

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

Don't let the Rohingya return to uncertainty

Safety and dignity in Myanmar must be ensured in repatriation talks

We are glad to finally see some positive development in the repatriation process of Rohingya refugees living in squalid refugee camps in Bangladesh. Through China's mediation, Myanmar officials agreed to take back their forcibly displaced nationals during a meeting with a Bangladesh delegation earlier this week, according to a report in this daily. Bangladesh and Myanmar are now discussing the repatriation of 3,000 Rohingya refugees by December. This development is indeed a big and timely one in the right direction, given the worsening humanitarian crisis that the Rohingya refugees face today. The agreement to let the Rohingya visit Myanmar for a second time as a confidence-building measure is also a prudent move.

However, one cannot help but feel a little apprehensive about Myanmar's reassurances regarding Rohingya repatriation. Since Bangladesh and Myanmar signed the repatriation agreement back in 2017, attempts were made in 2018 and 2019, but these failed because the Rohingya, with memories of the atrocities inflicted upon them still fresh in their minds, did not feel safe going back. The Rohingya fled Rakhine to escape a military crackdown that the UN has termed an act of "ethnic cleansing." Given that the same military junta runs Myanmar today, we cannot help but sympathise with the Rohingya's lack of confidence. There is also the issue of the Rohingya's full recognition as Myanmar citizens – something the Myanmar government has yet to commit to.

But there is no alternative to repatriation – as the Rohingya themselves have been saying. Since the latest and largest exodus in 2017, Bangladesh has been hosting more than 1.2 million Rohingya refugees with its minimal resources and help from the international community. But recent global events have diverted the international community's attention away from this crisis, which has caused a severe setback in aid supply. Earlier this year, the World Food Programme (WFP) had to slash the food assistance for the Rohingya twice as there are not enough funds. The Rohingya have no access to education, crime rates are on the rise, and in a desperate attempt to find a better life, some refugees have even gone on deadly sea voyages.

We have to listen to what the Rohingya want, and all they want are their basic rights restored, recognition as Myanmar's citizens, and a safe and dignified life back in their homeland. We appreciate what China has done to get the ball rolling on Rohingya repatriation, but now the rest of the international community must also step in. Let the humanitarian agencies, who have been working on the ground since the beginning of this crisis, get involved in the process. Together with the international community and the humanitarian agencies, Myanmar must work with Bangladesh to come up with a viable plan that will ensure the Rohingya get what they deserve.

Will policymakers remain blind?

Replace the capacity charge model with pro-people policies

It is frustrating that our policymakers seem as oblivious as ever to the pressing issues debilitating the power sector. According to a recent report by this daily, the burden of capacity charges from idle power plants has turned out to be far greater than what was previously reported. Just two months ago, the Implementation Monitoring and Evaluation Division (IMED) revealed in a report that the government has paid Tk 90,000 crore in capacity charges in the last 14 years. Now, the figure stands at a whopping Tk 99,279 crore. For a nation embroiled in economic turmoil and acute energy poverty, the situation is extremely alarming.

The latest report has revealed that 42 state-run power plants have been sitting idle, producing little to no electricity, while being paid Tk 13,446 crore in operation costs in the past five years. According to CPD Research Director Dr Khondaker Golam Moazzem, the government keeps these inefficient costly power plants to show how they've increased power capacity during their tenure. But what good has this culture of touting about achieving overcapacity done for the nation, when the public's demands continue to be unmet?

Ironically, despite overcapacity, Bangladesh reportedly witnessed the worst electricity crisis this year since 2013, which plunged residents and industries into utter misery. So then, would we be wrong to say that the overcapacity in the power sector – coupled with the disreputable capacity charge model – has only served as a cash cow for a powerful few? What's even more frustrating is that not only is there no sign of positive change, but more power plants are in the pipeline to increase the capacity to 60,000MW by 2040. This is beyond unacceptable.

Time and again, experts have criticised this practice of paying capacity charges to power plants. Numerous studies have shown the problematic nature of power plant contracts, which incentivise private high cost rental power plants to produce less and maximise their profits. The government's IMED report itself deemed it a "model of robbery," though it was later revised excluding the chapter critical of the government's current policies.

Experts have recommended adopting a "no electricity, no pay" clause in power purchase contracts and phasing out dysfunctional power plants. We urge the government to act on these logical recommendations and overhaul the long-festering power sector with energy policies that prioritise – first and foremost – the people. No excuses can justify the authorities' inaction to change this unscrupulous system.

ELECTION ATMOSPHERE

Is it all as calm as it seems?



THE STREET VIEW

Mohammad Al-Masum Molla
is chief reporter at The Daily Star.

MOHAMMAD AL-MASUM MOLLA

The government has just inaugurated the elevated expressway in Dhaka. A three-hour commute, that too on a good day, from one end of the capital to another will take about half an hour when the expressway is fully functional. But the part of the project that is currently open to the public has already reduced commute times by half. People are also reaping the benefits of the metro rail, also waiting to become fully functional. What better than the success of these megaprojects to showcase the ruling regime's achievements and contribution to the welfare of Dhaka's citizens and, consequently, to woo voters?

No doubt these are milestones and have added leathers to Bangladesh's development cap and to the cap of the ruling Awami League. A few more projects like the Padma Bridge Rail Link will be inaugurated soon, most likely as part of the ruling party's election campaign, to show its electorate that it is indeed delivering on its promises. Although there has been no over-electioneering yet, the ruling party appears to have factored the election into its business-as-usual attitude. But for all intents and purposes, Awami League can be said to be in election mode.

As for the ruling regime, it seems to be confident about having tackled the situation for now, with the BNP quietened down and the diplomatic front seemingly calm. As clear as the US' position is on free and fair elections, India's stance is equally unclear.

There is no denying that the typical election atmosphere is absent in the country. Usually, electioneering starts more than a year before the polls. But this time, even with the elections just four months away, there are hardly any campaigns. The absence of the usual hum surrounding elections is becoming more and more noticeable. Aspiring candidates generally warm up to their constituencies with leaflets,



FILE PHOTO: SK ENAMUL HAQ

The absence of the usual hum surrounding elections is becoming more and more noticeable.

posters, and banners. They swarm the streets, shaking hands and hugging people. But this time, there is nothing of the sort – from any of the parties.

Instead, what we see is political parties keenly observing the situation from a distance, unsure about getting out on the streets. Although BNP appeared to be flexing its muscles for a while, pushing for its single demand of holding the election under a non-partisan interim administration, the party appears to have quietened down recently. It managed to gather momentum twice in its campaign to get the government to step down and allow a non-partisan regime to take charge – once last December and then in July this year. Both times were a result of weeks of events and rallies culminating in a large, impressive showdown. Both times, BNP lost its momentum due to lack of coordination and confidence. The opposition on the streets is still trying to resume its campaign and get the momentum going again, but to no avail as of yet.

For Awami League, August is the

month of turning their grief into strength, in remembering how the party's founder and his family were assassinated nearly five decades ago. For BNP, it is a month of embarrassment because, on August 21, 2004, as investigation has proven, a BNP-backed group had attacked an Awami League rally with grenades

Delhi upon an invitation. Although we don't know for certain, politics and elections must have been at the centre of their discussions. Various Indian media outlets have produced numerous reports and opinion pieces about the upcoming election in Bangladesh and India's stance on it, but most were based on unnamed sources.

in an apparent attempt on the life of Sheikh Hasina, who was the opposition leader back then.

After the spectacular failure of the sit-in demo at Dhaka's entry points on July 29, BNP paused in August. This gave the ruling party some breathing space. And, in that time, the filing of cases against the BNP leaders and activists gained speed. The BNP Secretary General Mirza Fakhru Islam Alamgir was accused of vandalism in a case filed about 11 years ago. BNP leaders alleged that the government is trying to revive those cases only so that they can be sent to jail before the national election. If this happens, the party's ability to wage a successful campaign will seriously suffer.

As for the ruling regime, it seems to be confident about having tackled the situation for now, with the BNP quietened down and the diplomatic front seemingly calm. As clear as the US' position is on free and fair elections, India's stance is equally unclear. Recently, a team consisting of members from the ruling Awami League and Jatiya Party visited New

From the current situation, it seems that the government is fully planning to proceed with the election, no matter who joins in or doesn't. The Election Commission has already announced that the next polls could be held in the first week of January 2024. How many political parties will join the election is not yet clear. But one thing is certain: BNP will not be a part of it. The party had boycotted the 2014 polls, hoping that would put into question the legitimacy of the election, and had followed this up with months of violence on the streets. But, as we all know, this only backfired. This time, BNP's strategy will certainly be different.

So far, however, it seems that everyone is merely observing. The BNP is possibly waiting to see how the Western powers, especially the US, react in the coming days. The EU Election Exploratory Mission recently visited Bangladesh and a US team will also drop in on us shortly. Perhaps BNP will want to gear up its campaign to coincide with that visit, as it had done in July.

And as for the people, they have no option but to wait and observe.

Our forgotten elderly



Debra Efroymsen
is executive director of the
Institute of Wellbeing.

DEBRA EFROYMSON

"Why did the chicken cross the road?"
"Because it was still young enough to do so safely!"

When I lived in Hanoi back in the 1990s, occasionally an elderly woman would grasp my arm so that I could help her cross the street. It was not because she was too frail – but because she was afraid of the traffic, which was morphing from mostly gentle, peaceful, non-polluting, and non-intimidating bicycles to featuring many motorcycles and the occasional car.

On a recent visit to Hanoi, I collided with a motorcycle and fell while crossing the street. Fortunately, the road was mostly empty, so I didn't have to worry about someone else running over me. But the couple on the motorbike were greatly concerned on seeing a grey-haired woman lying in the street. Despite not being hurt, after that incident I was terrified of crossing the street.

I also realised, "Oh dear, I am now one of those elderly women who fear street crossings."

In many cities around the world, elderly people literally cannot cross the road because the timing on crossing signals is too brief. At least we don't have that problem in Dhaka, if only due to the absence of functional traffic lights.



ILLUSTRATION:
BIPLOB
CHAKROBORTY

We need to ensure that there are attractive outdoor public spaces in each neighbourhood where the elderly can gather.

For several years, I lived across Saat Masjid Road from Dhanmondi Lake. On many mornings, I would watch an elderly stroke survivor slowly crossing the road so that he could walk along the lake. In the early mornings, many people – including or especially the elderly – go for walks at the lake. The road was fairly empty, which meant that drivers sped along so fast that they could easily have killed someone

on foot. There was no way that the stroke survivor, or other elderly people with health issues, could run to save their lives. But somehow, the right of drivers to speed is considered more important than the right of the elderly (and others) to move about safely.

The more I think about Asian cities, the more I see how they have become

relatives who we do not wish to see trapped in the home. The city should be welcoming for everyone, and should not terrify those who cannot run and leap out of harm's way.

Nor is it just about the scary roads, though that's a big part of it. How are you to move about if you are terrified to walk? Many of our trips are within the neighbourhood; elderly people in particular need social contact and will die early if they are socially isolated. We need to ensure that there are attractive outdoor public spaces in each neighbourhood where the elderly can gather, and that they can reach these places safely on foot. Being able to walk to a place where they can socialise outdoors will improve their mental as well as physical health. And surely we want that for our elderly?

Important as walking is, there is also the potential for the elderly to ride bicycles. In the Netherlands, a significant portion of those in their 70s and 80s continue to cycle. A quarter of trips by those aged 65 and over are by bicycle in that mecca of cycles.

Buses, too, need to be addressed. How easy is it, after all, for an elderly to leap on and off a bus here in Dhaka? Or to climb the steep stairs? Again, why have we designed a transport system that ignores the needs of much of the population?

We talk about child-friendly cities (at least, occasionally). We pay respect to the elderly. But we also allow our cities to become aggressive, fast-paced, and terrifying places, where people not only fear injury and death, but regularly find their fears becoming a reality. We could do much better by our elderly – and benefit everyone else in the process.