

Rohingya crisis sidelined at ASEAN Summit

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The Rohingya crisis was sidelined in the ASEAN Summit in the Malaysian capital of Kuala Lumpur on October 26-28, despite it being a regional humanitarian challenge affecting Bangladesh the most.

The event carried special significance due to the presence of major global powers, including the US, China, India, Russia, Japan, South Korea, Australia, New Zealand, Brazil, Canada and South Africa as well as the heads of the World Bank, IMF, ILO and FIFA.

The timing of the event was also important given the global geopolitical shift, the tariff war and the presence of US President Donald Trump, who witnessed the signing of a peace deal between Thailand and Cambodia.

It acceded Timor-Leste and expanded ASEAN, while upgrading trade agreements, especially with China and across the region, to position ASEAN in key global value chains.

The summit addressed regional security issues, including maritime tensions, border disputes, and stability in neighboring countries, but not the Rohingya crisis.

“This is very frustrating,” said Nay San Lwin, co-chair of the Arakan Rohingya National Council (ARNC).

The summit was focused on trade and the economy.

“Everybody was busy with what Trump says – the US president too took credit for the Thailand Cambodia peace deal. But, what did he do for the Rohingya? Don’t they have right to live lives with dignity and

basic rights?”

The one positive aspect was that Myanmar’s Senior General Min Aung Hlaing was not invited to the event.

The Myanmar crisis and its fallouts including the Rohingya have been a much deeper and old regional problem, but global leaders have totally forgotten it, he told The Daily Star from Germany.

While about 750,000 Rohingya fled Myanmar’s Rakhine State and took shelter in Bangladesh in 2017, more than 150,000 of them again fled amid conflicts between the Myanmar junta and the rebel group Arakan Army since 2024.



FILE PHOTO

According to the UN, close to 3.6 million people are estimated to be internally displaced across Myanmar, as the ongoing conflict between the Myanmar junta, which took control of power in 2021, and various non-state armed groups continues to force civilians to flee their homes.

Aid agencies have repeatedly warned of starvation in war-torn Myanmar’s Rakhine State, as well as in the refugee camps in Bangladesh where some 1.2 million Rohingya live.

Of the total demand of \$934 million for the Rohingya humanitarian assistance in Bangladesh, only 38 percent was met this

year.

The summit adopted a four-page declaration, but there’s not a single word mentioning “Rohingya”, said Charles Santiago, co-chair of the ASEAN Parliamentarians for Human Rights.

“This means ASEAN does not think the Rohingya is a Myanmar problem. It is indeed a Myanmar problem creating a challenge for the whole region,” he told The Daily Star from Malaysia.

Though Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand have a sizeable number of Rohingya, Bangladesh is bearing the major brunt of the refugee crisis.

As a regional bloc, ASEAN has to take the responsibility to help address the crisis, he added.

“ASEAN cannot overlook a genocide that took place in its member country. Again, now the Myanmar military is preparing for the elections in December, but ASEAN does not appear to have any say on it,” Santiago said.

The UN, the EU and many other rights bodies are saying that the Myanmar elections will be a sham in a civil war and will not send election observers.

But ASEAN is likely to eventually endorse the Myanmar junta election.

“Thus, ASEAN is failing the Rohingya and the civilians of Myanmar seeking democratic rights. I would urge ASEAN to come out of rhetoric and act to protect the Rohingya and other refugees emanating out of Myanmar and oppose the genocidal events,” said Santiago, also a former member of the Malaysian parliament.

Metro rail hits another bump

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Metro rail operations were suspended on the Agargaon to Shahbagh section last night after a technical issue was reported around 9:10pm.

“Metro rail operations remained suspended following a jerk on the Bijoy Sarani-Farmgate part,” Ahsan Ullah Sharifi, deputy director (public relations) of Dhaka Mass Rapid Transit Line-6, told The Daily Star at 9:45pm without providing further details.

According to a metro rail official involved in the operation, the incident prompted the authorities to halt services between Agargaon and Shahbagh.

However, metro services on the Uttara-Agargaon portion continued uninterrupted, said the official, wishing anonymity.

Hours before yesterday’s incident, the metro rail authorities issued a notice reassuring passengers about the safety of its operations. In a statement, Dhaka Mass Transit Company Ltd (DMTCL), the implementing and operating agency of the metro rail project, confirmed that the service was operating in full compliance with all safety regulations.

“Therefore, passengers are kindly requested not to be concerned about safety,” reads the statement signed by AKM Khairul Alam, director (administration) of DMTCL.

This disruption follows a tragic incident on Sunday, when a bearing pad fell from a metro rail pillar in the Farmgate area, killing a pedestrian and injuring two others.



Political rift over July charter widens

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of the views of the “biggest stakeholder” showed that both the commission and the government had favoured a few selected political groups. Some of these groups, they claimed, were now trying to exploit the situation for their own interests.

By moving ahead without political consensus, the government was putting the entire political environment at risk, they warned. Some even questioned the chief adviser’s intention to hold the election in February.

POLIS FIRST: BNP

Speaking at the Jatiya Press Club yesterday, BNP Secretary General Mirza Fakhru Islam Alamgir said the commission had “deceived the people and political parties” through its final recommendations.

“We were surprised to see that the issues on which we disagreed, and for which we gave notes of dissent, were completely ignored,” he said.

Urging Yunus to correct the record by including the BNP’s dissenting notes, he said the chief adviser made a commitment to hold an acceptable election and carry out the necessary reforms.

“The parliament to be formed through that election will be the place to resolve all these crises.... If there is any deviation from this, or if you [Yunus] go beyond it, you will have to take full responsibility,” he warned.

BNP Standing Committee member Salahuddin Ahmed echoed similar frustrations, saying the commission’s proposals did not reflect the

discussions held with political parties nor align with the July charter signed on October 17.

“The report only contains the commission’s proposals. It does not mention what the political parties recommended, where consensus was reached, or where notes of dissent were recorded,” he said while speaking at a seminar.

“If this [omission of notes of dissent] was their plan all along, what was the point of 11 months of dialogue?”

He alleged that several issues now proposed for referendum were never discussed by the commission.

REFERENDUM FIRST: JAMAAT

Jamaat Nayeb-e-Ameer Syed Abdullah Muhammad Taher yesterday reiterated the party’s demand that the government hold the referendum before the national polls, warning that any delay could endanger the July charter’s implementation.

The referendum and the election are of different nature; one concerns reform, the other state power, he said at a briefing at Jamaat’s central office in Moghbazar.

“Even if, for any reason, the national election cannot be held on time, even though we believe it will, InshaAllah, the July charter must still be passed,” he said.

Jamaat Secretary General Mia Golam Porwar also called for an immediate announcement of the referendum date.

“As the head of the government and the consensus commission, it is his [Yunus] duty to dispel the

uncertainty hovering over the nation,” Porwar said. “Only he can clear the clouds from the political sky and give the country hope.”

IMPLEMENTATION FIRST: NCP

NCP Convener Nahid Islam said there was “no scope” for holding the national election unless the July charter was implemented.

“We also want a quick election. An elected government is necessary for stability in the country. Trust is also necessary, and for this reason, the reform process needs to be completed quickly,” he said at an event in Rangpur yesterday.

Nahid reiterated the NCP’s demand for a clear roadmap for the trials of those responsible for killings during the July uprising, reconstitution of the Election Commission, and assurance of a level playing field.

“The EC is losing the confidence of the public and political parties. These issues must be resolved quickly if an election is to be held in February,” he said.

“If any obstruction or delay comes from the government’s side, it will have to face the people,” he warned.

Calling the current situation a “multidimensional crisis”, Nahid said corruption, extortion, land grabbing, and “social fascism” had re-emerged after August 5. “The only way forward is unity,” he said.

At a separate press conference, the party’s Chief Coordinator Nasiruddin Patwary alleged that the BNP was trying to “sabotage” the July charter and “bring back the Awami League”.

“For 15 years, they couldn’t shake Hasina’s chair....,” he said.

its exclusion from the political process. “Yunus must reinstate the Awami League to give Bangladeshis the choice they deserve,” she told AFP. **‘DON’T FORGET HER PAST’** Chief Adviser’s Press Secretary Shafiqul Alam has said that those interviewing Hasina should not forget her past actions.

Speaking at a press conference at the Foreign Service Academy in the capital yesterday, he cited UN reports highlighting human rights violations by Hasina. “Moreover, reports from two other international media outlets suggest she gave orders to commit killings,” he said.

“In the 21st century, no one has committed more murders or human rights violations than Sheikh Hasina,” he said.

Asked about the government’s stance on Hasina’s interviews in foreign media, Shafiqul said that the International Crimes Tribunal could comment on the matter.

“We have not yet read the interview. We will comment after reviewing it,” he said.

About Hasina’s call for boycotting elections if the Awami League is barred from contesting, Shafiqul also said he did not foresee any issues.

“The Awami League is not active anywhere. There may be a couple of brief flash processions...and accordingly, some people might get a dollar or two, that’s all.”

The press secretary also criticised the way claims made by Sheikh Hasina are being reported. He accused her of hiring the UK’s most expensive law firms using stolen national funds and said some in the country are promoting these actions. “Her claims should not appear uncontested. Local news media have reported that her party is making claims in the ICC, yet there is no mention of the severe human rights violations she committed. This is unfortunate. We have also seen the Awami League claim that 400 people died, presented as uncontested,” he said.

Govt gears up for polls

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COMPLETE KEY TASKS BY NOV 15

At the meeting, Yunus instructed officials to complete certain key tasks – training Ansar members, procuring body cameras, and establishing committees to counter social media misinformation – by November 15, said Shafiqul.

Another instruction was to make training-related videos and materials available on the EC’s website and television channels, including BTv.

He added that since the parliament is not in session and state-run Sangsad Television is currently unused, the EC can plan to use it for election-related publicity.

Yunus further said, “To make the election festive and participatory, we have to reach people with information about the election code of conduct, voting procedures, and what to do if any disorder occurs.”

Asked whether a specific date was discussed, the press secretary told reporters that the EC said it will announce it in the first week of December.

Regarding concerns about possible attempts to disrupt the polls, he said, “There’s no reason to panic. This will be one of the best elections in Bangladesh’s history.”

The chief adviser’s meeting also emphasised coordination among the government, the EC, and various security agencies.

Meanwhile, the ministries of home and public administration have already begun work on the transfer and posting of officials who will perform election duties, taking into account the importance of the area and the competence of the officers.

At the same time, the EC has started training officials who will be assigned election duties.

The officials who served in the last three national elections will not be assigned this time, Shafiqul said.

“Even those who played a minimal role in those elections will not be assigned duties.”

Headed that during transfers in the local administration, certain factors will be taken into consideration – an officer’s political affiliation, physical fitness, professional competence, and whether any reports of irregularities about them have appeared in the media.

Polls date to be announced in the first week of December

Election-related postings to begin from November 1

Around 92,500 members of the army and navy to be deployed

Officials involved in the last 3 national polls will not be assigned this time

“The most capable officers will be posted in the most sensitive areas. No one will be posted in their home district or that of their in-laws. It will also be ensured that no officer is assigned to an area where their relatives are contesting in the election.”

These postings will begin on November 1, he added.

Shafiqul further said the home adviser informed the meeting that similar measures are being taken regarding the appointment of law enforcers.

“Discussions were also held on completing postings as early as possible so that officials have enough time to prepare and undergo necessary training.”

DEPLOYMENT OF SECURITY FORCES

The press secretary said that during the discussions, officials informed the meeting that nearly 92,500 members of the army and navy will be deployed across Bangladesh during the polls to ensure security alongside other law enforcement agencies.

Of them, 90,000 will be from the Army, with at least one unit stationed in each upazila.

The meeting also discussed how to maintain law and order before and after the election, Shafiqul added.

COUNTERING DISINFORMATION

The press secretary said a major part of the meeting focused on AI, disinformation, and misinformation.

“One of the major concerns raised was how to quickly debunk false information spreading on social media. It was noted that identifying a piece of misinformation and publicly clarifying it often takes time, during which significant damage can occur.”

“To address this, the meeting discussed setting up a central disinformation monitoring cell and a central communication cell,” he said, adding that the chief adviser stressed the need for fact-checking at not only urban and district levels but also in rural areas.

“Both cells will operate down to the upazila level and will immediately fact-check any false or misleading information and publish the verified results.”

The ministries of ICT and cultural affairs have been instructed to provide technical support for this initiative. “Discussions will also be held with Facebook authorities on the matter,” Shafiqul added.

A binary vote for a complex charter

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The first referendum in 1977 asked: “Do you have confidence in President Major General Ziaur Rahman, BU [Bir Uttam] and the policies and actions he pursued?”

The second referendum in 1985 posed the question: “Do you have confidence in the policies and programmes pursued by President Lieutenant General Hussain Muhammad Ershad and do you agree to his continuing as President until elections are held in accordance with the suspended constitution?”

In the third referendum of 1991, voters were asked: “Should the president give assent to the Constitution (Twelfth Amendment) Bill, 1991?”

It is worth noting that only the third referendum directly addressed a constitutional matter.

Currently, however, both alternatives seek approval on a package of 48 constitutional issues. These include fundamental matters such as redefining the basic principles of the state, establishing a balance of power between the prime minister and the president, introducing a bicameral legislature, and strengthening the opposition bench.

Other key proposals include identifying all citizens as “Bangladeshis,” limiting the prime minister’s tenure to no more than 10 years regardless of the number of terms, and preventing the prime minister from simultaneously holding the position of party chief.

This bundling of issues, will compel the voter to accept or reject the entire package, even if they support some reforms and oppose others. The

referendum, therefore, reduces a rather nuanced matter down to a binary choice.

Thus, raises a dilemma what do people if they support some proposals but opposing others? For instance, one may agree with limiting the prime minister’s tenure but disagree with the introduction of a bicameral legislature. How can, then, such a voter arrive at a clear yes or no?

Moreover, at least four leftist parties have refused to sign the July Charter. They argue that even with a note of dissent, they cannot endorse a document that commits to altering the constitution’s four fundamental principles: democracy, socialism, secularism, and nationalism. According to them, changes in the original four basic principles, which had emerged out of the liberation war, contradict their ideology.

The 1991 referendum was held in the aftermath of a decade-long anti-dictatorship movement, supported by political parties across the ideological spectrum. These parties supported a return to parliamentary democracy and urged people to vote yes.

Even after that rare unified position irrespective of ideologies, official figures showed that voter turnout was 35 percent, significantly lower than in the previous two referendums.

Moreover, the legalistic language of the referendum questions, the breadth of reforms, and the lack of knowledge about it could result in voter confusion, low turnout, or misinformed choices.

This time, too, major political parties remain sharply divided over key aspects of the July Charter—including

the timing of the referendum and the formation of an upper house.

The BNP prefers that the referendum be held on the same day as the national election. In contrast, Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami and the National Citizen Party (NCP) are pushing for it to take place before the polls. In fact, Jamaat and its allies have already taken to the streets, demanding that the referendum be held in November.

During the consensus talks, parties including Jamaat and the NCP agreed to the creation of an upper house alongside the existing 300-member lower house. Under this proposal, upper house would be constituted based on proportional representation (PR) based on the votes received in the general election, while lower house members would continue to be elected through the traditional first-past-the-post system. That would mean that the number of seats allocated to parties would correspond with the proportion of votes they get in the election. However, the BNP issued a note of dissent, insisting that the upper house be constituted according to the proportion of seats in the lower house.

The referendum’s timing—whether held before or alongside the general election—has become a flashpoint among major parties. Whenever the referendum is held, it is certain that at least one camp will be unhappy. But even more certain is that the breadth of issues covered in the referendum is so diverse and complicated that most people would be left befuddled while those who do understand the issues would be hard pressed to arrive at a clear yes or no.

Hasina also said she had “no intention of seeking asylum beyond India”. She said she continues to live “quietly