

A milestone achievement in fixing homelessness

The joy of those getting houses is a joy of all of us

ON any given night in Bangladesh, large numbers of people are either homeless – sleeping in temporary shelters, on the streets, in huts built on khas land, etc. – or facing the prospects of becoming one because of increased socioeconomic vulnerabilities. Many haven't had a fixed place to lay their heads in years. Their sufferings, especially that of children and the elderly, are well-documented. The government's Ashrayan housing project offers a solution to this problem, and on Thursday, it reached an important milestone as Panchagarh and Magura were declared the country's first two districts with no homeless and landless people.

This is indeed a moment to be proud of. Reportedly, the nine upazilas of Panchagarh and Magura were among a total of 52 declared free of the scourge of homelessness. In the process, a total of 19,780 landless families were rehabilitated. We share the joy of those who were handed over keys to houses that they can now call their own, a roof overhead that no one can take away. At the virtual handover ceremony, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina rightly called this “a big achievement”, before promising that “every person in the country will have a house and an address.”

According to officials, a total of 67,800 houses will be distributed among homeless families as part of the third phase of Ashrayan 2, an undertaking of the PMO meant to mark the birth centenary of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Of these, 32,904 houses were handed over on April 26, 26,229 handed over on Thursday, and the construction of 8,667 is underway. In the first two phases of the project, 117,329 semi-pucca houses, along with a piece of two-decimal land for each family, were distributed on January 23, 2021 and June 20, 2021, respectively. We're happy to know that the government plans to continue the scheme, given how it is contributing to rural economy with improved life prospects for the formerly homeless.

Such initiatives are vital in a country where homelessness is often as much a result of disruptive socioeconomic conditions as a failure of policy and governance, with no reliable data on the poor to guide policies, and no robust support mechanism for them to fall back on. The plight of street children is another example of that failure. Besides a permanent home, what the poor need is the guarantee of a range of support services such as proper schooling for children, the opportunity for earning incomes, and improved access to social safety net programmes. We urge the government to extend its housing scheme everywhere to end homelessness for good, and build a robust support mechanism for the poor so they can turn their life around and contribute to our economy.

Will peace return to Sri Lanka?

Uncertainties remain even after the election of new president

AFTER months of mayhem across the country, Sri Lanka finally got a new president in Ranil Wickremesinghe, 73, a veteran politician and six-time prime minister. On Thursday, Wickremesinghe was sworn in as its 9th president, before he was overwhelmingly elected in a parliamentary vote the previous day. According to media reports, he is expected to name his prime minister soon and form a unity government to manage the grinding economic crisis that the country finds itself in, as well as quell protests that continue to rock the streets.

But his replacing the unpopular Gotabaya Rajapaksa, who was forced to resign and flee the country in the face of protests, may not have the desired effect any time soon, as obvious from the angry chants on the streets. Many protesters believe Wickremesinghe is not the president Sri Lanka needed at this juncture, pointing to the fact that he was backed by the ruling Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) party and thus may still protect the interests of the Rajapaksa family. The protests in Sri Lanka came in the wake of shortages of fuel and other basic necessities and the inability of the government to deal with the crisis. As protests grew, the mob on the streets became more and more violent, demanding the ouster of a corrupt regime.

Wickremesinghe, in a speech, addressed the gravity of the situation, saying that the country was facing massive challenges and that the government would have to work on a new strategy as per the aspirations of the people. He invited all to work together. But observers believe that Sri Lanka may see more political unrest as the new president announced a crackdown on protesters, condemning them as law breakers. He vowed to deal with them firmly, not allowing a “minority of protesters to suppress the aspirations of the silent majority clamouring for a change in the political system.” Earlier, as acting president, he extended a state of emergency that gave police and security forces sweeping powers to evict protesters from state buildings that they had occupied.

His stance so far made it clear that he wouldn't allow violence to distract the new government from the more urgent task at hand: finding a way out of the economic crisis. But earning public trust is extremely important, otherwise tension may continue to be an impeding factor. We hope the new government will work together with all stakeholders, including members of the public, to bring peace and stability in the country soon.

Looking at Bangladesh through the minorities' eyes



THE THIRD VIEW

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MAHFUZ ANAM

WE liberated our country to establish – according to our constitution – democracy, socialism, nationalism, and secularism. Socialism, we discarded a long time ago. Nationalism, we never talked about much after independence. Democracy, we are in the process of discarding. The last, secularism, we never knew what to do with it. We liked it as an idea, but were never clear as to what it meant, how to translate it in our sociocultural context, and how to implement it in any sustainable manner. We never had the sincerity and the courage to pursue it with any degree of firmness. On occasions, we paid lip service to it, but more often than not, we looked the other way when the idea was torn to shreds and members of minority religious groups were victimised under one pretext or the other.

Religious strife – commonly termed as communalism – has a long history in South Asia. The Indian subcontinent was partitioned to solve the Muslim-Hindu question and bring about intercommunal harmony. Pakistan could never get out of its clutches; in fact, it never tried. India appears to be getting deeply into it once again. For Bangladesh, we came out of Pakistan to build a society of religious harmony, among other things. Now ours is a story of slipping away from our founding ideals.

On the question of religion, our position is very clear. Everybody has the right to be proud of his or her religion. But nobody has the right to hate, condemn, insult or denigrate the religions of others. This fundamental



Insulting others' religions or punishing followers of a different religion seem to have become a part of showing pride for our own. The happenings in Narail are the latest reminder of this fact.

PHOTO: HABIBUR RAHMAN

darker still. Insulting others' religions or punishing followers of a different religion seem to have become a part of showing pride for our own.

The happenings in Narail are the latest reminder of the fact that we have not been able to build a society of religious tolerance. For the minority communities, the issue is one of life or death, of survival or being perished, of living with dignity or servility. It is not something that you switch on and off. The fear remains, the lack of confidence in the future destroys

that cannot be easily explained away.

First, almost all of these incidents originated from a Facebook post showing a member of a minority community allegedly disrespecting Islam. This post was then made to go viral, generating severe reactions – mostly orchestrated – among the majoritarian community, leading to public gathering, demonstration and subsequent violent attacks. In most of the cases, the “insulting” Facebook post was found to have been fake, implanted by a hacker – a fact that did not seem to have any impact on the perpetrators of subsequent attacks.

Second, once the fake Facebook post becomes viral, protest groups form in no time, provocative speeches are made, slogans are uttered to instigate anger, and then demands are made for the arrest and punishment of the alleged culprit. However, without waiting for police to take action, the agitating groups take the law into their own hands and go into action. Within no time, things get out of hand and violence breaks out.

Third, once the stage is set, houses and shops of minority groups are attacked. It starts with an attack on the house or property of the alleged culprit, but soon it becomes an attack on the community as a whole.

Fourth, nobody raises any questions about the authenticity of the Facebook post, especially when previous examples of such hacking exist. Also, the fundamental injustice of punishing the whole community for the alleged crime of a single person is never raised.

Fifth, police in most cases play a very curious role. Either they take too long to appear on the scene or, if they are prompt enough to arrive, they never take a decisive action to nip the violence in the bud. This mysterious behaviour of the police has never come under questioning.

The Cumilla incident is quite extraordinary. Someone – police later caught the person – goes to a puja mandap at night and places a copy of

Ramu in 2012 and come to the latest incident in Narail, over the last 10 years, the same narrative and same technique – social media posts or livestreams – have been used to trigger violent attacks on the minorities. Is there no lesson to be learnt? Why have the massive advancement in our capacities for surveillance and instant response not been used to prevent communal violence?

The most damaging and disheartening aspect of these recurring tragedies is that no fully fledged legal process has been completed even in one single case. This prevented the whole story from coming out, and prevented the persons and forces responsible from being exposed and punished. In most cases, some initial arrests were made and the story ended there, save perhaps some innocuous follow-ups that revealed nothing. Till today, we never came to know the full story as to how, by whom, and why these attacks occurred. This lack of legal action has created an atmosphere of impunity, encouraging the forces whose aim is to destroy communal harmony.

So, at 51, what is the Bangladesh that we have built? The economic story remains strong, with some questions reappearing due to the present global turbulence. The democracy story is dimming. However, we must put in greater efforts to make our tolerance story stronger. In Bangladesh, Muslims are not only the majority, but an overwhelming one – at 90 percent. This imposes special responsibility on them to ensure that minority rights are protected and observed at every level.

This we need to do not only for the sake of our minorities, but more for our own sake. Once the culture of hatred enters the psyche, it seldom leaves. It proliferates and engulfs the whole society and us as individuals. Surely, that is a Bangladesh we do not and cannot want.



PHOTO: HABIBUR RAHMAN

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belief is what distinguishes us from the Medieval Age or even early Modern Age. Religious tolerance is a core achievement of modern civilisation, and its meticulous implementation is the basis upon which a world of peaceful coexistence can be built.

Religious tolerance is the most important value which a modern society must instil within itself, and Bangladesh is no exception. What we are noticing with increasing alarm is that, while exhibiting pride and respect for our own religion, we seem to think nothing of insulting that of others. In fact, the truth is

dreams, and the fear of recurrence slowly but decisively overwhelms.

Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK), a human rights and legal aid body, stated, based on newspaper reports, that from January 2013 to September 2021, a total of 3,679 instances of violence against minorities occurred across Bangladesh, varying from mob attacks to setting fire to their houses or shops, to vandalism of various kinds. In some instances – thankfully very few – even death occurred.

A cursory analysis of the big incidents of communal violence reveals a pattern of planned onslaught

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Give us our driver's licence cards

When I tried getting my driver's licence in 2019, it took me four months to get a date for the exam and another two to complete the biometric registration. Even though I managed to get the licence after that, I am yet to get my smart driver's licence three years later.

First, the BRTA authorised one company to print the licences, but that company got blacklisted. It then gave the job of printing 9 lakh licences to another company, which managed

to print only 13,000 licences. The company currently expected to print licences is operated by the army. But they are also behind schedule.

Despite none of this being the people's fault, it is us who face harassment on the roads by traffic police. The government needs to address this.

Siddique Karim, Mohakhali



PHOTO: UNSPLASH