



Slashing the food assistance will make the lives of the Rohingyas who have been surviving on the bare minimum in the refugee camps of Cox's Bazar even worse.

FILE PHOTO: REUTERS

# Rohingyas feel pangs of hunger too



## A CLOSER LOOK

Tasneem Tayeb is a columnist for The Daily Star. Her Twitter handle is @tasneem\_tayeb

TASNEEM TAYEB

They have endured pain, torture, loss and trauma. They took on the perilous journey from Myanmar's Rakhine state – where the military junta unleashed inexplicable brutality on the Rohingyas men, women and children with genocidal intent – to Bangladesh's Cox's Bazar, where they were given a safe shelter by the government and people.

Initially, the Rohingyas were afforded empathy, sympathy and compassion by both Bangladesh and the international community, but the interest of the latter – especially on the repatriation or sustenance of the unfortunate Rohingyas – has been waning over time. With other issues of more relevance – and of increasing geopolitical interest – riding high on the humanitarian agenda (i.e. victims of the Russia-Ukraine war), the donors are able to spare only a little of their funds – or thoughts, for that matter – for the Rohingyas.

Bangladesh, in the aftermath of the double economic shocks of the pandemic and the war in Ukraine, is struggling to provide for the Rohingyas, especially because of the ever dwindling funds from the international community. Last year, less than half of the appealed USD 881 million under the Joint Response Plan (JRP) was disbursed. As a result, the Rohingyas are helplessly drowning in their own misery. While some of the refugees seem to have accepted their ill fate with a stoic outlook, others – especially the younger ones – are desperate to change their fate. This is making them vulnerable to the lures and traps of criminals – from drug dealers to prostitution rings to human traffickers. Given there is little to no economic activity within the camps, and no certainty about repatriation, the Rohingyas face a bleak future.

And now the United Nations' decision to slash food aid for the Rohingyas – that, too, ahead of the month of Ramadan and Eid-ul-Fitr – has come as a shock, not just for the refugees, but also for the host nation. Stretched donor budget has been cited as one of the primary reasons for the decision. But the host nation and subsequently the Rohingya refugees are battling the same challenges, too. So, how does the international community propose the Rohingya refugees survive on a monthly allowance of USD 10, down from USD 12, which was already a little too stretched for them?

The World Food Programme (WFP) is appealing for an urgent fund of USD 125 million to avert the planned food aid slash, which, if not received, will lead to further and deeper cuts. If this comes to pass, it would lead to disastrous consequences for the refugees and

the region.

Already in the grip of abject poverty, the Rohingya refugees are trying to find ways to escape the confines of the fenced refugee camps in Cox's Bazar and Bhashan Char. In 2022 alone, more than 3,500 Rohingyas have tried to undertake desperate journeys through the Bay of Bengal and Andaman Sea, in 39 boats, according to data from the UNHCR. This is a 360 percent increase from the previous year, when about 700 Rohingyas tried to make similar attempts. While some of them have managed to land in various countries including Malaysia and Indonesia, many others have fallen prey to debt bondage, slavery and forced prostitution, while the rest were lost to the unforgiving seas. The looming prospects of increased misery will only add to the desperation of these refugees.

What is even more alarming is that sex trade is already highly prevalent among the female refugees, who are being forced by the never-ending economic

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wretchedness to choose sex trade to earn a living. Kutupalong is a sex trade hotspot where more than 500 Rohingya girls and women reside and serve clients. These women and girls are lured into sex trade by fixers with the promise of a better future, but they hardly make between USD 2 and USD 6 per client. Often, these women are also taken by the fixers – who collude with the local law enforcers – outside the camps to serve clients in hotels across Cox's Bazar. These women are dozed with steroids by the fixers and often subjected to battery, including by the clients.

"The food handout is not enough; when my kids cry for rice, where will I get it from?" a sex worker asked

Tania Rashid from PBS News Hour in 2018. Now that food aid is going to be cut further, more and more girls and women will be at the risk of exploitation and forced sex labour.

Moreover, according to WFP, about 40 percent of pregnant and breastfeeding Rohingya women are anaemic, while almost one in eight Rohingya children is acutely malnourished. More than 95 children are born in the Rohingya camps every day, and the Rohingya population is expected to grow to 1.2-1.3 million by 2025, according to a defence ministry report. How is Bangladesh expected to support this growing population in the face of shrinking donor aid?

Another major risk for the Rohingyas is the possibility of increased crime rate as a result of the dwindling aid. As assistance will become more and more elusive, livelihood and life choices for the Rohingyas would become difficult and reckless. We have already seen a sharp rise in violent crimes inside – and at times outside – the Rohingya refugee camps in the last couple of years. With the economic hardships creating added burden on the refugees, criminal gangs would find it easier to recruit Rohingya youth to serve their criminal intentions.

It is common knowledge that ARSA is already active inside the camps along with nine other armed gangs and they are trying to establish their superiority – with control of the drug trafficking business among its major goals – resulting in bloodshed. And all these gangs will need more muscle for cheap. There is a significant risk that it is these criminal groups that will plug in the financial vacuum left by the donors.

Bangladesh is going out of its way to provide for the Rohingya refugees. The Rohingya crisis is the responsibility of the international community, who has not only failed to broker a safe and dignified repatriation for the refugees, even when a so-called democratic government was in power in Myanmar, but has also shamelessly invested in the military-controlled businesses and development activities in Myanmar, including in Rakhine state, from where the Rohingyas have been mercilessly uprooted.

The aggravation of the Rohingya crisis will have a significant impact on the region, including in East Asia. While it is understandable that repatriation has become difficult due to the apparent non-cooperation of Myanmar's ruling military regime, the least the donors can do is provide for the Rohingya refugees to meet their basic sustenance needs.

USD 125 million – or, for that matter, the JRP appeal of USD 883 million for 2023 – to sustain lives is only a drop in the ocean for the international community, who generously give out billions of dollars in military aid to various countries, and even rogue states, to support military escalation that claims hundreds and thousands of lives. The Rohingyas deserve more than just mere words of "concern," and the world must remember that.

## PROJECT SYNDICATE

# India's Thin-Skinned Leaders



Shashi Tharoor, a former UN under-secretary-general and minister of state, is an MP for the Indian National Congress.

SHASHI THAROOR

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government has long been overly sensitive to world opinion, partly because Modi himself craves outside approval. The ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) likes to claim that India receives more international accolades now that Modi is in charge than it did under his predecessors. But in three recent instances, the attention was less than flattering – and the BJP government responded like prickly adolescents.

The most recent incident began when the BBC aired a documentary titled *India: The Modi Question*, which explored the prime minister's culpability for the anti-Muslim riots in Gujarat in 2002, when over a thousand people were killed. The government's response has shown it at its most belligerent, as well as its most defensive.

Anxious to shield Modi from the damning charges, government ministers and officials attempted to discredit the BBC, suggesting that the documentary was a politically motivated attempt to tarnish India's image just when it had assumed the G20's rotating presidency. The spokesman for the Ministry of External Affairs, Arindam Bagchi, derided the film as a "propaganda piece designed to push a particular discredited narrative."

The government also sought to prevent the documentary from being seen widely in India, including by ordering Twitter to remove links to it and getting YouTube to remove uploads. Nor has Modi's government been above petty retaliation. The

militants. Lapid, heading the jury at the International Film Festival of India, expressed his embarrassment at such a "vulgar" work of "propaganda" being screened at a prestigious festival and argued that it did not match the "cinematic richness, the diversity, and complexity" of the other films in the competition category.

It was an artistic and aesthetic judgement that Lapid was perfectly entitled to make. Yet, the Modi government and its defenders fired back, falsely accusing Lapid of demeaning the suffering of the Kashmiri Pandit community (Hindus displaced and killed by Islamist terrorists). They also pressed the Israeli ambassador to denounce Lapid, and transferred out of the Film Festival Directorate the hapless official who had invited the filmmaker to head the jury. Needless to say, Lapid is unlikely to receive another visa, let alone invitation, to visit India as long as the BJP remains in power.

Yet, another petulant overreaction from Modi's government came last May, when experts at the World Health Organization (WHO) reported, based on an analysis of excess deaths, that Covid-19 fatalities in India could be up to 10 times higher than officially reported. Whereas the Indian government claimed that half a million people had died as a result of the pandemic in 2020 and 2021, the WHO estimated the true figure could be some three to five million.

Here, too, the Indian government launched a full scale counterattack, with officials challenging the

immature individuals who lack a strong sense of self, not with official institutions. To see government officials behave this way – particularly in a democracy where criticism routinely flies in all directions – is bizarre, to put it mildly.

Modi's government has conflated its aversion to criticism with its obligation to protect India's national honour, to the detriment of the latter. National honour is a precious asset, but not every negative statement about anything Indian damages it. In fact, to respond so belligerently to every perceived slight implies that India's national honour is fragile and insubstantial, rather than deeply rooted and durable. Attempts to sustain a flattering narrative by suppressing facts and figures – a habit that extends to everything: from India's official poverty statistics to details of Chinese incursions into India – can even undermine policy.

India's current government is especially touchy about the perceptions of outsiders. This seems to reflect an awareness that foreigners' criticism is particularly likely to be well-founded, rather than politically motivated, and thus not easily dismissed or discredited. Desperate to prevent its carefully cultivated global image from being tarnished, Modi's government reacts to foreign slights that most other governments would simply ignore.

India's government should not only be able to withstand criticism; it should encourage a culture of dissent, based on an unshakeable belief in people's right to take opposing views and challenge orthodoxies. It should be able to accept criticism in stride and, when appropriate, seek to engage constructively with critics. In the aforementioned incidents, for example, Indian officials should have affirmed that its critics are entitled to their views, with which the government does not agree. In some cases, they might even acknowledge



People watch the BBC documentary 'India: The Modi Question' on a screen in the city of Kochi, in defiance of government attempts to ban its viewing or sharing in India, on January 24, 2023.

PHOTO: AFP

authorities conducted a tax raid on the BBC offices in New Delhi and Mumbai, confiscating phones and laptops in an episode widely viewed as yet another effort to stifle press freedom.

A similarly extreme overreaction came last November, after the Israeli filmmaker Nadav Lapid disparaged the controversial BJP-supported film *The Kashmir Files*, which tells the fictional story of a young man who learns that his Kashmiri Hindu parents died at the hands of Islamist

integrity, bona fides, and even statistical methodology of the WHO, a United Nations body whose intergovernmental executive committee had been headed by India's own health minister during the pandemic. The government's numbers, its representatives insisted, were perfectly accurate; any other deaths during the pandemic were the result of unrelated causes.

The BJP government's extraordinary hypersensitivity is a trait that one would associate with

that we can learn from our critics.

Acting as if all criticism is illegitimate is the hallmark of a banana republic, not a mature democracy. The Modi government's behaviour thus amounts to a betrayal of India's traditions. And to what end? By overreacting, questioning the good faith of foreign critics, and even seeking to suppress unflattering stories, the Modi government has succeeded only in drawing more attention to the criticism and exposing its own vulnerability.

## CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

### ACROSS

- 1 Mixologist
- 7 Relaxing places
- 11 Sigh, say
- 12 Sledding site
- 13 Crystal-filled stones
- 14 Spot
- 15 Blackmail
- 17 Baby's call
- 20 Unrefined
- 23 Stretch of years
- 24 Be eco-friendly
- 26 Peculiarity
- 27 Outback bird
- 28 Shade
- 29 Power plant part
- 31 Squid's squirt
- 32 More mature wine
- 33 Runs for health

### DOWN

- 1 Entreat
- 2 Forest tool
- 3 Letter after pi
- 4 Tyler Perry persona
- 5 Trebek of "Jeopardy!"
- 6 High home
- 7 After-dinner wine
- 8 Popular nut
- 9 The

### Matterhorn, e.g.

- 10 Cunning
- 16 Take place
- 17 Paris subway
- 18 "The Tempest" sprite
- 19 Popular nut
- 21 Suspended
- 22 Looks for
- 24 Fashionably dated
- 25 Moody music
- 30 Breakfast choice
- 33 Setting filler
- 35 Provo's state
- 36 One or more
- 37 Sandwich meat
- 38 Bauxite, e.g.
- 40 Completely
- 41 Carnival city
- 42 German articles



## MONDAY'S ANSWERS

D	E	L	T	A	S	A	B	L	E
O	C	E	A	N	P	R	O	U	D
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