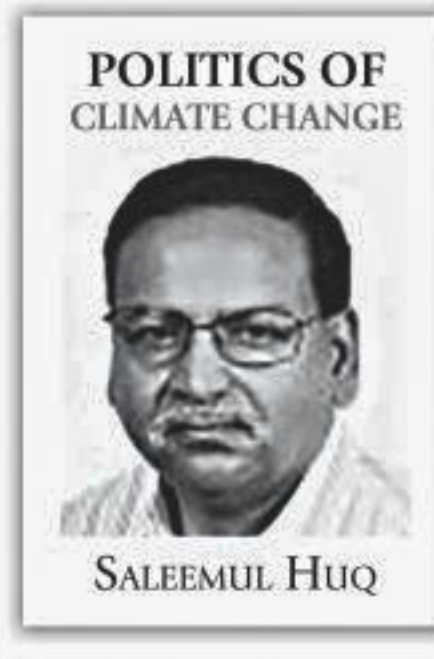
*Token allocation for ADP projects*

IT is surprising that a large number of projects, 62 to be exact, in this year's annual development programme (ADP), should be given only a token allocation of Tk 1 lakh each from the government. Apparently, this has been done only to keep the projects alive. Whereas the number of projects that got symbolic allocations were 26 in 2017, in the current fiscal year the number rose to 62. While Bangladesh's spending on development projects has increased significantly—the government has allocated Tk 2 lakh crore for 1,358 projects this year—there have been allegations that the money has not been spent wisely.

A case in point is the Tk 122.57 crore project that has been undertaken for widening a highway from Langelbandh to Minarbari in Narayanganj. Unfortunately, for implementing the project, only Tk 1 lakh has been allocated. The question is, what does the government expect the project to achieve with this meagre amount of money? Inadequate allocation for an important project such as this has only been causing delay in implementation, which would affect the people in the end.

Reportedly, 90 percent of the ADP projects have been undertaken years ago with extensions provided to them to meet the deadlines. There are also allegations that many of the projects have been included in the ADP on political consideration. The government should seriously look into the issue and stop taking up projects indiscriminately without giving consideration to their importance or deadline. Allocating only one lakh taka for each of the 62 projects means that Tk 62 lakh of public money has actually been wasted, which is not acceptable at all. We would like to see efficient planning from the government while taking up various development projects and also hope that there will be transparency and accountability in carrying out the projects. After all, it is the public who suffer and their money which is being wasted.

# Climate emergency, planetary emergency and our survival



SALEEMUL HUQ

**POLITICS OF CLIMATE CHANGE**

THE Bangladesh parliament has declared a planetary emergency in a resolution adopted a few days ago. This is indeed a major initiative and the parliamentarians should be

droughts and perhaps most importantly, salinity intrusion in the coastal zone due to sea level rise.

The good news in this front is that Bangladesh has been well aware of this problem for over a decade and has developed the Bangladesh Climate Change Strategy and Action Plan (BCCSAP) which has been implemented for nearly a decade and is now being revised to take it to 2030. Once the revised version is adopted it should

Conference of Parties (COP) under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). An important element in this strategy is to recognise that Bangladesh cannot simply speak for itself but must speak for all the vulnerable developing countries at the global meetings.

The upcoming 25th COP which will be held in Madrid, Spain in December will be a good opportunity for Bangladeshi parliamentarians to present their

once the damage is done it will be too late to rectify the situation.

Another area to take into account is the planned development of the eastern side of Dhaka city which is currently a major wetland area. If this development does not take a genuine nature-based development approach we will simply repeat the problems of waterlogging that we have to endure in the western part of Dhaka, which has been built by destroying the many wetlands that used to exist.



Smoke rises from the chimney of a paper factory outside Hanoi, Vietnam May 21, 2018.

PHOTO: REUTERS/KHAM/FILE PHOTO

applauded for it. Although other countries' parliaments—such as the United Kingdom—had declared climate emergency, Bangladesh is the first country to declare a planetary emergency.

The difference is that the notion of a planetary emergency includes both climate change as well as biodiversity and pollution concerns.

However, I am sure that the parliamentarians will agree that making such a declaration is not enough in itself and must be seen as the first step in tackling the problems that have risen to the level of an emergency.

However, a few things should be kept in mind by the policymakers and the concerned authorities while addressing this issue of planetary emergency.

Climate emergency is primarily a global emergency with very strong implications for Bangladesh, which is one of the most vulnerable countries to the adverse impacts of climate change. This has two dimensions for us to consider. The first is for us to do our best to reduce our own emissions of greenhouse gases that facilitates climate change. Even though our emissions are not significant we should nevertheless ensure that we minimise emissions from use of energy, transport and industries as well as enhance our tree plantation programmes.

However, the biggest climate emergency for Bangladesh is the fact that we are one of the most vulnerable countries to its adverse impacts, which will include more severe and frequent floods, more severe cyclones, more severe

become integrated into the 8th Five Year Plan as soon as possible.

The integration or mainstreaming of climate change into all national, sectoral and local plans should be the highest priority under the climate emergency implementation plan.

Another aspect of the climate emergency is the global one in which Bangladesh is among the most vulnerable countries and needs to play a more proactive leadership role at the

resolution and share how we plan to implement it.

The second planetary emergency is to do with protecting our biodiversity which includes both forests and aquatic species. Amongst the many issues to be concerned about is the protection of the Sundarbans, especially with the opening up of that region after the Padma Bridge is opened. This is something that the concerned Parliamentary Standing Committee should make a priority as

An important point to highlight in this regard is that simply having good legislation and laws to protect our biodiversity and natural environment is not enough as we have allowed the forces who have destroyed it to do so with complete impunity. So laws must be implemented and not just enacted.

The Parliamentary Standing Committee on Environment has an extremely important role to play in ensuring oversight of these laws by the ministries who are supposed to implement them.

The third and final area I will focus on is the pollution that is becoming a bigger and bigger problem around the country, ranging from the overuse of plastic to the problem of effluents from industries, such as textiles and ship-breaking. A more recent problem is the deterioration of air quality in Dhaka. This is another example of good laws being in place but with very poor implementation.

It is therefore essential to discuss the responsibility of the various departments or concerned bodies for implementing the planetary emergency plan. In addition, we need to identify and acknowledge our responsibility as conscious citizens and take necessary actions ourselves, from not polluting the environment and preventing others from doing so.

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## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### Reforms and strikes

Many workers of the transport sector took to the streets recently to protest the enforcement of the Road Transport Act 2018, which is meant for the overall betterment of all those who travel by public transport.

Due to their baseless protests, a tactic often used by transport workers to keep buses off the roads, many across the nation continue to suffer gravely.

Among their many demands, the transport leaders and workers recommended that the mobile courts be used for creating awareness for the time being rather than enforcing the law and bringing the wrong doers to book. But for how much longer?

Time has already been provided by the authorities so that everyone can adjust to the new regulations since its implementation, yet it seems inadequate for those protesting the much needed reform.

They also demanded changes in some sections of the new act.

The fact that a law meant for the protection of lives and to ensure safety and security of those on the roads is being opposed so that the perpetrators can continue with their irregularities, seems too irrational in a civilised society.

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