

Forsaken and forgotten



A CLOSER LOOK

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At the time of writing this, there was a stray boat with a failed engine and more than 185 Rohingya refugees on board—including women and children—out on the vast Indian Ocean, hoping against hope for timely rescue. The UN has urged the coastal states to save the lives of these helpless refugees, who are on a desperate journey and praying for a miracle.

According to the UNHCR, between January and August of 2023, more than 3,400 distressed Rohingya refugees have undertaken such journeys (by land and by sea), of whom at least 207 have died.

In 2022, of the over 3,700 refugees who had embarked on such daring journeys, 350 either perished or went missing, making the year the deadliest on record for maritime movements in the region since the 2015 Andaman Sea crisis, with at least a 360 percent increase in such journeys in comparison to 2021.

Not that the refugees who finally manage to reach their desired destinations are met with a warm welcome. Take the case of the hundreds of Rohingya who have managed to find safety on the shores of Indonesia's Aceh province. Since their arrival, they have been shunned by the local population who fear an influx of refugees. In the Blang Raya village, the locals even tried to prevent the refugees' boat from docking.

Some call the refugees hopeless, while others vilify them, blame them for their peril, and hold them responsible for undertaking these journeys. But what other options do the Rohingya really have?

To flee the genocide unleashed upon them by the nefarious Myanmar military, the Rohingya have made various risky journeys into Bangladesh in search of safety and protection since the late 1970s. Bangladesh currently hosts close to a million refugees, as registered jointly by the Government of Bangladesh and the UNHCR. With nearly 100 children born in the camps every day, the number of actual Rohingya refugees living in Bangladesh would be much higher if we included those who have not yet been registered.

These refugees live in filthy conditions in the sprawling camps across Cox's Bazar, and some away from the mainland on the isolated island of Bhasan Char. They have no economic opportunities and have to live on the aid they are provided by the international community. But this much-needed aid, too, has seen significant decline in recent years. According to one report, from \$689 million in 2018, international aid for the refugees dwindled to a mere \$383 million in 2022. The food aid for the Rohingya has also been slashed this year by the UN World Food Programme, from \$12 per month to \$8 per month, which comes down to 27 cents per day—or roughly Tk 30.

In order to scourge for food for their growing families, the Rohingya men especially have to resort to various illegal activities, including drug peddling and gang fighting. The women, on the other hand, are often forced into prostitution. The infiltration of the feared Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) has increased instances of turf wars and gang violence, which often result in innocent refugees becoming collateral damage. In the first half of 2023, at least 48 refugees were killed by armed groups in the camps. In 2022,

the number of such killings stood at 40. The actual numbers are thought to be much higher than what is reported. The women and girls are afraid to go and use the toilets after night falls, lest they be forced upon, tortured, or abducted by criminals haunting the camps despite the stringent presence of law enforcers.

The China-mediated discussions on Rohingya repatriation, and the assurances of a pilot project to repatriate the Rohingya to their homeland, gave refugees some hope earlier in the year. But even those discussions seem to have hit a roadblock, with no progress towards this end made in the last few months. While the ruling Myanmar junta has only agreed to give the returning Rohingya a National Verification Card, the demand of the Rohingya for citizenship is a must for their safe repatriation. One ought to keep in mind that at the crux of the Rohingya crisis lies the perpetual and unjustified refusal of successive Myanmar governments to grant them citizenship, which is their due human right. If the Rohingya go back to Myanmar without citizenship, they will potentially be stuck in the same mire of statelessness which has caused their displacement over decades.

At the same time, given the current situation where the junta is losing ground to the ethnic rebel fighters and a civil war is spreading across

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the country, there is also the risk that if the Rohingya go back without citizenship, they might even be branded by the junta as rebel fighters and persecuted as such.

The Rohingya live in a perpetual state of fear and uncertainty, and with no headway in sight regarding their repatriation to their homeland or the restoration of democracy in Myanmar, their future looks even bleaker. With global attention diverted to the war in Europe a couple of years back, the focus on the repatriation of the Rohingya lost intensity. The world is still distracted, preoccupied with concerns other than the fate of one million people stuck in the backwaters of Bangladesh. The Rohingya refugees have morphed into a mere afterthought in the global scheme of things.

As dawn falls over 2023, one can only hope that the stray boat with 185 Rohingya refugees, along with all other such boats out there in the vast watery expanse, reach their intended destination in safety, and that the Rohingya find light and hope as the sun shines over 2024.

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FILE PHOTO: AFP

Resolutions for 2024



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On Sunday, 2023 will come to an end. In the last week of this year, most of us will end up making resolutions, wish for a pair of wings, and draw up lists of what could have been, what was, and what will be. With time, remorse will set in once we realise that we haven't done enough; haven't been good enough; haven't eaten right; or lost enough weight; or even laughed out loud. In spite of regret being a wasted emotion, many of us will still end up listing failures, hoping for our pumpkins to change into carriages while the minute hand marathons towards midnight.

On a pragmatic note, if we were to pinpoint our desires, if we were to become like goalkeepers (with multi-sensory focus), what would be our worthwhile score of all? Would we want to stay fit?

Let's face it. Eating less and battling calories have been pains of the highest order. But little do we know that our minds have everything to do with our appetite. In the early 1950s, a man called Henry Molaison had brain surgery to treat epilepsy. But the procedure damaged his hippocampus, meaning that he couldn't form memories, which ultimately led him to dwell permanently in the present. Strangely, since he had no memory, Molaison ended up constantly eating. He ate plate after plate as his mind, without memory, refrained from sending any cues of satiety or hunger.

Therefore, for those of us with memories, we need to remember that while we can't really turn a lettuce leaf into a full feast, we could train our minds to have the cake and eat it too! After all, it's all in the head.

Or would we want more hope?

Exercise doesn't just pump extra blood to our brains, it also activates our skeletal muscles that secrete a potent mix of hormones and other proteins, which travels to our brains and brings a smile to our faces. This mix represents "hope chemicals" which positively influence our behaviour and also give birth to new brain cells. Therefore, in order to have smarter brains, we need to do what we enjoy the most and also work out. I, for one, have set a goal to trek. My children laugh when I say that trekking is going to be easy for me. Having not moved much throughout my life, my resolution to be challenged by heights seems implausible. To most, I may also appear delusional. But it certainly doesn't hurt to have a dash of an optimism bias.

Would we want to laugh harder?

Many of us have had difficulty spotting the source of our depression. Some have even blamed it on the sun. With winter setting in and the sun setting early, it goes that without exposure to sunlight, we end up getting depressed. As a result, the sale of Vitamin D3 has gone up.

Would we want to imagine?

Imagine I will end up playing the piano, learn to swim, retrain my vocal

chords for music, climb mountains, write at least a hundred pages of a book I have been planning for the longest time ever, etc. All within 2024. This list of mine is naturally a figment of my extreme imagination. Claire Dudeney, an artist, explains Extreme Imagination and shares that a few years ago when she was on a train reading about someone who got a nail stuck in their foot, she passed out. This ability to imagine is called hyperphantasia. Mental imagery, inherently, is a private thing but it can also be experienced by others who can identify with mind images

to our lives, most of us have reconciled with a compromised memory box. Post-Covid, many of us have had trouble remembering names. And the fear of dementia lurks in the dark. How can we slow it down? Some studies suggest that people engaged in education are less likely to suffer dementia. Apparently, people who are intellectually curious and stimulate their brains build up "cognitive reserves" and are protected from mental decline. Sudoku? Wordle? Chess? Brain teasers? Perhaps calculus for people like us who didn't learn enough maths?

Would we want to stay better in 2024 and beyond?

What would help the most? Warm connections? Relationships featuring secure attachments? Casual ties? Or rather, the healing sound of silence? In fact, the answer lies in all of the above.

A 2015 study showed that people aged above 60, who spent three



Exercise doesn't just pump extra blood to our brains, it also activates our skeletal muscles that secrete a potent mix of hormones and other proteins, which travels to our brains and brings a smile to our faces. PHOTO: UNSPLASH

as they are projected and experienced by others. Having no ability to conjure up a mental imagery is called "aphantasia." Therefore, it's essential for us to imagine as much as we can. Let's believe that this extra stretch of imagination will add to our years.

Would we perhaps want to rest better?

If you are having trouble sleeping, you certainly aren't alone. Once, I did everything to get six hours of sleep, even succumbed to wearing a ring to monitor my health, steps, and sleep cycles. But at the end of it all, I walked up to my wellness boss (my youngest daughter) and declared that the ring causes me "performance anxiety" and that I could not bear to be "monitored" by AI. She accepted and, ever since then, I have been able to talk myself to sleep with just a blackout curtain and with my phone safely distanced from my bed.

Quite unfortunately, insomnia comes with an increased risk of depression and other diseases. Quite expectedly, there is a loss of productivity caused by lack of sleep. In the UK alone, insufficient sleep is equivalent to 1.7 million working hours per year, amounting to an economic loss of almost \$50 billion. In the US, 9.9 million working hours are lost every year, equating to a loss of \$411 billion.

Would we want more memories?

With Covid being menacingly close

months doing quilting or digital photography (for 16 hours per week), had more efficient neural function and had, at the end, adopted more youthful patterns than the control group who didn't take part in these activities. This effect lasted for a year for some participants.

In one 2023 study, it was revealed that a group between the ages of 60 and 70 years, through the intervention of music, experienced improvement in memory, neuroplasticity, and grey matter volume.

A 2005 paper titled "Pursuing Happiness: The Architecture of Sustainable Change" shared that 50 percent of our actions are determined genetically; 10 percent depend on life circumstances while the 40 percent is under our control—and we can move the needle as much as we want. Above all, ruminating and cogitating over what's happening and being constantly anxious doesn't help.

For example, if the sign at a beach reads: "Shark sighted today. Enter water at your own risk," then let's also remember that in 2018, sharks killed five people while 3.2 million people die annually merely from inactivity.

Instead of pinning all our hopes on a nebulous future, how about stepping out of our comfort zones to walk the miles, feel the freedom, enjoy the luxury of rest, plan novelties, imagine, set new goals, and invest in memories that truly nurture life and breath?



Improving Computer and Software Engineering Tertiary Education Project

University Grants Commission of Bangladesh

www.ugc.gov.bd

UGC Bhaban, Agargaon Administrative Area, Sher-e-Bangla Nagar, Dhaka-1207

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Request for Expression of Interest (REOI)

Improving Computer and Software Engineering Tertiary Education Project (ICSETEP) under Secondary & Higher Education Division (SHED), Ministry of Education, is to improve Higher Education in CSE/IT Programs of Bangladesh to meet the challenges of Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) and to lead of the country in IT sectors. Asian Development Bank (ADB) is the Project Aid partner of ICSETEP providing of 87.72% of the implementation cost as loan; and University Grants Commission (UGC) of Bangladesh is the executing authority. ICSETEP is seeking specialists through Individual Consultant Selection (National) for its following consulting positions.

Sl.	Name of the Consulting Position	No. of the Position
1	Senior Procurement Specialist (SD-1)	1
2	Procurement Specialist (SD-2)	1
3	Financial Management Specialist (SD-3)	1
4	Gender Specialist (SD-4)	1
5	Higher Education Specialist (SD-5)	1
6	Environment Specialist (SD-6)	1
7	Consultancy services for stipend program manual (SD-7)	1
8	Industry Relations Expert (SD-9)	1

The last date of application is 10 January 2024. The detailed of this REOI as well as application procedure is available at websites of UGC (www.ugc.gov.bd) and ICSETEP (www.icsetep.ugc.gov.bd).

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