

Let the world share our burden

Strong message from the UN on Rohingya crisis

THE United Nations special rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar, Tom Andrews, has categorically said that Bangladesh cannot and should not carry the burden of Rohingya refugees alone. Rather, he called for the world community to share the huge responsibility, taking into cognisance the ground reality that the Bangladesh government needs and deserves a stronger international partnership in handling the situation. We feel that he could not have been more discerning when commenting that a stronger commitment of resources is required for the Rohingya refugees and the host communities.

There is no denying that the sooner the world realises that the cause of this crisis and its solution are not in Bangladesh but in Myanmar, the easier it would be to act in the right direction. Bangladesh has done its parts; now it's the world's turn to reciprocate. We are happy to note that the UN special rapporteur has seen the contribution of Bangladesh in this regard, and acknowledged it in the following words, "Bangladesh saved untold numbers of lives when it opened its arms and hearts to (the) Rohingya people who survived these most unspeakable horrors inflicted on them by the Myanmar military. All who value human rights owe Bangladesh a debt of gratitude."

Since the day Bangladesh opened its borders to the Rohingyas, who are genuine nationals of Myanmar fleeing from the genocide launched by its military, police and armed goons, more than 700,000 of them took shelter on Bangladesh's soil. The immediate burden of providing a roof over their head, food and water fell on Bangladesh's shoulders. The government and the people welcomed these unfortunate people with open arms completely on humanitarian grounds. The Bangladesh government started to address the issue through all available diplomatic channels, including keeping the UN updated on a day-to-day basis. But the Myanmar government remained incommunicado almost on every occasion.

As the refugee camps in Cox's Bazar and the surrounding areas became overcrowded with the burgeoning Rohingya population, which began to threaten our environment and law and order situation, the Bangladesh government built shelter homes in Bhashan Char, where about 19,000 refugees have been relocated so far.

Following his visit to the island, the UN emissary expressed his satisfaction at what he saw there and said that he would continue to work with Bangladesh on this major issue. He, however, urged the Bangladesh government to ensure availability of essential services at the new location before relocating more refugees. He welcomed the commitments made in the memorandum of understanding (MoU) between the Bangladesh government and the UN, and urged that they be put into practice.

It is good news that the UN special rapporteur said, before his departure on Sunday, that he would act to push for a stronger, more coordinated international response to this crisis, including exerting pressure on Myanmar and to hold the military junta fully accountable for this crisis. It is also significant that he put emphasis on the safe, sustainable and voluntary return of the Rohingyas to their homeland in Myanmar.

Farmers burdened with high fertiliser prices

Any disruption in the supply chain alongside artificial crisis must be checked

IT is most unfortunate that farmers across Bangladesh are being charged exorbitantly for fertilisers by the dealers and retailers, despite the government's claim that there is no crisis of fertilisers in the country. According to a report in this daily on December 19, while a 50kg sack of Triple Super Phosphate (TSP) should sell for Tk 1,100, Diammonium Phosphate (DAP) for Tk 800, and Muriate of Potash (MOP) for Tk 750, as per the government fixed rates, these fertilisers are currently being sold at much higher prices: TSP at Tk 1,400-1,700, DAP at Tk 950-1,050, and MOP at Tk 950-1,000. Only urea, the most widely used fertiliser, is being sold at the government-fixed rate: Tk 800.

While the government keeps saying that there are enough stocks of all these fertilisers in the country, and that a section of unscrupulous dealers and retailers are charging extra citing hiked prices in the international market, the dealers are saying otherwise—that the government's allotments are not enough to meet the local demand, so they have had to import the fertilisers at higher prices.

The authorities may be correct in saying that there are sufficient supplies of fertilisers, but it is also true that farmers are not being able to buy them at the proper rates. And in many cases, there are no supplies in the local markets. According to our report, a farmer in Dinajpur Sadar's Gopalganj Hat area went to the market to buy MOP two weeks ago, but could not due to its unavailability. Clearly, there is a serious lack of market monitoring by the authorities concerned.

In order to ensure a stable supply of fertilisers in the local markets, and to stop unscrupulous businessmen from cashing in on the situation, the authorities must have a strong mechanism to monitor the situation on the ground. Only claiming to have enough supplies will not help the farmers in any way. They are already burdened with high production costs following the fuel price hikes, and the high prices of fertilisers are just too much for them to bear. While regular mobile court drives may be helpful in checking any malpractices by fertiliser dealers and retailers, the authorities must also make sure that the supply chain is not disrupted in any way, which might create a crisis in the market.

Misleading analysis of US sanctions must be avoided



KAMAL AHMED

BANGLADESH'S elite law enforcement force, the Rapid Action Battalion (Rab), which has been subjected to a sanction by the US, has now been applauded by the same government

for its role in tackling terrorism, according to some media reports. The 2020 Country Reports on Terrorism, published by the US Department of State on December 16, 2021, which gives an overview of global counterterrorism environment, has reportedly praised Rab for its success in cutting down terror acts in Bangladesh. Some of these Bangladeshi media outlets have also quoted at least two noted experts on international relations saying that this praise proved that the sanctions were not a well-thought-out action, and could have been the result of intense lobbying by some anti-Bangladeshi elements. They argued that these contradictory acts were indicative of a lack of coordination

the Rapid Action Battalion established 'deradicalisation and rehabilitation programmes,' in addition to conducting community policing efforts and investigations and arrests of suspected FTFs." Clearly, this description neither praises nor criticises the Counter-Terrorism and Transnational Crimes unit (CITTCU) of police and Rab.

Before going into continental and country-specific reports in a brief note, under the subhead "The Human Rights Report," it suggests that alleged human rights abuses by security forces may have acted as impediments to counter-terrorism programmes. It says, "In the countries listed below, significant human rights issues influenced the state of terrorist activity in the country and may have impeded effective counterterrorism policies and programmes or supported causes and conditions for further violence. Such human rights issues included, among others, unlawful and arbitrary killings, including extrajudicial killings, forced disappearances, torture, and arbitrary detention (all of the preceding by both government and non-state actors); harsh and life-threatening prison conditions;

and Yemen.

When the government seems serious about assessing the likely impacts of the US sanctions and considering possible ways out of any adversarial impact, this kind of misleading analysis may prove harmful. The statements issued by two associations of cadre and non-cadre police officers seem quite strange as well, as they spoke about only the seven officials against whom individual sanctions have been slapped, but they

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One needs to be cautious about interpreting the small print of US sanction documents.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

within the US Department of State. If the latter report is correct, then there's every reason to thank those experts for the correct interpretation of these discrepancies in the US policy on Bangladesh. But, what about getting it wrong, and as a result misleading the nation and the government?

Hearing one of those experts—a professor in the country's top university—I went through the report again and found only one reference of Rab in the whole report, which says, "Throughout 2020, the CITTCU and

violence against and unjustified arrests of journalists; substantial interference with the rights to peaceful assembly and freedom of association; widespread and pervasive corruption; repression of religious freedom and violence against religious minorities; and forced and bonded labour." The countries listed in the report are: Afghanistan, Algeria, Bahrain, Bangladesh, Egypt, India, Iraq, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kenya, Kyrgyz Republic, Lebanon, Libya, Maldives, Pakistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Sri Lanka, Syria, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan,

remained silent about the sanctions against Rab. The sanctions against those seven individuals, however, were due to their role in Rab. Collective punishment of a whole unit of a country's security forces is quite rare and, therefore, perhaps has greater significance than any individual or individuals.

In the past, sanctions—either economic or military—were used against a regime and a country. But such sanctions have proven to be less effective without a consensus among major powers and getting the maximum number of countries on board. And in many cases, such sanctions also proved counterproductive as the politicians of those countries subjected to sanctions could rally their population, alleging such punitive actions as collective punishment of a nation, and that victimhood made sustaining such sanctions difficult. Hence, came the tool called Smart Sanctions that are targeted to specific persons and entities, and the Global Magnitsky Act has become the most effective tool for the Western democracies. After the US, Canada and the UK have enacted their own Magnitsky acts; a similar legislation is currently being considered by the European Parliament.

The US sanctions have two components: a) Travel ban by the Department of State; and b) the Department of the Treasury ban involving freezing of assets and restricting all kinds of transactions with the subject(s) of the ban. In this context, the gravity of the sanctions against Rab could not be

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The WHO's penny-wise and health-foolish members

MARIANA MAZZUCATO and ILONA KICKBUSCH

IT beggars belief, but it's true: In the midst of the Covid-19 crisis, the member states of the World Health Organization (WHO) are still pondering whether, and by how much, they should increase their regular financial contributions to the organisation, whose work continues to save lives within and beyond their borders.

While some may think that the WHO is sufficiently financed, it's the opposite. The WHO's current budget structure cripples and undermines its mandate to act as the world's principal international public-health organisation. Less than 20 percent of the WHO's budget comes from regular fees—"assessed contributions"—paid by the member states. The heavy reliance on voluntary contributions by member states and other funders severely hampers the WHO's ability to work on its core activities, leaves it vulnerable to political pressures, and skews its priorities toward individual countries' preferences.

The acute need to support the WHO's critical work to overcome the pandemic

Member states waste no time paying lip service to the WHO's relevance. But how well it can deliver is predicated on how well it is financed.

crisis and achieve "Health for All" is self-evident, as is the organisation's indispensable leadership role in health globally. The WHO is the most important global coordination mechanism to prepare for and respond to pandemics and other health threats, providing a vital public good that serves all countries.



The World Health Organization (WHO) headquarters in Geneva, Switzerland.

FILE PHOTO: REUTERS

It is, therefore, imperative that the member states support the proposals from a WHO working group to reform the organisation's financing, including increasing assessed contributions as a share of its budget from 16 percent to 50 percent.

Improving both the quantity and quality of financing for the WHO is a matter of global urgency. Member states waste no time paying lip service to the WHO's relevance. But how well it can deliver is predicated on how well it is financed. And as we note in our work for the WHO Council on the Economics of Health for All, finance is not neutral: the type of finance available affects the allocation and, ultimately, the outcome of investments.

Strengthening the WHO provides the best return on investment for health. Billions are being proposed—such as by the G20 High Level Independent Panel on Financing the Global Commons for

Pandemic Preparedness and Response—to set up and finance new global health security institutions that cannot guarantee broad political buy-in, especially from the Global South. There simply is no logical reason why member states should place heavy bets on a new venture that might not gain broad support over investing in their existing organisation, which most certainly can deliver more if funded accordingly.

It is simple: the greatest potential for global health solidarity lies with the WHO. Reliable financing by its owners—the 194 member countries—would make all the difference to global health cooperation and demonstrate the effectiveness of multilateral solutions to international challenges.

The time to walk the talk is now. Too many member states have long been indifferent to the need to strengthen the WHO or invest in global public health. It should not have been this way before

overstated. The Treasury announcement says, "As a result of today's actions, all property and interests in property of the persons designated above that are in the United States or in the possession or control of US persons are blocked and must be reported to OFAC (Office of Foreign Assets Control). In addition, any entities that are owned, directly or indirectly, 50 percent or more by one or more blocked persons are also blocked." It is, therefore, quite likely that any security equipment and technology coming to Bangladesh would be falling under additional scrutiny to ensure that the end users are not the subjects of the sanctions. It also makes it almost impossible for global banks having interests in the US to release any assets of Rab they hold or allow any transactions, like paying import bills.

It is still unclear whether these sanctions will have any impact on the UN peacekeeping role of those officers who have or still are serving in Rab. A leading human rights campaign group, the Human Rights Watch (HRW), has long been pushing the US and other Western countries for imposing sanctions against Rab and has also called on the UN to take similar actions.

Though ministers and politicians have blamed the so-called anti-Bangladeshi elements for the US actions, press reports about the meeting between the foreign secretary and the US ambassador after the latter was summoned at the ministry seems to suggest that Bangladesh's main disappointment was "the unilateral announcement instead of prior consultation." This is a flawed argument as, in October 2020, 10 leading senators in a show of bipartisan unity and urgency wrote to the then secretary of state to impose sanctions on Rab commanders. And again in August this year, the Congress caucus on human rights, the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, also heard calls for actions against Rab during a public hearing.

Questioning the moral authority of the US or pointing out their dismal records at home against minority communities may be good for politicking, but lacks any practical solution. Claiming innocence or simple denial after years of allegations of gross human rights violations is not going to result in any exoneration. Therefore, setting up a truly independent and transparent investigation mechanism—perhaps a judicial commission—to probe into the alleged abuses should be considered with urgency. Eight years of negotiations and lobbying to end another exclusion, the suspension of GSP to Bangladesh over workers' rights, have yet to succeed.

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Covid-19, and it should not continue being this way now, in the middle of the pandemic.

The hesitancy and reluctance that brought us to this point sharply contrasts with the spirit and determination shown half a century ago, when humans overcame seemingly insurmountable challenges in order to make it to the moon and back. In today's money, President John F Kennedy's moonshot cost a colossal USD 283 billion—without any guarantee of success. Of course, it did succeed, and in the process it catalysed cross-sectoral innovation that, in time, gave the world camera phones, better home insulation, and the modern software industry.

In other words, Kennedy's moonshot boosted economic dynamism and growth through mission-oriented innovation. In comparison, the current financing proposal would only cost all 194 WHO member states USD 1.2 billion a year, with the certainty that it would significantly strengthen the organisation's effectiveness. We believe it should actually be more.

Today's moonshot must be "Health for All." Most immediately, that means ensuring that Covid-19 vaccines are accessible globally. But it is not a moonshot for the WHO's member states to finance their own organisation so that it can do its job. That is just common sense: the WHO saves the lives of its member states' people. We already have very affordable, practical, and straightforward solutions for global public health, including financing common goods for health; what we need now is just a fraction of the policymaking ambition we once had.

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