

Police accused of torturing a minor into murder confession

Authorities must conduct urgent investigation of complicit officers

AS more details of the case of a 12-year-old boy from Bogura who was forced to confess to killing his younger brother in 2015 are being revealed, we are horrified to hear of the ordeal that this child and his parents have been put through for almost six years. This week, a video report from *The Daily Star* delved deeper into the case and revealed a shocking level of incompetence and potential corruption from the investigating police, as well as the torture of the minor suspect Sourav that continues to traumatise him, even today.

In the report, the statement from Sourav's father, day labourer Md Mohidul Islam, is truly heart-breaking. He struggled to hold back his tears while speaking of how, after the agony of losing his eight-year-old son, instead of receiving justice for his murder, he had to spend his remaining strength and resources in protecting his other child from a potential miscarriage of justice. It is clear from his tale that at every step of this case, there was a total disregard for the law—he could hear 12-year-old Sourav being tortured at the police station but was not allowed to see him; he did not receive any assistance from the police or local government actors regarding the case; and he was even forced to flee from his village after being threatened by the “influential” people who, he alleges, framed his son for the crime.

However, Md Mohidul refused to be intimidated and filed a no-confidence motion, after which the investigation was handed over to the Police Bureau of Investigation (PBI), which later arrested two persons in connection with the murder. In fact, the sub-inspector of PBI Bogura revealed that they did not find any evidence of Sourav even being near the scene of the crime. So based on what evidence did the local police arrest him? When questioned on this, the callous reply from the local police station was that they have “a lot of work to do” and new investigations can reveal new findings later.

The chief of the PBI has now suggested that to avoid further occurrences like this, higher officials should be involved in the process before any recording of a child's confessional statement. However, measures such as this will be far too little, too late for Sourav, who is still unable to hear from one ear due to the torture he was subjected to. This shameful police brutality as well as the possible police collusion with local influential actors to frame a minor are not an issue that can be taken lightly. It is symptomatic of a wider problem of law enforcers resorting to lawlessness and subverting the law to serve their own needs. For too long, we have seen violent and corrupt police officers escape accountability with little or no disciplinary action. We urge the government to recognise the gravity of the situation and take immediate step to investigate the police officers who tortured Sourav into confessing. The lack of a strong response from the authorities will only reduce people's confidence in their ability to protect minors from such abuse at the hands of law enforcers again.

Recognising the contributions of sanitation and waste workers

Their health and safety should be our priority

A discussion held by *The Daily Star* with health policy experts has brought to light the utter neglect and apathy of our society towards one of the most essential groups of people: the sanitation and waste workers. These hidden and unsung heroes who risk their health and lives every day to clean the sewerage drains and other waste on a regular basis have little to no access to healthcare, even though they are most prone to illness due to their work in the most unhygienic conditions. The discussion is part of a campaign titled “The Untold Stories of Sanitation and Waste Worker”, jointly organised by *The Daily Star*, WaterAid Bangladesh and the Embassy of Sweden. Experts have rightly pointed to the challenges in improving the health and healthcare condition of these workers.

According to experts, one of the major reasons why these workers are so neglected is the lack of recognition for their profession. They face social stigma, economic hardships and are also deprived of civic benefits. They are underpaid and cannot afford a decent lifestyle, especially quality healthcare. Due to a lack of affordable and comprehensive healthcare services for the country's urban poor—an economic cluster to which the sanitation and waste workers belong—it has become difficult to ensure even the basic healthcare services for these unsung heroes. While the DGHS runs around 35 urban dispensaries in Dhaka to provide outdoor patient services, more should be set-up with comprehensive healthcare facilities to cater to the primary healthcare needs of the urban poor, including these workers.

The government must implement universal healthcare coverage for the urban poor so that they can afford the medical care needed. In a nation where, according to World Bank, a staggering 74 percent of healthcare expenses have to be borne out of pocket by the patients, poor sanitation workers are deterred from seeking medical care even when they are seriously ill.

If the government is sincere in its efforts to ensure their proper healthcare, it needs to drive health insurance schemes for them. The government can collaborate with the NGOs working to ensure the rights of sanitation and waste workers through community partnerships to promote the insurance facility. Collaboration can also be made with the Municipal Association of Bangladesh (MAB), which has access to the 300 municipalities and their workers, to make sure every sanitation and waste worker has access to individual or even group health insurance policy. It is high time the government and the society as a whole recognised their needs and ensured their wellbeing. Providing access to healthcare would be the first step.



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corner, playing with a flammable item instead of a toy. Later, Amina's mother told me that she was hiding under the bed when the Myanmar military surrounded their household in Rakhine. She watched them kill her father and grandfather, and lay hidden while they gang-raped her mother. She hadn't said a word to anyone outside of her family since then.

Amina's mother also spoke of how lost she felt now that her parents and husband were dead. She lamented, “What will happen to my child?” During visits to the refugee camps, I have heard this refrain over and over again from Rohingya parents—“what will happen to my child?”

I started with this story because right after the 2017 refugee exodus from Myanmar—the result of military operations termed as a “textbook example of ethnic cleansing” by the then UN human rights chief—there was a lot more interest in Bangladesh regarding the human faces of the Rohingya who fled here. The stories of brutal murders, rapes and villages being burned *en masse* stirred something in the hearts of a nation prone to feel empathy towards persecuted populations. However, after four years of hosting close to a million refugees and feeling the strain on our local resources, that empathy has fast changed into refugee fatigue, and often downright aggression.

If mainstream and social media is anything to go by, we are no longer interested in hearing the stories of religious and racial persecution of this minority. Instead, we have fallen into the habit of speaking in sweeping generalisations only. In such a huge and diverse population, the stories of courage and agency—the Rohingya social workers teaching women about birth control, the elders passing on their language to the young, the youth volunteers engaging in community service—these stories are of no interest either. The words of the day, when it comes to refugees, are “crime”, “drugs” and, of course, “repatriation”.

The final buzzword is one thing that we can all agree on at least—despite what many may think, most Rohingya refugees have no desire to spend their whole lives confined in camps, however improved their conditions may be. A common accusation that you often hear against refugees in Bangladesh is that they are living a life of “comfort” and they would much rather live here for “free” than go back home. These voices have become even louder in the wake of Bhashan Char, where the resettled refugees have better accommodation and facilities (although the recent deaths of three Rohingya children amidst an outbreak of diarrhoea on the island shows that all is not as well as it seems).

While there are definitely marginalised pockets of our own citizens who would consider a daily ration of rice and lentils and a plastic tarpaulin over their heads

Together we heal, learn and shine



JOHANNES VAN DER KLAUW

number of displaced persons recorded in recent history, equating to some half of the population of Bangladesh. There are more disturbing facts: 2020 also marks the ninth consecutive year of increased forced displacements worldwide.

Myanmar, which forced almost 1 million Rohingya people to flee violence and persecution in 2017, is one of the top five countries contributing to increasing global displacement.

In Cox's Bazar, almost 900,000 Rohingya refugees have been generously sheltered by the government and people of Bangladesh for almost four years.

The refugees wish to return home, but until it is safe to do so and they can be guaranteed their basic rights and a pathway to citizenship in Myanmar, they have no choice but to remain protected and assisted to live in safety and with dignity in Bangladesh.

Despite countless stories of personal tragedy, loss and suffering, on this World Refugee Day, we celebrate the resilience and determination of refugees to continue to live with dignity and keep their hopes high to one day be able to return home in Myanmar.

This year, we celebrate this day to help refugees “to heal, to learn and to shine”, drawing attention to health, education and sports and arts being so important for their daily life and wellbeing.

The Covid-19 pandemic of the past year has shown us the spirit of Rohingya

a luxury, I can guarantee that the people who are repeating these xenophobic tropes are not one of them. And this perception of refugees as free-loaders completely erases their identities and personal histories. Do we really believe the Rohingya people would choose to live out the rest of their lives fenced in with barbed wire, without livelihoods, education and freedom of movement, a stone's throw from their homeland, simply for the sake of “free” shelter and rations?

There is no question that Bangladesh has acted magnanimously when it comes to hosting refugees. And at almost every event hosted in the refugee camps, such as the ones organised on Rohingya Genocide Remembrance Day every year, this gratitude towards the Bangladeshi authorities has been expressed by the Rohingya. Which makes it all the more depressing that when legitimate questions are asked about their current status—such as the right to education of over 450,000 Rohingya children in the camps who are being denied access to basic accredited education—our general reaction has been to shrug our shoulders and say “not our problem”.

Time and again, Bangladesh has said that it cannot solely take responsibility for the Rohingya refugees, and the authorities are justified in saying so. But by failing to uphold their cause and create legitimate platforms where refugee voices can be amplified, we have made an error of judgment—because from the looks of it, the rest of the world, instead of stepping up in our place, have also washed their hands of the “refugee problem”.

At the latest G7 meeting, global leaders met to discuss the pandemic, climate change and security issues—there was hardly a mention of the world's 26.4

million refugees (UNHCR estimate from mid-2020). Earlier this month, *The Guardian* reported that British foreign aid cuts of 42 percent will leave around 70,000 people without health services and 100,000 without water in Cox's Bazar, affecting not only refugees but host communities as well. Aid for Rohingya refugees has been dwindling by the year, with the latest Joint Response Plan receiving only 35 percent of the USD 943 million needed for 2021. Again, these funds are allocated not just to meet the needs of nearly a million refugees, but for almost half a million vulnerable Bangladeshis in Cox's Bazar as well.

Would things have been different if we had pushed a different narrative—if, say, instead of saying the Rohingya must return and the rest is not our concern, we had spoken up for a comprehensive solution that involved humane camp conditions, and donor investment in refugee training and education for third-country settlement, alongside dignified and safe repatriation to Myanmar? Could we have used our moral authority as the country with the largest Rohingya refugee population to remind other countries of their responsibilities, such as Japan and Saudi Arabia—who, according to the Norwegian Refugee Council, are guilty of taking in the least refugees despite having the best means? Bangladesh's presence in the region is no longer a minor one, as can be seen from the financial assistance we recently sent to Sri Lanka and the medical aid gifted to Nepal and India. So could we not have demonstrated that same leadership and diplomatic authority in denouncing the military coup in Myanmar and pushing other countries to do the same?

Earlier this month, ASEAN representatives met with the junta chief but failed to come up with a solution to

the crisis in Myanmar or even condemn the military's illegal takeover. At around the same time, Myanmar's shadow civilian government made a landmark announcement, pledging to amend the country's constitution and grant citizenship to the Rohingya if it regains power from the military. Which of these parties do our long-run interests coincide with? We need to carefully consider this while mulling our future diplomatic strategy concerning refugees.

The solution to the refugee crisis is not an easy one, but it will become even more difficult if Bangladesh and other refugee-hosting countries fail to play a leading role in engaging the international community and ensuring that donor support for the Rohingya does not continue to dwindle. And in order to play this role, we need to end the demonisation of refugees and see them for who they are—not free-loaders, not criminals, but a vast and diverse population struggling to survive and build a better life for future generations after being driven out of their native land.

To mark this year's World Refugee Day, Save the Children has released a report revealing that more than 700,000 Rohingya children across Asia are being denied their most basic rights. On this day, let us remember that we as a nation are well-aware of the fact that people can live through the most desperate situations, but what they cannot live without is hope. The Rohingya refugees are not here to snatch the bread out of the mouths of ordinary Bangladeshis, but for the most humane of reasons, as the question that is off-repeated in the camps show—“what will happen to my child?”

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File photo of a Rohingya child at Unchiparang refugee camp, Bangladesh.

PHOTO: REUTERS/TYRONE SUI

refugees and their host communities to prevent and protect from the spread of the virus like never before. At the onset of the pandemic, refugee and local Bangladeshi volunteers alike mobilised in huge numbers to protect their communities. Thousands of volunteers, including a network of 1,500 community health workers, worked day and night to spread awareness in the refugee camps and local communities on Covid-19, on how to keep themselves safe, refer cases for testing and support those who needed it. This has saved lives.

To heal from the pandemic, refugees have provided mental health and psychosocial support through the UNHCR's peer-to-peer mental health programme. They have gone door to door within their community to mentor peers on how to support themselves and their families to deal with stress, anxiety and anger. This kind of outreach and support not only empowers youth to teach one another, but also to build their leadership skills, self-confidence, and ability to cope with adversity.

Other refugees have taken it upon themselves to spread information in different ways—using videos and online information campaigns. A self-started refugee youth group known as Omar's Film School has been creating videos in the Rohingya language to raise awareness for refugees to share information about how to avoid the virus. These young people are stepping up in the face of adversity to protect their own communities despite the risks to themselves.

Access to school and learning facilities has been significantly impacted by the pandemic, not only in Bangladesh but globally, especially for 85 percent of refugee children who live in developing countries around the world. For refugees, going to school was already a challenge, but lockdowns have now made learning

almost impossible. Still, refugee Learning Assistants continue to spend their days going door to door throughout the congested refugee camps, to provide at least some kind of learning at home to students, and to support their parents. Resuming caregiver-led education in the camps would allow children to continue learning at home until it is safe for learning centres and schools to reopen. In parallel, continuing preparations to roll out the Myanmar Curriculum in the camps to allow for its rapid implementation, once the Covid-19 situation permits to reopen the learning centres, will help to ensure that a generation of Rohingya children is not left behind.

Sports has also proven time and again to be an excellent way for people to heal from trauma. In the Rohingya camps, however, access to open spaces is very limited. Still, many refugees can be seen every evening playing football, volleyball and traditional “Chinlone” from Myanmar. Young refugees here are motivated by the Refugee Olympic team and the remarkable challenges these athletes have overcome to compete at the top levels, while representing all refugees who have been forced to flee.

The recent news of the success of young Noor Kabir, who was born in the refugee camps in Cox's Bazar and has now become a bodybuilding champion in Australia, has encouraged young people to continue to dream big and work hard towards a brighter future. Noor Kabir is also studying to be a nutritionist and intends to share his knowledge with the refugees in the camps he left behind in Bangladesh. There are also many young refugees who have demonstrated resilience as budding artists. Following the devastating fire on March 22 in the camps, which destroyed 40,000 shelters and killed 11 refugees, a large mural of bright artwork painted by Rohingya youth remained intact, telling

the story of the hardships they went through to arrive in Bangladesh, and standing boldly among the ashes as a testament to how resilience through art can shine through even the most difficult of circumstances.

To add to the Covid-19 pandemic, Bangladeshis and Rohingya refugees alike face the annual threat of monsoon rains and cyclones. Again, it is the refugee and Bangladeshi volunteer “first responders” who are saving lives, raising awareness and protecting their communities. Braving bad weather, volunteers are out in force during heavy downpours and flooding, moving others to safety and ensuring that everyone has access to food and basic needs.

These are just a few stories of the incredible resilience that Rohingya—and other refugees around the world—continue to show in spite of the odds stacked against them. On the World Refugee Day, we celebrate refugees' resilience and support them in their hopes for a brighter future. On this day, we also acknowledge the dedicated humanitarians alongside whom I serve every day, colleagues from both Bangladesh and other parts of the world who work tirelessly and selflessly to create a better life for refugees, often far from their own loved ones.

Four years into the Rohingya crisis, we cannot lose focus on the need to find solutions for the Rohingya refugees by creating peace, stability and justice for them in Myanmar, with their rights fully restored and their living conditions improved. We must continue to stand with the Rohingya and with all refugees in the world, to support them, and to ensure that their hope and aspirations for the future are kept alive and allow them to heal, learn and shine.

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