

PM's timely call to the global community

The world should take responsibility of the climate migrants

AS one of the countries that are most vulnerable to the climate change, Bangladesh has been working relentlessly to combat the effects of extreme weather events induced by climate change. According to the German Watch Global Climate Index Report, Bangladesh is among the 10 most vulnerable nations affected by climate change. The impacts of climate change have become more real for us since natural disasters such as cyclones, floods, river erosion, and drought have increased both in number and ferocity in the country, displacing hundreds and thousands of people annually. Reportedly, even a one-metre rise in the sea level will have disastrous impacts on our coastal regions. Bangladesh will lose 17.5 percent of its land by 2050, which would displace an estimated 20 to 30 million people.

Now the question is, where would all these climate refugees go? Is it only the responsibility of Bangladesh and other vulnerable countries to accommodate this huge number of displaced people? What role can the global community play in protecting the rights of the climate refugees?

Under the circumstances, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's call to the global community was very timely. She has rightly said that climate change has become an existential threat for countries like ours. At the opening session of COP25, known as the UN Climate Change Conference, the prime minister has urged the global community to take responsibility for climate migrants by accommodating them and providing them with livelihoods as they would be displaced for no fault of their own.

Bangladesh has already made a compact national adaptation plan which is now under implementation. It has taken mitigation measures to reduce and eventually reach zero emission in the future. Bangladesh is the first LDC to establish a Climate Change Trust Fund and has so far spent more than USD 415 million from its own resources for mitigation and adaptation purposes.

However, without the necessary support from the world community, it would be difficult to deal with the issue of climate refugees. An appropriate framework is needed to address the needs of the people displaced by climate change. At the same time, the world's major emitters should be held accountable for their inaction to mitigate the impacts of climate change.

Govt. breaks all bank borrowing records

Overambitious revenue targets to blame

THE government is set to exceed its annual limit for bank borrowing within the first half of the current fiscal year. This is primarily due to poor forecast on revenue collection. The net result of this over-borrowing is sure to hit private-sector investments as banks are already facing liquidity crunch. As of November 21, banks are owed Tk 150,702 crore by the government, which is an increase of 39 percent from June of the previous fiscal year. The fact that there was poor planning on precisely what revenue could be collected through VAT and taxes is now plain to see.

The National Board of Revenue (NBR) had set a target of Tk 62,295 crore to be collected between July and September of this year. In reality, Tk 47,388 crore was realised during the period—a shortfall of about 31 percent. Economists fear that as revenue falls and the import of industrial raw materials increases significantly, it will eat up our export earnings. The fact that the government appears to be fixated on financing multiple mega-sized infrastructure projects, while ignoring much-needed reforms that would enable NBR to generate the necessary revenue, is leading us into a situation where our financial planners have no recourse but to borrow from banks.

Leading bankers in the country tell us that they are looking at a bleak future since the bulk of industrial and business loans are given out in January of every fiscal. But given the rate at which the government is borrowing, it will certainly put a big dent on lending. Unless this trend is reversed, we may have trouble financing our debt in the future. Borrowing from banks should be the last resort and efforts need to be made to mobilise internal avenues for revenue generation—through taxation, VAT, removal of tax on profits of savings certificates to begin with.

Myanmar's legacy of rape as a terror tactic



TASNEEM TAYEB

WHILE it is a well-documented fact that more than 700,000 Rohingya had to flee Myanmar's Rakhine state since the latest onslaught of violence unleashed on them by the Myanmar military and nearly 9,000 Rohingya had been killed in Rakhine between August 25 and September 24 in 2017—as recorded by Doctors Without Borders/Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF)—the number of women and girls who have suffered sexual violence at the hands of the military (also known as the Tatmadaw) remains unclear.

hide their pregnancy. Young, unmarried girls, who became victims of unwanted pregnancy due to rape, were especially encouraged by their families to give birth in seclusion so that their prospects of marriage would not be hampered. The result? Unwanted infants dumped in dustbins, left at the makeshift hospitals, given away to other families.

In worse cases, there have been botched abortions resulting in miscarriages and deaths of infants and mothers—mortality we do not even have a concrete count of.

Given the narratives of the Rohingya women and girls, it would not be incorrect to say that the Tatmadaw have adopted rape and sexual violence as a weapon of terrorism. Women narrate tales of being gang-raped by dozens of soldiers in their green and red outfits, often

been using rape and sexual violence as a weapon of war to exterminate the Rohingya community—or at least a part of it. By sexually violating young girls and women, the Tatmadaw is sending a strong message to the Rohingya community: that there is no place for them in the Rakhine State, and that staying back will be at the cost of their lives and the honour of their women, which to a conservative society like that of the Rohingya is the ultimate humiliation.

And these crimes leave us—the host country and the agencies that are trying to provide humanitarian support to the refugees—with many unanswered but critical questions: how many women living in the Rohingya camps have been infected with sexually transmitted diseases (STD), including HIV, as a result of the mass rape that they had to endure?

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PHOTO: THOMSON REUTERS FOUNDATION

Figures from the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) suggest that after arriving in Bangladesh, around 13,500 Rohingya women sought medical assistance and support to address the sexual violence—including gang rapes—that they had to endure at the hands of the Tatmadaw. But the actual number of women and girls facing sexual violence is expected to be much higher, since shame and fear of social stigma deter a lot of women from acknowledging the sexual violence that they had been inflicted upon by the Myanmar military.

Between August 2017 and February 2018, MSF recorded 160 cases of pregnant rape victims. And there were hundreds and thousands of women who chose to deliver their baby in confinement to

multiple times.

According to the Middle East Institute and a story published by *The Guardian*, there have been instances where women had been “tied by their hair and hands to trees and gang raped, for no other reason than being Rohingya Muslims.”

Razia Sultana, a prominent lawyer and activist, in an interview with *Time* recalls how she met a 14-year-old girl who had been raped by more than 30 soldiers. “The army is cutting women's breasts off, gouging out their eyes. This is not just rape. This is a weapon to punish the community,” Sultana further added.

And indeed, the rape of Rohingya women and girls by the Tatmadaw and the sheer brutality of these incidents suggest that the Myanmar military has

How many need immediate medical support to battle these diseases? How many babies have been delivered in the camps—at the makeshift hospitals or in seclusion—with HIV? How many women know that they are carrying STDs? And how many others, including locals, are at the risk of getting infected by the disease (especially since we don't know how many living in the Cox's Bazar camps are carrying these diseases)?

MSF, the UN agencies and the Bangladesh government are working hard to screen, identify and provide medical care to these unfortunate women and children. According to official estimates, till March 2019, at least 319 Rohingya had been identified with HIV, along with many children. Of them, 19 have died.

And while it is reassuring to see the concerned agencies are working to provide medical support to the Rohingya who have been infected with STDs, it is important to note that a lot of the potential carriers of these diseases have not opened up due to fears of social stigma.

In the midst of all these, the Rohingya women and girls are being preyed upon by human traffickers and forced into sexual slavery, potentially increasing the risk of the spread of these diseases. And while it is easier for the men to open up about their problems and seek help, it is not so easy for the women and girls who live in fear of retribution.

But the Rohingya women and girls cannot be allowed to suffer in silence. The trafficking of vulnerable Rohingya women and girls should be stopped at all costs. The Bangladesh government and the humanitarian agencies should make sure that the women and girls who have been subjected to physical, psychological and emotional trauma and pain by the Tatmadaw are given necessary medical and emotional support.

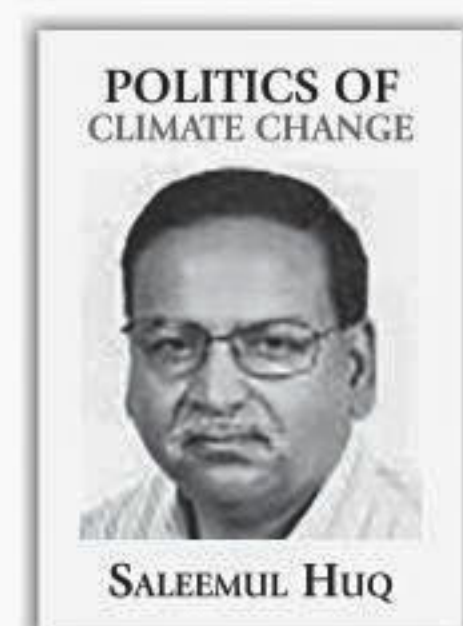
With such a large population of the Rohingya—especially those infected with deadly diseases like HIV—crammed up in the makeshift camps in Cox's Bazar in not very healthy conditions, the host country and humanitarian agencies must do their best to address their health issues on an urgent basis. The repercussions of the spread of these diseases are going to be devastating.

All the while, we need to provide psychological and emotional counselling to these women and girls. It will not be possible to erase the memories of horror that they had to endure, the mental and physical scars, but with proper support, they may be able to carry on with their lives.

Human suffering has no nationality and knows no borders. It is important that we constantly remind ourselves of these self-evident facts.

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COP25 off to a good start



SALEEMUL HUQ

THE 25th annual Conference of the Parties (COP25) of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) opened in Madrid, Spain on Monday with a high-level event of the Climate Vulnerable Forum (CVF). There, in the presence of UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, the current chair of the CVF, President Hilda Heine of the Marshall Islands, announced that she would like Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina of Bangladesh to take over as chair of the forum for 2020.

Sheikh Hasina, who was also present at the event in Madrid, accepted the offer and she will chair both the CVF, which now consists of leaders of over 50 vulnerable developing countries, and the V20, a group of finance ministers from the CVF countries, from 2020.

This is the second time that she will be the chair of the CVF. Being asked to be the chair again is a great honour indeed.

Another important part of the high-level event was the unexpected arrival of Nancy Pelosi, the Speaker of the House of Representatives of the United States Congress, along with over 20 of her fellow Congressional representatives, who gave an inspiring speech immediately after Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina where she expressed solidarity with Bangladesh and other vulnerable countries.

This gave a very strong and positive impetus for the next two weeks of negotiations at the COP25 in Madrid. Over the two weeks, there will be important decisions to be negotiated on a number of issues, of which the most contentious one is the issue of “loss and damage” where the vulnerable developing countries will be demanding that countries agree to start raising funds to compensate the victims of climate change

for the loss and damage they are suffering already.

The developed countries have, until now, pushed back against the notion of compensation, to the extent that even the word itself is taboo! However, there are two important factors that give us hope that we can finally make a breakthrough here in Madrid.

The first factor is the undeniable scientific evidence that “loss and damage” due to human-induced climate

has become the “climate emergency” of today.

This is a very significant factor as it means that British and European negotiators in Madrid now must put their money where their respective parliament's mouth is, and support the vulnerable developing countries' demands for funding loss and damage.

Failure to do so will mean that governments don't take their own parliaments seriously at all.

together comprise more than a hundred countries, which makes them a majority of the 195 countries in the UNFCCC, and they are also the countries with the greatest moral authority to talk about the effects of climate change as they have emitted a very small amount of greenhouse gases globally but are suffering the most.

Hence, COP25 in Madrid will prove to either show that the UNFCCC can indeed rise to the challenge of the climate



Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina holds a meeting with her Dutch counterpart Mark Rutte on the sidelines of the Conference of the Parties (COP25), known as the UN Climate Change Conference, in Madrid, Spain.

PHOTO: PID

change is now clearly attributable. This is a significant scientific breakthrough. The second factor is that national parliaments around the world, such as the British Parliament, and more recently the European Parliament, have made important declarations to recognise that the climate change problem of yesterday

Finally, from the vulnerable countries' side, the four of the most vulnerable groups—namely, the Least Developed Countries (LDC), Africa, Latin America and Small Islands—joined forces at a pre-COP workshop which I was asked to facilitate, to come with common demands at COP25. These four groups

emergency, or it will fail and become redundant as a global decision-making body.

I will be reporting back on the state of play in Madrid over the next two weeks.

Saleemul Huq is Director of the International Centre for Climate Change and Development (ICCCAD) at the Independent University, Bangladesh.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Introduce tax incentives to encourage citizens

I would like to draw the attention of the Ministry of Finance and the National Board of Revenue (NBR) to the importance of introducing incentive schemes, similar to those in some other countries, to encourage the citizens to pay their income tax and do so on time. The incentives may include, among others, allowance when someone loses their job, reimbursement of medical bills at old age, and social welfare programmes which will entitle the tax payers to certain retirement benefits.

The current system hardly provides any incentive to the people for paying their taxes. The feeling of give-and-take seems nearly non-existent, and the government is hardly providing for the wellbeing of the taxpayers. Tax payment should earn the citizens some sort of benefits in the short run to make it more compelling. I think the higher-ups at the NBR should take lessons from the experience of countries with such welfare schemes and try to replicate those in our system. Introduction of such methods will surely be beneficial to the government as well as the general public.

Nuruzzaman Khan, by email