

Savar tannery estate is a big hazard to the environment

Complete the CETP quickly

IT is sad but true that the Savar Tannery Industrial Estate (STIE) in Hemayetpur has defeated the very purpose for which it was established. In fact, it is wreaking exactly the same kind of havoc on the Dhaleshwari river that the Hazaribagh tanneries had wreaked on the Buriganga before being moved to the estate. It is, therefore, not surprising that the parliamentary standing committee on the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change has recommended that it be shut down because the capacity of the Central Effluent Treatment Plant (CETP) is incomplete in every respect, including its capacity to treat effluent—it being able to treat less than 70 percent of the waste produced every day.

The STIE has been in the headlines over the last several years. The tannery estate has become a very good example of poor planning and execution. The estate is far from being completed yet. For example, the CETP has not been completed even after nine years since the project was taken up in 2012. Yet, most of the around 160 tanneries have been shifted to the estate initially with no treatment facilities at all. Can the Dhaleshwari withstand the burden of 15,000 cubic metres of untreated waste, including all the solid waste, being dumped into it every day?

We forget that these rivers are the main lifeline of the major conurbations. The Buriganga is all but dead, and the Dhaleshwari faces the same fate. But was it inevitable? Why should it have taken nine years and counting to complete a CETP project? Was it necessary to shift all the tanneries and overburden the CETP? What has happened—as a consequence of bad planning and even worse execution of the plan—is that not only has the environment, including the two major rivers skirting the capital, been seriously endangered, but the leather industry, a budding sector that has added to our export basket, also faces a severe threat. Presently, because our leather industry has not been given the certification by the Leather Working Group, our leather products are fetching 40 percent less price in the international market.

However, we wonder if it would be advisable to close down the estate completely. And we in no way want to convey the impression that the parliamentary committee's recommendation is not justified. That notwithstanding, we suggest that the newly formed government company, which has taken over the task of completing the CETP, should get on with completing it as quickly as possible. We would hope that the planners would keep in mind the future production level of the tanneries so that the CETP does not become dated by the time it starts working at full capacity. Meanwhile, the tanneries should be asked not to overburden the current capacity of the plant. That would involve reducing the production, but we believe that is better than closing down the tannery estate completely till all the facilities are up to scratch.

Take all steps to rescue trafficked victims

Coordinating with the Indian authorities is vital

ON June 3, this newspaper highlighted the horrific experiences of three trafficked victims who were lured to India under false promises of getting well-paying decent jobs. In reality, they were tricked by members of a sex trafficking gang, sexually abused, and forced into prostitution. Every year, thousands of women and girls are trafficked from Bangladesh to India and other countries. As this newspaper again reported on Tuesday, some of the girls trafficked to India and forced into prostitution by a transnational racket—some of whose members have recently been apprehended—are still stranded in India, while a few, including a minor, are yet to be traced.

According to the report, at least 10 girls, mostly TikTok users, were trafficked by the racket recently. Of them, six victims, including a minor, are still stranded or untraceable in India. Now, a police team wants to visit India to rescue them and bring them back to Bangladesh, while interrogating those arrested in connection with the trafficking. Till now, the Indian police have arrested 12 members of the racket—11 of them Bangladeshis. And Bangladeshi law enforcers have arrested 20. Police said the gang members targeted female TikTok users and trafficked them in the name of providing well-paid jobs there at shopping malls and beauty parlours.

Major progress in busting this gang of traffickers only began after a video clip of a 22-year-old woman being tortured and sexually assaulted went viral on social media. This shows that the law enforcers of both countries were always a step behind the traffickers. However, following the recent arrests, the Bangladeshi law enforcers have managed to gather crucial information on this trafficking ring. And interrogating those in custody on the Indian side of the border might provide key information that could help in the rescue of the missing girls. Another matter that the law enforcers should follow up on is the identity of those providing the trafficked girls with new names and Adhar cards once they cross over to the other side of the border. Is any insider on either side of the border helping trafficking gangs commit these crimes? That is also worth investigating.

We wholeheartedly support any action by the law enforcers that could lead to the rescue of the missing girls. And we hope and trust that the Indian authorities will provide their full support to that end. As this case clearly illustrates, human trafficking by transnational gangs, due to its very nature, can only be stopped through transnational efforts on the parts of the authorities. In that regard, not only must our law enforcers become more competent at opposing human trafficking, through raising awareness and enhancing vigilance, but they must also step up coordination with other law enforcing agencies to effectively stop trafficking from Bangladesh.

ROHINGYA GENOCIDE REMEMBRANCE DAY

Four years on, no end in sight to the plight of the Rohingya



A CLOSER LOOK

TASNEEM TAYEB

IN the wee hours of August 25, 2017, a group of militants—the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA)—attacked around 30 police posts in the north of Rakhine State, Myanmar.

According to media reports, 10 police personnel, an immigration officer, one soldier and 59 militants were among the casualties. The militants were said to be equipped with knives and homespun bombs.

What followed was a brutal bloodbath unleashed by the Myanmar military—also known as the Tatmadaw—in the name of counter-insurgency operations. Rakhine State, home to about a million Rohingya Muslims, was turned upside down by the Tatmadaw—going village to village, door to door, exacting revenge on the Rohingya. Villages were razed to the ground. People were burnt in their own homes. Men were killed in scores; women and girls were gang-raped by the Myanmar military—in many instances, multiple times—their private parts intentionally mutilated, their bodies and souls bearing the scars of sexual violence; infants and children were shot, burned with their parents, and at times left out in the open for scavengers to feast on.

According to an estimate by Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF)—popularly known as Doctors Without Borders—at least 6,700 Rohingya were killed in the first month of that ethnic cleansing operation. MSF itself called the number “an underestimation.” The atrocities of the Tatmadaw led to the exodus of more than 700,000 Rohingya Muslims from Rakhine State, including around half a million children, who took on the desperate journey to cross to the other side of the Naf river into Bangladesh's Cox's Bazar.

It was later noted in a UN fact-finding panel report that the atrocious military offensive in Rakhine State was orchestrated with “genocidal intent”.

According to a report published by Thailand-based rights group Fortify Rights, the Tatmadaw attack on the Rohingya community had been premeditated. Titled “They Gave Them Long Swords: Preparations for Genocide and Crimes Against Humanity Against Rohingya Muslims in Rakhine State, Myanmar”, the report traced and documented how between October 2016 and August 2017, in preparation for the ethnic cleansing operation, the Myanmar authorities, “systematically ‘disarmed’ Rohingya civilians, confiscating household items that might be used as weapons or in self-defence. Systematically tore down fencing and other structures around

Rohingya homes, providing the military with a greater line-of-sight on civilians. Trained and armed local non-Rohingya communities in northern Rakhine State. Suspended humanitarian aid and access to Rohingya, systematically weakening the civilian population and removing monitors on the ground. Enforced a discriminatory Muslim-only curfew in northern Rakhine State and evacuated thousands of non-Rohingya citizens from the area. Built up an unusually sizeable military presence, incommensurate with the threats at hand.”

The world watched in horror as hundreds of thousands of persecuted Rohingya fled for their lives in the face of the vicious Tatmadaw crackdown. While today marks the fourth year of the latest Rohingya displacement, it is certainly not the first instance that this has happened.

The predominantly Buddhist Myanmar

land. A generally accepted etymological notion of the word Rohingya is that “Rohang” comes from the word “Arakan” and “gya” means “from”, in the Rohingya dialect. The irony is, these people terming themselves as “from Arakan” are barely allowed to live in their own lands.

It is not that the world did not react to these atrocities committed against the Rohingya. There have been multiple UNGA resolutions condemning these human rights abuses, and there have also been instances when sanctions were imposed on the Myanmar junta by countries and blocs. Unfortunately, none of these seem to have played any role in stopping the ethnic persecution of the Rohingya.

The 2017 Rohingya displacement created multiple layers of pressure on host countries, including Bangladesh, which is now sheltering more than 1.2 million refugees. It takes the Bangladesh economy

The living conditions in the Rohingya camps are also growing worse by the day. Sanitation, hygiene and health have become major concerns, especially in the wake of faecal contamination of the land and water, which has led to an increased risk of water-borne diseases.

Due to deforestation of more than 6,800 acres of forest land where the Rohingya have been sheltered in squalid camps, the refugees remain exposed to the risk of landslides and mudslides during monsoon. As recently as July this year, the Bangladesh authorities had to evacuate around 10,000 Rohingya due to lethal landslides.

Now unable to accommodate the growing number of Rohingya refugees in cramped camps, the Bangladesh government has been left with no choice but to relocate around 100,000 of them to the remote island of Bhashan Char. While the long-term habitability of Bhashan Char is questionable and is being doubted by the international community and humanitarian agencies, what other choice does Bangladesh have now?

With international funding declining drastically and living conditions in Cox's Bazar worsening, Bangladesh is almost left on its own to support these persecuted refugees. Despite the pandemic and the myriad challenges faced by the people of this nation, the Bangladesh government allocated Tk 202 crore in the last budget as part of social safety net programmes for refugees.

While during the time of Aung San Suu Kyi there was a small ray of hope that a safe repatriation of the Rohingya would be possible in the medium to long-run, that has been smothered after the military coup in Myanmar.

With no end in sight to the protracted stay and struggles of the Rohingya refugees, Bangladesh is doing its best to provide for them, even while the international community is failing them in both enabling safe repatriation and supporting them with livelihoods. Right now, relocation of the Rohingya to Bhashan Char looks like the most feasible option that Bangladesh can offer. The international community should support Bangladesh in making Bhashan Char more liveable and safe for the Rohingya, or provide the country with more funding so that it can arrange better accommodation for them. Complaining and pointing out flaws is not going to help any of the parties involved, not least the refugees. Until the international community is able to ensure that the Rohingya will be protected in their homeland from the Myanmar military regime's brutal crackdowns, the least they can do is support Bangladesh in providing for them.

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Rohingya refugees walk on after crossing from Myanmar into Palang Khali, near Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh on November 2, 2017.

PHOTO: REUTERS/HANNAH MCKAY

has historically harboured an exclusionary attitude towards the Rohingya, which has been reflected in their 1948 citizenship law, and especially in the policies adopted during and after the rule of General Ne Win, who grabbed power in 1962. General Ne Win, in various phases, systematically excluded the Rohingya Muslim minorities, initially excluding from citizenship those people whose ancestors had entered the country after 1823. Then, the 1974 constitution recognised 134 “national races”—this did not include the Rohingya, who were treated as a non-indigenous minority. Later, the Burma citizenship law of 1982 stated that only children of the “national races” will be considered full citizens of the country, thus excluding the Rohingya further.

Over the decades, there have been frequent spikes in attacks on the Rohingya, which have led to multiple episodes of displacement, specifically in 1978, 1991-1992, 2012-2013, 2016 and again from 2017 onwards. Yet, little has been done to ensure safe living conditions in their native

an estimated USD 1.21 billion every year to support Rohingya refugees, as mentioned in an article by *The Diplomat*.

According to a report published recently by a local news outlet citing an official from the Office of the Refugee Realief and Repatriation Commissioner (RRRC), around 30,438 infants are born in the Rohingya camps each year. And in the face of waning donor support, Bangladesh is grappling to support the refugees, especially in the backdrop of the ongoing global pandemic. In 2017, against an appeal of USD 434 million, the world community pledged USD 344 million as part of a six-month response plan; in 2018, it was USD 656 million against an appeal of USD 951 million. In 2019, the figure fell to USD 635 million. The worst was yet to come. In 2020, against a request for USD 1,058 million, the donors only pledged USD 509.95 million till October 2020. Till May this year, only USD 340 million has been pledged against a request of USD 1,000 million—just north of a third of the requirement.

We must focus on building Rohingya and host community resilience



ROBERT CHATTERTON DICKSON

THIS month marks the fourth year since the flight of more than 730,000 Rohingya from Myanmar's Rakhine State to Bangladesh after a military-led crackdown. The exodus followed decades of systemic disenfranchisement, discrimination, targeted violence and persecution against the Rohingya in Myanmar.

Every time I visit the camps in Cox's Bazar, I am humbled by the extraordinary fortitude of the Rohingya people and by the generosity of their hosts here in Bangladesh. But four years since the terrible events of August 2017—and nearly two years since The Gambia brought its historic case against Myanmar to the International Court of Justice—there has been little progress towards securing the Rohingya refugees' return to Myanmar or guarantees for their safety and citizenship there. February's military coup in Myanmar and the violence which has followed make the prospects of voluntary, safe and dignified repatriation in the short to medium term even more challenging, and the situation for the Rohingya people who remain in Myanmar more precarious.

Under the leadership of the prime minister and the government of Bangladesh, the humanitarian response has saved many thousands of lives. The crisis has slowly stabilised, and the refugees have access to healthcare, food, shelter and water and sanitation. The Rohingya refugees themselves, and the women and men in the host communities, have played vital roles in this. We see this generosity at work again in the roll-out of Covid-19 vaccines for refugees.

However, despite progress, the situation remains challenging both for the Rohingya and for their hosts in Bangladesh. The devastating impact of heavy monsoon rains in recent weeks is a reminder of how

vulnerable the region and the camps are to weather-related hazards and more frequent natural disasters, exacerbated by climate change. Earlier this year, fires in the camps compounded the trauma already suffered by the refugees. Camp security continues to decline. There are worrying trends on child marriage and gender-based violence against women and girls.

Faced with dim prospects for a durable solution to their situation, many Rohingya say they look to the future with a sense of despair and hopelessness, or are lured by human traffickers into attempting dangerous voyages in unsafe boats. For Bangladesh, the crisis brings increasing environmental, economic, social and security concerns.

This continuing crisis is a tragedy for all involved. No one chooses to live in a refugee camp, or to host a large influx of displaced people. As with so many other refugees worldwide, the great majority of the Rohingya population say they want to return home. Alongside others, the UK has played a key role in coordinating the international response to the coup in Myanmar. We continue to raise the plight of the Rohingya on the international stage, including in the UN Security Council. As a new Dialogue Partner of ASEAN, we support the efforts of the ASEAN Special Envoy. And we continue to provide humanitarian support to the Rohingya in Rakhine. But the reality is that returns will take time, especially given the current violence and political turmoil in Myanmar.

It is therefore essential that the humanitarian operation in Cox's Bazar is planned and organised for the longer term to provide for and protect the refugees until they can return home, as well as support the neighbouring communities. We are committed to working with the government of Bangladesh to do so, and have recently announced fresh funding under the UN Joint Response Plan. As I have seen for myself, the impressive purpose-built accommodation on Bhashan Char can help relieve the pressure in the camps, and we look forward to the establishment of a UN presence there.

But the sheer numbers involved mean the camps will remain the centre of the humanitarian operation, and refugees should be supported in the same way wherever they are.

As the crisis enters its fifth year, I suggest that there are four things which could be done now to help both the refugees and their hosts.

First, with the easing of Covid-19 restrictions nationally, and test positivity

eventual return to Myanmar. This is not to suggest integration, which we know neither the government of Bangladesh nor the Rohingya want, but to help avoid a descent into despondency, criminality and insecurity while the refugees are in Bangladesh.

Third, a new approach to camp perimeter safety and security could allow the refugees access to services and safe evacuation in case of emergencies. Fourth,



Rohingya refugees stretch their hands to receive aid distributed by local organisations at Balukhali makeshift refugee camp in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, September 14, 2017.

PHOTO: REUTERS/DANISH SIDDIQUI

rates in the camps under 10 percent, an easing of the Covid protocols would enable the resumption of essential camp management and protection services. This could include repair of infrastructure and shelters damaged by the monsoon and improved ability to prevent, or assist survivors of, gender-based violence and other violations of human rights.

Second, a renewed focus on equipping the Rohingya with education and skills would give them the opportunity to serve their refugee communities as volunteers, earn a basic living, and prepare them for

the international effort must continue to provide support for the Bangladeshi host communities affected by the crisis. UK humanitarian programming reflects this.

These steps could help keep the Rohingya community and their hosts in Bangladesh safe and resilient until the Rohingya can do what they and we all most want, which is to return as soon as possible in safety and dignity to their homes in Rakhine.

Robert Chatterton Dickson is the British High Commissioner to Bangladesh.