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The Rohingya issue continues to take the Centre stage thus distracting the administration to look into other pressing issues like the cease-fire process, economy etc.

First, the international agencies and the press in particular continue to castigate the Suu Kyi government without considering the limitations of Suu Kyi or the dynamics of the inter relationship of various stake holders in running the government in Myanmar.

It looks that even if these entities give some breathing space to Suu Kyi, the ARSA that has penetrated into the Rohingya Community will not let them in peace either.

The ARSA Strikes Again:

On 4h January, a vehicle carrying military personnel was attacked resulting in injuries to five of them. The ARSA posted a statement subsequently on 7th Jan confirming its involvement and saying that it has “no other option but to combat ‘Burmese state-sponsored terrorism’ against the Rohingya population for the purpose of defending, salvaging and protecting the Rohingya community.” This is hardly the way to protect the community when everyone knows that retaliation by the Myanmar Army will be swift and brutal.

While the US and the United Kingdom condemned the attacks at the embassy level, there appears to be no condemnation from those other agencies who were vociferously championing the cause of the Rohingyas.

In another incident, a weapons' cache consisting of 'one home made launcher with two props, 29 small home made guns which can open fire with use of gun powder and two home made guns without barrels' was discovered in a pond Thetkeipyin, in Maungdaw township- one of the places where the refugees are expected to be re-settled!

Agreement on Repatriation:

In the midst of all these developments, Myanmar and Bangladesh agreed to take back all the refugees now totalling over 650,000 in a space of two years. Some important aspects of the deal were

- * Bangladesh would set up five transit camps on its side of the border.'
- * These camps are to be entrusted with the task of sending the refugees to two reception centres on the Myanmar side.
- * The repatriation would start in a week- (in fact Myanmar side said that it is ready to take back the refugees from 23rd Jan onwards. In the end no refugee has been returned so far!)
- * The refugees will return after due verification.

There are practical difficulties in implementing this deal on the ground. Considering the enormity of the numbers and the experience in other countries, repatriation of over 650,000 refugees is not going to be an easy task.

Besides this, Myanmar is not going to accept any refugee without due verification process which itself is complicated with many of the refugees having lost their papers before running away from their homes.

The time limit of two years given is very unrealistic given the fact that the process of repatriation process after the earlier 1992 agreement had taken more than ten years!

There are other difficulties that have cropped up in the repatriation process. Bangladesh officials insist that repatriation will have to be voluntary, safe and dignified. According to the refugees the situation in the Myanmar side is far from normal and there are reports that the refugees are streaming in and a few thousand are still stranded at the Naif river border between the two countries.

The Bangladesh government is facing another problem- as many of the refugees are unwilling to go back because of lack of security guarantees. Some of the radical elements within the camp are said to be actively engaged in persuading the refugees not to go back

without specific guarantees. These include security, the granting of citizenship and the groups's recognition in Myanmar's list of ethnic minorities. They also want their homes, mosques and schools that were burnt down or damaged are rebuilt before they could move in-conditions that cannot be implemented in the immediate future.

Bangladesh government is equally concerned about the reported infiltration of ARSA elements within the refugee camps. Frequent raids are being conducted by the security forces in the refugee camps and a few cases of 'missing persons' have also come to notice. Another concern is the growing trafficking network of drug smugglers in collusion with fundamentalist groups like the ARSA. (Journalist Bidhayak Das on 22nd Jan).

The UN refugee agency and other groups have also urged a review of the decision of quickly sending the refugees back without ensuring the safety of the people returning to their homes. The UNHCR head at Geneva, Filippo Grandi had stated that issues like citizenship had not been addressed. Here again the UN Head is exceeding his brief- He should solely be concerned about the safety and return of the refugees with dignity and honour and nothing else. Grant of citizenship should not be his concern!

The refugee issue is getting more and more complicated and the net result would be that not only repatriation will be delayed, the extremist Jihadi elements within the camps will be having ample time to organise a sustained insurgency from southern Bangladesh. This has security implications not only for Myanmar and Bangladesh but also for India.

Peace Process in Pieces:

It was announced that the third session of 21st Century Panglong Conference has been postponed on the ground that the scheduled date in January was not convenient. The real reason is that the government is still hoping to get some of the non signatories to sign the cease fire agreement. Another problem was that the RCSS (Restoration Council of Shan State) had not completed the national political dialogue that is necessary to be completed and a report submitted to the Conference.

A third and a valid reason is that intensive fighting between the Tatmadaw and some of the non signatories of the agreement like the KIA and the Ta'ang National Liberation Army is going at a furious pace. A comment by the recent issue of Frontier that the government runs the risk of ceding so much control to the Tatmadaw that is simply becomes irrelevant to the peace process appears to be very much true.

Another development that will have an impact on the peace process is the decision of two more ethnic armed groups the New Mon State Party (NMSP) and Lahu Democratic Union (LDU) to sign the government's National wide Cease-fire Accord (NCA) very soon. The leaders of the two groups have already met the State Counsellor Suu Kyi and the Army Chief Min Aung Hlaing. This effectively will neutralise any clout the UNFC had so far in the cease fire process and also will result in the emergence of the China backed FPNCC as the sole major player in the cease fire process. The Government has not yet been able to even initiate a dialogue with this most important alliance of

armed ethnic groups in the country!

Suu Kyi had met recently Sun Guoxiang the person appointed by China to negotiate between the Myanmar government and the ethnic armed groups of the north. It is not known what exactly was discussed by them on the cease fire agreement.

Economy:

The Oxford Business Group in its study of Myanmar's economy has said that the economy of Myanmar is set to continue to gain momentum in the near and medium term while the slow pace of economic reforms has led to a drop of investor confidence. Sadly, the government in view of other pressing issues has not been able to focus its attention on the economic reforms that are vital.

The IMF has predicted annual GDP growth to increase between 7-7.5 pc in the medium term which is creditable indeed. Agriculture that employs 60 percent of the work force is set to improve this year from the disruptions caused by climatic conditions last year. One negative factor is the Rakhine crisis that could affect capital inflows and foreign direct investment.

One other factor that should cause some concern is the rise in inflation levels due to increase in consumer demand from 6.8 percent in 2106 to 7 percent in 2017 and 7.5 percent in 2018.

There is hope that with the new Companies Law and the recently enacted new Investment law will improve the investment climate in the country.

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