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Crime, tensions in Rohingya camps only soaring

Govt's response must be tactical and well-thought-out

THE killings of six Rohingyas in Moinarghona camp-18 madrasa in Cox's Bazar's Ukhiya upazila in the dead of Friday night has added to our concerns over the safety of the refugees within the camps. After the brutal assassination of Mohib Ullah—a Rohingya refugee leader and a spokesperson for the dignified repatriation of his people—last month, the lack of security and the prevalence of threat from various armed groups within the camps caught the light of day.

Though locals largely believe that members of the Arakan Rohingya Solidarity Army (ARSA), an insurgent group based in the northern Rakhine state of Myanmar, are behind the recent attacks, this cannot be confirmed until there is thorough investigation by law enforcement authorities. But what this attack does reveal is the failure of security forces within the camps to maintain safety and peace for the refugees. A report by this daily quotes an unnamed police official saying that at least 50 criminals stormed the madrasa carrying sharp weapons and firearms. Subsequently, six people were killed and eight others injured, with the attackers even opening fire at one point before leaving in small groups prior to police's arrival. Given that there are only three armed police battalions enforcing law and order in the camps housing over 10 lakh refugees, it is no wonder that such a catastrophe took place.

But such attacks will only go on if immediate measures are not taken by authorities to give Rohingya refugees the sense of security they need. The foreign minister's suggestion for law enforcers to "open fire, if necessary" is not going to solve the problem and bring down tensions. There is a serious need to amp up security forces, in numbers and capabilities, and to identify groups within the camps who wish to cause such unrest. We would also urge the government to not only improve camp security, but to also protect and engage with Rohingya leaders—starting with those who sought protection after the killing of Mohib Ullah. Reducing hostility from armed groups must go hand-in-hand with reassuring Rohingya refugees so they can regain their sense of safety and community in the camps until repatriation is achieved.

Resumption of regular flights at HSIA encouraging

Aviation sector needs govt's policy support to fully recover

IT is reassuring to learn that our aviation sector is recovering at a quick speed after the second wave of Covid-19 in the country waned and many countries lifted their travel restrictions. According to a report by this daily yesterday, flight operations and the number of passengers flying from Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport (HSIA) have almost tripled in the last three months. While only a handful of special, chartered and cargo flights took off from the HSIA during the past one and a half years of the pandemic, 80 flights are currently being operated from the airport daily. And, while the number of passengers flying from HSIA ranged between 3,500 and 4,000 three months ago, around 10,000 passengers are flying from the airport every day now.

According to the Civil Aviation Authority of Bangladesh (CAAB), almost all the domestic flights as well as all 28 foreign airlines have resumed flight operations to and from Bangladesh recently. This is particularly good news for our migrant workers who have been stuck in the country for more than a year. They can now return to their workplaces. In addition, the Bangladeshi students who have been waiting to pursue higher education abroad can now fly to their desired countries.

As our aviation sector is now on track to recover from the pandemic-induced losses, we think there are some measures that need to be taken by the airlines, the HSIA authorities, as well as by the government to make the recovery process easy and efficient. For instance, the government should give policy assistance and financial support to our local airlines as they incurred huge losses during the time of restricted travel. Reportedly, the three prominent local airlines of the country suffered a revenue loss of Tk 2,250 crore during this time—among them, Biman Bangladesh Airlines alone suffered a loss of Tk 1,300 crore. Reportedly, several aircrafts bought by Biman authorities are lying idle at present, which should be fully utilised.

As for the HSIA authorities, they must do more to reduce the sufferings of inbound and outbound passengers at the airport, by upgrading their facilities up to international levels. They must ensure that our migrant workers do not have to go through unnecessary hassles as they need to get tested for Covid-19 in the airport and get results at least six hours before boarding international flights.

In addition, as the flight operations and the number of passengers flying from the airport rapidly increase, the authorities must make sure that all passengers and employees of the airport and airlines strictly follow the Covid-19 health guidelines to avoid any risk of contracting the disease.

Proposed revisions in the EU-GSP scheme: Implications for Bangladesh

MUSTAFIZUR RAHMAN

AS is known, the current provisions of the EU's Generalised System of preferences (EU-GSP) scheme are being revised at present in anticipation of the new scheme to be put in place as of January 1, 2024. When finalised, the scheme will be effective for the next 10 years (2024-2034). Bangladesh has a keen interest in the proposed provisions as it is a major beneficiary of the scheme and has reaped significant benefits in the form of enhanced competitive strength in the EU market and the consequent higher export earnings. The proposals which have been submitted to the EU parliament for discussion, finalisation and decision, will have important implications for Bangladesh also in view of the country's graduation from the LDC group in 2026.

The EU-GSP scheme has three components: the standard GSP scheme for developing countries, the everything but arms (EBA) scheme for the least developed countries (LDCs) and the GSP+ scheme for selected (non-LDC) developing countries. The EBA provides duty-free, quota-free market access for products originating from the LDCs under flexible rules of origin. For example, average import duties on apparels in the EU is 12 percent. An importing EU brand/buyer sourcing ready-made garments from an LDC such as Bangladesh does not have to pay any import duty. This is the case even when the garment has been produced by the LDC producer from imported fabrics since the EBA rules of origin allows one stage conversion for apparels. Exports under the EBA provides Bangladesh's RMG exporters significant competitive edge over other countries which do not enjoy market access under the EBA. The standard GSP scheme provides preferential market access to (non-LDC) developing countries, in the form of duty-free or reduced duties, for 66 percent of tariff lines (of which 26 percent are duty-free, and 40 percent enjoy reduced duty market access). Also to note, the rules of origin (RoO) are more stringent for the standard GSP compared to that for the EBA (e.g., for apparels, the RoO requirement involves two-stage conversion: yarn to fabrics to readymade garmenting). The GSP+ is a special scheme for certain (non-LDC) developing countries as part of which all items in the list of the standard GSP scheme enjoy duty-free market access (e.g., instead of 15 percent duty exemption for apparels allowed under the standard GSP scheme, the GSP+ scheme allows 100 percent duty-free access to the EU market for this item).

As is the case, the EU allows the graduating LDCs an additional three years to enjoy the EBA benefits following the graduation (e.g., for Bangladesh, preferential market access under the EBA will be available till 2029). The new proposals are of relevance to Bangladesh also because it will be in its interest to try to get into the GSP+ scheme on expiry of the EBA.

As of now, all 46 LDCs enjoy the benefits of the EBA scheme; 11 developing countries enjoy the standard GSP and nine developing countries are beneficiaries of the GSP+ scheme. The magnitude of benefits originating from EU's GSP schemes may be understood from the fact that, in 2019, total imports under the three EU-GSP amounted to about 62.0 billion Euros, equivalent to 39 percent of all imports from the GSP beneficiary countries. The amount of imports to the EU under the EBA in 2019 was 25.2 billion Euros (rising from 17.1 billion Euros in 2014), with Bangladesh having by far the largest share in this.

The proposals which have been submitted to the EU parliament for discussion, finalisation and decision, will have important implications for Bangladesh. PHOTO: RAJIB RAIHAN

The draft GSP regulations presented to the EU parliament has proposed a number of changes which Bangladesh will need to take into cognisance and study closely.

Firstly, the provisions reemphasise that the EU GSP preferences are extended to countries that "respect international standard and principles related to human rights, including labour rights, as well as environmental protection and good governance". The number of international conventions, on which the GSP sustainable development principles are founded, has been further strengthened with six additional international instruments: (a) the Paris Agreement on Climate Change (replacing the Kyoto Protocol); (b) the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD); (c) The Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict (OP-CRC-AC); (d) ILO Convention No. 81 on Labour Inspection; and (e) ILO Convention No. 144 on Tripartite Consultation and (f) The UN Convention against Transnational Organised Crime.

The implication of the proposals is that Bangladesh will not only need to ratify all the 32 international conventions and agreements, it will also be expected to take concrete steps to ensure their compliance in order to enjoy GSP benefits. Since Bangladesh will be eligible and interested to be considered for GSP+, on expiry of the EBA, work on fuller compliance assurance must be given due importance by Bangladesh, beginning from now. EU has also indicated that it will further strengthen monitoring of implementation of the proposed regulations.

Secondly, in a welcome move, the new GSP proposal removes the import share criterion from the GSP+ eligibility (previously this was set at 7.4 percent of the average import for three recent past years which implied that any country whose share was more than 7.4 percent of EU imports from GSP beneficiary countries would not be eligible for GSP+). The new GSP proposal is thus geared to ensure smooth transition from the EBA to the GSP+ status. This will be of significant benefit to the increasingly large group of graduating LDCs. The new provisions envisage that a well-defined framework will be put in place to allow current GSP+ beneficiaries adjust their policies to the new requirements, offering a transition period and requiring articulation of implementation plan. Removal of the ceiling has important implications for Bangladesh as it would not have been eligible for the GSP+ programme had the ceiling been there. Indeed, in the submissions made by the concerned GoB bodies, the Bangladesh mission in Brussels as also civil society organisations such as Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD), arguments for removal of the threshold was put forward most strongly. On the other hand, the new provisions foresee a faster institutional process as regards GSP withdrawal procedure. This is indicative of more stringent monitoring of the state of compliances by the EU.

Thirdly, according to the new regulations, a product can lose tariff preference if the import value of GSP eligible items exceeds the threshold of 47 percent (as share of import value of items in relevant section) instead of existing 57 percent (for textiles the corresponding shares are 37 percent and 47 percent, respectively). This lowering of ceilings for GSP eligibility by 10 percentage points is not relevant for the EBA or GSP+ scheme, but could become a constraining factor for purposes of eligibility for standard GSP scheme. Bangladesh will need to take note of this and strive to ensure export diversification in the EU market.

From the perspective of preparing for the new GSP regime, following LDC graduation (plus three additional years' of EBA eligibility), Bangladesh will need to undertake the needed policy reforms and build institutional capacities to ensure better economic governance, and strengthen enforcement mechanisms to secure human rights and rights of labour. Work towards better compliance with various international conventions must be strengthened further. Bangladesh should ratify the convention on minimum age for work as early as possible, amend the labour laws, strengthen labour inspection and improve environment friendliness of production processes (e.g., in the leather sector).

Not only ratification of the 32 conventions and agreements, but proper enforcement of those will be important in view of the above. However, improved economic governance, and ensuring labour rights, child rights, rights of people with disability and human rights, as also promoting green growth and environmental sustainability, should demand priority attention not just because these will be monitored strictly for GSP eligibility under the newly proposed regulations, but also because these are in alignment with Bangladesh's aspiration to be an economically developed, socially inclusive and environmentally sustainable country, as has been articulated in the Bangladesh Vision 2041.

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PROJECT SYNDICATE

Ending Hunger Sustainably

MAXIMO TORERO

IN 2015, 193 countries gathered at the United Nations and pledged to end global hunger by 2030 as part of the Agenda for Sustainable Development. With less than a decade to go, prospects for achieving this goal appear bleak. Improving them will require governments and the private sector to address the global food and environmental crises simultaneously.

Food insecurity has increased in recent years as a result of conflicts and climate change, as well as the Covid-19 pandemic and the accompanying global economic crisis. Today, up to 811 million people suffer from hunger, including 132 million additional people who were classified as undernourished during the pandemic. Another three billion people are too poor to afford a healthy diet.

Efforts to fight hunger have traditionally focused on producing more food—but this has come at a high environmental cost. Agriculture depletes 70 percent of the world's fresh water and 40 percent of its land. It has contributed to the near-extinction of around one million species. Food production generates 30 percent of global greenhouse-gas (GHG) emissions and is the leading cause of deforestation in the Amazon.

Policymakers seeking to eradicate hunger today thus face a difficult dilemma: preventing billions from going hungry while also saving the planet. For example, a fertiliser subsidy could boost crop yields and reduce hunger, but it could also lead to excessive nitrogen use, thus ruining the soil.

Similarly, cattle and rice farms emit methane, a more potent GHG than carbon dioxide. The most effective way to reduce methane emissions is to tax them. But this would cause food prices to rise, affect poor consumers' access to nutrition, and threaten the livelihoods of farmers and ranchers.

Countries must therefore establish an optimal level of environmental pollution that doesn't reduce agricultural productivity or undermine the social and economic well-being of the poor. We need a solution that feeds the most mouths without endangering the planet.

Finding a workable plan requires looking at food systems holistically—a major departure from the current siloed approach. To avoid unintended consequences, it is essential to quantify any trade-offs with data. And to turn data-driven strategies into action demands a coordinated effort to boost public and private investments.

A farmer examines rice in a paddy field near a farmhouse in Dhaka. PHOTO: REUTERS

No one intervention alone can solve the hunger problem. But studies suggest that a mix of key measures aimed at increasing farm productivity and cutting food loss and waste could reduce the number of chronically hungry people by 314 million in the next decade, and also make healthy diets available for 568 million people. Expanding countries' national safety nets, including school-feeding programmes, could give an additional 2.4 billion people access to a healthy diet by 2030.

Another study shows how a series of low-cost initiatives can end hunger for 500 million people by 2030 while also limiting agricultural GHG emissions in line with the goals of the 2015 Paris climate agreement. These initiatives include agricultural research and development to produce food more efficiently, information services that provide farmers with weather forecasts and crop prices, literacy programmes for women—who account for almost half of small farmers in developing countries—and scaling up social protection. This can be accomplished if rich countries double their food-security aid to USD 26 billion per year until 2030, and poorer countries maintain their annual investment of USD 19 billion.

Automation can help to manage the trade-offs between food production and environmental protection. For example, "AgBots" that resemble small farm vehicles can identify and remove weeds. Because they don't use expensive chemical herbicides, robots can reduce the cost of weeding by 90 percent and protect the soil from potentially harmful chemicals. Likewise, artificial intelligence and cloud solutions can detect pest-infested areas using drone imaging. The data collected can help to guide farmers' irrigation, planting, and fertilisation decisions, and indicate the best time of the year to sell a given crop.

Governments must now work with the private sector to make these high-tech, precision-farming systems available at lower costs, especially for small farmers. The good news is that private firms are increasingly keen to promote sustainability—including through "blended finance" schemes, which combine an initial investment from governments or multilateral financial institutions with subsequent commercial financing. This kind of approach can effectively de-risk private finance and encourage investment in improving food systems.

For example, the US and Dutch governments have been working with the German coffee company Neumann Kaffee Gruppe and three European banks to provide a USD 25 million loan to small farmers in Colombia, Kenya, Honduras, India, Indonesia, Mexico, Peru, and Uganda for sustainable coffee production. The banks initially rejected the proposal because small farmers are usually shut out of financial services and thus unable to prove their creditworthiness, making them a high-risk group for commercial lenders. But the banks signed on to the scheme after the Dutch government and Neumann Kaffee Gruppe agreed to cover the first 10 percent of losses should it not pan out, with the US government absorbing 40 percent of the remaining losses.

Detractors will argue that individual countries should be responsible for reversing the trend of rising hunger through domestic policies. While this may be true, other problems such as GHG emissions cannot be tackled by a country or a region on its own, and must be addressed and funded globally.

Saving the planet does not have to come at the expense of feeding the poor, and vice versa. If governments get their act together, it's still not too late to wipe out hunger by 2030.

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