

From largest open-air prison to 'greatest open-air graveyard'

Israel is using starvation as a weapon



THE THIRD VIEW

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The heading is a reference to the comments of EU's foreign policy chief Josep Borrell at the opening of an EU conference on humanitarian aid for Gaza in Brussels on March 17. "In Gaza we are no longer on the brink of famine but in a state of famine affecting thousands of people." The EU has accused Israel of using starvation as a weapon. The UN-backed Integrated Food Security Phase Classification, which formally declares famine, said two of its three criteria have already been met. It believes that the third, the number of deaths by starvation, may already be in effect. After the killing of 32,000 Palestinians, of which 13,500 were children, the rest are being starved to death. Their health stands already damaged enough that they may never return to a normal, healthy life.

However unjust the world has been with its discrimination, exploitation, repression, and killings, we have never before seen anything close to the barbarity that Israel is now inflicting upon unarmed Palestinians. The only imagery that comes to mind is what the Nazis did to the Jews during the Holocaust. Where is the difference in what Israelis are doing to Gazans now?

Make a mental picture of what's going on. The Gaza Strip is 41 km long and 6-12 km wide, with a total area of 365 sq-km which is comparable to Dhaka's area of 306.4 sq-km. (But of course, hosting a vastly lower population). Now, imagine that all the population of north Dhaka was forced, under threat of being killed, to gather in the southern half and then is indiscriminately bombed day and night. Imagine that almost all the buildings of north Dhaka stand destroyed and nearly half of those in the south are razed to the ground. Those that remain are unsafe. All the roads are unusable.

Over the years, Arab countries have lost more clout and the reverse is true for Israel, whose power and influence has become unchallengeable. The only solution is through negotiations and not war. But the Arab countries are losing their negotiating power with each passing day. If Israel is able to inflict such barbaric actions on Palestinians, what respect will be left for the Arab countries?



Palestinians with children wait to receive food cooked by a charity kitchen amid shortages of food supplies, in Rafah, in the southern Gaza Strip, February 13, 2024.

PHOTO: REUTERS

There is no electricity and no water. And the whole place is filled with the stench of the dead buried under the rubbles. Those who survived the initial bombing and remained trapped died, one day at a time; shouting, then crying, then whispering to loved ones above who could not remove the rubble and save them due to lack of equipment. Can anyone live a normal life after seeing their loved ones die within reach of themselves, pleading for water and help while they could do nothing? This is the reality—now far worse and getting worse still—that every Palestinian in Gaza is having to live with.

Imagine also that all the hospitals in Dhaka were bombed. Doctors were killed, assaulted, and picked up as pro-Hamas suspects. Consider that in the whole of Dhaka, there is no hospital to go to, there is no supply of medicine or medical aid. There

in Bangladeshi media—the slaughter of 115 starving Palestinians who had lined up for flour and water on February 29 in the southeast of Gaza city and were machine-gunned by Israeli soldiers. Popular US commentator Judge Andrew Napolitano said to the Nobel prize-winning economist Jeffrey Sachs in a recent interview: "This has got to be one of the most reprehensible and public slaughtering that they've [Israeli soldiers] engaged in." Consider the brutality, the utter inhumanity in shooting down people waiting in line for food. The Israeli narrative, that much of the West swallowed, is that Palestinians started rioting and Israeli troops started firing when they felt threatened. Is it possible that emaciated food seekers suddenly become so strong and organised as to become a threat to those who are heavily armed, well-protected, and

the energy to cry." She said how "thousands [of children] have been injured. They may be stuck under rubble. Thousands have lost one or both parents... they are just by themselves managing their younger siblings."

Dr Jeffrey Sachs said, "Israel has deliberately starved the people of Gaza. Starved. I'm not using an exaggeration. I am talking literally starving a population. Israel is a criminal, is in non stop war crime status now. I believe, in genocidal status..."

Take the latest situation in Rafah, a small Gazan border town with Egypt where more than a million and half of the two million Gazans have gathered as a result of Israeli bombing. The Israeli military, on March 15, approved plans to invade Rafah and the Israeli prime minister announced on March 17 that no amount of international pressure will stop him from doing so.

What does ground invasion of Rafah mean? Again, using the example of Dhaka, imagine that in some corner of the city about 15 lakh people—helpless, homeless, starving—have gathered under the open sky. They are waiting to be invaded within days by what can be termed as one of the most brutal armies in the world. Not to mention lethal bombs will rain on them from planes and drones.

Scenes from the bombing of Tokyo, London, and Dresden during World War II, and even the bombing of Vietnamese and Cambodian villages during the Viet Nam war, surface in our minds. But they were wars, and the fighting was between sovereign countries or well-established guerilla outfits. Not a country, armed to the teeth, against a civilian population.

First, the indiscriminate bombing and invasion of Gaza, and now planned ground assault on Rafah against 1.5 million defenceless refugees. It will be nothing short of mass slaughter turning Gaza into the biggest graveyard in the world. This attack will be carried out by soldiers who have been totally desensitised against Palestinians, who have been taught to think of them as non-humans and belonging to some lower species who do not deserve the minimum dignity that a human being does.

Will the world just watch and utter some appropriate platitudes from time to time? Are we to remain silent as we see all the values, morals, and ideals that our civilisation represents being torn to bits by the blood-thirsty regime of Netanyahu? South Africa has set a laudable example by taking Israel to the International Court of Justice. We see massive outpouring of protest in faraway countries in South America, we see heartwarming gatherings of hundreds and thousands in many capitals of Europe. But we do not see similar protests in Africa and Asia, including South Asia. What is most disappointing is the role of the Arab countries. It is the same people. It is happening in their own backyard and has been happening for so long. The history is clear. Over the years, Arab countries have lost more clout and the reverse is true for Israel, whose power and influence has become unchallengeable. The only solution is through negotiations and not war. But the Arab countries are losing their negotiating power with each passing day. If Israel is able to inflict such barbaric actions on Palestinians, what respect will be left for the Arab countries?

A similar question comes upon us. Why have we not had massive public demonstrations condemning what Israel is doing? Why have we been so restrained in expressing our solidarity with the people of Gaza? As a political leader and head of government, our PM has made some very bold statements. But why haven't we, as a people, done as much? Why haven't our intellectuals, the academia, writers, and artists spoken out more? Only in the social media space have we seen vocal protests, for which I praise our young. We, the media, have covered the events but haven't done enough either. We should have done much more.

With each Palestinian who is killed, Israel loses its legitimacy, the West its moral standing, and the rest of us, remaining silent, our humanity.

The hijacking of MV Abdullah was preventable



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It is 2024 and piracy is seeing a resurgence, one of its first victims being the Bangladesh-flagged bulk carrier MV Abdullah.

Pirates in the Indian Ocean were a prominent threat in the 2010s and the cause of considerable international havoc. Somalian pirate action groups were somewhat of an enterprise, with a stock-market-like financing scheme for their operations and coastal village economies dedicated to the occupation. For their part, the pirates do not consider the hijacking of vessels and payment for ransom a crime, but rather a "tax" for fishing in their waters and using their resources. There is a film on the topic, Captain Phillips, which is a good depiction of piracy at the time. Spoiler alert: Tom Hanks ingeniously escapes his captors while the US Marines arrive to extract an American—that most valued of human beings. But that is not the reality for the 23 Bangladeshi men being held by Somali pirates currently.

The world of piracy has changed; following extensive naval cooperation, pirates had all but disappeared from the Indian Ocean. The recent upsurge comes from a more evolved, highly weaponised group of men. In the early 2010s, small groups of pirates attacked ships

within 200 nautical miles of their shore with makeshift weapons like knives and, at most, a gun. The pirates on board the speedboats now come with AK47s, and the motherships that transport the speedboats go deeper into the ocean than ever before, in search of ships that have grown accustomed to a relatively safe ocean.

This certainly seems to be the case for MV Abdullah. The bulk carrier was 575 nautical miles east of Mogadishu, Somalia, and cruising at a speed of 11 knots. AIS data shows that she made no attempts to speed up or zigzag to brush off her assailants, which could only mean that the crew did not spot the pirates in time or gave up too soon. And they seem to have a good reason for this. Video footage shows that the vessel was not following crucial Best Management Practices, if any. A pirate is seen, quite easily, climbing up a hook ladder and onto the ship, and there is not a single razor wire on the railings. A foghorn is commonly used to alert pirates that the ship is taking action, and a water cannon is sprayed to discourage boarding. But the only thing one can hear during this attack is the frantic voices of the crew looking on from the deck and, justifiably, panicking as they

notice the pirate's gun. Best practices would have the crew nowhere near the deck at this point, but safely hiding behind a bullet-proof door at the heart of the ship, called the citadel. While the first officer recounts the majority of the crew hiding there, it begs the question of why the captain and the officer did not follow protocol.

An expert could go over this incident with a fine-toothed comb and find several other

The owner likely believed the route to be relatively secure deep in the ocean, but did they bother to complete a transit risk assessment? Or were they hoping to brave the odds and let MV Abdullah pass through on pure luck? Probably the latter. It is unfortunate because the same company lost a ship to pirates 14 years ago.

gaps in MV Abdullah's policy, but the one that should irk us most is the willing exclusion of armed guards. For obvious reasons, crew members are not allowed to carry guns on merchant vessels. And even if they are, they do not have the authority to use weapons on board. Back in the 2010s, at the height of the Somali piracy crisis, it became common to have a private armed security team or a security escort vessel tagging alongside the ship. There have been countless close calls for

merchant vessels where the mere existence of a security guard and a few warning shots in the air made all the difference. Although that requirement had become lax as piracy went down (a big shout-out to naval patrols in the Indian Ocean), maritime security companies and insurers have been recommending a private armed security team on board for this strait of the water since the end of last year.

The owner likely believed the route to be relatively secure deep in the ocean, but did they bother to complete a transit risk assessment? Or were they hoping to brave the odds and let MV Abdullah pass through on pure luck? Probably the latter. It is unfortunate because the same company lost a ship to pirates 14 years ago. In 2010, the MV Jahan Moni and her 25-member crew were hijacked by pirates 170 nautical miles from Lakkha Island, India. The crew were released only after a reported \$4 million ransom and 101 days in captivity. The ransom amount may even be higher, as it is often not declared to dissuade copycats. It is surprising, then, that despite the lessons in large payout and incredible duress, we sent out Abdullah as literal easy pickings in an ocean where every other ship is maintaining best management practices.

On a positive note, it should be made clear to the families of the hostages that the crew need not fear for their lives. Unless attacked, the pirates have every incentive to keep the crew alive to reap the reward. And although no US Marines are swooping in to save our Bangladeshi brothers, there has been a recent rescue story that shows that international maritime collaborations remain strong. On March 16, the Indian naval warship INS Kolkata intercepted a hijacked vessel, arresting 35 pirates and rescuing all 17 members of the

crew. The bulker had been hijacked over three months ago, and the pirates had set out from Somalia, presumably to use the vessel as a mothership to hijack more ships at sea. The Indian naval warship's move to intercept the ship early shows that the international maritime community is not willing to wait for the Somali piracy threat to blow up; they would much rather nip it in the bud.

So, what can Bangladesh do concerning the 23 of our people currently stranded in Somalia? Collaboration seems to be the key, along with actionable and reliable information. I do not doubt that our navy has already reached out to the European Union Naval Force Operation ATALANTA, the International Maritime Bureau, and other maritime institutions to assess the situation and recommend the next steps forward. Organisations such as Ambrey International, a maritime security and intelligence company, can also provide pertinent information and connections, which can help ease the way forward. With the recent interception of a hijacked ship, it is highly unlikely that Somali pirates will risk taking out another merchant vessel to scour the oceans. So, MV Abdullah and her crew may have to wait until ransom negotiations close.

Though unfortunate, this incident was preventable. The oceans have never been truly safe, whether from the climate or men, but it is perhaps the most turbulent that it has been in modern history. With the Houthis sinking ships in the Red Sea, Russia and Ukraine scattering sea mines all along the Black Sea, and protestors attacking several ports, the big blue is proving to be treacherous for mariners around the world. The only difference is that Bangladesh, of all nations, cannot afford to pay the price of negligence.