

Plight of Rohingyas might worsen after Myanmar military coup

The world must put pressure on Myanmar to protect Rohingyas from further violence

THE United Nations' fear that the recent coup in Myanmar will worsen the plight of around 600,000 Rohingyas staying in the country must be taken seriously by the world. The Rohingyas in Myanmar have been living in constant fear as their basic rights are not ensured. Reportedly, among the 600,000 Rohingyas who remain in the Rakhine State, 120,000 are confined in camps. They have very limited access to basic healthcare and education and cannot even move freely. The 750,000 Rohingyas who fled to Bangladesh after having faced genocidal violence by the Myanmar army in 2017 have still been living in our refugee camps as the repatriation process could not be started. And now, with the Myanmar army taking control of the country and declaring a state of emergency, the future of the repatriation process seems very uncertain.

Amid such a situation, it is unfortunate that the United Nations Security Council members could not agree on a statement on the Myanmar coup although they should have sent a clear signal in support of democracy there. This has happened as China and Russia, Myanmar's two close allies, sought more time to give their opinion regarding the situation. During the Rohingya crisis in 2017, China always prevented the UNSC from issuing joint statements insisting that the brutal military crackdown on the Rohingyas was an internal issue of Myanmar. We hope China will stop doing the same now and act to solve the present crisis in the country.

We are more concerned about the changed situation in Myanmar because the coup might have a serious negative impact on the Rohingya repatriation process. Although not much progress was made in repatriating the Rohingyas while a civilian government was in power, with the military in power now, it might get worse. At this point, Bangladesh should request China to play its role in starting the repatriation process.

Most importantly, during this uncertain time in Myanmar, the safety and security of the Rohingyas living in the country must be ensured at all costs. Only last month, the Human Rights Watch (HRW) in its report described how the Rohingyas remaining in the Rakhine state were subjected to government persecution and violence. They are already suffering having been cut off from access to adequate food, healthcare, education, and livelihoods, and must be protected from facing further risk of violence. The world should do everything to protect their rights.

Are sand lifters above the law?

Attack on journalist is the latest in a long list of transgressions

WE strongly protest the assault on Kamal Hossain, a correspondent of Bangla daily Sangbad in Sunamganj's Tahirpur upazila, who was beaten up for his attempts to collect information on illegal sand and stone extraction in the area. A video clip obtained by *The Daily Star* shows a traumatised Kamal tied to a tree at a local bazar, begging for mercy to his attackers. Four people were subsequently arrested in this connection. Kamal was reportedly investigating the activities of sand lifters on the banks of Jadukata, a transboundary river once famed for its scenic beauty which has now reportedly lost its navigability due to unchecked and unplanned extraction of sand and sand-mixed stone over the decades. Sand lifting has always been a major environmental challenge in the region. But the fact that nothing could stop it shows how powerful and unrelenting those involved with the business are.

In fact, the attack on Kamal Hossain is the latest in a long list of transgressions committed by these people. A June 2020 report by this paper highlights a trend that couldn't be broken despite judicial moratoriums on sand extraction and leasing out of sand quarries ("balumohal"), sporadic drives and arrests by officials, and protests by local residents. The report shows how the illegal activities resumed with renewed zeal after every drive, for which the local administration was no less responsible. The administration has either leased out new quarries or attempted to do so, enabled the operations of extraction parties in other ways, or simply looked the other way. This is despite a High Court ruling on June 3, 2010 terminating sand extraction in the Jadukata river "illegal". Activists say the impunity enjoyed by influential people involved with the business and the oft-complicit silence of the local administration are responsible for why sand extraction continues unabated, despite its devastating effect on the river.

Journalist Kamal Hossain is another casualty of this mindless drive for profits. We urge the government to take all measures necessary to ensure he gets justice. Equally importantly, the government must take decisive action against sand extraction in line with the High Court ruling, and hold to account officials who fail to uphold it. We understand that the sand of a river may need to be dredged for navigability purposes, but that must be done in a planned manner, and only after proper hydrographic surveys. Dredging or sand/stone lifting for private gains must not be allowed under any pretext.



A CLOSER LOOK

TASNEEM TAYER

THE United Nations has rightly expressed fears that the recent military coup in Myanmar would exacerbate the plight of the Rohingyas still remaining in the country. "There are about 600,000 Rohingyas those that remain in Rakhine State, including 120,000 people who are effectively confined to camps; they cannot move freely and have extremely limited access to basic health and education services," said UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric.

While the recent episode of Rohingya genocide was unleashed during the regime of the democratically elected leader Aung San Suu Kyi in 2017, which led to the exodus of more than 700,000 Rohingyas to Bangladesh after having endured unspeakable horrors, the seizing of power by the military—who will have no accountability either to the people or to the international community—is likely to make life worse for those who had remained behind.

The Myanmar military, which ruled over the country for fifty years till 2011, has a track record of taking brutal and atrocious measures to suppress dissent and public calls for democratic rule. One may recall that in 1998, it carried out a massacre of thousands of people—including students, Buddhist monks, community leaders and civilians in

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general—who had called for a transition to democracy, in a stark reminder of the ruthlessness that the military is capable of. During the massacre, the military not only killed the protesters but also healthcare professionals—doctors and nurses—who had been treating the wounded at the Rangoon General Hospital, as reported by Human Rights Watch.

And this time, although Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) party, in anticipation of a coup (since

to the second quarter of the year. "We pushed [sic] to initiate the repatriation in the first quarter, but Myanmar sought more time for logistical arrangements and some physical arrangements. So we asked to start repatriation in the second quarter, and they agreed on it," Bangladesh's Foreign Secretary Masud Bin Momen said with regard to the agreement.

In a statement issued late last year, Bangladesh's Ministry of Foreign Affairs added, "Myanmar has made all necessary arrangements for the repatriation and

inhumane conditions.

In view of the current realities and the history of Myanmar military's torture of the Rohingya and pro-democratic civilians, Bangladesh's responsibility in the repatriation process has only increased manifold. Bangladesh has embraced with open arms the hundreds and thousands of desperate Rohingyas fleeing into the country since 2017, and has sheltered and hosted them ever since. Even in the face of waning donor support over the years, Bangladesh has been proactive in providing shelter to these refugees.

While the international community has praised Bangladesh's generosity towards the Rohingya refugees, they have done little to ensure their safe repatriation back to their homeland. Now with the military in power, the international community can do even less in this regard. Bangladesh, however, as the host of the Rohingya, must now be more vigilant in its repatriation discussions and processes with the new Myanmar government. While it needs to push for the Myanmar government to take back the Rohingya as per the previous agreement—from the second quarter of 2021—it also needs to make sure that policies and mechanisms are in place to monitor how the Rohingyas are treated once they are taken back.

Myanmar taking the Rohingyas back only to detain them in squalid camps remains a possibility, one that Bangladesh must ensure does not happen once the new government there starts the repatriation process.

The United Nations and the greater international community must support Bangladesh in this. China and Russia, and even ASEAN countries, are unlikely to allow the UN to take any proactive measures against Myanmar. Given India's economic ties with Myanmar and their joint military efforts to counter insurgency in the shared border regions, India is also unlikely to come to Bangladesh's aid in this regard. The new Biden administration now needs to step up and take leadership in pushing the Myanmar government to not only take back its own people but also to ensure that they can return to their homes in a safe environment and that their rights as citizens are ensured.

The Rohingyas have suffered the pain and trauma of genocide. The least we can do is to make sure they go back to their homeland with dignity and safety.

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File photo of Rohingya refugees walking along an embankment after fleeing from Myanmar into Palang Khali, near Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, on November 2, 2017.

PHOTO: REUTERS/HANNAH MCKAY

trouble had been brewing between NLD and the military for some time), called for the nation to resist it, the Myanmar people have not come out on the streets to rise up against the autocratic usurpers of power.

Given the history of the Myanmar military against their own people, one can only wonder how things would turn out for the already persecuted Rohingya minority.

This is a concern for Bangladesh more than any other country. First of all, the sudden shift in power in Myanmar has pushed its Rohingya repatriation agreement with the country into uncertain grounds. It was recently agreed upon by Myanmar to start repatriation of the Rohingyas back to the country in June 2021. Bangladesh wanted the repatriation to start from March 2021, but due to Myanmar's request, it had been delayed

reaffirmed Myanmar's readiness to receive the verified displaced persons in line with the bilateral agreements."

Now with the hardline Myanmar military taking full control of the power, one wonders if Myanmar would keep its part of the commitment. Even if the military agrees to take the Rohingya refugees back, Bangladesh will have to be more watchful to make sure that the Rohingyas being taken back, if at all, are given their due rights and the protection they deserve.

Even under the NLD, swathes of land in Rakhine State and many Rohingya villages had been demolished to erase the existence of any Rohingya settlement there, and of course, to make space for the special economic zones. And many of the Rohingyas still in Myanmar are being detained in camps in Rakhine State under

Municipal Polls: Tales of Two Candidates



ABDUL MATIN

like Eid, New Year and Independence Day as preparations for contesting an election. As the polling date approaches, they become more active. They wear a smiley face, address people very politely whenever they meet them. They print attractive posters seeking votes and visit voters house-to-house posing as their admirers and close friends. They organise processions and public meetings in support of their candidacy.

The candidates promise to build roads, bridges, schools, colleges, water supply systems, sanitation and draining facilities... basically anything conceivable for the benefit of the voters. They open temporary offices where they entertain prospective voters with tea and cigarettes. For most party workers, it is an opportunity to earn a few bucks as the candidates pay them handsomely for their services. Needless to say, electioneering in our country has become an expensive affair. As a result, mostly the rich people can afford to contest elections.

Even in festive moods, untoward incidents also do occur during elections. There are occasional clashes between rival candidates and their supporters, often resulting in injuries and even deaths. Occasionally, polling agents are driven out of the polling centres on the election day by supporters of the rival candidates. Thus we see both money and muscle play decisive roles in most elections in our region. As a result, honest people who have no money or muscle power hardly get an opportunity to contest the elections.

A similar situation is now prevailing in the ongoing municipal elections in Bangladesh, perhaps with very few exceptions. Two stories will illustrate this point. First, it has been reported that a candidate named Jamal (not his real name) recently contested in a municipal

election for the position of councillor but failed miserably. Out of frustration, he went to a pond close to his home early in the morning and dived seven times in the cold water. While diving, he was holding his ears with his two hands in front of the media and some local people. After each dive, he shouted loudly, "I promise I shall never contest any election."

Later, he explained his reasons. He said: "I am an honest man and I wanted to serve my people sincerely. I became a

honest and sincere people take Jamal's advice seriously and abstain from contesting future elections, what will be the character of public representation in our country? What will our leaders deliver to the people if only candidates with money and muscle power are elected to hold important positions in local bodies and parliament?"

Now here is a different story to indicate that the future may not be as scary as depicted above. It has been



ILLUSTRATION: THE SEATTLE TIMES

candidate hoping that the people would vote for me because of my honesty and sincerity. Initially, everybody in my locality supported me. I thought I would easily win but a day before the election, the whole scenario changed dramatically. All my supporters deserted me because a rival candidate bought all of my supporters by paying them handsomely. Consequently, I lost to him. Now I have realised that no honest person can win an election unless he also spends lavishly on buying votes. So I promised never to contest any election in the future, and I would advise all honest people to do the same."

Knowing the present culture of elections in our country, this story seems to be authentic and it terrifies us. If all

reported that one beggar was contesting an election for the councillor position in a municipality. Let us call him Zahed, not his real name. He is a real beggar in the sense that he actually begs for alms. Irony is, during elections, all candidates beg for votes but we do not call them beggars! Zahed was a day labourer during his early life. He is now 70 years old and unable to work. So he became a beggar to meet his family expenses. He organised other beggars in his locality and formed a Beggars' Association of which he became the chairman. (Begging, by the way, is not a respectable profession and should be discouraged. Some people are, however, forced to beg as there is no effective and comprehensive system to rehabilitate them.)

Zahed is well-known as an honest person. His fellow beggars inspired him to contest the election. Initially, he was hesitant as he had no money to contest the election. The people in his locality came to help him. They contributed whatever they could to meet his election expenses. Tk 100, 200 or 300. His wife also came to his aid. She prepared tea for his supporters who came to visit him. He reportedly became a popular candidate. His arguments were simple but very convincing. He said that he was a beggar and he had been poor all through his life. So he understood the sufferings of the poor people which no well-to-do candidate could. Marginalised people like Zahed live in slums in very unhygienic conditions without proper roads, sanitation, water supply and drainage systems. A candidate like him is thus better suited to solve their problems.

Zahed's candidature is a unique case in our country. He had no money and no muscle power and yet he was contesting an election with the support of fellow beggars and the local people. To say the least, this is democracy in its best form. It is not known if he won the election but his candidacy itself is a giant step forward toward the empowerment of the marginalised people. One can only hope to see more candidates like him in future elections, both at local and national levels.

According to one estimate, most of the current members of our parliament (over 61 percent) belong to the business community. The voices of the marginalised people are, therefore, rarely heard in parliament even though they form the vast majority of our population. Their problems and grievances remain mostly unresolved. Their voices will be louder if marginalised people like farmers, day labourers, domestic workers, garment and factory workers and rickshaw pullers find their way to all public offices in our country. Surely they can do this if they can unite and organise themselves, like the supporters of Zahed. Their journey to power may be long and arduous but if they can accomplish this, they will be a major driving force to realise Bangabandhu's dream of emancipation of the downtrodden people of our country.

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