

We are Asiya: A battle lost, but the fight lives on



Sarzah Yeasmin
is a contributor to The Daily Star and works on the intersections of education and public policy. She is an alumna of Harvard University.

SARZAH YEASMIN

Asiya's sister cried, her voice shook as she spoke with a journalist, her sweet southwestern Bangla accent rang in my ears—a very familiar voice. It could have been my aunt, my grandmother, my cousin, someone very dear and beloved. I grew up with this warm accent wrapped around me. My family is from Jashore, and Magura is not too far. I have always identified with that place, and always will, even though I am not sure if I'll be able to bring myself to visit my real homeland again. I romanticise the idea that, perhaps one day, I'll be buried in my family graveyard there, and that'll be the next—and last—time I visit.

Injuries ran deep, the unthinkable cruelty shattered Asiya's tiny limbs and life. Asiya's sister said that even if she survived, she wouldn't have any value. Asiya didn't live to hear her sister's words, she didn't live to bear the burden of cruelty, but she fought valiantly. This is heartbreak upon heartbreak: even a child is not spared from having her value placed between her legs. Even Asiya's lonesome and gut-wrenching fight to return to this world alive was not enough to fulfil the measure of value placed on girls and women. Sexual harassment and trauma often ushers a girl child into "womanhood"—a painful, shocking and sometimes deadly experience is often the passage. Can we imagine the physical pain Asiya lived through during her last days? She lived through all of it, and it took three cardiac arrests to end her battle for life. It is a testament of her power and indomitable spirit, but why do we need our children to be so strong?

In this country, if a girl or a woman is not part of the rape statistics, she is lucky—at least, so far. It can happen to anyone, at any time, and can be done by anyone.

No one, and nothing, is off-limits. Family members, elders, significant others, people we have just met, strangers—the list is non-exhaustive. Who hasn't been shamed or looked at because of the slight growth on the chest, and shamed because it was too little or too much for the age? If we start collecting data on body shaming alone, we can build one of the largest psychological case studies in history—an undeniable dataset of humiliation and hatred. Asiya did not need to be yet another cautionary tale for this nation. She was supposed to spend some time with her sister and then go back home. She was supposed to be colouring the pictures in her picture book, and the only borders she should have known were the borders outlining the figures in that book. And yet, we sent her to fight on the border between life and death and now she has drawn her final line—one that will never be crossed again.

Being raped is a matter of chance—being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Think about all the times you could have been raped, but weren't. Think about all the times you could be raped in the future, and if you have been raped and still living with the experience, then you are forced into thinking all the things you could have done differently to avoid bringing the unfortunate event upon yourself: only if you didn't get out that day, only if you didn't stay home that day, only if you didn't catch the eye of that one relative who lured you with chocolates so that they could inappropriately touch you, only if you didn't say yes to the guy who called you pretty, only if you didn't say no to the advances of the popular neighbour guy who blocked your way, only if you didn't get late at work that day.

Now, since women have to take the



FILE ILLUSTRATION: NAHFIA JAHAN MONNI

responsibility of provoking men, there is always a "because," a rationale—she was loud, too out there, her clothes were tight, her breasts too voluptuous. And if she's a respectable woman, why was she out so late or so early? What was a child's responsibility here, and what was Asiya's sister's responsibility, who was forcefully sent back to live with abusive in-laws?

Women are expected to plan their lives

around the possibility of being assaulted/raped. Every step is a checkpoint. Shall we impart the same lesson to our children? We can teach them what's good touch and bad touch, we can teach them not to interact with strangers, we can teach them to say no to "friendly" offers, but what else? Who is responsible for making sure that no one strangles another Asiya, suffocates her, whisks her away in the middle of the night

from her sleep, cuts and penetrates through her, puts her lifeless body on life support and murders her? The real question is, what can we teach the perpetrators and potential perpetrators? What is the responsibility of the one with power? Has revenge, retaliation and the death penalty ever worked?

It's easy to capitalise on Asiya's unfathomable suffering and death. Many influential people will speak, as they should, but please, can we stop putting people on a pedestal just because they're doing the bare minimum? When we fail our women, we fail our children. We fail the next generation, and we fail the future even before it can happen.

I wanted Asiya to live against all odds, and I wish she knew that she is a warrior and carried all our fears and pain even when she had no means to bear the weight we put on her. The youngest of this country are fighting the hardest battles. We have turned children into child brides, malnourished mothers, sex slaves, beggars in the streets, sweatshop workers, cleaners in people's homes, victims and survivors on the edge of death, stopping their journey even before they could dream of having a life. Asiya's tiny hands will never hold the life and future that we ripped away from her.

They say the heaviest coffins are those of children. Our hearts break for Asiya, but are our hearts strong enough to stick around and fight, or will we catch the next flight and leave? Leaving the fight is a privilege, but I will not blame any woman who is exhausted and doesn't have it in her to fight. We don't have to do the heavy lifting today. It's okay to mourn, to rest; resting is resistance as well. But the next day, we must come back so that Asiya's legacy is stronger than ever. This should never have been her battle. She was meant to grow, to dream, to paint the world in whatever colours that gave her joy. We are not too far from Asiya; we were once like Asiya, we love someone like Asiya, we are Asiya. Could Asiya be our turning point, our guiding force directing us towards justice? Will this be the moment we finally act on our words, "Enough is enough?" The blood of our daughters will drown us if we don't fight back. We women, we as a nation, owe this fight to ourselves.

Will the UN chief's visit put the focus back on the Rohingya issue?



BLOWIN' IN THE WIND

Dr Shamsad Mortuza
is professor of English at Dhaka University.

SHAMSAD MORTUZA

UN Secretary-General António Guterres's ongoing visit to Bangladesh has given us an opportunity to explore international dimensions to our national crises. An editorial in this daily shared optimism over finding a lasting solution to the influx of more than 1.1 million Rohingya refugees into our country from Myanmar. Perhaps Friday's iftar with the refugees in the camps in Cox's Bazar would further compel the UN chief to resolve the crisis and reconsider their actions.

The Rohingya refugees in the Cox's Bazar camps are about to face a situation worse than they have been enduring. Funding shortfalls have prompted the UN World Food Programme (WFP) to halve monthly food rations for Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh—from \$12.50 per person to just \$6—from next month. In real terms, \$6 a month is about Tk 24 a day—not even enough for a banana and

an egg. Bangladesh's recent economic health card is not promising enough to suggest that the host country can bear the burden of these stateless people for a long time without any international assistance. The funding cut is likely to lead to malnutrition, which carries far more dangerous implications. Rohingya leaders and aid workers have already voiced their concerns that the despair is likely to feed militancy.

We have already seen reports of thousands of refugees who, frustrated by poverty, idleness and insecurity, have become prone to armed struggle. A Reuters investigation last year revealed that the promise of income or purpose has drawn many disillusioned young men, leading to the recruitment of 3,000 to 5,000 Rohingya fighters from the refugee camps. Some even joined factions aligned with their former persecutors to fight ethnic

rebels, while others engaged in gang violence within the camps. Officials stationed at the Rohingya camps expressed their helplessness, as they know more than anyone the dire consequences of the fund cuts. It's uncertain whether the impact of hunger will soon transcend beyond health and affect stability and peace.

Any immediate solution to the Rohingya crisis is unlikely because of the slow nature of the judicial process. The Gambia, backed

legal delays. Substantive arguments began in late 2023 when several nations intervened as the idea of genocide concerned them. Bangladesh strategically refrained from any formal involvement, preferring diplomatic solutions through China and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), for instance. The case is important to keep the global optics on the Rohingya crisis, and we will eventually need all the diplomatic efforts as well as action from the UN Security Council

Bangladesh's recent economic health card is not promising enough to suggest that the host country can bear the burden of these stateless people for a long time without any international assistance. The funding cut is likely to lead to malnutrition, which carries far more dangerous implications. Rohingya leaders and aid workers have already voiced their concerns that the despair is likely to feed militancy.

by the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), filed the Rohingya genocide case at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in 2019, holding Myanmar accountable for the 2017 ethnic cleansing. The ICJ has imposed some provisional measures, but the progress has been painstakingly slow due to Myanmar's

for justice to be delivered. Without sustained international pressure, the Rohingya risk becoming a forgotten crisis, overshadowed by other global events.

The attempts of the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) for Rohingya repatriation have seen hardly

any success. The lack of credibility and fund shortage will further exacerbate the situation on the Bangladesh side. This will only add to the security concerns mentioned earlier. A UK government report shows that many of the refugees have fallen prey to human trafficking as they try to leave the country, often using fake Bangladeshi IDs. The relaxation of police verification for obtaining national IDs has made it easier to abuse the system for the refugees. The identification may either help them assimilate into the mainstream Bangladeshi society or explore overseas travels through criminal syndicates. The lack of bare minimum food funds, if unchecked, can have a ripple effect.

We hope that the UN secretary-general's iftar at the Rohingya camps will help him adopt a balanced role, learning from the experience of fund and food shortages in Gaza and their domino effect. The UN must facilitate not only humanitarian aid but also seek sustainable solutions, ensuring refugee rights, upholding community concerns, and pressuring Myanmar for meaningful refugee repatriation. We expect the UN in a more balanced role to remain a credible actor in resolving one of the most prolonged refugee crises in recent history and their geopolitical atrophies.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

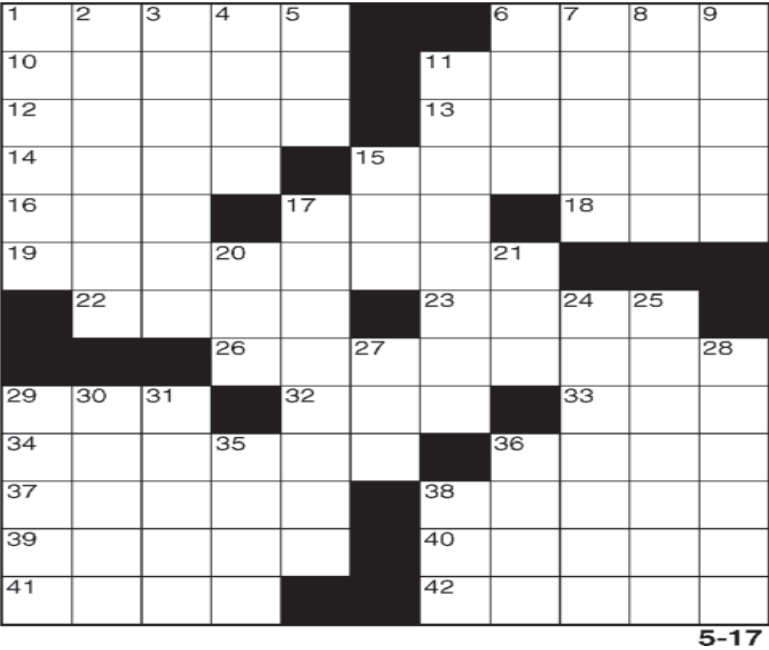
- 1 Lab liquids
- 6 Ernst's art
- 10 Twangy
- 11 Wise ones
- 12 Creamy color
- 13 Russian range
- 14 Parcel (out)
- 15 Petite
- 16 Commotion
- 17 Match part
- 18 Put away
- 19 Cosmetics counter buy
- 22 At hand
- 23 Melodies
- 26 Oil-checking item
- 29 Chemist's place

DOWN

- 1 Zoo resident
- 2 Yielded
- 3 Uranium-235, for one
- 4 Be bold
- 5 Cunning
- 6 Move quickly

DOWN

- 7 Banded rock
- 8 Perry's assistant
- 9 Useful skill
- 11 Travel need
- 15 Maui souvenir
- 17 Vociferous
- 20 Blue
- 21 Model buy
- 24 Last name for Lucy
- 25 Fraud perpetrator
- 27 Poker prize
- 28 Massages
- 29 Places last
- 30 Barcelona buddy
- 31 Hall of Fame catcher
- 35 Lusty look
- 36 Extinct bird
- 38 Collar



WEDNESDAY'S ANSWERS

C	A	T	E	R		A	D	D	E	R
H	E	A	V	E		P	E	E	V	E
A	R	M	E	D	F	O	R	C	E	S
P	I	E		E	A	R		O	R	E
S	E	R	V	A	N	T		D	E	N
		E	L	S		J	E	S	T	
C	O	S	T	S		B	U	S	T	S
O	N	T	O		H	E	N			
A	L	A		C	A	L	O	R	I	E
R	E	N		A	L	L		A	N	A
S	A	L	E	S	F	O	R	C	E	S
E	V	E	N	T		W	H	E	R	E
R	E	E	D	S		S	O	R	T	S