

## International

# Bittersweet revival of Rohingya culture in exile in Bangladesh

## Senior Myanmar government official insults Rohingya as 'kalar'

**KUTUPALONG REFUGEE CAMP, Bangladesh:** Chain-smoking singer Gudar Mia, who recently turned 80 in a refugee camp in Bangladesh, lit another cigarette, closed his eyes, and crooned the opening words of a Rohingya folk song. "Sorry, my throat is not good," he said, taking a puff as he sat cross-legged in the home of his lifelong friend, Amir Ali, a violinist in his mid-seventies. As young men, back in Myanmar, they had played together in a wedding band, touring their native Rakhine state on the western border performing on moonlit nights beside the rice fields.

"We were hired every day, sometimes we couldn't go home for 20 days," said Amir Ali, a bone-thin man with hollowed cheeks and a faraway look. Now their venue is a bamboo shelter in a Bangladeshi camp on the edge of a trash-filled swamp, their audience a curious crowd of fellow refugees. But for the first time in decades they are free to play music. In recent years Myanmar imposed debilitating restrictions on the Rohingya, a Muslim minority demonised as immigrants from Bangladesh. They were prevented from travelling, gathering in groups, and expressing their ethnicity. Getting permission to perform was nearly impossible, refugees said.

"Back in Myanmar, we couldn't gather more than 10 people, so how could we sing?" said Amir Ali, idly strumming the violin and cradling his baby nephew. It had been a long time since the band's last wedding when, in August 2017, soldiers arrived in their quiet village in northern Rakhine State and burned it to the ground. The sweeping crackdown, which the United Nations has said was executed with genocidal intent, drove 730,000 Rohingya into Bangladesh.

Now home to close to a million people, including those who fled previous waves of violence, the camps comprise the world's largest refugee settlement. There, Rohingya society is re-forming. While life in the camp is bleak and monotonous, refugees say Bangladesh offers relative freedom compared with the apartheid-like conditions they endured in northern Rakhine.

### 'Play an old song'

On a recent morning, several hundred Rohingya, including the wedding band, crowded into the office of a local community organization for a 'Rohingya Traditional Affairs Day'. Someone rigged up a large speaker normally used for the call to prayer to amplify a harmonium, an accordion-like instrument, and an ensemble of musicians including Amir Ali the violinist, now deafeningly loud, struck up with a high-tempo jam. "This is a traditional affairs event!" one of the organizers cried out, gesturing at the players to stop. "Play an old song," he said.

Known as hawla, the old songs are slow and normally played at weddings, love stories that revolve around the towns of northern Rakhine, traditions like flying kites, and the rhythms of rice farming. They involve frustrated love affairs and travel by boat and motorcycle between the villages. Unlike newer songs, they are not about recent suffering, but rather a peaceful time before. Amir Ali and Gudar Mia grew up in the same village, Hlaing Thi, in Maungdaw township, close to the Bangladeshi border. Amir Ali, from a wealthier family, learned to play violin from a relative who owned one.

He forged an imitation instrument out of bamboo before

later buying one in Bangladesh. "The whole day he was playing the violin," recalled Gudar Mia, who lived across the river and memorized old songs from his relatives as a child. "Mostly we sang in the farmland while we harvested our crops, and sometimes in the moonlit nights we sang and danced," he said. "At that time there were no restrictions."

After 1978, when the administration led by General Ne Win led a crackdown on the Rohingya that drove tens of thousands into Bangladesh, restrictions on the village tightened, with most villagers unable to travel. Gudar Mia never ventured further than a few miles from Hlaing Thi. "Only rich people could get the permission to hold (wedding) ceremonies," said Amir Ali. "We could not earn money, like earlier. I was very disappointed."

### 'Not an ethnic group'

In Myanmar, where ethnicity is linked to citizenship, the authorities and much of the public do not recognize the Rohingya as an ethnic group, and expressions of culture are restricted. In 2015, five men who published a calendar featuring the phrase "Rohingya is an ethnic group" were jailed for causing "fear or alarm to the public". At the traditional affairs event, after the music, the crowd gathered for traditional food, including a sweet dish known as modu-hu baator or "honey rice" usually eaten during the hottest time of the year to cool down and luri feera, rice-flour flatbreads made during festivals to be eaten with beef or goat curry. "When we talk about (our culture), it becomes fresh in our memories," said Mohammed Eleyas. "We are an ethnic group with our own strength that we can develop."

Speaking to Reuters by phone, Min Thein, a senior

Myanmar government official at the Ministry of Social Welfare, which is tasked with repatriating the Rohingya, referred to them as "kalar", a slur reserved for foreigners of South Asian origin. "Their culture was not restricted, they were able to build a lot of mosques in Rakhine," he said. "There is a transportation problem for the area not only for kalar but also other ethnics such as Rakhine, Dagnet, etc.," he said, referring to Buddhist minorities. "In Myanmar, Rohingya is not considered as an ethnic (race) according to our history books," he said, adding that another Muslim ethnicity, Kaman, was the only one recognized. Rohingya refugees, he said, "can go through the verification process to apply for citizenship when they come back".

### 'Each of us has trauma'

But the Rohingya are facing what is likely to be a long exile. Efforts to start repatriation to Rakhine failed last year, after refugees protested and the United Nations said conditions in Rakhine state were not right for returns. In the camps, youth leaders see cultural activities as a form of therapy for the young generation, restless, frustrated and with few opportunities for formal education.

Before he fled Rakhine, a young NGO worker named Mayyu Ali secretly mailed verses to local literary magazines under a pseudonym. In Bangladesh, he has hosted poetry training for students and since appealing for submissions for poems to post on a Facebook page called Art Garden has been inundated with more verses than he can publish. "What I feel is I don't want to see them with a gun and knife in their hand ... I want to see them hold a pen," he said. — Reuters

## Taliban storm US-backed aid group compound

**KABUL:** Taliban militants stormed a US-funded aid group's central Kabul compound in an ongoing attack Tuesday, having targeted the organization for promoting Western culture and the "inter-mixing" of men and women. At least nine people were wounded in the latest attack to rock the Afghan capital, which came even as US and Taliban officials were meeting in Qatar for talks aimed at bringing an end to Afghanistan's war. The assault began around midday (0730 GMT) when a massive blast tore across Kabul. Interior ministry spokesman Nasrat Rahimi said attackers then entered the compound of Counterpart International, a non-profit group funded at least in part by the US Agency for International Development (USAID).

"The police have surrounded the area and a clearing operation is ongoing," Rahimi said, later adding that in the hours following the initial blast, 169 people were rescued from the site. Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid quickly claimed responsibility for the attack, saying Counterpart International was targeted because it promoted the "inter-mixing" of men and women. The aid group mentored "Kabul admin workers in various aspects of brutality, oppression, terror, anti-Islamic ideology & promotion of western culture," Mujahid said on Twitter.

Counterpart was not immediately available to comment, but the group's website says it runs a USAID-funded Afghan civic engagement program supporting women and other marginalized groups across Afghanistan. Emergency, an Italian-run trauma center in Kabul, said it had received 15 patients so far. Wahidullah Mayar, the spokesman for the ministry of public health, said at least nine people had been wounded. The huge explosion shook nearby buildings and shattered windows.

"We started running out of the building and while running outside, I heard small gunfire and the sound of grenades going off nearby," said Akbar Khan Sahadat, a prosecutor in the Attorney General's office which was close to the scene of the blast. John Bass, the US ambassador to Afghanistan, said he strongly condemned the attack against the US non-governmental organization. "The targeted organization helps local communities, trains journalists and supports the Afghan people," he said on Twitter. "For this, it is the target of senseless violence," he added, thanking local security forces for their rapid response. The UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan said the attack was "particularly deplorable, hitting civilians helping Afghans & taking place during Ramadan".

### Difficult peace talks

The Taliban are notorious for their treatment of women during their reign from 1996-2001, when the extremists kept women locked up in houses, barred them from getting an education and sometimes stoned them to death on allegations of adultery. Suhail Shaheen, the Taliban's political spokesman, told AFP earlier this week that the latest round of peace talks, currently taking place in Doha, had become



**KABUL:** A wounded Afghan man is brought on a stretcher to an Italian aid organization hospital as Afghan security forces battle an ongoing attack by Taliban militants on a compound housing an international aid organization yesterday. — AFP

bogged down over the issue of when foreign forces might withdraw in return for the Taliban security guarantees. The two foes are hammering out a deal that could see foreign forces leave Afghanistan in return for a ceasefire, talks between the government and the Taliban, and a guarantee the country will not be used as a safe haven for terror groups. The talks follow a massive peace summit in Kabul last week where President Ashraf Ghani offered the Taliban a ceasefire to begin on the first day of Ramadan - but the insurgents refused.

The insurgents have rebuffed repeated calls to halt fighting over the last year as they seek to gain leverage at the negotiating table by pressing the fight on the bat-

tlefield. Last year the Taliban announced a three-day ceasefire at the end of Ramadan after Ghani declared a unilateral truce for eight days earlier in the month, in the first formal nationwide ceasefire since the US-led invasion of 2001.

Since then the insurgents have steadfastly refused to talk to Ghani, who they view as a US puppet, and talks thus far have cut out his government. According to Counterpart International's website, the organization was founded in 1965 by Australian actress Betty Bryant Silverstein and a priest called Father Stan Hosie. Officials earlier wrongly identified the target of yesterday's attack as the nearby CARE International. — AFP

## 2 kids dead as car ploughs into nursery outing

**TOKYO:** A car ploughed into a group of kindergarten children in western Japan's Shiga region yesterday, killing two toddlers and injuring others, with one still in critical condition, police said. Police said the car veered onto the pavement after making "contact" with another larger vehicle that was turning at a junction in Otsu City. The accident killed a girl and a boy, both two years old, a police spokesman told AFP.

"The (smaller) car rammed into a group of 13 nursery school children and three teachers who were walking on

the pavement," the police said in a statement. A police spokesman said others in the group suffered injuries but declined to give further details. One remained in critical condition, a police spokesman told AFP. There were no immediate details on the teachers. The children and their teachers were on the pavement near a crossing when the small vehicle crashed into them. Japanese nursery schools regularly take children to the local park for playtime or out on short excursions during the day.

"We're very shocked and terribly saddened by this ghastly accident," the company operating the nursery said in a statement on their Facebook page. "We are truly sorry, thinking of the future of the children who passed away." Footage on local media in the aftermath of the accident showed one car had veered off the road and onto the pavement. A second car that appeared to have been damaged in a crash could be seen still on the road. Police said they had arrested the drivers of both cars - two women aged 52 and 62. — AFP



**OTSU, Japan:** Police remove vehicles from the scene after a car ploughed into a group of kindergarten children at a crossing yesterday. — AFP

## Storm continues over #MeToo claims against India judge

**NEW DELHI:** Several dozen employees of India's highest court gathered yesterday to express support for the chief justice, days after an in-house inquiry cleared him of sexually assaulting a former staffer. On Monday a three-judge panel - one of whom was a woman - concluded that accusations against 64-year-old Ranjan Gogoi had "no substance", according to a press statement from the supreme court, prompting protests in Delhi and Bangalore.

Gogoi became the highest-profile figure to be caught up in India's #MeToo backlash after being accused by a former staffer of twice making unwanted advances towards her. The woman, 35, wrote a letter to the inquiry panel Tuesday saying she was "shocked" by the findings of the report, which will not be made public - although it was submitted to a senior judge and to Gogoi. "I find it rather strange that the complainant in a case of sexual harassment is not to be provided with a copy of the report which finds her complaint to be without substance", she said.

Several women's rights activists were detained Tuesday during a demonstration outside the Supreme Court, one of India's most respected institutions. Yesterday small protest was in support of Gogoi. Last week, the woman said she was withdrawing from the inquiry as she was "not likely to get justice" from the panel. In a letter, she said she found the "atmosphere of the committee very frightening" and that she felt "very nervous" as she was not allowed to be accompanied by her lawyer.

Gogoi, who is due to retire in November after a year in the job, has called the allegations "unbelievable" and an attempt to malign his reputation. The case comes after a string of #MeToo sexual harassment allegations were publicly made against Bollywood directors, actors and media figures last year. A junior foreign minister was forced to resign after several women accused him of harassment. He has since sued one of the women for alleged defamation. — AFP

## Sharif returns to jail after medical treatment

**LAHORE:** Pakistani former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif returned to prison yesterday to complete a sentence for corruption after being released on bail for six weeks to receive medical treatment, officials said. Sharif, who is serving a seven-year sentence imposed last year for failing to disclose the source of income that allowed him to acquire the Al-Azizia Steel Mills in Saudi Arabia, was released on bail in March.

He returned to the District Jail in Lahore in the early hours, accompanied by thousands of cheering supporters, several hours after he was due back. Shahbaz Gill, spokesman for the Punjab chief magistrate, said Nawaz arrived at the jail after its gates had closed for the night but was allowed in to avoid inflaming tensions.

Thousands of supporters of Sharif's PML-N party joined their leader from his house and stopped his car at several points along the route, showering his car with flowers and chanting in support. Three-time premier Sharif, who was disqualified from holding political office for life, has been suffering from a heart condition and kidney problems. — Reuters



**LAHORE:** Former Pakistani Prime minister Nawaz Sharif (center left) sits in a car as he heads back to Kot Lakpat Jail yesterday. — AFP

## American succumbs to Sri Lanka Easter bombing injuries

**COLOMBO:** A US official wounded in Sri Lanka's Easter Sunday suicide bombings has died in hospital, raising to 258 the total number killed, including 45 foreigners, officials said yesterday. Alaina Teplitz, the US ambassador to Sri Lanka, paid tribute to Chelsea Decaminada who was seriously wounded when two bombers hit the luxury Shangri-La hotel in Colombo on April 21. "We pay tribute to Chelsea - and all those lost and injured - by partnering with Sri Lanka and nations worldwide to bring unity in the face of terrorism," Teplitz said.

Decaminada, a graduate of Duke University, worked for the US Commerce Department and was on assignment in Sri Lanka when she was caught in the bombings, claimed by the Islamic State group and attributed to a local radical cell called National Thowtheeth Jama'ath. The bombers targeted three luxury hotels and three Christian churches. Nearly 500 people were wounded in the attacks, the worst single-day bombing against civilians in the Indian Ocean island.

Officials said Decaminada was airlifted to Singapore for treatment, but she succumbed to her injuries over the weekend. "As we mourn her loss, we must continue to fight terrorism around the world," US Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross department said in a statement. The Sri Lankan foreign ministry had previously said 44 foreign nationals died in the attacks, while another 10 are still unaccounted for. Sri Lankan authorities say they have arrested or killed all the jihadists responsible for the April 21 suicide bombings, but the island still faces the threat of "global terrorism," the prime minister said yesterday. — AFP