



## A peculiar order

In staying a floor test in the House, the Madras HC has adopted a less-than-reasonable course

The rationale for the Madras High Court's interim order that there be no floor test in the Tamil Nadu Assembly until September 20 is hard to fathom. The order stalling a trust vote came on a writ petition seeking an early test on the floor of the House to ascertain whether Chief Minister Edappadi K. Palaniswami enjoys its confidence. The introduction of a motion in the Assembly is essentially an internal matter of the legislature, and is ordinarily outside the jurisdiction of the courts. The ostensible reason for the interim order is the apprehension voiced by the petitioner, the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, that 19 MLAs in the rebel AIADMK camp headed by T.T.V. Dhinakaran may be disqualified just ahead of a trust vote so that the ruling party can convert its minority into a majority. Two different issues appear to be conflated here. One is the Governor's unexplained delay in ordering a vote of confidence even after it has become clear that Mr. Palaniswami is short of a majority in the House; the other is the possible disqualification, under the anti-defection law, of dissident MLAs. The stay has been imposed mainly because the Advocate General declined to give an undertaking that they would not be disqualified before the floor test. It is a moot question whether delaying the trust vote itself is the correct way of protecting a dissenter's right to vote against a government. After all, if some MLAs are indeed barred from voting, and the regime clears a floor test as a result, the courts can still set aside the disqualification and, thereby, necessitate a fresh test on the basis of the original strength.

Between preventing a regime-saving disqualification and delaying an urgently required floor test, the High Court has preferred the less reasonable option. The court chose to be restrained on the issue of disqualification, over which judicial review is available, but proactive on the timing of the floor test, an issue on which courts are normally reticent. It must be conceded that in the event of flagrant violations of the Constitution or complete disregard for constitutional norms, a superior court has a right to intervene. For instance, it may be lawful for the court to even question the Governor's silence when it becomes glaringly obvious that the incumbent regime does not have a majority. It is also empowered to ensure that no member is disqualified solely to alter the outcome of a trust vote. Last year, the Supreme Court did stay a floor test in Uttarakhand. But in this case, a direction that none should be disqualified before a floor test could have taken care of the petitioner's fears without interfering with its timing. A stay on the vote, in fact, would only give more time for horse-trading and further scope for a regime to remain in office without an apparent majority.

## The arc to Tokyo

India and Japan are infusing bilateral ties with a sharper geopolitical agenda

Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's visit to India, part of annual summits between the two countries, has set strategic ties on a fast track. This is best symbolised by the Ahmedabad-Mumbai bullet train project that was launched by Mr. Abe and Prime Minister Narendra Modi. India's decision to partner with Japan for the 508-km, ₹1.1 lakh-crore project is as much about politics as it is about infrastructure: Japan has been keen to export its high-speed train technology along with rolling stock, and India's move to confirm the Japanese contracts while China wins projects along its Belt and Road railway line is significant. The joint statement and comments by the two Prime Ministers in Gandhinagar also sent out a similar message that will be read closely in China on several counts. For example, Mr. Abe said North Korea was a "joint" challenge for India and Japan, and the statement contained a phrase about holding countries "that have supported North Korea's nuclear and missile programmes" accountable, obviously aimed at Pyongyang's benefactors in Beijing. The clause calling for zero tolerance on terrorism referenced China's veto on the Jaish-e-Mohammad chief being put on the list of UN-designated terrorists. Both the title of the joint statement, "Toward a free, open and prosperous Indo-Pacific", and substantive paragraphs on cooperation in the region, indicate a much closer alignment between India and Japan in countering China's influence in the South China Sea, its forays into the Indian Ocean, and investments in South Asia and Africa. The coming into force of the India-Japan nuclear deal and more military and maritime exercises will buttress such efforts. India has also extended to Japan an offer denied to any other country, which is to assist in infrastructure development in the Northeast.

It is clear that the Modi government has set India-Japan ties on an accelerated geopolitical course that will be a major factor in its dealings with the rest of the world, especially China, at a time when the U.S. is perceived to be retreating from the region. Having made this leap, it is imperative that India and Japan also look beyond their lofty geopolitical aims, at the more basic aspects of bilateral engagement. While Japan is India's largest donor and the third largest provider of FDI, bilateral trade has steadily declined since 2013, and is down to \$13.61 billion in 2016-17 from \$14.51 billion the year before. The contrast with India-China trade, at \$71 billion a year, and Japan-China trade, at \$279 billion, is stark, and the decision to finalise four new locations for special Japanese industrial townships may be only one way of addressing the difficulties businessmen face in India. With the opulent pageantry and 8-km roadshow in Gujarat over, it is time to get down to brass tacks and address some of the issues in order to facilitate closer ties between India and Japan, even as the two leaders and militaries forge closer bonds.

# The federal manoeuvre

The Dravidian movement's contribution to keeping India united is not appreciated enough



PULAPRE BALAKRISHNAN

To have served for 60 consecutive years as a legislator is a rare achievement especially if it is in Tamil Nadu, a large and relatively successful State. Few politicians in India can match this record of Muthuvel Karunanidhi, known as *Kalaighar*, or artist, to his admirers. When some do come close to it, they possess none of his achievements. He was Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu more than once and played a role on the national stage once coalition governments became a reality. He also has quite a unique significance to which I shall return. How are we to view his legacy?

### Karunanidhi's role

Despite his long presence in Indian politics, Mr. Karunanidhi is really a beneficiary of the Dravidian movement and its vehicle, the political party Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK). The movement itself had been sculpted by E.V. Ramaswami Naicker and its presence in national politics was cemented by C.N. Annadurai, who led the party in the Lok Sabha. Thus unlike his contemporaries, Mr. Karunanidhi inherited significant political capital. For instance, he did not have to carve out a path for a party, as did E.M.S. Namboodiripad almost a generation before him. Namboodiripad had to first craft the Communist movement in the country and then govern a newly formed State during the high noon of Congress hegemony, the 1950s. In a brief and turbulent tenure, Namboodiripad attempted a move to a distinctly new model economy and society in Kerala, even though subsequent developments may not have conformed to what he had anticipated of them. It is difficult to detect a similar mo-

tivation in Mr. Karunanidhi as judged by his actions while in office. Tamil Nadu today may be considered a leading Indian State economically, but most of its achievements in this sphere had been initiated by Congress politicians, notably R. Venkataraman when he was Industries Minister of Madras State.

In fact, Mr. Karunanidhi's chief ministerial accomplishments may be considered less impressive than that of M.G. Ramachandran or even Jayalalithaa, Chief Ministers who followed him. 'MGR' is known for having scaled up to unimaginable levels the noon meal scheme started by K. Kamaraj in the fifties, an intervention that has received global attention. Jayalalithaa's implementation of compulsory rain-water harvesting in Chennai ameliorated the situation in a city that was once the byword for water shortage. It is difficult to ascribe a similar game-changing role to the flyovers in the State capital associated with the Karunanidhi government.

### Standing up to Mrs. Gandhi

He does have a unique significance though. He had stood up to Indira Gandhi and dared to oppose the Emergency when few politicians even outside the Congress party had done so. For this he paid a price. His government was dismissed, though on grounds of charges of corruption. It is not entirely surprising that Karunanidhi's achievements are difficult to detect for it is not clear how he saw himself, whether as an artist or as a politician aiming to improve the condition of his people, an urge evident in Kamaraj and even in 'MGR', both politicians much loved by their people. As Mr. Karunanidhi's own record in office does not stand out when compared to the Chief Ministers who came after him, the occasion of his completing 60 years as legislator is perhaps better utilised reflecting upon the role of the Dravidian movement of which, as we have seen, he is a scion.



THE HINDU ARCHIVES

Paradoxically, the significance of the Dravidian movement lies in its having played a major role in keeping India together at a crucial juncture. This may appear counter-intuitive given its image as a permanent opposition to the Indian mainstream, but is actually not so. By staunchly opposing the imposition of Hindi on the rest of the country, an end relentlessly pursued by certain sections of the north, the Dravidian movement and its principal heir, the DMK, saved India from going the way of Pakistan or Sri Lanka. Before the former lost its eastern wing, West Pakistan's conspicuously anglicised establishment had imposed Urdu on their Bengali co-religionists who were unwilling to bear the injustice. In Sri Lanka the Oxford-educated S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike disempowered the Tamil minority through the 'Sinhala Only Act', making it the official language of the country. While Sri Lanka remains intact, it has lost some stature in the eyes of the international community due to its suppression of minority rights. India avoided this fate only due to the creative leadership of the Dravidian parties.

That the DMK had only sought cultural autonomy and not secession was made clear in Annadurai's parliamentary intervention during the Indo-China war in 1962, when he affirmed his State's unwavering commitment to the Indian Union. This was not reciprocated though, when, at the first opportunity after

the death of Nehru, cultural chauvinism was to raise its ugly head and the possibility of Hindi being adopted as the sole official language re-emerged. Riots erupted in Tamil Nadu accompanied by acts of self-immolation. A compromise was arrived at and English was to be retained till such time as the southern States desired it. This remarkably mature arrangement saved Indian democracy. From time to time linguistic chauvinism has been on display from actors as diverse as Mulayam Singh Yadav and Central ministers in the Narendra Modi government, but by and large the principle has been adhered to by the Centre in its dealing with the States. Of course, the other southern States must thank the Tamil leadership for this extraordinary achievement, but so must the rest of India, for it contributed to the country being left in one piece.

It is possible to argue that the Dravidian parties' love of the Tamil language may have been more steadfast than their commitment to the Tamil people. As already mentioned, it is not obvious they have led the State to exceptional achievements in any sphere. Punjab matches it in agriculture, Karnataka leads it in IT and Maharashtra dominates it in manufacturing. Also, Chennai is no longer the iconic southern city that Madras was when these parties first came to power. Tamil Nadu was among India's first States to allow private entry into education,

leaving it to entrepreneurs, often from the political class itself, who get away with poor-quality service. Over time they have emerged as a vested interest opposing all regulation that curbs their exploitative practices. The State has had no land reforms and populist policies for electricity and water use have led to a plunging of the water table with long-term implications for its agriculture. And, finally, the State pioneered the practice of using the treasury to dole out private goods. This has weakened its public finances and encouraged the politics of clientelism with individual politicians depicted as the fount of welfare. Termed 'social justice' by the Dravidian parties, the practice is at odds with the usual understanding of democracy.

### The social sphere

Ironically, it is not in the economic sphere but in the social that the Dravidian movement's legacy is more dubious. While the Keezhvenmani massacre of agricultural labourers attempting to form a union may have taken place at the very beginning of DMK rule, violence against Dalits has not ceased, and even very recently activists have claimed that it has increased. The Dravidian movement may have succeeded in unseating the upper castes in governance but it has actively strengthened the middle castes that form the backbone of the rural economy. In the absence of land reforms, they control the rural economy and with patronage from the state have succeeded in keeping the lower castes in a state of permanent suppression. This is a disappointing denouement for what had started out as an anti-caste movement. Tamil Nadu's history suggests a difference between loving your identity and nurturing your country. The nationalists in today's India share a similar predicament.

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# Understanding the slowdown

Investments-led growth can reverse the situation but the policy response has been sluggish



PUJA MEHRA

India's economy is slowing down: GDP growth has lost momentum in each quarter since the one ending March 2016. With every passing quarter, the slowdown is explained away either as a transitory phenomenon or as happening for reasons beyond the government's control: deficient rains, the sluggish world economy, or lately due to demonetisation and the goods and services tax (GST). The reasons offered change. The economic trend does not.

### All four engines slacking

In the boom years during the United Progressive Alliance's (UPA) tenure, four engines powered the economy: exports, government investments, private consumption, and private investments. Of these, government investments and private consumption were still running at the time the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) took office. The other two were, and remain, out of steam. Official num-

bers have captured the weakness consistently — in exports for the past three years, and in private investments for more than five years. Yet, the debilitating impact of these on growth has received inadequate policy attention. The pain has begun to spread to the rest of the economy: growth in government investments and private consumption started slowing down in the quarter ending June 2017. The economy's four growth engines are stalling or slacking.

Government investments and private consumption depend on how well the economy is doing. As incomes improve, private spending and tax collections pick up. Let's look at exports and investments. The global economic downturn that followed the 2008 financial crisis dealt a body blow to exports, before which exports were growing smartly. Recovery in the global economy has lifted exports of most Asian countries, but Indian exports are stagnating, their competitiveness eroded by the overvalued rupee.

India's economic future can improve significantly with investments-led growth. The share of investments, the principal growth engine in the economy, in the GDP has declined steadily for the past five years. The decline in private in-



GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCK

vestments is so sharp that it has offset the increases in government investments. The steps taken for improving the ease of doing business and the foreign investments regime have proved insufficient in restarting the private investments cycle. As a result, new jobs are not getting created. Without new jobs, consumption will only grow up to a point.

Why are investments on hold? The returns-risk projections of projects are not favourable. Companies are not convinced that new factories will be sufficiently profitable. Among the variables that affect investment decisions are costs and availability of finance, land, labour, technology, logistics, and taxation. Market prices, or consumer prices inflation, is also a determinant of profitability. The government is politically sensitive. So, it has set a low target for consumer price inflation. For the same reason, it is unable to progress on

land and labour reforms. The flow of credit in the economy has thinned to a trickle, as the government moved on bad bank loans belatedly and ineffectually. Even if big companies can raise finance from alternative sources, the smaller ones cannot. Most of the other factors have escaped policy attention altogether. Additionally, in an environment of constant shocks and unanticipated policy changes, investment decisions tend to get postponed. If people feel unsettled, they are unlikely to invest.

### Reversible trend

Even though dark clouds loom over the economy, the situation is not irreversible. But the policy response so far has been feeble and misses urgency.

It's not as though there is policy paralysis. In fact, decision-making is speedy, perhaps too much so. The ill-informed idea of demonetisation and the GST rollout demonstrate the growing disconnect between policy tools and objectives. The provisional official statistics show demonetisation proved to be a drag on an already slowing economy, even as we wait for its full impact to be estimated. The damage to the (more vulnerable) informal economy is being measured, and will be plugged to GDP

estimates. On revision, past quarters' GDP growth may turn out to be even slower. The complicated design of the GST may have added to the vulnerabilities of the informal sector.

The government insists these measures will prove beneficial over time. There is an inexplicable reluctance to take decisions that will deliver positive results quicker, such as reversing the investments slowdown and the exports stagnation. Politically difficult structural reforms have fallen off the agenda: liberalising land, labour, and agriculture.

Part of the problem seems to be the inadequate regard for sound economics and trained economists. The government is inert even to the advice of its own economists; the analyses documented in successive editions of its own publication, the Economic Survey, influenced policy minimally. Chief Economic Adviser Arvind Subramanian has diligently raised red flags over damages to the economy: from bad bank loans to the slowdown of investments, the distorted signals to farmers on what to grow and how much, and the GST's suboptimal design. The government must start paying heed.

Puja Mehra is a Delhi-based journalist

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Letters emailed to letters@thehindu.co.in must carry the full postal address and the full name or the name with initials.

### India and the Rohingya

India should have a neutral approach towards the Rohingya crisis ("At home and in the world", Sept. 15). Neither should India call for deporting the Rohingya nor should it welcome them at the moment. Instead of giving a joint statement with Myanmar, India should build international pressure on its neighbour to provide a peaceful environment for the Rohingya to go back to.

FATEHVIR SINGH DHINDSA, Patiala

### A long way for Rahul

I watched Rahul Gandhi's UC Berkeley speech live on television and have come to the conclusion that he has a long way to go to prove that he is a convincing speaker ("Rahul's U.S. trip aims to win friends, influence people", Sept. 15). Mr. Gandhi's team consists of Shashi Tharoor, Sam

Pitroda, Milind Deora, and Manish Tewari. Even with a strong backing, Mr. Gandhi's body language seemed feverish, and he was sometimes unrealistic and unintelligible. What's more, he strutted and stammered more than once at the question and answer session, exhibiting his inability to answer the questions extempore.

RAVI MANNETHU, Pullad, Kerala

Once a party sits in the Opposition, it has become an inevitable practice for it to make personal attacks on the head of government. In the past three years, it has become common for Mr. Gandhi to personally attack the Prime Minister. Instead of his image-building endeavours abroad, Mr. Gandhi should spend time at home on party-building exercises that counter the

ruling party's hollow claims of achievement in every nook and corner.

R. SKIDHARAN, Chennai

### China's reluctance

There is no point in India and Japan slamming North Korea unless China is also on board ("N. Korea: Japan draws in India", Sept. 15). The situation is also not going to change unless the U.S. takes steps to dismantle its nuclear arsenal. North Korea perceives these weapons as posing an existential threat to it. China fears that any unravelling of the dictatorship in North Korea will lead to unification of the two Koreas, which will lead to the growth of a formidable new power in the region. That will in turn pose a threat to China's growing status in the region. China will therefore not go the

whole hog in enforcing UN sanctions against N. Korea.

M.P. MURALIDHARAN, Bengaluru

### Bullet trains necessary?

This project is a great idea, but it also seems a little misplaced given that there are still places where people do not even have roads to travel, forget bullet trains ("Fly" on train from Mumbai from 2022", Sept. 15). This is only increasing the already existing gap between the rich and the poor, between rural and urban areas. Overall development requires both these sections to go forward simultaneously.

DEEPIKA TRIPATHI, Lucknow

The media seems to have gone gaga over the new bullet train project. This is a welcome move, but skyscrapers are never raised

on dodgy foundations. The functioning of the Railways as a service provider is currently in a deep mess. When 206 rail accidents have been reported in three years, our celebration over a bullet train seems to be a misstep. The Railways is in need of new bogies, a transparent ticketing system, extended tracks, guarded rail crossings, pocket-friendly fares, and good hospitality on board. Most importantly, it is in need of safety.

D.S. THUKRAL, Ambala

### Award for 'The Hindu'

I was delighted to see that *The Hindu* has bagged two golds and a silver ("The Hindu wins the best news website award at WAN-IFRA awards", Sept. 14). I am an avid user of technology and *The Hindu* website has accurate and timely

updates. With its simplicity and proper distribution of news, the website makes it easy for students to stay updated.

MANISH S., Mysuru

Congratulations! I often go to your website whenever I want to read live updates. But a request: lately, you have been mentioning in print a pointer called 'More on the Web'. Please note that a majority of your readers love the print version only and many can't access the Web pages. Some like me don't feel comfortable reading the online edition. So please keep most of the information in the print edition only.

SUDHEER KEELAMBI, New Delhi

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STATELESS: "Bangladesh faces an acute problem of space." Rohingya arriving by boat to Bangladesh. (Below) Hamida, a Rohingya refugee, holds her 40-day-old son, who died as their boat capsized off the shore of Shah Porir Dwip in Bangladesh. •GETTY IMAGES/ REUTERS

# Bangladesh's burden to bear

They trudge through treacherous terrain and cross stormy waters to escape death. But as the numbers of Rohingya fleeing Myanmar swell, a humanitarian crisis is brewing in Bangladesh, reports **Haroon Habib**

It took three days for the heavily pregnant Nafisa Begum, 26, to scramble to safety. On September 9, after walking over 20 kilometres of treacherous mountainous terrain and being occasionally carried by her husband and her brother in a makeshift palanquin, the family fleeing from Rakhine's Maungdaw reached Teknaf's Lambabil border point in Bangladesh. They were forced out after the Myanmar military initiated a violent crackdown since August 25, an onslaught that shows no sign of ending. "We desperately wanted to protect our unborn child," says her husband, Zahirul. A day later Nafisa went into labour and gave birth to a boy under the open sky.

Hungry and weary, the family is relieved to be alive. But the relief is short-lived as an uncertain future awaits them, stemming from a realisation that they are unwanted here as they were back home. Nafisa holds her baby close to her chest. "The army killed our people, raped our women, murdered our children. I have lost count of the number of people stabbed to death. We just fled with the clothes we are wearing. We have nothing with us."

Hasina Begum, 32, a resident of Rakhine's Kuanchibon locality, also gave birth under a starry sky — mother and baby are lucky to have escaped violent death; there's no knowing if the father has safely made it. At last count, there have been at least 100 deliveries in the past two weeks in Bandarban district of Chittagong Hill Tracts and in Teknaf and Ukhiya sub-districts of Cox's Bazar along the banks of the Naf river on the Bangladesh-Myanmar border.

## An extraordinary exodus

Three Rakhine townships — Maungdaw, Buthidaung and Rathedaung — have been torched by the Myanmar security forces, who, in the name of flushing out terrorists, have destroyed 2,000 houses in these areas. The forces have now targeted Sittwe, the Rakhine capital, forcing an exodus of hundreds of thousands of Rohingya across the 271-km boundary with Bangladesh. Their numbers are estimated by the UNICEF, UNHCR and other aid agencies as 400,000 since August 25, with thousands more arriving every day. Around 60% of the refugees are children, according to preliminary estimates announced by UNICEF on September 14. The UN Migration Agency, International Organisation for Migration, has appealed for an immediate fund of \$18 million for humanitarian assistance.

The refugees bring with them bloody accounts of what appears to be state-sponsored genocide. Kalimulah, who crossed the border from Rathedaung along with his mother, wife, three chil-

dren and two young brothers, says, "We saw bodies scattered across our region when we rushed to the border." Says Abdur Rob, who fled from Buthidaung, "The military first ordered the male members to enter their houses, singled out young women, took them away, and then set the village on fire." Rob doesn't know the whereabouts of his two brothers, who he claims were picked up by the army.

Bangladesh faces an acute problem of space. For a country which has given refuge to some 500,000 Rohingya in the last three decades, the current crisis presents a tough challenge. "Despite out limited resources and space shortage, we are taking in refugees," Bangladesh's Disaster Management Minister Mofazzal Hossain Chowdhury said while visiting refugees in the border areas.

The two biggest registered camps in Kutupalang and Nayapara in Ukhiya and Teknaf sub-districts are overpopulated, forcing others to take up temporary shelter on the Ukhiya-Teknaf road, and in schools, madrasas, mosques and nearby hills. The 81-km Marine Drive that connects Cox's Bazar and Teknaf is a never-ending line of desperate people who braved a dangerous boat ride through the Bay of Bengal to reach Bangladesh shores.

The Myanmar authorities have belatedly acknowledged that 176 of 471 ethnic Rohingya villages in three townships are now "completely empty", and that at least 34 villages are "partially abandoned". The country's presidential office spokesperson Zaw Htay admitted to at least 86 clashes till September 5, but none since. "What that means is, when the security forces are trying to stabilise the region, they have succeeded to a point," he said.

The Myanmar army's actions are being projected as reprisals for the August 25 attack by insurgent group Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) on over 30 of its camps and those of the border police. But many Myanmar experts in Bangladesh are of the view that these are not mere acts of retaliation, coming as they did close on the heels of the report of the Rakhine Advisory Commission led by former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, which was aimed at finding a lasting solution for the decades-old crisis.

Under pressure from the world community, the Myanmar government had constituted the commission to identify the central issues of "citizenship verification, documentation, rights and equality before law". Its recommendations went on to say that "... if they are left to fester, the future of the Rakhine state — and indeed of Myanmar as a whole — will be irretrievably jeopardized". "No state would tolerate attacks on its secur-

ity personnel, but to punish an entire community is never an acceptable response to aggression by a few," says Major General (retd.) Abdur Rashid, a Bangladeshi security analyst.

## Bangladesh's concerns

It is perhaps an irony of history that Bangladesh, 10 million of whose population had to take refuge in India during the 1971 liberation war, finds itself in a situation where it has to provide shelter to a people as desperate as once they were 46 years ago. Initially, the government refused to accept the Rohingya, but found it difficult to push hundreds of thousands of desperate people back, especially after the police recovered over a hundred bodies from the sea and the Naf river — of Rohingya who drowned during their bid to escape.

On September 12, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina visited the Bangladesh-Myanmar border and talked to refugees at the Kutupalang camp in Ukhiya, before proceeding to denounce the atrocities in Rakhine state as "acts against humanity". The Prime Minister was categorical in her condemnation: "Myanmar has to take back its nationals and give them a safe place to live in their homeland. The international community should put pressure on Myanmar. This must stop... We will make arrangements for them [the Rohingya] until the Myanmar government is ready to take them back."

Dhaka's predicament stems from several concerns. On the one hand, there is public anger that the government was not doing enough; on the other are serious security concerns. The ARSA, previ-

**The army killed our people, raped our women and murdered our children. I have lost count of the number of people stabbed to death.**

NAFISA BEGUM  
Rohingya refugee



ously known as the Harakah al-Yaqin, is believed to be a radical Islamist group which local security experts claim receives assistance from jihadists, including from Pakistan. Dhaka has repeatedly condemned attacks on Myanmarese military posts by insurgents and also proposed joint inspection along the border to flush them out. It has also called for creating a "safe zone", if necessary, inside Myanmar under UN supervision to protect the innocent, and full implementation of the Annan Commission's recommendations. But all this has elicited no response from Naypyidaw.

## A persecuted people

The name Rohingya originates from 'Rohang' or 'Rohan', the names given to those who lived in the Arakan region during the ninth and tenth centuries. Another group, the Rakhine people, are the ethnic majority, with a Hindu and Mongol background.

Buddhist-dominated Myanmar (88% of the population, with Muslims comprising a mere 4.3%), the Rohingya, who speak a dialect close to Chittagong version of Bengali, have suffered a history of abuse, and since World War II have been fighting for recognition as a distinct ethnic group. They were not included in the citizenship law in 1982, and thus become stateless, and continue to suffer persecution, including forced labour, confiscation of property, rape and other forms of violence. Violence has visited upon on the Rohingya in phases, most notably beginning in 2012, when inter-religious conflict forced them to flee their homeland. In 2014, they were refused enumeration during the Myanmar census, the government identifying them as Bengali which they refused.

In the successive rounds of violence following 2012, thousands of Rohingya fled their homes and sought refuge in Bangladesh, with others moving to Thailand, the Philippines, Indonesia



and Malaysia. Before the latest exodus, an estimated 87,000 Rohingya had fled Rakhine to Bangladesh since October 2016 when the Myanmar military stepped in to quell insurgents. This time too, the Myanmar army says it targeted "only the terrorists", while refugees say the offensive aims to push the Rohingya out of Myanmar.

Although the overwhelming majority of the Rohingya are Muslims, in the wake of continued violence, some 550 Rakhine Hindus (Hindus constitute 0.5% of the Rakhine population) have also taken shelter in Bangladesh. "It's genocide, no matter who are conducting it," said Rana Dasgupta, the leader of the Bangladesh Hindu-Buddhist-Christian Unity Council, after a visit to the Hindu refugee camp in Ukhiya.

## Worldwide condemnation

The latest Rohingya persecution has been condemned worldwide, with the exception of China which has defended Myanmar's action against the insurgents. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi avoided addressing the humanitarian catastrophe during his recent visit to Myanmar, but the External Affairs Ministry said New Delhi remained "deeply concerned" about the situation in Rakhine and the outflow of refugees from that region: "We would urge that the situation in Rakhine State be handled with restraint and maturity, focusing on the welfare of the civilian population alongside those of the security forces. It is imperative that violence is ended and normalcy in the State restored expeditiously." After a nudge from the Hasina government, New Delhi has rushed consignments of humanitarian aid for the refugees in Bangladesh.

Ignored for decades, the violence in Rakhine has for the first time prompted the United Nations to give serious thought to the issue. UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres, at a press conference at UN headquarters in New York on September 13 ahead of the 72nd United Nations General Assembly, said

the situation in Rakhine was best described as "ethnic cleansing". He said: "When one-third of the Rohingya population had to flee the country, could you find a better word to describe it?"

The 15-member Security Council met behind closed doors on September 13 at the request of Sweden and Britain to discuss the crisis for the second time since it began and agreed to publicly condemn the situation. The council "expressed concern about reports of excessive violence during the security operations and called for immediate steps to end the violence in Rakhine... re-establish law and order, ensure the protection of civilians... and resolve the refugee problem".

A number of Muslim-majority countries, especially Turkey, Indonesia and Malaysia, not only expressed serious concern but also tried to rally support. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan rallied Organisation of Islamic Conference countries into denouncing Myanmar's actions, but given Ankara's dubious record on human rights, the initiative is more a political posture than a humanitarian gesture.

## Another deadly threat

The Myanmar army has allegedly planted landmines along the border with Bangladesh. The landmines, banned worldwide, have killed at least nine refugees and a Bangladeshi relief worker in Bandarban, and seriously injured dozens of others. "This is another low in what is already a horrific situation in Rakhine State. The Myanmar military's callous use of inherently indiscriminate and deadly weapons at highly trafficked paths around the border is putting the lives of ordinary people at enormous risk," said Tirana Hassan, Amnesty International's Crisis Response Director, after a visit to the Bangladesh-Myanmar border. Earlier last week, the spokesperson for Myanmar's State Counsellor and Foreign Minister, Aung San Suu Kyi, dismissed reports of an army hand behind the planting of landmines along the border, but Bangladesh Foreign Secretary Shahidul Haque subsequently confirmed that Dhaka had launched a formal complaint with Myanmar.

Geography apart, Bangladesh has historic ties with Myanmar and also has a colonial legacy. Myanmar counts among the first countries to have accorded recognition to independent Bangladesh. The two have bilateral trade and are involved in infrastructure projects. They resolved a long-standing maritime boundary dispute in 2012. But unless the situation arising out of the exodus is swiftly addressed by Naypyidaw, 400,000-odd Rohingya might cast a long shadow on friendly ties.