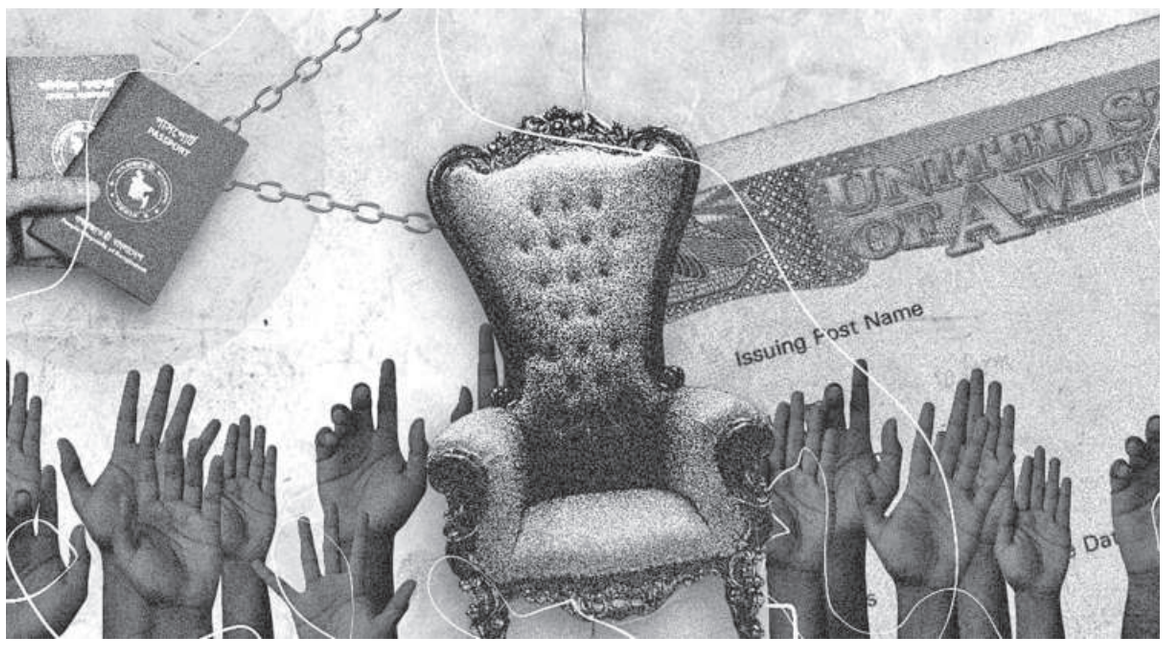

ILLUSTRATION: **SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR**

Has the ruling party finally met its match?

THE OVERTON WINDOW

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ERESH OMAR JAMAL

For almost a decade, the current Awami League government has enjoyed unmatched power. Its main opposition, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, has made numerous political blunders and has been decimated by the ruling party via various state machineries. Aside from using law enforcement agencies to prevent opposition parties from staging any substantial protests, accusations of detention and enforced disappearance of opposition leaders and activists – and even extrajudicial killing of some of them – have been rife. Even human rights activists, independent journalists and ordinary people who expressed dissenting views were seen as hostile to the ruling party and shut down, often using repressive actions. And all these serious rights violation accusations were simply brushed aside by the government as trivial, even when presented and challenged in front of the United Nations Committee against Torture (CAT).

But all of a sudden, things aren't looking as smooth as before for the ruling party.

It has seemingly been under tremendous pressure since the US announced its new visa-restriction policy against individuals (and their immediate family members) "if they are responsible for, or complicit in, undermining the democratic election process in Bangladesh" – if not earlier, when the US imposed human rights-related sanctions on the Rapid Action Battalion (Rab) and six of its current and former top officials. Even though the new policy came to media light in the last week of May, the US apparently notified our government of its decision on May 3 – about which the government initially remained silent. However, between the time the US notified the Bangladesh government and when it became public, it became evident that tensions were growing when the prime minister said Bangladesh would not purchase anything from countries that imposed sanctions against it.

The sanctions against Rab may have made some members of our law enforcement agencies think twice before resorting to the same measures as before, but the US visa restrictions will extend such doubts even among bureaucrats. As is well-known, corrupt officials (from across different government agencies) who have amassed huge wealth often send their children abroad to study, or even settle down sometimes. Oftentimes, they also stash their ill-gotten wealth abroad – particularly in Western countries. Therefore, it is doubtful how many of them are willing to risk it all by assisting the current government to stay in power through another controversial – if not outright rigged – election.

When the new US policy first became public, both the AL and BNP in typical fashion said it would harm the other side; AL General Secretary Obaidul Quader, for example, said it would ruin BNP's sleep. It is true in some sense, as according to the US officials, the policy applies equally to everyone across partisan lines.

But breaking from her party line, the prime minister on June 3 said that it did not matter if someone did not go to the US, crossing the Atlantic Ocean on a 20-hour flight. "There are other oceans and other continents in the world." What does that mean? Does that mean AL is going to resort to measures in the upcoming elections that will get its members banned from the US under its new visa policy – i.e. undermine "the democratic election process in Bangladesh"?

We are seeing a pattern emerging with the US and its European allies (for now) ramping up pressure on the Bangladesh government. Now, it would be naïve to believe that human rights and free elections are their only agendas. But the fact is that the Western countries involved in this pressure campaign aren't making up the majority of allegations against the current regime – many of them are true.

Interestingly, only a few days after her comment, on June 12, six members of the European Parliament (MEPs) issued a letter asking the EU high representative to contribute to ensuring free, fair, and impartial general elections in Bangladesh, "possibly under a poll-time neutral caretaker government." In the letter, even more strongly worded than the letter previously issued by six US Republican Congressmen to President Joe Biden, the MEPs expressed serious concerns about "violation of human rights in Bangladesh," and called for the restoration of "democracy and the rule of law" in the country. In order to do so, it even called for measures "such as restriction of entry into the EEA zone of those responsible for and complicit in the human rights abuses, or regular reminding of the conditions for the GSP+ incentive to which Bangladesh is a bidder."

Should these measures be applied, they would reduce the number of countries where individuals who are involved in human rights violation or election interference in Bangladesh can potentially hide their wealth in or escape if things turn sour.

Soon after, we learnt that on June 8, six US Democrat Congressmen urged Secretary of State Antony Blinken via another letter to continue his call for accountability for human rights violations committed by Bangladeshi law enforcement agencies and officials. This letter contained many of the concerns and allegations mentioned in the other letters; however, it also asked "what efforts" the State Department was putting in "to encourage US allies to coordinate on the imposition of sanctions and visa restrictions against the Rapid Action Battalion and its current and former officials." And, of course, it's possible that the next question asked could be what efforts the US would take to "coordinate with its allies" regarding "visa restrictions that apply more broadly" to those involved in human rights violations and election interference in Bangladesh.

So, we are seeing a pattern emerging with the US and its European allies (for now) ramping up pressure on the Bangladesh government. Now, it would be naïve to believe that human rights and free elections are their only agendas. But the fact is that the Western countries involved in this pressure campaign aren't making up the majority of allegations against the current regime – many of them are true. And the way many Bangladeshis seem to be welcoming some of this pressure on social media and elsewhere shows that the government does not have much sympathy from the people, whose voting rights it has denied, whose freedom of speech it has largely taken away, etc.

And this is what makes the current ruling party particularly vulnerable. Over the past decade, it did not bother to gain its strength from the people. In fact, it used the state machinery to clamp down on people, to maintain its power and benefit its coterie. But now that Western countries are increasingly disincentivising those operating within the state machinery (law enforcers, bureaucrats, etc) to continue to support the current regime through repressive and often illegal means, its main source of strength could fast erode.

This is an increasingly concerning time for our country. The fact that internationally, our government is being vilified as a serial human rights violator is extremely embarrassing for Bangladeshis – more so because much of it is true. At the same time, the growing hostility between foreign powers and the current regime, and the complete deterioration of our state institutions over the last decade in particular (but also before that), increases the vulnerability of our state by manyfold.

The ruling party would be well-advised to change its ways and try to make the people its main source of strength through good governance, by returning power to the people and making amends for its past mistakes. But given its past insistence on doing anything but that, will it even consider that as an option? And is it now too little, too late for that?

WORLD REFUGEE DAY

Building resilience ignites 'hope away from home' for Rohingya refugees

Johannes van der Klaauw
is the UNHCR representative in Bangladesh.

JOHANNES VAN DER KLAAUW

Today we mark World Refugee Day, an occasion intended to celebrate the resilience and courage of millions of people forced to flee their homes due to war, persecution, violence, and human rights abuses. This year, more than 35 million people in the world are living as refugees, forced to cross an international border to find safety.

Around the world, people show extraordinary hospitality to refugees as they extend protection and help to those in need. We need not look far to see how the Bangladeshi people continue to show hospitality towards some one million Rohingya refugees in Cox's Bazar.

Such welcome in time of need offers safety and shelter. It also sows hope – hope for a brighter future and hope to be able to return home when it is one day safe to do so. While they wait to return to Myanmar, the Rohingya want to carry on with their lives in Bangladesh by providing for themselves and not depending solely on humanitarian aid.

Each time I meet with Rohingya women, men, and youth, they tell me of their desire for education, their eagerness to learn new skills, and to contribute meaningfully to life in the camps. Hope is not an idle wish. It's a sense of becoming that is rooted in action. We give refugees hope when we empower them to take control of their daily lives and give them a sense of purpose by investing in education, skills training, and livelihood opportunities.

The Rohingya stand at the core of all humanitarian activities in the camps, demonstrating time and again resilience, dedication, and capabilities. From controlling fires and responding to floods, teaching in the learning centres, providing community health support, to participating in vaccination campaigns, they are a lifeline serving their communities every day. Bangladeshi volunteers also play an important role in these activities. More support is needed to sustain this.

This World Refugee Day, there is an urgent need to invest in collective efforts to allow the Rohingya to become self-reliant as they cannot, and do not wish to, remain dependent on humanitarian aid. This can be achieved by developing skills training programmes, scaling up livelihood initiatives, and continuing to provide volunteering opportunities for Rohingya refugees, so they can meet their basic needs and support their communities. In parallel, efforts to improve the lives of affected host communities must continue in earnest.

In parallel, we must continue to pursue efforts to realise safe, voluntary, and sustainable repatriation to Myanmar when conditions are right for return. This remains the optimal solution to the crisis, and the unwavering desire of the Rohingya refugees.

The Rohingya response is facing a severe funding crisis, with this year's Joint Response Plan just over a quarter funded mid-way through the year. The consequences are dire, illustrated by the recent cuts in food assistance, which is worrying every single Rohingya to whom my colleagues and I speak in the camps. Combined with a rise of criminality by armed groups in the camps, and the camps last month. Refugees were once again forced to rebuild their homes from scratch, highlighting the need for a more sustainable approach to shelter materials in the camps.

I remain inspired to see the refugees engaged in many positive activities. Inspired by the sight of more adolescent girls attending classes in the learning centres following the Myanmar curriculum. Encouraged by the passion of young Rohingya men fighting sexual and gender-based violence. Moved by the eagerness of Rohingya of all ages to make the camp environment better, and the positive stories of more and more women who are learning new skills by volunteering in production centres. The list goes on: Rohingya refugees are doing everything they can to live a dignified life and we, in turn, must do everything we can to give them hope and find solutions. Igniting hope away from home, something which every single refugee needs the most.

I have hope, too, that the narrative in the media and in society towards the Rohingya refugees will show more empathy and understanding for their protection and assistance needs. No one chooses to become a refugee; no one wishes to remain in exile for any longer than needed. Hope is powerful and helps people get through dark times. But hope needs to be nurtured and supported, or we risk seeing it fade away, burnt to ashes by one of the several fires that ravage the camps, or blown away by the strong winds of Cyclone Mocha, which again affected more than 30,000 people in

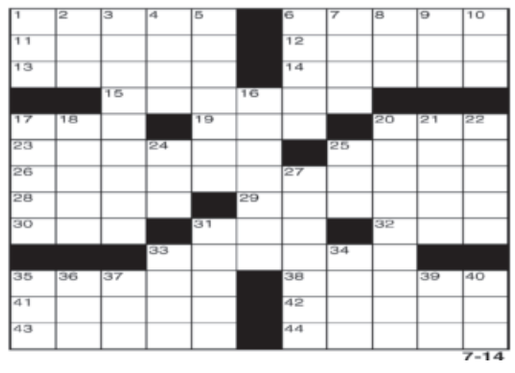
The Rohingya response is facing a severe funding crisis, with the 2023 Joint Response Plan just over a quarter funded mid-way through the year.

FILE PHOTO: **REUTERS**

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS
1 Temple figure
6 Match in value
11 German sub
12 Reluctant reply
13 Some messages
14 Seminar group
15 Loquacious
17 Clerk on "The Simpsons"
19 Put down
20 D.C. baseballer
23 Admits
25 Undiluted
26 Bad place for a mind
28 Pants part
29 Where many jokes are set
30 Lobed organ
31 Handful of
32 Try out
33 Legal expert
35 Jeans material
38 Lecturer's aid
41 Full of energy
42 Because of
43 Blends
44 Aerosol output

DOWN
1 Deep groove
2 Penny prez
3 Utility knife
4 Soaking spot
5 "Not true!"
6 Gas gauge reading
7 Wharf
8 Ensign's org.
9 Feasted
10 Rap's — Nas X
16 Moroccan port
17 Similar
18 W. Va. neighbor
20 Almond spread, e.g.
21 Scopes
22 — Haute
24 That woman
25 Sch. support group
27 Chills out after a tough day
31 Is furious
33 Deceptive talk
34 Diner order
35 Block
36 Ivy League student
37 Veto
39 Greek vowel
40 Tofu base



7-14

YESTERDAY'S **ANSWERS**

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