

Delayed Rohingya repatriation poses new challenges

Govt needs to make long-term plans

A recent report titled "Forcibly Displaced Myanmar National (Rohingya) in Bangladesh: Governance Challenges and Way Out" prepared by Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) tells us that the country faces long-term financial, political and security challenges due to the prolonged stay of Rohingyas on Bangladeshi soil. Since Myanmar is not under any serious international pressure to prepare the grounds to take back the Rohingyas, we are increasingly facing socio-economic instability. These extend to security issues and as pointed out by TIB executive director, "risks of growing extremism as the people who face violence are more likely to become more violent."

So, what is the government to do? Since 2017, the government has spent more than Tk 2,000 crore on the Rohingya influx and this financial burden will grow as international interest wanes. Unfortunately, there is overlapping of activities and lack of coordination between government agencies and non-government actors that include international NGOs and local ones. This is resulting in deep distrust as there is a gap of information and allegations are being raised as to how much of the international aid is being spent on the refugee community and what is going to pay as administrative expenditure. These discrepancies are raising suspicions and leading to delays in granting permission for project approvals and ultimately, hampering the much-needed aid that Rohingyas depend on for survival.

What is sorely needed now is a multi-stakeholder assessment that will include state and non-state actors to formulate plans from short to long-term intervention for the Rohingya populace, because the way things are being played out in the international arena, this displaced community may be here for a long time. And if we intend to avoid many of the governance challenges already creeping in, it is best to have an effective monitoring and coordination mechanism in place to avoid some of those pitfalls. Side-by-side, the diplomatic pressure must be an ongoing effort to force Myanmar to take back its nationals as soon as possible.

Hold those responsible to account

Public money cannot be wasted like this

PRICES of equipment purchased at Sheikh Hasina Medical College in Habiganj, as this newspaper reported on Wednesday, have been exceptionally high without any explanation. For example, Tk 35 lakh has been spent to buy 450 anatomical charts for Tk 7,800 each supplied by a Dhaka-based company. Whereas they should have cost at most Tk 2,179.80 each only, even if they were of the highest quality. But that is not all. The invoice for computers, printers, projectors, weighing machines, furniture, books, and anatomical models submitted by two suppliers to the college authorities show unusually high prices compared to market rates. And this newspaper even managed to obtain the documents and bills submitted to the college showing the questionable prices.

Among the committee members responsible for signing the minutes of the meetings that approved the tender process for the purchase, one member was not invited to the meetings. And another who did sign, refused to take responsibility for corruption, if there was any.

This sort of behaviour is completely unacceptable. It is obvious that crores of taka were overspent to procure the equipment, and the money came from the public exchequer. The college authorities cannot shy away from irresponsibly spending public money like this—nor for corruption, which is the most likely explanation for such astronomically absurd prices.

We are informed that the Anti-Corruption Commission in Habiganj has started a primary inquiry into the alleged irregularities in the purchase process of the college. We call on the authorities to thoroughly investigate the matter and hold those responsible to account.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Fear of dengue still lurks

Right when it seemed that the dengue epidemic would come under control, for some unusual reason, the deadly disease is back to claim more lives. And the steps taken by the authorities seem to have had little effect in eliminating the deadly *Aedes* mosquitoes.

And now the disease is not only widespread in the capital, but it is also affecting lives across the nation. I would like to request the authorities to take stricter measures to bring the situation under control. At the same time, it is the responsibility of every citizen to do their best to prevent the spread of this deadly disease.

Shafkat Rahman, BIAM Model School and College



Trafficking in Rohingya: Exploiting the desperate



A CLOSER LOOK

TASNEEM TAYEB

one aim: survival. And survive they did once they crossed the border and made it to the world's largest refugee camp in Bangladesh's Cox's Bazar.

While coping with the changed circumstances—from having a life in their native Rakhine State to finding themselves displaced and stateless—the Rohingya population has had to face up to another insidious and menacing threat lurking in the shadows in their place of refuge: human trafficking.

As it turns out, refugees are some of the easier prey for the human traffickers.

Human trafficking is a profitable business. Data from International Labor Organization (ILO), as reported by *Fortune*, suggests that "Human trafficking is estimated to bring in global profits of about USD150 billion a year—USD 99 billion from sexual exploitation".

The majority of the victims of human trafficking are women and girls. According to the Counter-Trafficking Data Collaborative (CTDC), females make up for about 71 percent victims of human trafficking. A lot of these women and girls are sold into forced prostitution. ILO estimated suggests, "Women represent 99 percent of the victims of forced labour in the commercial sex industry and 84 percent of forced marriages."

The Rohingyas have been vulnerable to human trafficking for years. Between 2012 and 2015, human trafficking trade involving the Rohingyas is estimated to have generated between USD 50 and USD 100 million a year.

The result: trafficking of around 170,000 Rohingyas from Bangladesh and Myanmar, and "murder, extermination, enslavement, deportation or forcible transfer, imprisonment, torture, and rape, as part of a widespread and systematic attack directed against Rohingya civilians from Myanmar and Bangladesh" with knowledge of the widespread and systematic attack underway", as revealed in a six-year investigation by Human Rights Commission of Malaysia (SUHAKAM) and Fortify Rights, a nongovernment rights body.

And the influx of new refugees has only made it easier for the notorious human traffickers to prey on the vulnerable people. Rampant poverty; insecurity; and lack of access to even the most basic of necessities, such as food, clothing, medicine; force the despairing people to accept whatever income-generation options that are presented to them by the traffickers.

Taking advantage of the desperation of these displaced people, the traffickers trick the more vulnerable ones into sex slavery,

domestic servitude, and forced labour. And although men and young boys also fall victims to the lure of the traffickers, who give them false hopes of better lives abroad, it is the women and girls who are easier targets and the more lucrative ones.

Witness accounts, testimonials of the victims and various reports by the media and humanitarian agencies suggest that a lot of the Rohingya women have been pushed into forced prostitution and domestic slavery.

While talking to *AFF*, a Bangladeshi police official suggested that teenage girls, especially between 15 and 19 are at a higher risk of being sold into sex slavery. According to the US state department's Trafficking in Persons Report 2019, Rohingya girls are transported to Dhaka, Kathmandu and Kolkata, among other destinations, where they are forced into prostitution. In the booming sex industry in Kolkata and Kathmandu, these girls become faceless sex slaves, with no

and pay. While the traffickers and sex traders take bigger cuts of the money earned through this trade, the women are given a paltry amount to live on.

Secondly, the women are being exposed to unsafe sex with the possibility of being infected with all kinds of STDs, including HIV. Especially because the customers are often not willing to use condoms. While talking to *South China Morning Post*, a Rohingya sex worker said, "I take birth control injections, but I worry about HIV every day". Unfortunately, she has never been tested for STDs.

And not testing these girls pose a bigger and more serious threat for the customers: HIV. It is a known fact that a lot of the Rohingya women and girls have been subjected to gang rape and sexual violence by the Myanmar military. And given that Myanmar is one of the 35 countries making up for 90 percent of new HIV infections globally, as reported

these young Rohingya girls face. Often these girls are sent away with unreliable traffickers to distant lands—Malaysia, Indonesia, among other countries—to be married off to much-older Rohingya men who had fled to those countries earlier.

These Rohingyas men are undocumented and are involved in low-paid jobs in factories and industries in those countries. And they cannot marry local women. Therefore, their only way of getting married and starting a family is by smuggling these young, vulnerable girls to those countries through traffickers.

These marriages are usually arranged over phone by the grooms' relatives who live in the camps. In the face of sustained economic hardships, the parents often are left with no other option other than accepting these marriage proposals and allowing their daughters to embark upon desperate journeys across seas in rickety fishing boats, with no hope of ever reuniting again.

And the lucky girls, who manage to survive the hardships of the journey are exposed to all kinds of domestic abuse once married to these men. These girls live like prisoners, forced to do all kinds of household chores, and cannot even seek medical help when ill, because of their illegal residential status.

Fortify Rights have recorded cases of young girls who have been abused by their husbands in Malaysia. For these young girls, life ends even before they realise when it began.

And the growing problem of the trafficking of the Rohingyas has been acknowledged by the host country. "We have alerted all the security agencies that trafficking events are taking place... We have tightened the border areas, security has been tightened on the sea and we have increased patrolling by the coast guard and the police and military are guarding and protecting this population from trafficking", said Bangladesh's Refugee Relief and Repatriation Commissioner Mohammad Abul Kalam while discussing the problem.

And over the last few years the host country has indeed been able to rescue some of the victims of the human trafficking. But the problem is so complicated that it cannot simply be addressed by strengthening security measures.

In order to eliminate human trafficking, we need to address to root causes that make the Rohingyas vulnerable to traffickers: economic hardships, lack of education, lack of livelihood generation opportunities, lack of access to the basic necessities.

The host country, along with the humanitarian agencies working with the Rohingya population, needs to take a more thorough and comprehensive approach covering all aspects of human trafficking in order to address and eliminate this problem. Till then, desperate people will keep falling for desperate measures in search of a better life.

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Bangladesh police rescued 15 refugees near Kutupalong. PHOTO: REUTERS/FILE PHOTO

prospect of ever reuniting with their families.

And some of the others become involved with the sex trade closer to home—in Chattogram, and even in the prostitution business in Kutupalong itself. According to a report by *South China Morning Post*, in Kutupalong the "sex industry is thriving". "At least 500 Rohingya prostitutes live in Kutupalong," the same report quoted a fixer as saying while elaborating the sex trade situation in the biggest Rohingya camp in Cox's Bazar.

Most of these women and girls work in secrecy, making sure their families are unaware of their work. Fear of social stigma and retribution force these girls to endure sex slavery in silence—a fear fully taken advantage of by sex traffickers.

And prostitution by Rohingya women pose multidimensional problems for everyone involved. First of all, these women are being deprived of their dignity

by UNAIDS, many of the rape victims might have been infected with the disease and other STDs during rape.

Unprotected sex exposes the customers to the sexually transmitted diseases that these women might be carrying. And spread of these diseases remains a potential threat for the region, and it is important to address this at the earliest.

Being sold into domestic slavery is another major problem faced by the Rohingyas women and girls. Small girls especially are more vulnerable to this problem. Often traffickers approach desperate parents and offer to take their children to better households in the city—where life will be much easier and food more frequently available. In the hope of a brighter future, parents give away their children, who end up in domestic servitude—often exposed to battery and abuse at the hands of the employers.

Child marriage is another threat that

As the terrible denouement unfolds

Trump's impeachment and re-election



ASHFAQUE SWAPAN

benchmark of just how terrible can you be and still be reelected to the White House.

Key advisers in the campaign in prison? Check.

Historically huge turnover in cabinet members, with some leaving in disgrace? Check.

Appalling mendacity which forced the US media to break a long-standing taboo and actually admit in print that the president *lies*? Check.

An impeachment process that has laid bare how the president twisted the arm of a foreign government for personal political gain? Check.

Now, the impeachment process is an intensely partisan process. It has always been so. Democrats led the impeachment process against Republican President Richard Nixon in 1974 and Republicans returned the compliment in their impeachment process against Democratic President Bill Clinton in 1998.

This time around, the Democrats are leading the attack on a Republican president. On the whole, I've been pleasantly surprised by the focus and discipline of the Democrats.

There is always a tension between a party's die-hard base and its savvy elected officials who always keep a careful eye on which way the winds of opinion are blowing. (After all, they're the ones who have to get reelected.)

I saw this first hand in the 2018 Congressional campaign at an event for the Democratic candidate in an Atlanta suburb. The Democratic hopeful at that

time, Lucy McBath, was fighting a tough, almost impossible race. Supporters at the event were all gung-ho partisans who were seething over the fact that Trump wasn't already impeached.

McBath reacted with calmness and certainty of purpose. While she shared much of the outrage of some supporters, she steadfastly stood her ground as she insisted that she would much rather focus on bread-and-butter issues, because that's what constituents wanted.

True to her word, she stuck to her guns. It turned out she was right. History was made when McBath, an African American gun-rights advocate, won an improbable victory in a predominantly white ruby-red Republican Congressional constituency which was once the stomping ground of firebrand Newt Gingrich, a former Republican House Speaker.

Democratic House Speaker Nancy Pelosi did exactly the same thing on the national level. She kept a tight lid on the partisan clamor for impeachment until an explosive whistleblower charge accused Trump of twisting the arm of Ukraine for personal political gain. She was forced to launch impeachment hearings.

The resulting proceedings do the Democrats enormous credit.

What's remarkable here is what did *not* happen. The US House brings together arguably one of most narcissistic bunch of people on earth. Many a proceeding can quickly descend into a dreadful love-fest: A lawmaker deeply in love with his/her own voice. Some of this was embarrassingly evident during the earlier Robert Mueller hearings, when a lawmaker would ramble on and on until a listener was wondering what on earth the question was.

This time around, though, the initial hearings heard from non-partisan witnesses, many of such impeccable standing that even Republican lawmakers shied away from going after them. The testimony of these witnesses built a rock-solid case against Trump's

malfeasance.

At the judiciary committee, distinguished experts of constitutional law provided their considered, sober opinion on why Trump ought to be impeached.

The whole process was fast, thorough and rigorous, and best of all, free of Democratic bombast and grandstanding. Republicans are another story.

However, here's the brutal fact: A fat lot of good it will all do.

Such is the state of the nation where partisan fissures run so deep. All politics is tribal now. A substantial chunk of



PHOTO: BRENDAN SMIALOWSKI / AFP

Among independents, 45 percent said in the latest poll they supported Trump's impeachment and 32 percent said they opposed it.

Republicans has turned into "the Fifth Avenue crowd"—a reference to Trump's acute observation that his supporters wouldn't desert him even if he shot somebody in New York City's Fifth Avenue.

So, it is shocking, but not surprising, that polls show that the dramatic revelations at the impeachment hearings

have barely moved the needle in terms of public opinion.

This brings us to the mind-boggling possibility that despite everything Trump is still quite competitive. The fact that Democrats took back the House in 2018 is cold comfort, because presidential elections are a completely different beast.

If the US presidential elections were decided by popular vote, it would have been a foregone conclusion.

But the presidential elections are fought on a state-by-state basis.

This is how it plays out: There are a whole bunch of solidly Democratic states, another whole bunch of solidly Republican states, and the fight comes down to a handful of so-called battleground states where the jury is still out. Here the shots could well be called by a demographic cohort that is particularly partial to Trump—what political analysts call white non-college educated whites. Trump is particularly canny at riling up this group with his race-baiting antics.

So, it might well be that despite coming short in the popular vote by several millions, Trump could eke out a victory come November 2020. On the other hand, some analysts are beginning to wonder if a president with such a terrible public standing can actually win reelection.

"For now, there is simply no empirical reason to believe that Trump will win next year," respected political analyst Stuart Rothenberg wrote recently.

"In fact, the evidence is not compelling in either direction. . .

"For the moment, all we can safely say is that polls continue to confirm that Trump is in deep trouble, with a job approval rating that no incumbent president seeking reelection would want."

As the great American baseball player had observed: "It ain't over till it's over."

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