

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR
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Myanmar's coup shocks the world

A blow to democracy

In a shocking turn of events, Myanmar's military has seized power on the day the first new parliamentary session was due to be held after the November national election that gave a landslide victory to the National League for Democracy (NLD). That the party's leader Aung San Suu Kyi and other top civilian leaders were taken into custody on Monday is an ominous sign for democracy in Myanmar. Despite our strong opposition to Suu Kyi's denial of atrocities committed against the Rohingya, which forced them to flee to Bangladesh, we cannot but express our disappointment in Myanmar's total disregard for the democratic process of elections and the will of the people.

The Myanmar army's actions have only reinforced their image of arbitrariness and ruthlessness that was evident in their treatment of the Rohingya, which the international community has termed ethnic cleansing and genocide. For Bangladesh, this latest act of seizure of power has created greater uncertainty regarding the Rohingya refugee repatriation process, talks of which were going on between the two countries. The Bangladesh foreign minister, however, has said that talks regarding the repatriation process will continue regardless of who is in power.

The Rohingya, meanwhile, have continuously said that the conditions in Rakhine state were still very precarious with no guarantee of citizenship, safety and basic rights. Now, with this latest arbitrary move, it will be even more difficult to ascertain the conditions.

It is clear that after ruling the country for almost all of the last six decades, the military does not want to let go of its absolute power that it partially shared after it allowed Suu Kyi to be the State Counsellor of Myanmar. Now, after witnessing a landslide victory with an even larger portion of the popular vote than in the 2015 elections, it has decided that it will go back to the old way of total and absolute control by declaring a state of emergency and a take-over of power for 12 months. Tensions were already brewing after the elections, with the head of the military warning that the country's constitution could be revoked, and protests by pro-military supporters against the election results. The military has brought up allegations of voter fraud and other irregularities, which are befuddling considering the extent of their control and power in the country.

Thus, whatever illusions the people of Myanmar had about democratic reforms in the country have been shattered. As most of the world, we too, are concerned by these disturbing developments. As a democratic nation that has suffered much from military dictatorships, we want our neighbouring countries to be governed by representatives who are fairly elected by the people and not ruled by undemocratic forces.

Study reveals the loopholes in govt's relief distribution system

Relief must reach those who need it the most

A study by CPD, Oxfam and the European Union on the government's relief distribution patterns found that relief for Covid and Amphan-hit people did not reach those who needed it the most. The organisations studied the relief distribution patterns in 13 districts and recently shared their findings about Pirojpur district, which has the highest poverty rate among the districts studied. It was revealed that the upazilas of Pirojpur where the poverty rate is the highest received the least amount of relief and cash incentives. For instance, although most people in the Kawkhali upazila of Pirojpur live below the poverty line, it received only 9.1 percent of relief rice and 5.7 percent of the cash allocated for the district.

We believe the study findings will be very helpful to the government in reaching out to the people who are still in need of cash and relief assistance. The study revealed that the list of the beneficiaries could not be made on time, as there was a lack of proper direction from the government in this regard, and the field level workers also did not get much time to prepare the list. Many of the beneficiaries of the district did not have access to digital financial services, which was another problem in providing them the cash. Furthermore, many of those who left the cities during the lockdown and came back to their village homes did not receive any assistance from the government. Another major problem was that the district coordination team did not have data about the number of beneficiaries in the upazilas, and what the upazila-wise allocation of relief was, according to CPD.

Previously, Transparency International Bangladesh also conducted surveys on government's cash incentives and OMS programmes and found that a large portion of people in need did not receive any assistance because of corruption and irregularities in the system.

Since the loopholes in our relief distribution system have been identified in several studies, the government should now address those with urgency. This includes completing the list of people eligible and reaching the relief to these people while making sure that there are no irregularities in either the list or relief distribution. There has to be a proper system of accountability to find out why the distribution was so inefficient and how much of the cash and other relief have been left undistributed. Needless to say, the government's relief and cash distribution programmes will hardly see any success in future if those who need its assistance the most are left behind.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

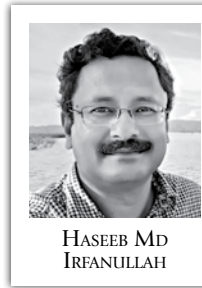
letters@thedailystar.net

Golden jubilee of Liberation

We are proud of the performance of the Bangladeshi military contingent in the Republic Day parade at New Delhi on January 26, in the year of the golden jubilee of the Liberation of Bangladesh. We request our government to invite Indian regiments, armed forces etc, who actively fought and gave blood for our cause, to participate in the Independence Day parade in Dhaka in 2021.

Dr SN Mamoon, via e-mail

Can we look at Bhashan Char through a research lens?



HASEEB MD
IRFANULLAH

THE third batch of Rohingya refugees entered Bhashan Char on January 29 and January 30, 2021. Out of Cox's Bazar's 867,000 refugees, about 6,700 have now been voluntarily

relocated since December 2020 to this island on the Bay of Bengal. While the Government of Bangladesh and the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) have different points of views on such a move, there are three reasons why we should start doing research on this island and its incoming inhabitants.

First, as the refugee population of this 53-square kilometre island is slowly approaching the 100,000 target, it gives us an unprecedented opportunity to understand how an artificially constructed society changes over time and its members interact among themselves and with nature. We rarely get such a large population relocating to one place over a short period of time. The last time that happened was in August and September 2017, when hundreds and thousands of the Rohingya population crossed the Bangladesh-Myanmar border. Giving them food and shelter was a priority back then, rather than doing research on their lives and new contexts. But things are quite different on Bhashan Char—well-thought out refugee relocation does open up new research windows and allows us to explore how to improve their circumstances.

Second, in Bangladesh, we hardly see multidisciplinary, long-term research to create knowledge on people, society and nature. With the right facilitation and encouragement from the government, Bhashan Char can excite our researchers, and their funders, from relevant fields to do research—from culture to climate, from education to energy, from mental health to mangroves. This will make Bangladesh a global knowledge leader in refugee crisis management.

Third, given the sensitivity around the refugees and access restrictions on Bhashan Char, any research done there should be endorsed by the government. As a first step, this requires researchers and policymakers discussing this issue—a rare scene in Bangladesh. Such conversations will not only guide us to what research should be done on this island, but also how the research outputs can effectively help the government

to make decisions on refugee crisis management. This will create a new avenue of evidence-guided policymaking and practice change in Bangladesh, as envisaged in the Perspective Plan of Bangladesh 2021–2041—a roadmap to become a developed country in the next 20 years.

It may be asked if over the last three and a half years, the Rohingya refugee crisis has generated any interest at all

of Bangladesh. From a strategic point of view, these research advisors should identify broad thematic research areas and develop a "strategic research framework" to guide research in the Rohingya communities staying on the island. Instead of conducting research in single areas, this framework should encourage multidisciplinary research—where researchers from diverse disciplines work together to bring in their disciplinary

In Bangladesh, like in many developing countries, researchers and policy or decision-makers live in separate silos.



An aerial view of the buildings intended for accommodating Rohingya refugees at Bhashan Char.

FILE PHOTO: AFP/MUKTA DINWIDDIE MACLAREN ARCHITECTS

among researchers. On March 25, 2020, on the Google Scholar search engine, I found 47 original research articles published since January 1, 2018 on Rohingya refugees staying in Cox's Bazar camps and shared my findings in *The Scholarly Kitchen*.

On January 25, 2021, I made a similar search and found 54 new journal articles on Bangladesh's Rohingya refugees. So despite the Covid-19 pandemic, over the last 10 months, there has been a 115 percent increase in refugee research outputs. Most of these research papers are on the refugees' current conditions, related political and security concerns, and mental, reproductive and Covid-19 related health issues. The increasing number of research papers clearly shows a growing interest of researchers in this refugee crisis. But we need a system that can make these research findings and recommendations impactful by feeding them into decision-making processes.

To capitalise on the research opportunity Bhashan Char is offering, the government now needs to bring together the relevant research minds

knowledge and interdisciplinary research—so that scholars can go a step further and combine their knowledge and methods from different disciplines to conduct research.

For effective use of research outputs and creating impact on the ground, the above research framework should also outline how the research findings could be translated into evidence-based actions, so that concerned government agencies and other stakeholders can take them up and act on them.

From an operational point of view, the government should establish a coordinating body to ensure all proposed research projects are in line with the strategic research framework. Data collected and research outputs communicated by research teams—from public or private institutions, from Bangladesh or abroad—should abide by the rules and regulations of the government. These teams should also maintain high ethical standards and norms of research, keeping in mind the Rohingyas' persecution in their homeland, their statelessness, and possible misuse of

their personal information.

The Government of Bangladesh has already invested more than USD 350 million of its own money to build facilities on Bhashan Char; it does not need to commit any more money to support research on it. It is anticipated that the comprehensive research framework will provide a strong basis for interested researchers to apply for domestic and international research funds, since the research outputs are expected to immediately contribute to government decision-making.

Uncertainty is a big concern of the Rohingya refugee crisis. Even if refugee repatriation starts in June 2021, as reported in some media outlets, realistically speaking, it will take time. Whatever data we collect from Bhashan Char will not only be important for the sake of knowledge creation, but also for supporting an evidence-based decision-making system.

In Bangladesh, like in many developing countries, researchers and policy or decision-makers live in separate silos. Researchers often conduct research only as a part of their academic duties—they hardly carry their research findings and recommendations beyond research reports or peer-reviewed academic journals. Similarly, the role of research, new knowledge and evidence is still limited, if there are any, in our policy-making system. Therefore, policy demands and priorities often do not attract the researchers to respond on time. It is very difficult to break these silos, as these are deeply rooted in our structures, systems and minds.

Instead of breaking these silos, let us connect them, so that research demands and research outputs can flow between policymakers and researchers. Despite its remoteness, Bhashan Char can bring these two groups closer, even if on a small scale, even if for a while.

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PROJECT ■ SYNDICATE

Prevent the next food crisis now

MARK LOWCOCK and AXEL VAN TROTSBENBURG

THE toxic cocktail of climate change, conflict, and Covid-19 is making itself felt most intensely in the world's poorest and most vulnerable countries. As a result, a record 235 million people worldwide will need humanitarian assistance and protection in 2021—an increase of 40 percent from last year.

It can be hard to wrap one's head around such numbers. But behind the statistics are individual human lives. For the most vulnerable people, the pandemic's secondary effects—not the coronavirus itself—will cause the most damage. And the hunger pandemic triggered by Covid-19 threatens to be the biggest killer.

The number of chronically hungry people increased by an estimated 130 million last year, to more than 800 million—about eight times the total number of Covid-19 cases to date. Countries affected by conflict and climate change are particularly vulnerable to food insecurity. Empty stomachs can stunt whole generations.

Moreover, the spectre of multiple famines looms just as government budgets are being stretched by efforts to protect populations and economies from the pandemic. International solidarity to help prevent such disasters may look like a hard sell just now. But preventing famine and food insecurity is a smart investment for everyone.

Still, we must ensure that we are getting the most from every dollar we spend. That is why the United Nations and the World Bank are increasingly investing in an anticipatory approach to humanitarian need. It has become ever clearer that acting early to address humanitarian needs ahead of a crisis is more effective, dignified and cost-efficient than waiting until disaster has struck. Such a strategy also protects hard-won development gains.

For example, in Bangladesh last year, the United Nations and the Red Cross/Red Crescent provided vulnerable people with cash so that they could get themselves and their livestock out of harm's way before devastating floods hit. This effort cost half as much as picking up the pieces afterward would have done, and it helped more people.

We are applying a similar anticipatory approach to the growing hunger

pandemic, by taking action before food emergencies turn into full-blown famines. This involves addressing long-term drivers of food insecurity—including vulnerability to extreme weather and pests, low incomes, fragile value chains and conflict—in order to prevent new crises down the road.

In line with this goal, the International Development Association (IDA), the World Bank's fund for the poorest

with seeds and fertiliser to safeguard future harvests, and supported small irrigation works that increase long-term resilience. The IDA has also extended its Crisis Response Window to include USD 500 million in financing dedicated to responding during the early stages of slow-onset food-security crises and disease outbreaks.

Likewise, in June 2020, the UN's Central Emergency Response Fund

most vulnerable countries, the crisis will have deep and long-lasting after-effects—on incomes, health, nutrition, education and whole economies.

Swift action can make the hangover less painful. We need to focus today on monitoring risks and the factors that compound them, and emphasise effective early action and long-term investment to avoid much larger costs in the future.

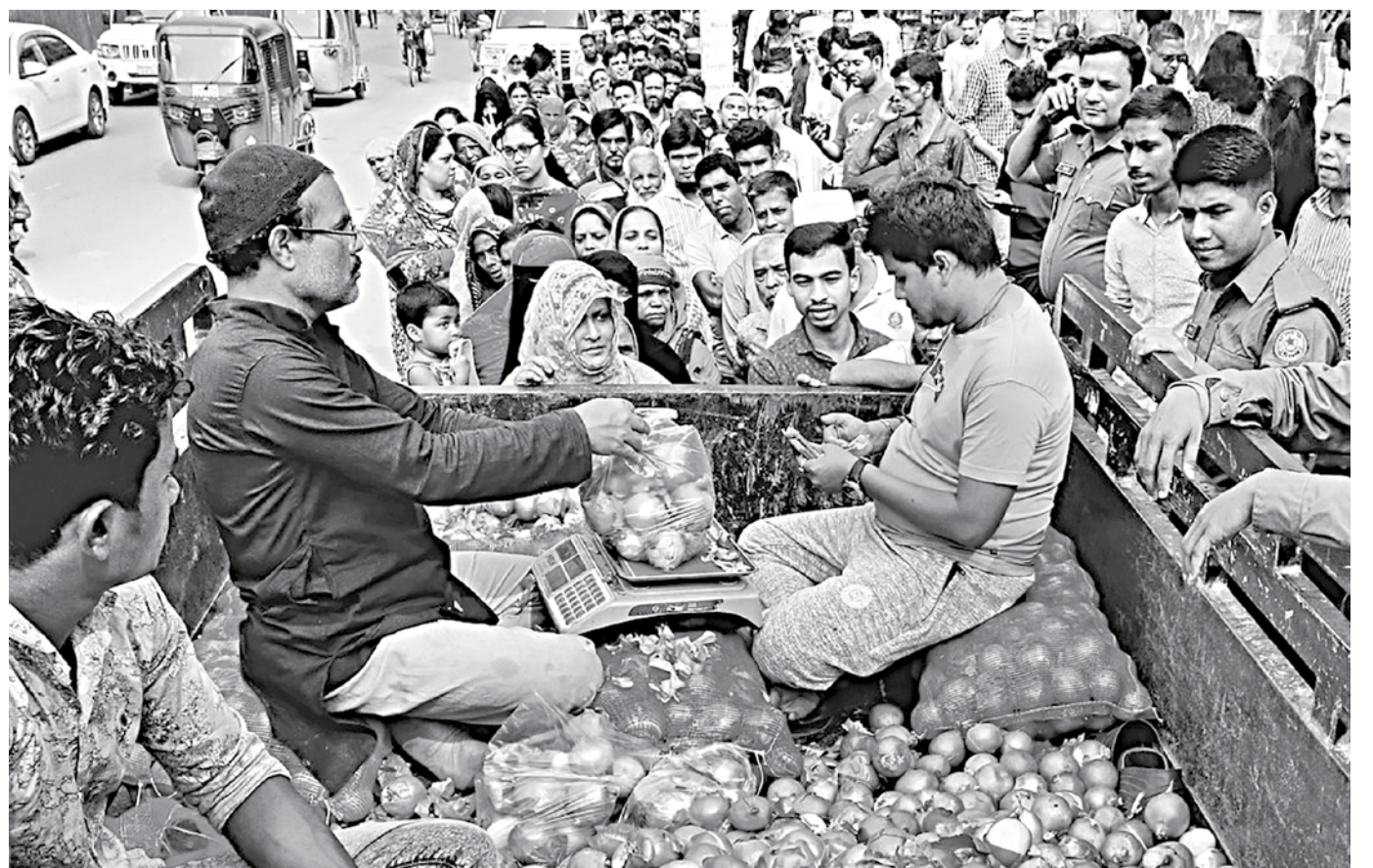


PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

countries) committed USD 5.3 billion for food security in the six months between April and October 2020. This sum comprised a mix of short-term Covid-19 responses and investments to address the longer-term causes of food insecurity.

In Bangladesh, the World Bank redirected resources from an existing project to provide, among other things, cash transfers to 620,000 vulnerable small-scale dairy and poultry-farming households. In Haiti, where remittances were expected to decrease as a result of the pandemic, the IDA provided farmers

provided financing to help avert a food crisis in Somalia. Acting ahead of the triple threat of locusts, floods and Covid-19 reduced the risk of disease outbreaks. By upgrading boreholes early, the UN averted disputes related to water sources, kept livestock healthier, improved household finances, boosted mental health and prevented large-scale population displacement.

The development of effective Covid-19 vaccines means that the world may soon start to see the light at the end of the pandemic tunnel. But for many of the

Acting now on the danger signals is the smart, moral and cost-effective strategy. By working together to save and transform lives, we can free the world's most vulnerable people from crippling hunger and insecurity and build the foundations of a better future for all.

Mark Lowcock is the United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator. Axel van Trotsenburg is Managing Director of Operations at the World Bank. Copyright: Project Syndicate, 2021. www.project-syndicate.org (Exclusive to The Daily Star)