If Bangladesh turns away, so will the world

We are the last hope of the Rohingya refugees at sea

SHUPROVA TASNEEM

AT any other time, if hundreds of refugees fleeing genocide were starving at sea with nowhere to go, there would be widespread condemnation. Unfortunately, the pandemic that has swept across the world has relegated this issue into being a mere footnote in our news.

In the early hours of April 16, Bangladesh rescued 396 Rohingya refugees who were adrift at sea for around two months after being turned away by Malaysia, according to an Al Jazeera report. The videos that emerged were harrowing—a terrified crowd of mostly women and children huddling together, their emaciated bodies reminiscent of refugees in 1971, or the famine of 1943. Survivors told the BBC that they drank sea water to survive, and the bodies of the dead were pushed into the sea. Médecins Sans Frontières, which treated about 400 survivors, said the passengers were mostly aged between 12 and 20, and more than 70 people died on the boat.

Now, there are confirmed reports of at least two more fishing trawlers with more than 500 Rohingya refugees adrift for more than ten weeks, trapped somewhere in between the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea. While there have been reports of 43 of these refugees landing on Bangladesh's coast on May 2—the Arakan Project monitoring group suggests they escaped from one of the trawlers on a smaller boat—there are still hundreds remaining on the vessels that have been called "modern day slave ships", completely at the mercy of their human traffickers. Both Malaysia and Bangladesh, who have in the past shown exemplary moral authority in taking in the Rohingya, have turned away from these refugees.

This was not always the case. In August 2017, when the Myanmar military crackdown—which was subsequently described as "textbook ethnic cleansing" in a UN report—forced over 700,000 Rohingya men, women and children to flee to Bangladesh, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina famously said "if my government can arrange food for over 160 million people of Bangladesh, we can also feed one million people more." Bangladesh's decision to open the borders saved thousands of desperate people from falling victim to genocide—and as the stories of the Myanmar army and their local collaborators hunting down Rohingya men, raping women, burning mosques and razing whole villages to the ground were reported in local media, the people of Bangladesh also showed great sympathy for the world's most persecuted minority.

However, as time went on, we saw a perceptible "refugee fatigue" set in, especially in the host community in Cox's Bazaar. Bangladesh's policy went from solidarity and an "open arms" approach to insisting on repatriation, building a wall around the refugee camps, restricting education opportunities for Rohingya children, limiting internet and mobile services in the camps and generally doing everything possible to make life unpleasant for refugees and "encourage" them to go home. The fact that "home" no longer existed for most of these refugees, and return would mean almost certain death, was erased from the narrative. Local media outlets played a shameful role in changing the perception of Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh, taking every opportunity to label them as drug dealers and "disturbers of the peace". That a population of 1.1 million could be anything beyond the desperate/dangerous binary, and that the Rohingya could contribute to society and if given the opportunity, use their voices to rise up and fight injustice—was quickly forgotten.

Ironically, the onset of the coronavirus pandemic, while leading to many sweeping statements about the importance of solidarity and building a new world based on community feeling—has also led to populations that are usually "othered" into becoming even more susceptible to victimisation. This is most obvious in Malaysia, where Covid-19 fears have created xenophobic campaigns against refugees and undocumented migrants, and have led to the Malaysian authorities rounding up and detaining hundreds, including children. Let us not forget that this population may also include our own workers—an estimated two lakh Bangladeshi workers in Malaysia are undocumented—who are facing an imminent food crisis, according to a report in this daily. However, in Malaysia, human rights activists and community leaders have spoken out against this targeting of vulnerable populations, with the phrase "Migran juga manusia" (migrants are humans too) trending on social media. President of the People's Justice Party Anwar Ibrahim asked the Malaysian government to "safeguard our humanity", saying there is no excuse to condemn to death the hundreds of Rohingya refugees at sea. It is appalling that in Bangladesh, no such kind words have been spoken, even by development professionals and activists who have been working with the refugee crisis in recent years.

Foreign Minister Dr AK Abdul Momen's comment—"It's not the responsibility of Bangladesh alone to take care of all the stateless people of the planet Earth; ask the global leaders"—is not an unjustified one, although one would hope for a more sensitive tone from a state representative when discussing starving refugees. There are seven other countries sharing the seas that the Rohingya are now trapped on—India, Myanmar, Thailand, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia. Myanmar has used the pandemic as an opportunity to strengthen its aggressive nationalism, all but leaving ethnic minorities out of the scant government efforts to deal with the virus. If persecuted populations feel even greater pressure and choose this time to try and reach better shores, then their policy has worked.

India is primarily concerned with realpolitik—Myanmar is their gateway to Southeast Asia and rival China already has a strong presence there, not to mention the current pro-Hindutva regime has little interest in speaking out for Muslim refugees. Myanmar's communal sentiments are mirrored in Sri Lanka—in 2017, the few Rohingya refugees who live in Sri Lankan shelters were attacked by Buddhist monks and hardline nationalists. Human Rights Watch has termed the Thai government's policy towards asylum seekers as "inhumane" and "racist". Singapore is Myanmar's second largest trading partner in the region, and despite being the world's most populous Muslim nation, Indonesia last year called for the world to "stop pointing fingers" after the Gambia took Myanmar to the International Court of Justice (although the local population of Aceh have been known to shelter Rohingya refugees despite government policy to refuse asylum seekers), according to the Jakarta Post.

In this situation, Malaysia and Bangladesh are the Rohingyas only hope in the region. The Bangladesh government's stance—that the more refugees we take in, the more they will be pushed out of Myanmar—is flawed; there have already been decades-long efforts to displace the Rohingya, and whether they drown at sea or languish in camps is of no concern to Myanmar. Bangladesh had already made plans to relocate refugees to Bhashan Char, and those recently rescued on the coast are reported to have been taken there already for quarantine. If we have the space, why not rescue the rest, especially when we know most of them are likely to be women and children who are victims of trafficking? If we have the capacity to send rice and vegetables to the UAE—a country that is notorious for its treatment of our own migrant workers—can we not, with the help of international agencies, provide for a starving population? As a nation where ten million of its people once became refugees, can we not understand the desperation that drove these people to sea, and reach out a hand of kindness during Ramadan?

Rohingya refugees, who were found floating on the Andaman sea in 2015, desperately reaching out for airdropped food.

PHOTO: AFP/CHRISTOPHE ARCHAMBAULT/GETTY IMAGES

We can make many rational arguments against the disproportionate responsibility shouldered by Bangladesh, and we can demand for the UNHCR and other international agencies to provide us with greater support. We can engage in diplomatic talks with our allies in the region who have consistently turned away from the Rohingya, and we can hold talks with ASEAN and OECD countries about the fate of these refugees. We can appeal to international courts to hold Myanmar to account, and we can call out the hypocrisy of nations and blocs (such as the EU) that "request" Bangladesh to take in refugees but continue to trade with the oppressive regime in Myanmar. But we can only do this if we continue to exercise our moral conscience as a nation and share with the most desperate refugees, whatever little we have.

According to the UNHCR, the economic effects of hosting refugees are mostly felt in poorer countries. The GDP per capita in Uganda and Ethiopia are less than half of Bangladesh's—yet they host more refugees than us. It is the way of the world that those who have the least to give, are the ones who give more. During the pandemic, there has been a lot of talk of building a kinder world—the optimist in me believes we have already started this project, if the extent of appreciation shown for essential workers is anything to go by. But we cannot build this world if we are going to leave refugees behind, abandoning them to starve at sea for fears of spreading Covid-19. Maybe it is time to put rational arguments aside and focus on our capacity for kindness. The refugees trapped at sea are dying by the hour—by rescuing them, we will be rescuing our own humanity.

Shuprova Tasneem is a member of the editorial team at *The Daily Star*.
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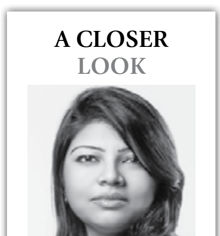
How will the new normal for our migrant workers look like?

A CLOSER LOOK



TASNEEM TAYEB

THE world watched in paralysed horror as oil prices plummeted to below zero: the price of West Texas Intermediate oil grade went negative to –USD 37.63 per barrel (pb), for the first time in history. The shock of the collapse was intense, leading to traders naming the day "Black Monday".

Although this fall is related to US Texas crude oil for May contracts only, and prices of future contracts are still comparatively higher, this collapse was ominous for oil producing countries including the Gulf states and Russia, who have been scrambling for months in the wake of Covid-19 to find a way to keep oil prices stabilised. The reverberations of this fall are going to be felt intensely across the globe, including in Bangladesh.

For a net importer of oil such as Bangladesh, where the government has to pay large subsidies for this import, falling prices of oil might be, on occasions, seen as a respite. However, on the whole, any high or low in prices of oil worldwide—that can destabilise the commodity market—can have disastrous consequences, including for net importers.

Producer nations, especially the Gulf states, face major economic problems, including the risk of turning into debtors. For instance, even before the collapse of oil prices, Riyadh-based Jadwa Investment Company predicted that the Saudi budget will mark a deficit of 422 billion riyals—40 percent of the country's budget and 15.7 percent of its GDP. With price of oil crashing, one can only assume what implications the negative figures will have on the Saudi economy now.

For us, the challenge is on a different front: What will happen to our migrant workers? Since the outbreak of Covid-19, many migrant workers have had to return to Bangladesh. And we cannot say for certain when these migrant workers can go back to their destination countries to resume work, or if at all, in the foreseeable future. What is even more alarming is the possibility of more migrant workers returning home from the Middle East—especially those working in the construction sector—in the aftermath of the oil price collapse.

Bangladeshi workers in the Middle East are mostly engaged in construction, transportation services, hospitality, security services, household services and so on. The fear is—if oil prices remain unstable, in the face of mounting economic challenges, the oil producing countries will have to pull the plug on many of their projects, which includes construction. According to an article by David Hearst, the editor in chief of Middle East Eye, the "Saudi's economy was already struggling before coronavirus took hold with a growth rate of just 0.3 percent and a drop of 25 percent in construction since 2017." With the Covid-19 situation wreaking havoc on the global economy, the situation might deteriorate in the days and months to come.

> *With 1.38 crore people underemployed and potential new cases of unemployment, helping former migrant workers find sustainable earning solutions will be difficult.*

So, if let's say major construction work is halted in the Gulf countries due to a tightening of their belts as a result of coronavirus and now the oil price collapse, what happens to our migrant workers working in these countries? Of course, the possibility of them being laid off and sent back to Bangladesh cannot be ruled out—already, the Bangladesh mission in Saudi Arabia has announced that the coronavirus fallout and slumping oil prices may lead to the deportation of up to 10 lakh Bangladeshi migrant workers in the next three to five years.

If this comes to pass, it will be a big blow for our economy, whose sustained growth in all these years has been heavily reliant on strong export earnings from the RMG sector and the heavy flow of remittances, thanks to our migrant workers working in various countries abroad. At present, both are already under stress: RMG factories are losing orders, and according to data from Bangladesh Bank, earlier in March this year, Bangladesh's remittance inflow fell by around 12 percent year-on-year, the collateral damage of Covid-19. The employment of migrant workers who have returned home also remains a big worry. According to the Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training, around 80 lakh Bangladeshis work in Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain, Oman and other Middle Eastern countries.

If more migrant workers are sent back home due to job loss abroad, Bangladesh will be scrambling to find ways to support them at home. One major problem will be absorbing them into the economy or sending them to other destination countries, since it is the semi-skilled or unskilled workers who might be affected most.

And without jobs or some form of government support, how are these former migrant workers going to support themselves and their families, especially those who haven't been able to work abroad for long enough to make some savings or even recover the fee they had to pay when going abroad?

Earlier, the Asian Development Bank suggested that the USD 300 billion-plus Bangladesh economy could lose USD 3.02 billion in a worst-case Covid-19 outbreak scenario. This would mean a loss of 894,930 jobs, according to their March estimates. With 1.38 crore people underemployed and potential new cases of unemployment, helping former migrant workers find sustainable earning solutions will be difficult.

The Ovibashi Karmi Unnayan Program has already requested the government to announce a social safety net programme for the families of migrant workers who have returned home, or are not being paid their wages in their destination countries due to the Covid-19 lockdown. But with the government already rolling out multiple stimulus packages to address the needs of the people who are engaged in the informal sector— around 87 percent of our workforce—which has been hit hard by the pandemic, it remains to be seen how much it can do to support migrant workers and their families.

According to Zahid Hussain, former Lead Economist at the World Bank, the government can, for now, tap into the Wage Earners' Welfare Fund (WEWF), which according to the International Labour Organization is a "a single trust fund pooled from the mandatory membership contributions of migrant workers, investment and interest income on these funds, and income from other sources" to support the workers who are in need of immediate assistance. Most of the migrant workers and their families do not fall below the poverty line, and for now have they might have the means to tide themselves over. This is especially true for those migrant workers who have been working abroad for many years, but there are also others who have not been able to recover the money that they paid to get the jobs abroad.

Zahid Hussain suggests that the government identify these workers and their families and provide them with support through the WEWF, which otherwise is only used for taking "measures to bring back the dead bodies of the migrant workers and extend financial aid to the families of the deceased workers, take care of afflicted migrant workers, provide scholarships to the children of migrant workers through Wage Earners' Welfare Fund and to undertake other welfare activities for the migrant workers," according to information on the Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare & Overseas Employment on a government website. And only to supplement this measure, if deemed appropriate, the government can later draw from the budget under social safety net programmes.

The more than 10 million Bangladeshi migrant workers, who toil day and night, often living in sub-human conditions, far away from their loved ones, remitted USD 18.32 billion to Bangladesh last year. While we often refuse to sit next to them in airplanes or at least feel ashamed of their "uncouth" behaviour, and even questioned the government's wisdom in bringing them back to Bangladesh in the wake of the Covid-19 outbreak, it is these workers whose hard earned money boosts our foreign exchange reserve, enabling us to lead better, more comfortable lives. If there ever was a time to give back to these people, it is now.

These migrant workers and their families right now need our help, and the government can come forward in this, as it has done for the other sectors, by utilising the WEWF. The question remains, is the government willing to come to the aid of migrant workers, especially those in need of immediate support?

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CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS
1 Gung-ho
5 Knight's attendant
11 TV's warrior princess
12 Activate
13 Highlands girl
14 Put on the line
15 Yale student
16 Casserole staple
17 Because of
19 Little rascal
22 Baseball's Pee Wee
24 Dogpatch boy
26 Lotion additive
27 Land in the sea
28 Compete with a lance
30 Sudden all-out attack
31 Little laborer
32 Brandish
34 Musical number
35 Here, to Henri
38 Dangerous
41 Varnish layer
42 Paltry
43 Runs smoothly
44 Warhol's forte
45 Secret agent TV show of the '60s

DOWN
1 Wheel connector
2 Schnitzel base
3 Wrong way to wear a shirt
4 German article
5 Walk with pride
6 High-protein grain
7 -- Major
8 Quill need
9 Fish eggs
10 Stop
16 Kicker's aid
18 Calls on
19 Sneakily dangerous
20 Dissolve
21 Veep's boss
22 Indian prince
23 Musk of Tesla
25 Potential law
29 Money-saving offer
30 Implore
33 Unmoving
34 Long account
36 Scout's base
37 Tiny
38 Strike caller
39 "The Matrix" hero
40 Maple fluid
41 Greek X

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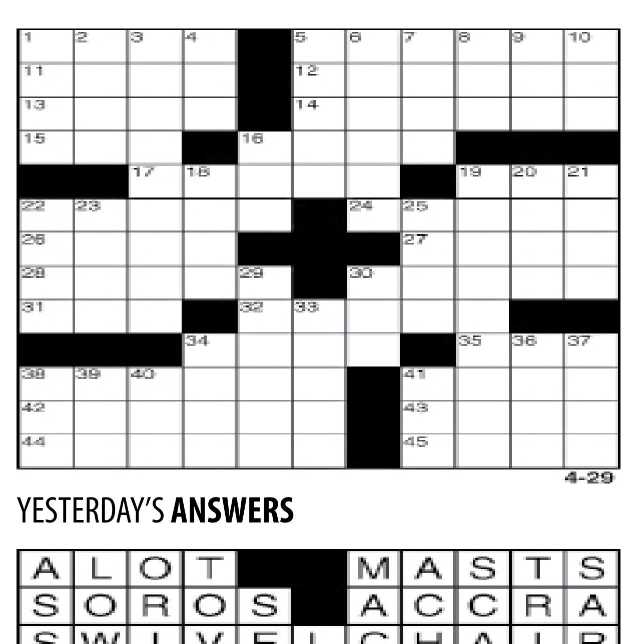

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YESTERDAY'S **ANSWERS**

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