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Has the world lost interest in the victims of genocide?

Rohingya repatriation remains a far cry

IT is three years today since the beginning of the mass exodus of Rohingya refugees into Bangladesh from their homeland in the state of Rakhine in Myanmar, in order to flee from what has been called the worst genocide of this century. Since August 25, 2017, almost 750,000 Rohingya refugees have taken shelter in Bangladesh to escape persecution in their own country, bringing the refugee population in Cox's Bazar to around 1.1 million. Over the last three years, Bangladesh has had to bear the greatest brunt of the worst humanitarian crisis in recent times, resulting from the execution of Myanmar military junta's long term plans of denuding the area of the Rohingya population.

Myanmar's pogrom of an ethnic minority has been acknowledged as an act of genocide and ethnic cleansing by the UN and most of the countries of the world. However, nothing has been done to rein in the Myanmar military. All efforts to see the safe return of the refugees to their own country have met with utter failure, thanks to Myanmar's subterfuge. Every time when it appeared that some progress in this regard was being made, Myanmar scuttled the prospect by creating more unrest in Rakhine. Regrettably, the role of China and Russia has contributed to a large extent to Myanmar's intransigence, encouraging its military to ride roughshod over international opinion. Every single resolution at the Security Council to take strict action against Myanmar has failed in the face of consistent opposition by these two countries. The Rohingyas have become victims of geopolitics mixed with blatant economic consideration.

As of today, more than a hundred thousand Rohingyas are stuck inside ghettos in Myanmar, living in the most miserable conditions. And the world watches silently while the Myanmar military continues targeting the Rohingya on the flimsy excuse that they are conducting anti-insurgency operations.

And while the Rohingyas in Myanmar are under threat of extinction, those on our side of the border are living an uncertain, indefinite half-life, with no hope of a change in their circumstances anytime soon. Meanwhile the host community has become increasingly frustrated, as the costs of living in the area has soared and neither the economy nor the land can bear the brunt of the pressure. It is thus discouraging to see the matter virtually on the backburner and no longer on the international agenda. While there has been no dearth of assurances from our friends, far and near, of help in the repatriation process, nothing tangible has been done. The international community can ill afford to remain silent any longer.

78,043 expatriates return to further insecurity

Have we done enough to mitigate their sufferings?

MIGRANT workers have been among the first victims of the global economic fallout of Covid-19 and latest data by the expatriates' welfare ministry shows that a large number of them have been compelled to return to Bangladesh over the last four months. At least 78,043 Bangladeshi workers returned home from 26 countries since April, according to statistics published by the ministry on August 23. Of them, 44,695 returned from nine countries, including the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Malaysia, the Maldives and Iraq, as they either lost their jobs or there was no prospect of employment in their host countries. As many as 4,732 female workers were also compelled to return home.

From the beginning of the pandemic, migration experts have been apprehensive of its impact on migrant workers, their households, communities and the national economy at large. We, too, have written at length about the plight of those forced to come back home empty-handed, in debt and/or to a life of poverty, insecurity and unemployment, and urged the government to involve all stakeholders to come up with a comprehensive rehabilitation plan for these returnees. While the government created a Tk 200 crore fund for giving soft loans to returnees and the family members of those who died from Covid-19, and a separate loan package of Tk 500 crore for the expatriates who lost jobs amid the pandemic, experts note that these allocations are woefully inadequate given the far-reaching impact of the fallout on households and communities dependent on these migrants' incomes. In the proposed national budget for 2020-21, the Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment was allocated Tk 641 crore, which is one of the lowest allocations among major sectors.

We appreciate that the government is documenting the number of people who are returning, based on which, we hope, it will design appropriate training and rehabilitation packages for all concerned. It is also imperative that the government document the violations of labour rights in the host countries and ensure that the wages and other dues of returnees denied by their employers are recovered through diplomatic negotiations. The ministry has assured the media that they will be training migrant workers to meet changing demands in a post-Covid international labour market, but their success will depend on how well designed and accessible the trainings are and how resourcefully the ministry is able to find job opportunities abroad in the near future.

The government has so far maintained that the migration issue is "under control" but we reiterate what we've been saying all along—there is no room for complacency when it comes to such a crucial sector and the lives of millions of returnees and their families. Migrant workers and their families are yet to be included in the government's social safety net programmes, which it must revisit and address in an urgent basis.

Living with floods and reducing vulnerability in Bangladesh

MACRO MIRROR

FAHMIDA KHATUN

EVERY year, Bangladesh suffers from floods that cause loss of life, livelihoods, crops and property. However, in certain years, due to heavy rainfall and the flow of upstream water, floods become devastating. The floods of 1988, 1998, 2004, 2007 and 2017 are examples of when Bangladesh has seen the severity of floods in terms of duration and damages. The floods of 2020 have also emerged as one of those natural disasters, since the shocks are being felt by a large number of people for a prolonged period. It has been more than 40 days since the northern, north-eastern and south-eastern regions of Bangladesh are experiencing floods. Jamalpur, Kurigram and Lalmonirhat districts are reported to be among the most affected, while Rajbari, Bogura and Manikganj are the moderately affected districts. In more than 33 districts of the country, about six percent of the total population of Bangladesh have been affected so far.

The impact of floods is multi-dimensional, which encompasses economic and social aspects. Although floods are still ongoing and the actual cost of damages will be estimated by the Department of Disaster Management of the Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief once floods are over, some preliminary reports have assessed their impacts in 2020. The early assessment by the Needs Assessment Working Group (NAWG), which is a platform for government and non-government humanitarian agencies, indicates damages in several areas. These include loss of agricultural production, fisheries, livestock and poultry, and damages to food stock, infrastructure, roads, culverts, embankments, local markets, schools and health clinics. This has resulted in not only shortages of food, but also contributed to a lack of pure drinking water and a barely functional sanitation system. Livelihood systems have been disrupted due to loss of employment and the limited scope of income earning activities. Hence, livelihood, food security and healthcare are currently the major concerns among a large number of flood-affected people.

This year's floods are like a double whammy for Bangladesh since the country is fighting the coronavirus pandemic along with the rest of the world. Several people were already without jobs and income for the last few months because of Covid-19. The situation has been aggravated by the floods, especially in affected districts such as Jamalpur, Sunamganj and Netrokona, where people were already vulnerable because of the pandemic. While people had to be evacuated to shelters from their inundated and damaged homes, health protocols of Covid-19 such as physical distancing, hand wash and mask use were not maintained. This created risks of the spread of coronavirus among the flood affected people. Also, the floods have made it difficult for people to access healthcare since mobility is restricted and healthcare services have been disrupted. Lack of healthcare facilities at the local level may worsen the coronavirus situation, in addition to the usual risk of increased waterborne diseases and infections during floods. Women, particularly pregnant women, as well as girls, children, elderly people and persons with disability, are more vulnerable due to the disrupted healthcare system.

The government has initiated relief and rehabilitation measures in affected areas, but the adequacy and coverage of relief have to be expanded in view of the demand for support. The government relief measures are mostly targeted based on the level of poverty. However, during floods, people from other socioeconomic backgrounds also become susceptible. The relief needs to be distributed among those who are facing survival challenges during floods, rather than going by the poverty list.

Since the impact of floods is location specific, the allocation of relief has to be based on the need of each specific locality. Moreover, the types of flood relief have to be different from the usual relief items such as cash and food. During floods, people need items such as cooked food, drinking water and medicine. Keeping in mind the coronavirus pandemic, special health related support will be needed this time as well.

Ensuring efficiency and effectiveness in relief distribution is critical to make the best use of the limited resources that the country has. A common criticism of the social safety net programmes in Bangladesh is that they suffer from lack of accountability. There are both inclusion and exclusion errors in the beneficiary lists, which include many who do not need support while excluding several others who do. This could be the case in the distribution of flood relief too. The local administration should involve non-government and community level organisations in the identification and selection of flood affected people, and also in the distribution of relief. For the sake of transparency, the local administration should publish the list of recipients so that local people can see for themselves who have received relief and who have not.

The rehabilitation of food supply will require attention to both crop and non-crop sectors, including agriculture, fisheries and livestock. According to experts, the floods may persist till September. This risks Aman cultivation and food security. Therefore, the government has to procure enough rice from domestic and international markets. In case of rice imports, a realistic assessment of the need should be made to protect the interests of both farmers and consumers. Timely decision-making on rice imports by policymakers is crucial since the rice exporting countries are likely to take restrictive measures during the pandemic period.

As the impacts of natural disasters such as flood are mostly similar every year, one would expect that the recovery measures are also well known. However, after every disastrous flood, the same issues surface afresh. For example, how efficient has the early warning system been, what has been the preparations including maintenance of shelters and the evacuation system, why were the embankments not repaired in time, and why was the flawed infrastructure not abandoned already?

From media reports, it is clear that crops have been damaged in places where there are no embankments. Districts with higher water levels than others have nevertheless been less affected, as they have better embankments and infrastructure. Reconstruction of damaged embankments have to be done regularly. Besides, some infrastructure such as culverts cause waterlogging, which have to be replaced by bridges. For effective infrastructure development, coordination among various ministries and departments—including the Ministry of Water Resources, the local government engineering department, and the roads and highways department—is necessary. The role of the Ministry of Finance is also very important since more resources are needed and timely disbursement of funds is crucial. One of the concerns regarding project implementation in Bangladesh is its cycle. The delay in the initiation of the project implementation process has been a perennial problem. However, if we want to reduce the sufferings induced by floods, the work on repairing embankments should be finished by March of the coming year.

Riding a boat, a group of students leave an inundated school compound in Lalmonirhat's Chongadar village in July. PHOTO: S DILIP ROY

Each year, when the country faces floods, these issues resurface even though floods are not unusual in Bangladesh. About 17 percent of Bangladesh remains underwater throughout the year, which is needed for environmental balance. Regular floods inundate around 18 percent of Bangladesh. So, approximately 35 percent of the country is under water during regular floods. Therefore, Bangladesh will have to learn to live with this situation. Indeed, Bangladeshi people have been coping with this annual deluge historically. What is needed most is to learn how to manage floods better with minimum damage of lives and livelihoods, and how to reduce flood-induced vulnerability. Adapting to floods is the key strategy for Bangladesh and a crucial part of its policy on disaster risk reduction.

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Bangladesh My Bangladesh

A spotlight on Bangabandhu's revolutionary speeches

TABASSUM MAISHA MONA

IT is incredible how the death of one person can impact the future of a country for generations to come. In the month of August, we remember the Father of the Nation with great remorse and regret over his heinous killing as well as his unfinished life and work. In our journey "from darkness to light, from captivity to freedom, from desolation to hope"—Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's words are resolutely appended everywhere.

The present generation has had the opportunity to be acquainted with the narratives of the emergence of Bangladesh in more than one form, and no doubt it will be retold many times in future too, but who could tell it better than Bangabandhu himself? The book *Bangladesh My Bangladesh*, edited by Ramendu Majumdar and published by Muktodhara, aims to portray a critical political juncture in the history of Bangladesh by compiling some crucial excerpts from Bangabandhu's speeches and statements from 1970 to 1972. As written in the blurb of the book, these speeches "tell us a story which has been heard in bits and pieces before but never with the continuity and intensity that this volume achieves by letting readers hear it from the man himself."

Excerpts of selected speeches and statements included in the book can be categorised in three phases: 1970 pre-election speeches, 1971 post-election speeches, and finally two 1972 post-liberation speeches—the 1972 speeches are limited perhaps because the book was originally published in January 1972 immediately before his release from Pakistani captivity, with the more recent one being the Bangabandhu Birth Centenary 2020 edition. To be exact, the book starts with Bangabandhu's election broadcast on October 28, 1970, and concludes with the fiery speech he gave on his return from Pakistan on January 10, 1972. Additionally, before every speech and statement, useful analytical editorial anecdotes are included to familiarise the readers with the political state of affairs of the time. Overall, it is a well-edited publication befitting Bangabandhu's Birth Centenary celebration this year.

The 1970 pre-election phase portrays Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's preparations for fulfilling the promises he made to the Bengali people at different times of his political career—the very fundamental pledge of which was to confront the oppressive Pakistani rulers and break the shackle of army and bureaucratic supremacy if his party, the Awami League, came to power. That also included the establishment of a living democracy guaranteeing fundamental freedoms in a revised constitution. During that very eventful time, a cyclone ravaged the costal districts of what is now Bangladesh. Noticing the Pakistan government's indifferent and callous response to the unbearable sufferings of the people, he declared in his party manifesto the need to raised a collective voice in order to gain the freedom of the people of then East Pakistan from social, political, economic and cultural exploitation. He also repeatedly showed his firm conviction and faith in majority rule. All his speeches during the period were focused towards the restoration of people's fundamental rights and the realisation of the historical Six Points Movement.

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History endorsed Awami League as it grabbed 151 seats out of 153 in then East Pakistan, gaining a total of 291 seats in all of Pakistan. In his post-election speeches, Mujib supported a re-envisioning and rewriting of the country's constitution on the basis of the Six Points, and assured the people that as the majority party, Awami League would bring an end to the era of exploitation. But he was soon disillusioned and realised that the corrupt and crafty Pakistani rulers would not abide by the verdict of the majority. He called upon the people to resist the conspiracy of sabotaging the people's victory, famously saying "Die but never surrender".

From March 1 to 25, 1971, wherever he went, he encouraged people to remain resolute and fight for their legitimate rights. The March 7 speech thus culminated in his declaring, "Our struggle this time is the struggle for independence." The final clarion call for independence came from him on March 26, with decisive instructions to the people to resist and fight until the last soldier of the Pakistan army was expelled from the sacred soil of Bangladesh.

In his post-liberation speeches, Bangabandhu, like a mature statesman, said there should not be any feeling of hatred against anyone; only a feeling of satisfaction and happiness should prevail as truth had at last triumphed—an attitude that can only be compared with Nelson Mandela when apartheid came to an end in South Africa. Only great and humane leaders like Mujib and Mandela, being politicians par excellence, can act in such a way towards those who have wronged them.

All of the information here is from the excerpts of the speeches compiled in the book *Bangladesh My Bangladesh*, and all of them clearly warrant my claim that Bangabandhu's speeches between October 28, 1970 and January 10, 1972 were a journey of his pragmatic political agenda that has ultimately come to fruition with the existence of an independent Bangladesh. Obviously, Ramendu Majumdar has done a significant job as the editor of this publication. This work will specifically be rewarding for the generation that did not and will never have the opportunity to listen to Bangabandhu in person, as it will make them realise what a great politician and human being he was.

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