

Worrying decline in funding for Rohingya refugees

The world must not turn its back on this persecuted community

YESTERDAY marked the fourth anniversary of the deadly Myanmar military operations against the Rohingya community in Rakhine State, Myanmar, which led to the mass exodus of hundreds of thousands of Rohingya refugees to Bangladesh, fleeing what was described by the then UN human rights chief as a “textbook example of ethnic cleansing”. At the time, there was widespread condemnation of the atrocities committed by the Myanmar military, as well as praise for Bangladesh for opening its borders to the persecuted refugees. However, it is extremely disheartening to see that, four years on, the international community has failed to put its money where its mouth is, as international funding for Rohingya refugees continues to decline.

According to a report in this daily yesterday, the fund for humanitarian assistance for refugees and host communities in Cox’s Bazar—which ranged between 72 and 75 percent of the total requirement in the first three years since 2017—came down to 65 percent in 2020. Until July this year, USD 366 million has been committed or disbursed, which is only 34 percent of the required amount of around USD one billion for this year. On the other hand, the military coup and recent unrest in Myanmar, which includes brutal crackdowns on pro-democracy protesters, have also put the repatriation of refugees at risk, creating even greater uncertainty in the lives of the refugees trapped in Bangladesh.

It is contemptible that not only has the international community, including ASEAN countries, failed to properly condemn the Myanmar military’s unlawful seizure of power, but they are now also failing to support its victims. According to experts, the slashing of humanitarian funds in the camps will only increase the risks of human trafficking, gang violence, drug-related crimes, domestic violence and early marriage, as well as leave Rohingya youth vulnerable to being exploited by extremist groups. It is widely acknowledged that the best way to minimise these risks is to provide education and income-generating activities within the refugee camps, while strictly maintaining law and order. However, this cannot be done by the host country in isolation—the international community must do its fair share in supporting Bangladesh. In turn, the Bangladesh government must also conduct joint campaigns for funding and keep up the pressure on donors, so that we are better equipped to ensure the rights and protection of refugees within our borders.

Already, there are worries that the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan will take the spotlight away from the Rohingya. However, we cannot accept a situation where the world is only concerned with one crisis at a time, forgetting that other communities and groups are also in dire need of support. Despite being one of the world’s most populous nations, Bangladesh has generously hosted Rohingya refugees for decades. It is time the rest of the world came forward and provided robust support for refugee-hosting nations, which includes coming up with comprehensive solutions to the plight of the Rohingya refugees.

High time for in-person learning to restart

Govt must listen to experts and urgently take all necessary steps

A group of teachers from different universities announced on Tuesday that they will start holding symbolic classes in open spaces if the authorities do not reopen universities from the first week of September. Alongside this demand, they have also provided a roadmap to ensure greater safety for students, a precondition for reopening.

According to the roadmap, the residential halls should be reopened immediately (from September 1) for honours and master’s students—then for following batches in phases. Exams should only be taken after residential facilities are provided—students staying in dorms and those coming from home should be seated in separate rooms to curb Covid-19 transmission. A hybrid system of education—where students can opt to attend classes either offline or online—should be offered for convenience. And lastly, Covid-19 testing facilities and vaccination centres have to be set up on campuses.

Even after ensuring these steps, there will be plenty more to do, and the University Teacher’s Network, as the group of teachers is called, has recognised that. Which is why they have also called on authorities to abolish the “onoroom” system in halls—and have instead advocated for the transfer of authority back into the hands of teachers from the ruling party’s student wing, which has gained enormous influence across university campuses in recent times. Moreover, steps have to be taken to ensure that hygiene rules are being followed.

Given the immense length of time over which most education has remained completely stalled, the authorities should seriously consider these suggestions, as well as others that have been made by academics and experts regarding reopening educational institutions. The DU authorities have already announced that they will reopen dormitories in the first week of October for the resident students of master’s and honours final year, who will sit for their exams, and we believe that is a good first step. But government authorities must provide universities with full support in order for them to reopen safely.

On the flipside, the government should also use this time to make preparations for the reopening of primary and secondary schools. As revealed by Unicef on Tuesday, Bangladesh’s school closure since March 17 last year has been the second-longest school closure in the world. This means that, on the educational front, Bangladesh is falling further behind the rest of the world. And this is something that we cannot afford to do. The psychological toll this prolonged closure must be having on students is simply unimaginable. Unless absolutely necessary, we see no reason why reopening of schools should be postponed any further.

At the same time, prioritising the health and safety of all students is vital. For that, academics and other experts have provided the government with plenty of good, workable suggestions. It is now up to the government to formulate those into a system and work alongside educational institutions to implement them effectively.

The desperate plight of workers in pandemic

CR ABRAR, ANU MUHAMMAD, JYOTIRMOY BARUA and REZAUZ RAHMAN LENIN

THEY work in mills and factories, also under tin sheds in squalid conditions. They begin their long days commuting in crammed public transport vehicles or taking long walks, braving monsoon rain or summer heat. Despite working hard, most earn meagre sums and find it difficult to pay for rent, food, attire and their children’s education. Securing medical care when sick is a dream for them to indulge in. They know little about leisure, as nearly all have to “opt for” the coveted paid overtime, which comes in handy to maintain their subsistence. Being able to see their loved ones during religious festivals is the only break they and their families enjoy in their dreary lives. With virtually no representation to the management of their factories (employers), the laws that are meant to protect them remain largely unenforced, putting them at the mercy of their supervisors and employers. They do not have insurance or any social protection to shield them when faced with arbitrary retrenchment, industrial accident or unemployment.

The workers of Bangladesh, both in formal and informal sectors, are the forsaken lot with almost no voice. Their powerlessness has been patently visible after the outbreak of Covid-19. The administrative decisions, plans and programmes, particularly the ill-conceived lockdowns imposed to combat the pandemic, failed to take into account how those would affect the workers who live hand-to-mouth and depend on daily earnings. The inefficiency of the public health system has disproportionately affected workers living on the margins of society. These issues came up at a Nagorik virtual public discussion on “Covid-19 and the rights and dignity of workers” held on August 10. The panellists included workers and leaders from a range of formal and informal trades, including apparel manufacturing, tea estates, tourism, hotels and restaurants, and rickshaw pullers.

There was unanimity that the government’s decision pertaining to lockdown, without extending any kind of support to the daily wage earners, has pushed them to untold sufferings including starvation, malnutrition, ill health and indebtedness. The haste with which lockdown decisions and their revisions were arrived at forced the workers into “chaotic, hazardous, life-risking and Covid-spreading travel”. In the first round of lockdown, the authorities announced that factories would be run with 30 percent workforce stationed in close vicinity of the factory premises. But the reality was different as, in many instances, the management recalled workers staying in rural areas who had to report back for fear of losing jobs. Needless to say, workers were summoned at a time when there was a complete shutdown of transport facilities. The belated and bizarre decision to allow transport services to resume only for 16 hours, ferrying the workers back to their

workplaces during the second lockdown, again reflected the callousness, ineptness, and insensitivity of the authorities that inflicted immeasurable harm on the workers. “They did not learn anything from the first lockdown and put us into a perilous situation yet again. They think we are machines,” said a garment worker panellist, narrating her harrowing journey during lockdown conditions.

Although opening mills and factories was at the top of the agenda of the captains of the industry and the state, such priority was not supplemented by ensuring easy access to Covid-testing and treatment facilities, including that of quarantining. While those on the frontlines, such as health professionals, law enforcers and civil administrators, were justifiably given priority in the vaccination drive, no one—including those in the powerful trade bodies—spent any energy in lobbying that workers rendering services during the pandemic should get priority in vaccination, too.



Several workers’ organisations have highlighted the risk of cluster community transmission in factories.

PHOTO: UNB

At the factory premises, compulsory wearing of masks could be largely implemented, but ensuring physical distance remained an issue. Several workers’ organisations have highlighted the risk of cluster community transmission in factories. After the resumption of work, an increased incidence of infection was reported in various factories. The participants noted that several factories in Savar allegedly allowed operations despite being affected by Covid-19 infection. The participants claimed that, instead of reporting it, a section of the factories tended to suppress information on cases of infection, thereby making healthy workers vulnerable. The union leaders, validating workers’ claims, stated that there is yet to emerge a set of enforceable guidelines to deal with issues of health risk, allowances, medical expenses and leave if workers are affected by Covid-19. It is disconcerting that apex trade bodies have thus far shied away from engaging on this critical issue.

Instead of taking responsibility for further check-ups, including conducting Covid-19 tests, workers recording above-normal temperatures were sent

on leave, and that too, without pay. “How can you demand pay if you are sitting at home?” was the reply received by several affected workers from the management of a garments factory in Ullail, Savar. Questions were raised about the employers abiding by the prime ministerial offer of Tk 5,000 crore incentives to the export-oriented industries, which was tied to the former spending the amount on wages of workers.

The panellists claimed that, while state inaction in dealing with arbitrary termination, non-payment of wages and lack of ensuring physical protection of workers was palpable, the Industrial Police located in various industrial zones rather geared up its surveillance operation to ensure no “untoward incident” took place. This weighed in heavily against the legitimate expression of discontent by the affected workers. Workers’ representatives claimed that at least five workers were called by the Industrial Police in

Ashulia and detained for a whole day for “provocative posts” on social media between April and May 2020. They were released only after signing bonds to refrain from further posting. The workers’ representatives also claimed that fictitious cases were lodged in all six industrial zones. Industrial Police sources claim that 444 workers participated in protests in the six zones in April (as reported in *New Age* on May 1, 2020). In several instances, factory authorities registered cases against a number of named and unnamed workers.

Meanwhile, in the tea industry, curiously categorised as “food” by the Tea Board for it to qualify as an “essential” sector, 150,000 tea estate workers continued their work in 166 tea gardens across the country during the pandemic (as per an April 12, 2020 report by *The Daily Star*). A union leader claimed that, demystifying the notion that “tea gardens are free from virus”, deaths were reported with Covid-19 symptoms in several tea gardens. This led to the demand to bring the tea estate workers under a “general holiday”. Many tasks performed in the tea estates are reportedly group

tasks requiring workers to be in close proximity, thus increasing the risk of infection. The absence of hygienic toilets in worksites and the practice of drinking water using only their cupped palms also increase the risk. Non-payment of wages during the pandemic prompted tea estate workers to organise a “hungry long march” in Kulaura for two hours with placards and empty dishes.

The adverse effects of the pandemic has also taken a huge toll on the tourism, hotels and restaurant industry, throwing lakhs of workers out of work. Many turned into porters, rickshaw pullers and vegetable vendors. The informal nature of their employment acted as an impediment to securing any benefits from official quarters.

Transport sector workers have also been facing major hardships during the pandemic, and many families are on the brink of starvation. This is particularly depressing as about 70 lakh transport workers are believed to pay a sum of Tk 2,000 crores per year to the 300 transport workers unions that exist in the country. According to a report by *Kaler Kontho* in May 2020, it has been alleged that leaders of the federated unions are engaged in “list politics” in dispensing government assistance. A similar situation was faced by rickshaw pullers, who disproportionately bore the brunt of lockdowns. News reports were aplenty on law enforcers’ degrading treatment of rickshaw pullers and seizure of their vehicles at a time when the latter had few options for fending for themselves. The ill-timed decision to ban battery-operated rickshaws has thrown 60 lakh families into dire poverty during the pandemic.

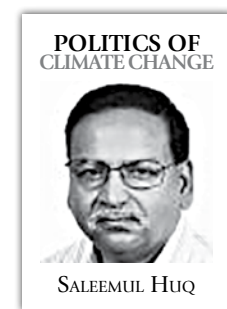
The workers had to bear huge social costs as well. Making up for lost income prompted families to withdraw children from schools and put them to work, swelling the ranks of child workers. Marrying young girls off was another form of coping strategy.

The Nagorik panellists felt that it was time the government accorded due priority to the livelihood and healthcare needs of the workers in its planning process, and framed insurance and other social protection measures. They also demanded that workers are given priority in vaccination and are provided with risk and transport allowances during the pandemic. The need to incorporate workers’ representatives in framing decisions affecting workers was also highlighted.

The Nagorik webinar has shed light on the lived experiences of millions of workers, the principal protagonists of the country’s development, during the pandemic. It is time the policymakers took due note of the flip side of the much-celebrated national development and ensured that all workers enjoy their rights, entitlements and dignity. Moreover, the government’s approach to “life versus livelihood” during the Covid-19 pandemic needs to be changed to “life and livelihood”.

CR Abrar and Anu Muhammad are academics, Barrister Jyotirmoy Barua is an advocate of the Supreme Court of Bangladesh and Rezaur Rahman Lenin is an academic activist.

Young people can be saviours in dealing with climate change



IN just the last few days, there have been two major reports from the United Nations on the status of global climate change and our efforts to tackle it. The first was on the science of climate change impacts by the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) which, in its sixth assessment report, confirmed for the first time that human-induced climate change is now unequivocally an attributable reality all over the world, and that its impacts will get worse unless drastic actions are taken to reduce emissions of greenhouse gases and to keep global temperature below 1.5 degrees Celsius above what it was in the pre-industrial period. The time window for achieving this goal is closing in on us fast, as the global mean temperature has already gone up above one degree Celsius due to human-induced climate change.

The second report was published by the United Nations Children’s Fund (Unicef), which highlighted the fact that over a billion children and youths around the world will be victims of the adverse impacts of climate change if we do not take urgent actions to prevent the worst impacts from occurring. Both the reports contained further information on the basis of region and country. In both cases, the South Asian region stands out as a particularly vulnerable one with nearly one and a half billion people at risk—of whom a very large proportion consists of children and youths.

The Secretary General of the UN, Antonio Guterres, has described these

reports as a “Red Alert” for world leaders to step up their actions to tackle climate change through reducing emissions of greenhouse gases as quickly as possible, to stay below 1.5 degrees Celsius of warming and also to build the adaptive capacity of vulnerable populations in every country.

While these reports have painted a very dire picture of a crisis requiring emergency measures from all countries, there are ways for us to turn this challenge into an opportunity going forward.

The first point to make is that, globally, young people didn’t cause the problem but will be the victims of their parents’ failure to act when they could. This point has been made *ad nauseam* by teen Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg, who started skipping school three years ago every Friday and sitting alone with a placard in front of the Swedish parliament in Stockholm. Since then, millions of schoolchildren have joined her Fridays for Future movement and every Friday, they go on strike in practically every country of the world.

The schoolchildren and youth in the South Asian region have also been quite active in joining this movement, as well as in other initiatives where the young people are being activated to not just protest but to start taking actions themselves.

In Bangladesh, Youth Net is an active part of this global initiative, amongst other youth groups who are becoming more responsive on the issue of tackling climate change.

One such global group is the Youth Adaptation Network (YAN) that was set up by the Global Center on Adaptation (GCA), which has its headquarters in the Netherlands and has a Regional office for South Asia in Dhaka, hosted by the government of Bangladesh. This South Asia regional office has already launched

the YAN chapter in Bangladesh and in other countries of South Asia. The network is very active at the local level in not only raising awareness of adaptation to climate change, but also for taking actions, especially for locally-led adaptation where Bangladesh is an acknowledged world leader.

Thus, as the world is now entering the era of human-induced climate change and also loss and damage from the adverse impacts of climate change, Bangladesh—

effectively to the adverse impacts.

Thus, over a short time, if we invest properly in capacitating our young girls and boys to become adaptation experts, they can not only help their own countries adapt but can also share that knowledge with countries around the world.

This should mean having climate change included in primary and secondary schools’ curricula, and even more rigorously at the university level in all public and private universities in



Globally, young people didn’t cause the problem but will be the victims of their parents’ failure to act when they could.

PHOTO: STAR/PRABIR DAS

and South Asia, as a whole—can become world leaders in promoting actions on adaptation and share that knowledge and experience with the rest of the developing and developed world.

As the impacts of climate change become global and universal and even the richer countries are bound to be affected, they can learn from countries like Bangladesh on how to adapt more

Bangladesh, and in South Asia at large. Gopal Krishna Cokhale’s age-old saying, “What Bengal thinks today India thinks tomorrow,” can thus be modified to “what Bangladesh does today to adapt and build resilience to climate change, the rest of the world will learn and do tomorrow.”

Saleemul Huq is Director of the International Centre for Climate Change and Development at the Independent University, Bangladesh.