

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR  
LATE S. M. ALI

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## Shut down the Gono Rooms

*The authorities must rid our university campuses of this source of toxicity*

We are disappointed to find that although the Dhaka University authorities recently spoke of their decision to get rid of “Gono” Rooms at their dormitories, first-year students have been forced to cram into such rooms after the full reopening of residential halls. Only last month, we expressed our doubt about the university’s ability to end this Gono Room culture, given that these rooms are mostly occupied by former students who are involved with the ruling party’s student wing.

Reports suggest that the authorities had even prepared lists of former students staying in the dorms illegally, and of first- and second-year students to whom these seats would be allotted. While these preparations are commendable, it is apparent that the implementation has been less than desirable. On Sunday night, around 30 to 35 students had to sleep on the floor of each Gono Room, which is supposed to accommodate only eight students. The political use of “guest rooms” has also returned. According to a report in this daily, first-year students were forced to attend gatherings in the guest rooms of certain dormitories on the same night.

University students have been deprived of in-person classes throughout almost the entirety of the Covid-19 pandemic due to fears of the disease spreading. Now that they have finally returned to their campuses, it is extremely troubling that they are being forced together into spaces where physical distancing is impossible—that, too, because of political reasons, rather than an accommodation crisis. The repercussions of such actions could be serious, at a time when the Covid-19 situation finally seems under control in the country.

Prior to the pandemic, the dormitories did not allot seats to first-year students, who had to seek the patronage of Chhatra League men to cram into Gono Rooms in exchange for attending political processions and meetings. This highly toxic practice has been criticised by the prime minister herself, according to the DU vice-chancellor, who sought help from all students to end this culture. However, the cooperation he has asked for must come, first and foremost, from Chhatra League. Although the DU Chhatra League general secretary seemed to agree on the importance of physical distancing, his outright denial of all other allegations against the organisation is not conducive for change.

We urge the ruling party to investigate this matter, and rein in its student wing and their political influence over university campuses. The university students urgently need a safe and enabling environment to recover from learning losses. Campuses that are occupied by former students, and where rules do not seem to apply to certain sections of its inhabitants, will only hamper their progress.

### LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

#### I, too, have a dream

MUDASSIR HOSSAIN KHAN, Bir Protik

I am no Martin Luther King Jr, but I, too, have a dream.

I strongly believe that a peaceful world is not an illusion or absurdity, but an achievable reality—albeit a complex and difficult task. What is needed is a change by leaders in every field, all across the planet. The onslaught of Covid-19 has exposed the futilities of mammoth war machines that only help generate rivalries and hatred, offering no solution to basic human needs, while at the same time demonstrating the immense benefits that can be accrued through cooperation, friendship, and fraternity, needing only a microscopic portion of the amount spent on the killing machines.

The pandemic has also proven, beyond doubt, the indispensability of interdependence, irrespective of the power and wealth of an individual or a nation. While the weak need the help of the rich and powerful in uplifting their conditions, the latter also need the support of the former in maintaining their economic prosperity. My question to both sides is: Why do you have to resort to conflict and hostilities to realise your objectives? Why can’t we achieve our goals peacefully, through dialogues, negotiations, and compromise?

Wouldn’t it be worthwhile to make an honest and united effort to strive for peace? What good is it to speak of peace, when the world gets pushed towards inescapable destruction, and we run the risk of destroying our own species?

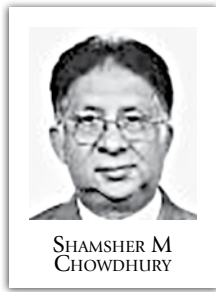
It is my view that we can organise movements for peace with passion and love at every level: individual, family, community, national, and international. Let’s dedicate more time, effort, and resources to restore peace. It’s not reasonable to conclude that we cannot secure peace when the whole of mankind wants it deep in heart.

True, the world has witnessed devastation caused by monsters in the garb of humans, like Genghis Khan, Hitler, Mussolini, and, of course, the brutal colonial powers. But we have also been blessed with a greater number of saintly and benevolent souls, like Prophet Muhammad, Mahatma Gandhi, Mother Teresa, and Nelson Mandela.

I am making a fervent appeal to people all over the world, especially world leaders, to come forward and say “No” to hatred, violence, genocide, and war, and say “Yes” to harmony, conciliation, love, and peace. Let us work together for freedom and peace as we can never separate peace from freedom.

I conclude with a quote by one of the greatest minds the world has ever seen, Albert Einstein: “The world is a dangerous place to live, not because of some people who are evil, but because of people who don’t do anything about it.” With due respect to Einstein, it’s time we proved him wrong.

# For Rohingyas, Bhashan Char is a chance at a better life



SHAMSHEER M CHOWDHURY

latter’s willingness to help in the ongoing relocation of Rohingyas to Bhashan Char, is welcome news—albeit a couple of years delayed.

For more than two years, the Bangladesh government, wisely, has been talking about relocating the Rohingyas—at least a segment of them—from the

THE recent signing of an MOU between the Bangladesh government and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), affirming the

put the necessary infrastructure in place, which included constructing houses of better quality, putting healthcare facilities in place, ensuring their safety and security, possibilities for generating economic activities, and even education facilities. The process was meant to be temporary, while all efforts at ensuring the Rohingyas’ safe and dignified return to Myanmar would continue.

In the last year or so, a few thousands of Rohingyas have already been relocated to Bhashan Char, with a larger number of them waiting to make the move. It is expected that over the next six months, a total of 100,000 Rohingyas would be relocated to Bhashan Char from the camps in Cox’s Bazar. The island can house up to a million people, with space to spare.

By and large, the Rohingyas have

the Naf River to Bangladesh, after being driven away from his ancestral home in Myanmar’s Rakhine state as a part of the well-planned and brutally executed ethnic cleansing by the Myanmar military, backed by a willing Aung San Suu Kyi.

By any measure, this was a well-thought-out move by the Bangladesh government, and executed with precision and utmost care. There was hardly anything wrong either with the concept or with its implementation. The process was also fully transparent.

But for reasons still not clear, sections of the international community, mostly our Western friends, and the United Nations, especially the UNHCR, were not in full accord with this move. Their initial reluctance was ostensibly driven by concerns about the severe vulnerability

Zealand, have become a regular feature in the international news media.

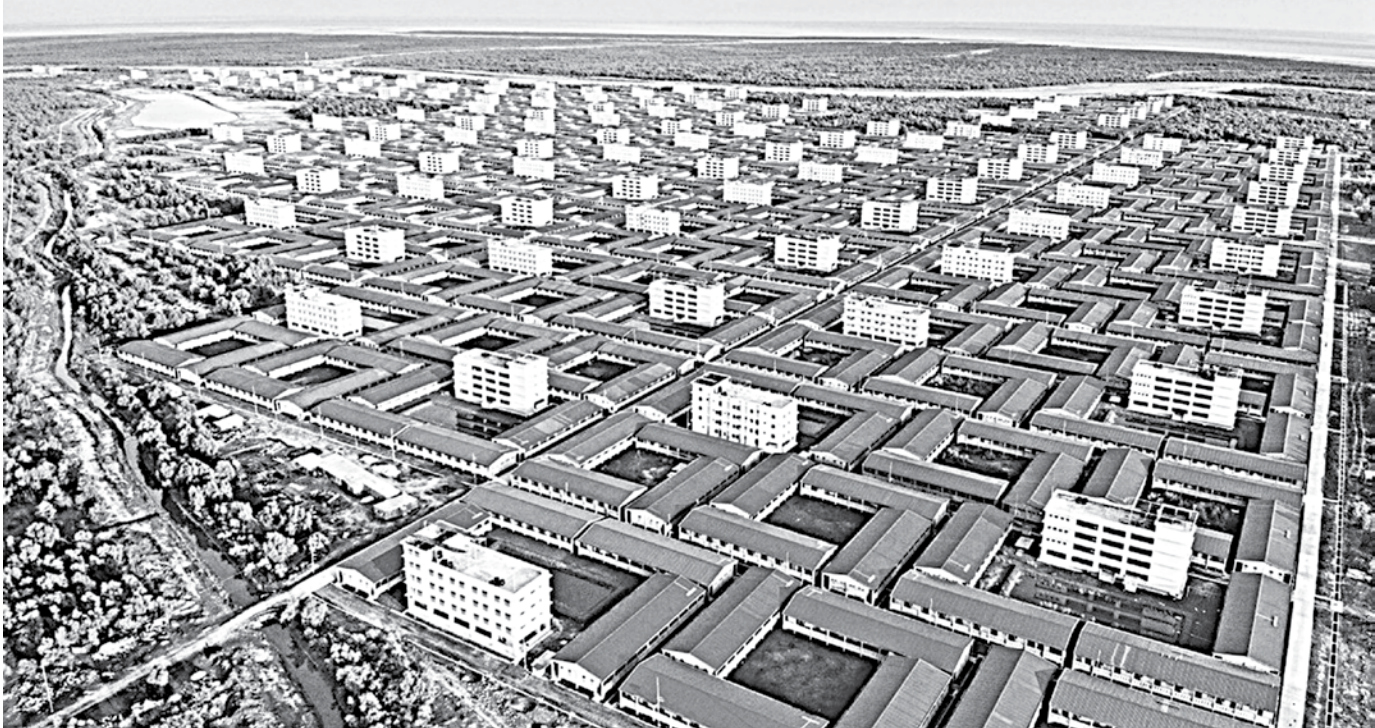
One of the main contentions of the international community was that there should be an “inspection” visit to Bhashan Char by them before the relocation process began, when there has hardly been any independent inspection by the international community in Rakhine, the origin of the horrible crimes committed against the Rohingyas—the request of such visits categorically ignored by the Myanmar authorities. While the global community warmly appreciated the Bangladesh government for receiving and providing shelter to a community fleeing persecution at home, they were hesitant to appreciate that the government was now ensuring a better quality of life for the victims of this state-sponsored persecution.

In the face of this unhelpful stand of the international community, Bangladesh stood firm on its decision to go ahead with the process of relocation, while at the same time pursuing all avenues to get the repatriation process started. Sadly, no progress has been made as yet in the issue of repatriation. The global community, on the other hand, has failed to exert even an iota of pressure on Myanmar for the rightful repatriation of the Rohingyas. The key countries in the region with deep ties to Myanmar have similarly come up short in doing anything tangible that could have facilitated the repatriation process, perceptively putting their geo-strategic and geo-economic interests ahead of humanitarian concerns.

The latest change of heart of the international community, however belated, has come with their eventual acceptance of the reality that the living conditions in Bhashan Char are better than the inhospitable ones in Teknaf and Kutupalong by a country mile, if not more. This also reflects their acceptance that for the moment, this is the best option. Most importantly, the Rohingyas have warmly welcomed this development.

One hopes that the commitment of help for the Rohingyas from the UN and others will be substantial in form and a sustained one in execution, and will be accompanied by effective steps to facilitate their eventual repatriation to Myanmar. Credit goes to the Bangladesh government for demonstrating resolve on a decision that was right, humane and pragmatic. In short, it was a diplomatic triumph and a recognition of a humanitarian step.

Shamsheer M Chowdhury, Bir Bikram, is a former foreign secretary of Bangladesh.



Bhashan Char provides a better quality of life than what the Rohingyas have at the refugee camps in Cox’s Bazar.

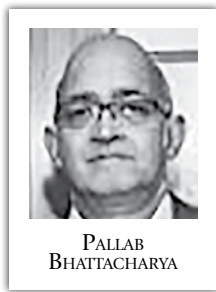
FILE PHOTO: STAR

squalid, unhygienic, unsafe, and severely overpopulated camps located in Cox’s Bazar’s Teknaf and Kutupalong areas, to the much healthier and habitable island of Bhashan Char. The aim was to ensure a better quality of life for this group of people, who are victims of mass persecution and ethnic cleansing in their own homeland—Myanmar. It took a while for the Bangladesh government to

been happy with the relocation. In fact, they welcomed it. The most graphic and enduring image of this was that of a young happy Rohingya man on board a Bangladeshi naval vessel, strumming on a guitar-like musical instrument while the boat sailed through the Bay of Bengal towards Bhashan Char. This scene was in sharp contrast to the one he had faced when making the perilous crossing of

of Bhashan Char to climate threats like cyclones, storm surges, high tides, and the like. What they ought to have recognised was that most of the coastal belt of Bangladesh, like any other part of the world, is under constant threat of Mother Nature. Harrowing scenes of the severe impact of climate change and global warming, from the United States and Canada down to Australia and New

## Can the regional be the national in Indian politics?



PALLAB BHATTACHARYA

Mamata Banerjee-led Trinamool Congress (TMC) and Arvind Kejriwal-led Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) trying to expand their footprints beyond West Bengal and Delhi, respectively, and go national. The trend is nothing new, and just a rerun of the past when these two parties had unsuccessfully sought to shed their tag of being regional and aspire for a national status that requires a certain percentage of votes.

While TMC is hoping to expand their footprints in Uttar Pradesh, Tripura, Assam, Goa, and Gujarat, AAP is looking to go beyond their stronghold of Delhi and make its presence felt in Punjab, Uttarakhand, Uttar Pradesh, and Gujarat. But why are these two parties spreading their wings beyond the borders of their established spheres of influence? Unlike many other regional satraps of Indian politics, Mamata and Kejriwal nurture the ambition of seeing TMC and AAP achieving the tag of national parties and play a much larger role nationally. And they are not the ones to give up that ambition based on their past failures in those states.

To be recognised as a national party with its own election symbol, a party must have at least two percent representation in the 545-member Lok Sabha from four states, and have six percent of valid votes polled in state legislative assembly or Lok Sabha elections in at least four states. The assessment in TMC and AAP is that the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), ruling India since May 2014, is facing the heat of anti-incumbency in the run-up to 2024 general elections, and the Congress is struggling with top leadership, in-house chummings, and a shrinking electoral presence in several states.

This, according to Mamata and Kejriwal, provides regional parties a chance to gain by projecting themselves as a credible third alternative to the two national parties in other states. As part of Mamata’s efforts to build a pan-India image for herself, she pointed out soon after her

victory by a record margin in the by-poll in Bhabanipur assembly constituency in Kolkata on October 3 that she won from a constituency that comprises 46 percent of non-Bangalee population. With an eye beyond the borders of West Bengal, Mamata’s intended message is that she is popular not just among Bangalees, but also among other linguistic communities. In the state assembly elections earlier this year, her main plank was Bangalee sub-nationalism. Politics is the art of changing track without being bluntly upfront about it.

How is the TMC going about venturing into other states? An array of TMC leaders, including Mamata’s nephew Abhishek Banerjee, has made several trips to Tripura

by luring away leaders from established parties there, instead of going for the time-consuming exercise of building their own party apparatus from scratch, which requires considerable political and economic capital. Ironically, TMC had accused BJP of engineering defections in its fold in the run-up to 2019 Lok Sabha elections—when Mukul Roy joined BJP, although he is now back in the TMC—and the West Bengal assembly elections earlier this year, with hordes of leaders from Mamata’s party switching to the saffron party.

In recent months, TMC succeeded in not only getting back its leaders who had joined BJP in West Bengal, but also snapping up BJP’s former lawmaker



Mamata Banerjee’s Trinamool Congress is looking to go national.

FILE PHOTO: REUTERS

where fresh assembly polls are due in 2023. The ruling BJP is facing internal dissidence in Tripura, with a section of the party seeking to remove Chief Minister Biplab Kumar Deb.

TMC and AAP have chosen the path of inorganic growth (model usually followed by big corporate houses) in other states by going for acquisition of the ranks and files of established parties there. While in Tripura, TMC has roped in dissident leaders from BJP, Congress and the Communist Party of India (Marxist), AAP too plans to feast on the sulking leaders of other parties in Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Punjab, and Gujarat.

The two parties have opted for the easiest route for growth in other states

from Asansol, Babul Supriyo, and senior Congress leaders Sushmita Dev from Assam and former Goa Chief Minister Luizinho Faleiro. These acquisitions from other parties are aimed at showcasing the regional parties’ appeal as viable alternatives to the national parties. But it is questionable whether such import of disgruntled leaders of other parties pays off in the long run and can be an effective substitute for the organic growth of a party from grassroots over the years. There cannot be any short-cut for political success. No one should know it better than the TMC, which found out how almost all of its leaders who went over to the BJP in the run-up to the assembly polls in West Bengal earlier this year faltered in the

elections and are returning to the parent party.

For instance, Congress has been reduced to a negligible force in Tripura and Goa, and its leaders have not been able to stem the party’s decline. Take, for example, the situation in Goa. Despite emerging as the single largest party in the previous assembly poll with 17 legislators, Congress today finds itself reduced to just four in the 40-member assembly, where BJP got majority by poaching Congress’ and other parties’ lawmakers. So, how can leaders of the same party be of any help to an aspiring regional outfit like the TMC or the AAP trying to find their feet in an uncharted terrain? Besides, it is being asked if the TMC and the AAP could end up fighting with each other in Goa and cause a split in anti-BJP votes, and in the event of that, if the saffron party would stand to gain. In 2012, TMC had tested the political waters in Goa by contesting 20 seats under the leadership of former Goa Chief Minister Wilfred de Souza of Congress. However, Mamata’s party drew a blank in terms of seats and managed just two percent of the total votes. Another Congress veteran in Goa, Churchill Alemao, had unsuccessfully contested South Goa Lok Sabha seat in 2014 as a TMC candidate.

Regional parties’ wanting to become national players must take into account the reality that the established national parties would not easily cede space and would rather throw everything into protecting it.

Only time will tell whether or how far the regional parties’ strategy pays off politically. One thing it has ensured is that it has dealt a major blow to the talks of opposition unity as Congress and TMC are embroiled in a spat. Ironically, the Twitter spat came after the in-person meeting between Sonia Gandhi and Mamata in New Delhi on July 28, apparently to discuss a possible joint strategy for the next national polls.

While TMC has been favouring the presence of Congress in a broader opposition unity against BJP, the Mamata-led party has rightly pointed to the fact that Sonia-led Congress is in the opposition camp in a number of states like West Bengal, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Odisha, and Delhi, where regional parties are in power at the expense of the grand old party. Clearly, an over-arching opposition unity across India is easier talked about than done.

Pallab Bhattacharya is a special correspondent for The Daily Star. He writes from New Delhi, India.