

## No respite for the Rohingya

Faced with fund shortages, they must now deal with another devastating event

The future of thousands of Rohingya refugees looks even bleaker after a massive fire ripped through a crammed refugee camp in the Ukhiya upazila of Cox's Bazar on Sunday. Reportedly, nearly 2,000 shelters were burned to the ground by the fire, rendering around 15,000 Rohingya homeless before it was brought under control. Although the extent of the damage is yet to be fully determined, as well as the cause of the fire, it is obvious that the affected refugees need urgent assistance and humanitarian support.

According to reports, the authorities there have been working with international and local humanitarian organisations to provide food and temporary shelters to those who have lost their homes. Aside from houses, the fire also burnt down around 90 facilities including hospitals, learning centres and mosques, and robbed hundreds of families of whatever belongings they had. Such devastation will only increase the suffering of the refugees, who have been stuck in a cycle of relentless problems for more than five years.

The latest setback comes at a time when the international community has been reducing their support for the Rohingya ever since the pandemic started in 2020. Only recently, this newspaper reported that the United Nations was preparing to cut food aid to the Rohingya refugees. In fact, starting this month, the UN's World Food Programme plans to reduce the value of its food assistance to only \$10 per person, from what was already a meagre \$12. Despite two UN special rapporteurs calling this move "unconscionable" – saying it will have devastating impacts on the refugees – we have not yet heard of any change to this plan, nor of wealthier nations stepping up to cover for the shortage of funds.

The recent fire should once again be a reminder to the whole world about just how vulnerable the life of Rohingya refugees is, and the type of support they require. This is the third major fire in three years in the Rohingya camps, and time and again we have seen the Rohingya struggle, trying to overcome their misfortunes. The least the world community can do is provide them with adequate humanitarian support following such a major disaster. But that's not all; this fire is also a clear reminder that such makeshift refugee camps can never guarantee a sustainable and safe future for the Rohingya. The international community should get back to working on a permanent solution to the Rohingya refugee crisis – something that has been put on the back-burner of agendas for quite some time.

The Bangladesh government, while appealing for urgent aid from the international community, also needs to reevaluate the make-up of the refugee camps. Because the huts in these camps are mostly made up of bamboo and tarpaulin – all closely packed together – they are particularly susceptible to fires. Perhaps some redesigning of the camps is in order so that such devastating fires can be avoided in the future. This, of course, will require expensive rebuilding and rehabilitation, and consequently increased – rather than decreased – funding.

## Thugs in the making?

Habitually sparring college students raise concerns about the state of education

We're deeply alarmed by the manner in which young students are increasingly getting involved in violent activities. On Sunday, students of Ideal College and Dhaka College, together with City College, clashed on the streets. As a result, a number of students were injured, while traffic was held up for several hours near the Science Lab and Green Road areas, causing huge public suffering. Earlier, on Thursday, students from the same colleges also clashed, again closing off nearby roads. Two incidents within the space of a week indicate a degree of animosity between these closely located institutions. But this also goes beyond simple college rivalry, with students in many other tertiary and pre-tertiary institutions showing a similar penchant for violence.

The question is, why is this happening? Why are young men increasingly adopting violent tactics, instead of healthier alternatives, to resolve their disputes? Often, it is seen that violence flares up on the flimsiest of excuses. In case of the two recent clashes, as per a report by Prothom Alo, it started after a group of students of Dhaka College apparently harked their Ideal College peers by calling them "farm chickens", leading to the latter vandalising a bus of Dhaka College. In retribution, DC students extracted the nameplate of Ideal College. Attacks and counterattacks followed. The picture that emerges from this scenario is of a deeply troubling educational landscape where there is little discipline. It's worrying how easily young men are set off these days, and how quickly it escalates into violence, often using lethal weapons.

It's easy to blame these students. After all, as young adults, they should be able to make better choices, and be held responsible for the consequences of their action. But to suggest the blame lies squarely with them will be unwise. They are but the product of a time when intolerance is being encouraged from the highest seats of power, when democratic institutions are crumbling because of lack of accountability and rule of law, when criminals are getting away with heinous crimes, and when thuggery is incentivised and merit is deprioritised. Add to that the politicisation of educational institutions like colleges and universities – traditional powerhouses that are now being used as training grounds for political recruits. This is, thus, also a failure of our educational policy that no longer promotes pursuit of enlightenment – only material development.

In such a situation, students, without proper role models and a proper learning environment, are at risk of getting derailed off their path, which doesn't bode well for our future as a nation. Over the years, we have seen how far the rot has spread. Even in schools you hear of children getting involved in crimes and violence. We must stop and reverse this destructive trend. We urge the authorities to critically examine the state of our education sector, and ensure that it produces the kind of citizens and leaders we need going forward.

### HISTORIC MARCH 7 SPEECH

# The fiery call for freedom



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MIR AFTABUDDIN AHMED

Suhrawardy Udyan, or what was known as Ramna Race Course back in the day, is closely linked with Bangladesh's history. It was where Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, with a sense of passion, a vigour for democracy, and an anticipation for change, made the most iconic declaration of his life on March 7, 1971, and subsequently etched his name in the history books unlike any before or after him. He showed his political guile, moved people with his captivating voice, and in a matter of 19 minutes, went from being the leader of the Awami League to the country's greatest national asset.

The idea of Pakistan that Bangabandhu and many of his colleagues had envisioned in 1947 was wholeheartedly unfulfilled. The efforts of the likes of Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy or Sher-e-Bangla AK Fazlul Haq in stamping the authority of Bangalee leadership in the national politics of Pakistan culminated in Sheikh Mujib's victory in the 1970 parliamentary elections. The debate on whether this nation wanted independence or autonomy prior to March 7 is one for which historians, not politicians, are required to perform greater research and analysis to resolve. But if one is to analyse Bangabandhu's speech, it becomes clear that the search for autonomy was very much enshrined with a subtle, if not vocal, ultimatum for independence.

Bangabandhu did not encourage a military conflict, nor did he push the country to the brink of war in his speech. His address is surely indicative of his desire to achieve independence through a peaceful, cooperative and dialogical process. He lit a fire in the heart of the average Bangalee. It was President Yahya Khan's actions and Operation Searchlight that resulted in the grievous nine-month war, but Bangabandhu's address motivated the country into defending itself unequivocally.

In his address to the masses, Bangabandhu acted in the most decent and humane way possible. On March 7, 1971, he was still unsure about the path his country was going to take, and the dilly-dallying from the Yahya regime only made the situation more difficult. As such, Bangabandhu tackled the question of independence in the most delicate way possible. He referred to



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Bangabandhu's March 7 speech speaks volumes of the magnanimity and skill he had as a politician.

himself as the leader of not only East Pakistan, but of the majority party of Pakistan. He spoke respectfully of his dialogues with President Yahya Khan and Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. Bangabandhu's entire argument was based on how, when and why he demanded that the laws and constitutional requirements of the Pakistani state be fulfilled. None of the points he brought forth were utopian or unconstitutional, even in the fragile legal architecture of Pakistan. He demanded the basic democratic rights of lifting martial law, withdrawing military personnel to their barracks, transference of power to elected representatives, and an inquiry into the loss of life during the prevailing conflict.

In order to protest Yahya Khan's severe violations of democratic rights, Bangabandhu gave several non-cooperation directives. He suggested that government officials and East Pakistani institutions should observe strikes while the people should refrain from paying taxes. None of this explicitly mentioned a call to take up arms. He understood how violent and

should have been a shining example to the entire country. Yet, Yahya Khan faltered terribly on March 25.

The entire nation of Bangladesh knows the allusive statement, "Our struggle this time is a struggle for our freedom. Our struggle this time is a struggle for our independence. Joy Bangla!" Even then, there are those who question Bangabandhu's personal desire for independence. To suggest that he never wanted an independent Bangladesh is inaccurate. The man had fought his entire life for his beloved countrymen. He had suffered in jail under military autocrats. In the end, his trust towards his own people cost him his life.

There can be debates around the idea of a pre-emptive war versus a defensive war. Debates can arise as to when, rather than if, Sheikh Mujib wanted independence. But in no uncertain terms, Bangabandhu did what was best for his nation. There were young leaders who were willing to jump into the battlefield and initiate the struggle for independence. On the other hand, Bangabandhu wanted a political and

Then again, it is important to reiterate that historical evidence suggests that Bangabandhu did not want mothers to lose their sons in the battlefields; he did not want to leave children as orphans. He did his best to prevent a war. Which great leader would not? Nevertheless, when it came to it on March 25, he remained resolute and confident that he may have done enough to spur the vigour that would allow the country to fight back and achieve independence. Bangabandhu remained in jail under military supervision throughout the entirety of the nine-month war. But his vision, aims, personality, and influence directly guided Bangladesh to victory. Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was a patriot. He was undoubtedly the only person capable enough to vociferously inspire the country towards independence. His March 7 speech speaks volumes of the magnanimity and skill he had as a politician. People from all walks of life should not think twice in respecting the man for who he was – a visionary, an icon, a leader.

## Lit Fest and Boi Mela: A linguistic, cultural apartheid?



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My occasional trips to the storied Ekushey Boi Mela have always been a special joy. In recent years, this has been augmented by the occasional opportunity to experience the charms of a relatively new kid on the block: the Dhaka Lit Fest (DLF).

Books are the lifeblood of a culture, and these two events provide telling insights into our cultural locus.

Take the Dhaka Lit Fest. Over the years, it has morphed – and has since dropped one of its international affiliations. It gives bibliophiles a great opportunity to meet internationally recognised authors in person. This year, I was excited to be able to listen to Amitav Ghosh and Nobel Laureate Abdulrazak Gurnah. The festival casts a wide net – actor Tilda Swinton, cricketer Gordon Greenidge or Australian master chef Kishwar Chowdhury aren't exactly famous authors – yet it offers a welcome window into world culture. I give the festival special credit for organising remarkably well-stocked bookstores, carrying many titles that are otherwise hard to get, of many of its featured international participants. This adds considerable cultural heft to the event that could have easily been limited to

an ephemeral cultural jamboree – here now, forgotten tomorrow.

For all the plaudits that the DLF richly deserves, the basic concept of the festival is a bit troubling for me. Similar to its cultural cohorts in India, like the Jaipur Literature Festival and Apeejay Kolkata Literary Festival, the DLF, when you think about it, is a curious cultural confection. It's a literary festival where the main language of its readers takes a back seat.

To be sure, DLF has added Bangla panel discussions now, but it still appears to be an afterthought.

Then there is Ekushey Boi Mela. It's hard not to feel a surge of pride at the mammoth scale of the book fair. A closer look, however, reveals a less salubrious fact: the books on sale are a mixture of wheat and chaff – and there's a lot of chaff. As a passionate book fair goer for over half a century, I'm nostalgic for the book fair of several decades back. It was smallish, the handful of bookstalls fit comfortably in the Bangla Academy premises, and most publishers appeared to look upon their trade as a calling rather than a means of making a quick buck.

This year, I found a few good publishing houses that rekindled my

hopes of publishing in Bangladesh. There was my old favourite UPL; we go back half a century when I used to ride my bike to its Motijheel offices to grab a new title. UPL's booklist remains solid: serious, thoughtful books on Bangladesh's history, politics and culture including an excellent list of Bangla translations. Prothoma, I'm pleased to see, has grown into an elegant publishing house with a wide, impressive list of Bangla titles with excellent production values. A book, one must not forget, is an aesthetic artefact as well as a vehicle for thought. Chattogram-based Baatighar is another favourite publisher of mine.

My own impressions do not suggest massive book sales. I was heartened, however, to see some assiduous browsing. On the other hand, I was taken aback by what is a new phenomenon on an old-timer like me. I suppose you could call it the "book selfie." For the uninitiated, the reader – I use the term quite loosely – appears more pleased to have his/her photo taken with a book than actually owning (or presumably reading) it.

Both the Dhaka Lit Fest and Ekushey Boi Mela offer sobering insights into the underlying socioeconomic challenges that have hamstrung Bangla publishing.

The DLF offers stark evidence that the dissociation of a huge chunk of Dhaka's elite from Bangla is complete. This festival is a symptom rather than a cause. A section of today's youth are culturally illiterate in Bangla, which has resulted in a new educated elite whose first language is English. You can make the case that beyond this

thin sliver of elite are the huge masses of Bangla readers. True enough, but for at least half a century, the economics of Bangla book publishing has been becoming more and more impossible. As the disposable income of the middle class – the main constituency of Bangla books – gets more and more squeezed, the price of paper and ancillary costs of publishing keep going up and up.

Today, Bangla publishing – and more broadly Bangla culture – confronts a linguistic cultural apartheid, while we need the exact opposite. Mass schooling should offer every high school student the tools to master the rudiments of English; English-medium schools should ensure students leave school with at least a high-school level command of Bangla.

It's not at all as improbable as it sounds. In fact, we lived through such a time. Ironically, it was during the days of the colonial British, that my father finished high school from Mymensingh Zilla School. His English teacher was a keen reader of Shakespeare. The upshot was that my father had a formidable command of both Bangla and English. We must not forget that Buddhadeva Bose taught English literature at Dhaka University – and poet Shamsur Rahman was his student. Both are titans in Bangla literature.

Proficiency in Bangla and English need not be mutually exclusive; there was a time when it was, for part of the intelligentsia, mutually inclusive. Not only for the sake of Bangla publishing, but for our overall cultural development, we need to find a way to reach that goal again.