

'Only justice can heal our wounds'



REUTERS, Cox's Bazar

Rohingyas demand Myanmar be held to account at the United Nations' top court in The Hague, where Myanmar leader and Nobel peace prize laureate Aung San Suu Kyi is set to defend the country against charges of genocide of the minority community.

Rohingyas housed in sprawling refugee camps in southern Bangladesh reacted strongly yesterday to the prospect of Suu Kyi appearing this week at The International Court of Justice in hearings set for

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ROHINGYA TESTIMONIES

"One grave for 10 people... When they were being buried, some were still making noises. Others were already dead."

Soe Chay, 55, a retired soldier from Inn Din's Rakhine Buddhist community who said he helped dig the pit and saw the killings, where soldiers shot each man two or three times.

"This was my village. All our homes were burned. The army has occupied our land."

Hussein Ahmed, village chairman of Inn Din

"They beat and killed my husband with a knife. They went into my house. Five of them took off my clothes and raped me. My eight-month-old son was crying out of hunger when they were in my house because he wanted to breastfeed, so to silence him they killed him too with a knife. I thought I would die, but I survived."

A 25-year-old woman from Yae Khat Chaung Gwa Son said during an interview with UN OHCHR, published in a report in February 2017

"It was around 3:00am in the morning; we were sleeping, when the military attacked our village. We ran outside in panic, leaving my five-year-old brother behind in the house. The military came and set fire to the house, burning my brother alive. We found his burnt body in the morning, after the military had left the village."

A victim told UN OHCHR, which published the interview in a report in February 2017

"The military came to my village and killed my husband and burned my house. Three soldiers dragged me to a bush and pointed a gun at me and raped me until I lost consciousness. I fled here after the army put up large posters with my photo and went door-to-door looking for me because I gave interviews to foreign journalists after the brutal incident."

Jamalida Begum, 29, who said she was raped by the army in 2016 after her husband was killed

ROHINGYA GENOCIDE

Rights groups call for boycott of Myanmar

REUTERS, The Hague

Human rights campaigners supporting Myanmar's Rohingya Muslim minority yesterday called for a global boycott of the country, a day before genocide hearings begin at the International Court of Justice in The Hague.

Myanmar leader and Nobel Peace prize laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, who arrived in the Netherlands on Sunday, will defend her country's record during three days of hearings initiated after a lawsuit was filed by Gambia in November.

Suu Kyi's office posted a picture of her arrival at Amsterdam's Schiphol airport, where she was greeted by the ambassador to the Netherlands and

then headed to The Hague, where the tribunal, also known as the World Court, is located.

Several demonstrations are planned in coming days in the Dutch city by Rohingya survivor groups, as well as by government supporters.

Gambia, a tiny, mainly Muslim West African country, filed the suit in which the Buddhist-majority Myanmar is accused of genocide, the most serious international crime, against its Rohingya Muslim minority.

More than 730,000 Rohingya fled Myanmar in 2017 after a military-led crackdown. The United Nations has said the campaign was executed with "genocidal intent" and included mass

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The burden gets heavier

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The latest military crackdown since August 2017 turned out to be the most brutal one during which the Rohingyas faced murders, rapes, mutilation of bodies, and burning of their homes.

UN investigators say that these crimes were committed with genocide and ethnic cleansing intent.

More than 750,000 Rohingyas fled Myanmar since then, bringing the total number of refugees in Bangladesh to more than a million.

Bangladesh and Myanmar signed a bilateral deal in November 2017 for repatriation when Myanmar committed to creating conducive conditions for Rohingya return.

In 2018, the UNDP and the UNHCR also signed a tripartite deal with Myanmar for helping it create conducive environment in Rakhine state. Nothing, however, worked. Two repatriation attempts – one on November 15 last year and the latest on August 22 this year – fell flat as the Rohingya refugees alleged that there was no guarantee of citizenship and safety in Rakhine.

Even the UN Security Council could not take any concrete action against Myanmar mainly for objections from veto powers China and Russia, close allies of Myanmar.

ASEAN countries too have not been able to play an effective role.

China, Japan, and India, who are

allies of Bangladesh and Myanmar, want a bilateral solution to the crisis, but their efforts have not been effective so far.

Bangladesh, a crowded country with limited natural resources, is seriously burdened with the crisis.

According to government data, between August 2017 and November 3 this year, Bangladesh government directly spent Tk 2,308 crore for management of the Rohingyas crisis.

Due to the presence of the Rohingyas, 6,164 acres of reserved forest has been damaged. Its local cost is Tk 2,420 crore. Besides, biodiversity worth Tk 1,409 crore was also damaged.

Ground water table in Cox's Bazar has dropped seriously, while local infrastructure and health services came under serious strain, said officials concerned.

According to a recent report of the Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB), Cox's Bazar saw a demographic imbalance due to the Rohingya influx. Population density in Ukhaia and Teknaf was 792 and 680 respectively, but after the Rohingya influx it went up to 3,468 and 2,085, which turned the locals into a minority.

Locals are also facing trouble in getting health services as 25 percent services of government hospitals go towards the refugees, it said. Some 50 percent of the local administration's

human resources and logistics are deployed for refugee management.

As the Rohingyas provide cheap labour, wages for local labour went down by 15 percent, while prices of daily essentials went up 50 to 60 percent.

According to the TIB report launched on December 5, the funding for the Rohingyas from the international community was on the decline. Bangladesh got 73 percent of the projected fund for 2017, 69 percent for 2018, and 55 percent as of October this year.

"This means the pressure on Bangladesh is going up. It will have adverse socio-economic, political and security implications," said TIB Executive Director Iftekharuzzaman.

Bangladesh Institute of Peace and Security Studies President Maj Gen Muniruzzaman (ret'd) said several people have already been killed in fighting between the Rohingyas and locals, a worrisome trend.

"Prolonged stay of the Rohingyas without definitive future creates an environment that triggers internal radicalisation. It has serious regional implications too," he told The Daily Star.

He said the Rohingyas were also becoming involved in drug smuggling. They were potential targets of local and international human traffickers.

Human trafficking via the Bay of Bengal came to light in 2015 when

Malaysian and Thai authorities discovered dozens of mass graves of the Rohingyas in the bordering jungles and mountains of the two countries.

Human Rights Commission of Malaysia and Fortify Rights, a nongovernment rights body, in an investigation during 2012-15 found more than 170,000 people were either trafficked or smuggled from Myanmar and Bangladesh to Malaysia and Thailand.

Human trafficking of the Rohingyas could contribute to the lowering of Bangladesh's ranking in the US Trafficking in Persons report, said Maj Gen (ret'd) Muniruzzaman.

"Cox's Bazar is a tourist district for its beach and natural beauty. But damage to natural forest, pollution of air, and water are major factors that can harm our tourism," a government official said.

Former foreign secretary Touhid Hossain said citizenship is the most important aspect for the Rohingya return, but Myanmar wants to issue National Verification Cards, which are given to foreigners.

Rohingyas say that they lived there for generations and cannot accept the card.

Bangladesh's relations with Myanmar could have been much better if the Rohingya crisis was not there, he said.

Lower House clears it

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given Indian citizenship, reports Times of India.

Earlier in the day, Home Minister Amit Shah introduced the bill in the lower House. The House voted on the introduction of the bill with 293 MPs voting yes, 82 MPs voting no.

Hundreds of people in Assam and Kolkata staged protests and marched against the proposed bill yesterday after Shah tabled the bill.

The bill is not in violation of constitutional provisions, Shah told the lower House. "It will give relief to people living a painful life after facing persecution in neighbouring countries," he said.

Claiming that the bill was "worse than Hitler's laws", Hyderabad MP Asaduddin Owaisi tore a copy of the legislation in the midst of a heated debate yesterday.

"It is an attempt to divide the nation. The proposed law is against our country's constitution," he declared.

In his address to the Lok Sabha, the AIMIM chief also said that Gandhi gained the title "Mahatma" after he tore the discriminatory citizenship card in South Africa, and there was no reason why he should not do the same with the Citizenship Amendment Bill.

Owaisi also accused the BJP-led government of insulting the country's freedom fighters by trying to marginalise Muslims, and wondered why it was not concentrating its efforts on retaking parts of the country under foreign occupation instead, reported NDTV online.

"Are you afraid of China?" he asked, in a reference to the neighbouring country's encroachment in Arunachal Pradesh.

Ruling party members described his act as an "insult" to the parliament.

Congress leader from Assam Gaurav Gogoi told the House: "I vehemently oppose the bill. The Home Minister should apologise to the one lakh Gurkhas who defend our borders and found themselves out of NRC."

"This is against article 14, article

15, article 21, article 25 and 26 of the Indian constitution. This bill is unconstitutional and against basic right of equality", Congress leader Manish Tewari told the House.

AIUDF leader Badruddin Ajmal said, "We want the government to take this bill back. It is against Assam, Constitution and unity of Hindus and Muslims. It is the government's divide and rule policy."

Sukhbir Singh Badal of Shiromani Akali Dal says his party backs the bill.

He talked about the horrors of partition, the minorities who stayed back in Pakistan and how some were kidnapped and forced to convert to Islam, in line with the majority community. He said Sikhism embraces secularism.

"This bill is going to protect the Sikh community," he said before signing off.

PROTESTS OVER BILL

Student groups called for dawn-to-dusk shutdown in four districts in Assam yesterday. Shops, businesses, educational and financial institutions remained shut and public transport stayed off the roads.

"We will fight and oppose the bill till the last drop of our blood," All Assam Students' Union adviser Samujjal Bhattacharya told Reuters, underlining the region's resistance against migrants amid fears that tens of thousands of settlers from neighbouring Bangladesh would gain citizenship.

In a statement issued yesterday, a group of more than 1,000 Indian scientists and scholars also called for the immediate withdrawal of the bill.

"We fear, in particular, that the careful exclusion of Muslims from the ambit of the bill will greatly strain the pluralistic fabric of the country," the statement said.

After going through the lower House of parliament, where BJP has a majority, the bill has to be passed by the upper House, where the ruling party lacks enough votes. Any bill needs to be ratified by both Houses of India's parliament to become law.

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Rab claimed to have seized torture tools, firearms, two Kangaroo hides, 1,160 Yaba pills, and 19 bottles of foreign liquor from his office in Kakrail.

An arms, and a drug cases were filed against him with Ramna Police Station, while a mobile court sentenced him to six months' imprisonment for possessing the hides and liquor.

Dhaka yet to make visible progress

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recommended that the government take steps to identify what constituted as "special circumstance", but that is yet to be done.

"Steps taken nationally to end child marriage will not work unless the law is changed," Kamal said.

According to UNICEF data from 2017, 59 percent of girls in Bangladesh are married before the age of 18.

A summary of their 2019 data says 51.4% get married before 18. While this can be considered an improvement, rights activists maintain that revision of the law is crucial for any visible change to take place.

Regarding women's rights, the government had also accepted seven recommendations to protect migrant workers. This includes a recommendation that states, "continue efforts to enhance the transparency and efficiency of the recruitment system of migrant workers from Bangladesh."

The Council asked to "adopt legislation and comprehensive public policies to guarantee the human rights of persons in a situation of human mobility."

Thongs of female migrants coming back home after surviving sexual abuse and torture in recent months, however, shows that these recommendations too have remained unimplemented.

"The situation of migrant workers might have deteriorated," said Sheepra Hafiza, head of Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK).

She pointed out another group of female workers, regarding whom the government has accepted recommendations but done nothing yet – the informal female workers. "Our domestic workers are still not protected because there is no law protecting them," Hafiza said.

"The government has also made a commitment to reduce the [number of] children in hazardous work, but we neither have any baseline nor any real data [in this regard]," she said.

Advocate Sara Hossain said, "We want to see fewer conferences and more concrete action to enforce rights and hold accountable those responsible for gross violations of rights, in particular disappearances and extra judicial killings, as well as the ongoing and pervasive violence

against women."

Another critical recommendation of the Council was that Bangladesh investigate and prevent enforced disappearances and extrajudicial killings in the country. Bangladesh had accepted it, but rights activists say there has been no effort in this regard.

According to the Human Rights in Bangladesh: Annual Bulletin 2018, by the Human Rights Support Society, at least 92 people became victims of enforced disappearance and 23 of them are still missing.

Besides, 429 people were killed in so-called crossfires or gunfights involving, in most cases, law enforcers, it says.

Moreover, police reportedly tortured seven people to death, shot five dead, and 33 others died in their custody, it adds.

"Instead of investigations, we only get justifications. We are also supposed to create an independent commission to investigate these, but we have not done so yet," said Kamal.

She said extra-judicial killings aren't even investigated and all they get are "denials".

The issue at hand here, rights

activists feel, is that there is no nationally coordinated effort to implement the recommendations.

"This is the reflection of the government's attitude towards human rights. Only implementation of the UPR can improve the human rights situation of the country," said Dr Mizanur Rahman, former chief of the National Human Rights Commission.

"It is the job of the ministry representing the government at UPR [in this case it was the ministry of law] to relay the recommendations to the relevant ministries. But they do not monitor how much these are being implemented," he added.

"If we had a central authority to supervise these, we could implement [the recommendations] better," he said, adding, "the state needs to be fully committed."

Law Minister Anisul Huq, however, contradicted rights activists and said progress was being made in implementing the recommendations.

"We are very committed to the suggestions and the ones we have accepted. We are making very steady progress in fulfilling these recommendations," said Huq.

Ajoy Roy passes away

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after Avijit and his wife Rafida Ahmed Bonyta came out of the Amar Ekushey Boi Mela. Bonyta suffered injuries when she tried to protect her husband.

Prof Ajoy, who was a plaintiff of the murder case, could not see justice for his son's killing.

On November 25, he was admitted to the Birder hospital with fever and breathing problem. He was later shifted to the hospital's ICU as his condition deteriorated, Brig Gen (ret'd) Shahidul Hoque Mallik, director of the hospital, told The Daily Star.

Best known for his prominent role in promoting human rights and freethinking, Prof Ajoy, a freedom fighter, had vented his anger on October 28 over the slow progress in the murder case.

He told a Dhaka court that he would not keep appearing before it for hearings anymore. "I am tired now," he told the court on that day.

Before his death, Prof Ajoy donated

his body to the hospital for research purposes. It will be taken to the Central Shaheed Minar premises and then to the DU campus today so that people could pay their last tribute to Prof Ajoy, said his cousin Binay Bsushan Barman.

As the news of the death spread, many rushed to the hospital yesterday to have a glimpse of Prof Ajoy.

In a condolence message, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina expressed deep sympathy to the bereaved family.

Talking to The Daily Star, Shahrar Kabir, president of Ekattorer Ghatok Dalal Nirmul Committee, a platform formed in 1992 to raise voice for the trial of war criminals, said, "Prof Ajoy Roy was the icon of the freethinking movement in Bangladesh. With his death, a vacuum has been created and the loss is irreparable."

One of the founders of the Nirmul committee, Prof Ajoy also played a pivotal role in anti-fundamentalism movements and protecting human

rights in the country, he said.

He also said it was a matter of great regret that the trial in Avijit murder case had not been completed yet.

Born on March 1, 1935 in Dinajpur, Prof Ajoy obtained his Honour's and Master's degrees from Dhaka University, and obtained his PhD in physical chemistry from Leeds University, England.

He joined as a teacher at the physics department in DU in 1959 and went into retirement in 2000. He was also a professor of University Grants Commission.

The veteran educationist participated in many progressive movements, including the Language Movement in 1952, 1969 Mass Uprising, and Non-cooperation Movement. He joined the Liberation War in 1971.

During the war, Prof Ajoy was the general secretary of the teachers' association. He mobilised opinions of Indian educationists against the atrocities of Pakistani occupation

forces.

Founder of "Shikkha Andolan Mancha" (a platform for education movement), Prof Ajoy was the editor-in-chief of Muktanwesa magazine, a Bengali publication for promoting freethinking.

He was the general secretary of the Asiatic Society of Bangladesh.

Prof Ajoy also played an active role in protecting victims when there was a wave of violence and oppression against the Hindu community in 2001. Besides, he worked for promoting the rights of the people of the Chattogram Hill Tracts.

He worked as a columnist in different national newspapers of Bangladesh.

Yesterday, different government, professional bodies, socio-cultural and rights organisations, including Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, Bangladesh Puja Udjapan Parishad and Ain o Salish Kendra, also expressed condolences to the family of Prof Ajoy.