



Fire rages on following an Israeli strike on an area designated as a safe zone for displaced Palestinians in Rafah, in the southern Gaza Strip, on May 26, 2024. PHOTO: REUTERS

RAFAH ON FIRE

Is the cult of the US and Israel above int'l law?



Yousef SY Ramadan is the ambassador of Palestine to Bangladesh.

YUSEF SY RAMADAN

On Tuesday, a new round of negotiations were reportedly set to start for a ceasefire to facilitate the exchange of detainees in Gaza. The talks were set to happen after a shocking, blood-soaked overnight attack by Israel in Rafah, where burnt bodies, including those of children, could be seen being pulled out by rescuers. In all the previous attempts made to reach temporary truces and a limited exchange of hostages and prisoners, there was a feverish race between the chances of success and failure. Benjamin Netanyahu has always been winning, and the mediators have been continuing the attempts without success.

But the horror in Rafah has sparked global outrage, as it should. The truth of Israel's cruelty is coming out day after day. UN Chief Antonio Guterres is set to hold an emergency meeting to discuss the strike that Netanyahu terms a "tragic mistake." When will this tyrant, Netanyahu, pay reparations for his lies that have killed thousands and thousands of innocents? The new attempt at a ceasefire will not be the last, but its failure will open new gates to continue the war, bleeding, destruction and funerals—not only for the Palestinians, but for Israel as well. The future is bleak and frightening.

On the optimistic side, the world is now slowly opening its eyes to the genocide in Gaza, coming to terms with the need for Israel's accountability, the need to recognise Palestinians' right to self-determination. All those who have unilaterally supported Israel are now shocked with the extent of its cruelty. After the strikes in Rafah, French President Emmanuel Macron said he was outraged. Germany, a staunch supporter of Israel, described the "images of charred bodies," as "unbearable."

Netanyahu and the US are becoming increasingly isolated. Prior to the Israeli airstrikes in Rafah, the US and Israel threatened anyone who attempted to end their megalomaniac killings of the Palestinians on Palestinian land.

Last week, for the first time in history, the International Criminal Court (ICC) received a request for arrest warrants against the prime minister and defence minister of Israel, the closest ally of the US—the champion of human rights. Three European countries—Ireland, Norway and Spain—announced formal recognition of Palestinian statehood in historic landmark decisions that are to take effect on May 28, and both Israeli and US politicians lashed out at the decisions like a pack of wolves.

The recognition of Palestinian statehood would serve to create more momentum in Europe, and in the short term, it can also lead to new levels of communications between the European countries and Palestinian leaders. These developments are, of course, minor as they cannot halt what's happening in Gaza, but they do still serve as small beacons of hope for the Palestinians who continue to face the most difficult national movement and fight for existence in modern history.

According to Haaretz, Israeli Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich urged Netanyahu to take punitive measures against every country that recognised Palestinian statehood, by building tens of thousands of settlements in the West Bank, and revoking permits of the Palestinian Authority officials and imposing economic sanctions on their families.

So, Netanyahu and his army of far-right thugs aim to "punish" the nation states of Spain, Ireland and Norway, by accelerating its invasion of Rafah and confiscating wages for Palestinians, while Israeli soldiers throw the Holy Quran in fire in Gaza, as shown in a viral video recently.

Washington, a mouthpiece for Israel, also pushed back against the three European countries. White House National Security Council Spokesperson Adrienne Watson said President Joe Biden is a "strong supporter of a two-state solution," but argued that a Palestinian state should not be recognised "through unilateral recognition," and instead should be "realised through direct negotiations between the parties." Netanyahu has made it more than clear that he does not want a permanent ceasefire. He will prolong the war, fighting his decisive and final battle.

Joe Biden, who loves talking about the crisis in Gaza like it's some unfortunate earthquake and not a

man-made disaster of his own backing, condemned the ICC arrest warrant request against his favourite war criminal Bibi, calling the decision "outrageous." He's now eerily silent after images of real beheaded children by Israeli airstrikes have come out. Where are his crocodile tears for the real beheaded children of Gaza?

Before this massacre in Rafah, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, who is directly complicit in this genocide—constantly appeasing Netanyahu—welcomed the idea put forth by Senator Lindsey Graham to sanction the ICC. Many other US lawmakers, like Republican Congressman Brian Mast, went on to delegitimise the court itself and openly threaten consequences, writing on X, "America doesn't recognize the International Criminal Court, but the court sure as hell will recognize what happens when you target our allies." The entitlement embodied in these statements cannot be overstated.

Washington and Israel's response can be summed up in one sentence: "To hell with international laws." The US and its ally, the apartheid regime of Israel, truly believe that they are above international law. There should be no question of that anymore.

The whole of Israeli society has now ingrained in it a bloodthirsty desire for war. As fire burnt Palestinians alive, Israelis celebrated the Jewish holiday of Lag BaOmer, where prominent figures and members of the Israeli public viewed the deadly fire in Rafah as a symbolic way to celebrate the bonfire.

Israelis mocked the shocking images from Rafah,

A viral video of an Israeli soldier also shows that 100,000 reserve soldiers will not hand over Gaza to any Palestinian entity. The unnamed soldier threatened a military coup against Israeli Defence Minister Yoav Gallant, saying, 'All those little kids who stepped on our soldiers' and brothers' heads when they stepped into Gaza, we will kill them. No one will be alive.'

including the one of a man holding up the body of a child with no head. A member of a popular right-wing Israeli Telegram group shared the photo, writing, "Fresh chicken 1 shekel a kilo." The barbarity has crossed all our worst nightmares.

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When these video accounts of the Israeli soldiers and their intentional targeting of civilians is so out in the open, Biden's incoherent babble of "two-state solution" no longer provides cover for the US support for genocide. The US knows, and knowingly backs, Israel's intention to kill the Palestinians and destroy Palestinian civilian structures—from villages to camps. We refuse to be fooled any longer by the masquerades of "democracy" and "human rights." The world's most outrageous coalition, the US and Israel, have shown their true faces. It is more fitting to call them gangsters than government officials.

More and more countries are starting to see that, and a day will come when they will not be able to hide anymore. There's a saying by former US President Abraham Lincoln, "You can fool...all of the people some of the time, but you cannot fool all of the people all of the time." The world will not be fooled. The world defeated Nazism. The world defeated apartheid. The world will defeat this cult, but the most painful question whirling in our minds is how many innocent Palestinian civilians—children—will get massacred before that day arrives.

FOREIGN FIGHTERS IN MYANMAR

Implications for the region



Professor Imtiaz Ahmed is executive director at the Centre for Alternatives in Dhaka, Bangladesh. He can be reached at imtiazalter@gmail.com.

IMTIAZ AHMED

Al-Jazeera came out with a piece of news on May 17, titled "Western volunteers join the battle against Myanmar's military regime." The news otherwise heralds a new dimension to the three-year-old civil conflict in Myanmar. But more importantly, it sounds almost like a repetition of what happened earlier in Afghanistan, which also saw a flow of Western (and Eastern) volunteers before the United States intervened militarily, which, in the end, killed thousands of Afghans and devastated the country. However, following the military intervention, the US government spent \$2.26 trillion, with the most significant portion—nearly \$1 trillion—consumed by the Overseas Contingency Operations budget for the Department of Defense, mainly to benefit the country's military-industrial complex. Should the news then concern the countries in the region that something similar is in the offing in Myanmar, unless contained in its infancy?

The question merits attention for two reasons. Firstly, the NUG/PDF, in its conflict against the Myanmar military or Tatmadaw, is overtly and covertly supported by the Western powers, including the US. Secondly, the Burma Act, declared by the US in April 2022,

the case of KNF, if any, seemed dubious and half-hearted. However, having native mercenaries is the new trend, primarily because of the decline in getting foreign mercenaries and the cost of hosting such mercenaries.

The case of foreign fighters operating in Myanmar is more problematic because the members would require access through one of the five neighbouring countries, namely Bangladesh, China, India, Laos and Thailand, unless, of course, the fighters venture through the life-risking paths of the Andaman Sea and the Bay of Bengal. Not sure about Laos and Thailand because of their porous borders, but one can be sure that Bangladesh, China and India will not encourage or entertain such foreign fighters entering Myanmar through their respective territories. This is mainly because none of these three countries benefit from the civil conflicts in Myanmar. On the contrary, all three wish to see an early resolution of the civil conflicts. China providing access to "Western volunteers" is out of the question. India, too, would be opposed because of the situation in the northeast, which is already infected with various insurgency movements. Similarly, given the economic burden it

commonality between Bangladesh, China and India: all aspire and thrive on stability. It is this commonality, particularly in the backdrop of civil conflicts in Myanmar and the US' declaration of the Burma Act, and now with foreign fighters in Myanmar, that creates space for reactivating the BCIM Forum for Regional Economic Cooperation, a 25-year-old entity initially called the Kunming Initiative. The BCIM Forum is indeed mandated to work on "economic cooperation," but how can states cooperate on economic issues without peace and stability in the region? The latter is a minimum condition for economic cooperation to thrive within and among states. Instability otherwise, if not contained, is bound to create greater instability, and often it becomes too late to stop the tragic consequences of such instability. There are ample examples in the world from which to take lessons. Bangladesh certainly would have an added interest in reactivating the BCIM Forum and reproducing stability, indeed, for the repatriation of the Rohingya and resolving the Rohingya crisis once and for all.

But how does one reactivate the BCIM Forum? This should be done in stages, combining Track 1 and 2 diplomacies. There are two reasons for this. Firstly, a trust deficit exists between China and India despite China being India's largest trading partner, surpassing the US in FY2023-24. The trust deficit arises primarily from territorial disputes, and the two sides remain rigid in finding solutions. There are also mindset issues, with Indian policymakers' propensity towards the West and democratic values and the Chinese policymakers'



Volunteer members of Karenni insurgent forces walk in Moe Bye in Kayah State, Myanmar on November 12, 2023. FILE PHOTO: REUTERS

gave "discretionary authority" to the US president to interpret the act liberally, mainly when providing military aid to ethnic armed organisations (EAOs). Both reasons, in combination, probably encouraged Western volunteers to slip into Myanmar for adventure, dedication, and profit, albeit taking advantage of the US' concern for civil rights in Myanmar, notwithstanding its lopsidedness and naïveté.

A moot question then arises: how should the countries in the region respond to the arrival of foreign fighters in Myanmar, numerically insignificant though they may be at this stage? It is crucial to keep in mind here that having "foreign fighters" or mercenaries in conflict zones is not out of the norm. Instead, it has become the rule. In almost all conflict zones, whether Congo or Ukraine, mercenaries actively aid one side or the other. Apart from foreign mercenaries, there are also native mercenaries who are exploiting and profiting from the situation. One good example would be the Kuki-Chin National Front (KNF), the banned ethno-nationalist armed militant group in Bangladesh based in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. Recently, they trained and supplied weapons not to their people but to the members of Jama'atul Ansar Fil Hindal Sharqiya, an Islamist militant group.

Put differently, conflict zones, as is the case in Myanmar with the NUG/PDF and the EAOs—albeit mostly separately, fighting against the Tatmadaw—create space for the mercenaries (both local and foreign) to have a role, indeed, in the backdrop of a surge in the proliferation of arms and ammunitions. But then, without some powers' blessings, if not sponsorship, whether internal or external, it becomes almost impossible for mercenaries to become active in conflict zones. This is precisely why the KNF did not make much headway, mainly when the Bangladesh government directed its security agencies to handle the situation with zero tolerance. External sponsorship, in

is faced with as a result of the Rohingya exodus, with the goal being a quick repatriation of the latter, Bangladesh can hardly afford to support foreign fighters in Myanmar. However, this may not be the case with the Tatmadaw, not even with some international actors, particularly the US. Let me explain.

There is a general perception that humans are rational beings. While this is largely true, experience tells us that some humans, including states, are driven by what psychologists call "motivated rationality"—reason driven by motivation (Ezra Klein, Why We're Polarized, Pg 100-101). Keeping this in mind, it is worth pointing out that not all humans or states thrive on stability and peace. Some humans or states thrive on instability and conflicts. Such is the case when the reproduction basis of the state's economy depends on arms production and purchases or what is now referred to as the military-industrial complex or military-business complex. The US is a good representation of the former, and this is precisely why President Dwight Eisenhower, in his farewell speech, warned the American people of its menace, economically as well as socially.

The Myanmar military, on the other hand, is a good representation of the military-business complex. Some forms of chaos and conflicts within Myanmar rationalise its importance and presence in contradistinction from having a civil authority in power. At the same time, it is no wonder that international watchdogs have repeatedly singled out the Tatmadaw for profiting from narco-production, mainly synthetic drugs called "yaba" (or madness medicine) and its concentrated form "ice" (Imtiaz Ahmed, Myanmar, Narco-terrorism, Rohingya, and the World). In this respect, one ironically finds a commonality between the military-industrial complex of the US and the military-business complex of Tatmadaw. Both thrive on instability of some form or other.

However, contrary to the positions of the US and Myanmar, there is a

proclivity toward communism and civilisational values. Yet, both countries have gone a long way in shedding their mistrust and have started cooperating on many issues, including in the BRICS, SCO, Ukraine-Russia conflict, and de-dollarisation; even with respect to the UN voting on Myanmar, the two countries have voted identically.

Secondly, the BCIM Forum as a platform for "economic cooperation" was a non-starter. Similar was the fate of SAARC. As developing economies, protecting old markets and searching for new ones became the sole concern for policymakers in India and China. Given the size and double-digit growth of China's economy 10 years back, it was natural for India to be apprehensive of the BCIM Forum. For Bangladesh and Myanmar, it was doubly so in the backdrop of China's growth momentum and India's rising economic surge. Indeed, critical setbacks for BCIM and SAARC resulted from a predominance of economists in policymaking and an economic or linear understanding of regional cooperation. More emphasis should have been placed on education and people-to-people exchanges to renew and alter the mindset before embarking on economic issues.

But time has changed. The conditions that fostered zero-sum competition and restricted Indo-China cooperation are no longer there. Geopolitical transformation, coupled with the fact that India's economy has gained momentum and is destined to emerge as a polar in the multipolar world, creates space for a renewed relationship between India and China. And there lies the merit of revisiting and reactivating the BCIM Forum. Given the crisis in Myanmar and how it is unfolding with speed and sophistication, the quicker the BCIM Forum is revisited and reactivated, the better the prospect of fostering stability in the region. Anything less will reproduce instability and create space for "Western volunteers" or foreign fighters, including local mercenaries, to meddle and thrive in Myanmar.