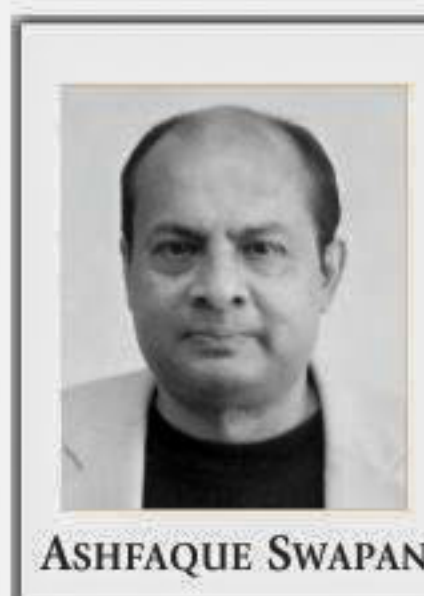


The catastrophe that Trump has wrought



ASHAQUE SWAPAN

THE American presidential campaign has taken on a bizarre, dystopian quality. For the first time in living memory, a US presidential candidate refused to commit to accepting the

result of an election. Republican candidate Donald J. Trump did exactly that during his final debate with Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton on October 19. I wondered if I was in Dhaka. Trump had borrowed the barroom-brawl attitude right from our part of the world, where losers routinely discredit winners.

Trump's stance runs against the spirit of US presidential races. I vividly recall listening to prior losing presidential candidates like Democrat John Kerry, Republicans John McCain and Mitt Romney. They differed in their politics, but each one was especially gracious in his concession speech. Each time, it was an emotional, healing moment that brought the nation together after a bitterly-fought campaign.

Like a bull in a china shop, Trump tramples through political niceties with a wanton abandon that is horrifying to watch.

To give the devil its due, this debate was by far Trump's best performance to date. (True, it's a really low bar.) But like a bright yet delinquent adolescent, he went back to sulks, swagger and a sophomoric vocabulary. His explanation about how he would fix the national debt with extravagant tax giveaways to the rich was characteristically substance-free bluster.

Hillary hit Trump hard. She is one of the most articulate presidential candidates I have seen in over two decades – but she was evasive about accusations about Clinton Foundation.

Does any of it matter? Most probably not. Although elections are a few weeks away, early voting has begun in a majority of states, and pollsters say Hillary is running away with the race. The question now is whether it's going to hit the Republicans in down-ballot races. Remember, about a third of the Senate and

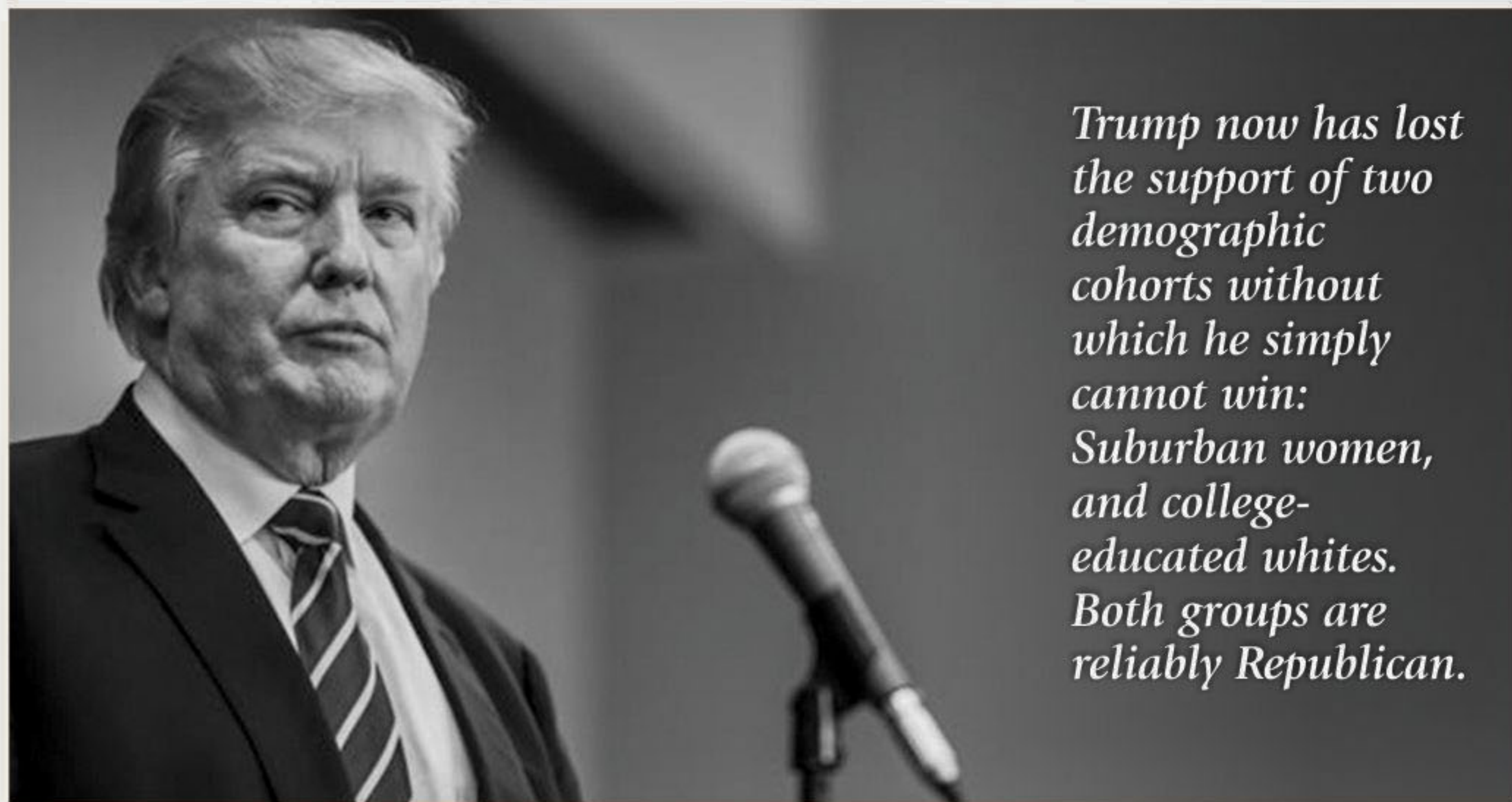


PHOTO: AFP

the entire US House is also up for re-election.

While the jury is still out on that, the one thing Trump has managed to do is tear his own Republican Party apart. A substantial chunk of the party establishment has dumped him, again unprecedented in modern US history.

American newspapers have almost unanimously refused to back Trump. This includes newspapers which have backed Republican presidential candidates for decades. This, too, is unprecedented in modern US history.

The turning point came when a tape revealed The Donald's lewd admissions of molesting women. Women are coming out of the woodwork to confirm that's true.

Trump now has lost the support of two demographic cohorts without which he simply cannot win: Suburban women, and college-educated whites. Both groups are reliably Republican.

Take Pennsylvania, a battleground state that Trump must win. Normally, Democrats win heavily in Philadelphia and Pittsburgh, and Republicans make up the difference by winning the rural areas and the suburbs. Only this time, suburban support for the Republican

candidate has plummeted – women and college-educated men are too turned off.

Yet the demographic cohort that supports him – non-college educated whites – are committed to him no matter what. These people swell his rallies and allow him to live in a fool's paradise.

While the presidential elections seem a foregone conclusion, what is going to happen is anything but.

The signs are ominous. Trump says the elections are rigged, with his usual disregard for facts. The notion of a presidential election being stolen in such a crazy-quilt decentralised system is ludicrous.

The Republican Party is deeply divided, and the establishment finds itself caught between a rock and a hard place. This became apparent after Trump's lewd remarks became known. The flow of elected Republicans abandoning Trump grew into a torrent, but after a backlash from Trump supporters, many returned to the Trump fold.

Why would they do that, you would think? It's the unforgiving math. To win elections, Republicans need the support of those who despise Trump as well as

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those who think he is the second coming.

As a passionate Democratic Party supporter, I could take pleasure in the party's meltdown, in what the Germans call *schadenfreude*. But I cannot. I am too horrified of the collateral damage that could happen if a major US party commits *hara-kiri*.

Yet the Republican Party is not entirely blameless. Decades back, since the days of New Gingrich, the firebrand Republican house speaker who pioneered scorched-earth politics, Republicans have been happy to pander to mean-spirited demoralisation of Democrats. Right-wing media like Fox television and conservative radio commentators have happily fanned the flames of hatred and bigotry.

Now the chickens have come home to roost. The Republican Party today has the dubious distinction of being the first major party of the Western world where its candidate is poised to question the results of a democratic election.

It's a profoundly depressing moment in American politics.

The writer is a contributing editor for *Siliconer*, a monthly periodical for South Asians in the United States. He has been writing for US-based South Asian media for over 25 years.

AL Council promises more grassroots leaders

Address the prickly issues

THE excitement surrounding the AL's Council today and tomorrow underscores the anticipation of party members and the public, of a positive change in the party. The hope, backed by news reports, is that there will be greater emphasis on electing leaders who have closer links at the grassroots level. This means party members who are more in touch with the pulse of the people, will have a chance to show their leadership skills in spearheading development in the most backward and poorer parts of the country.

The Awami League is a party with a glorious past, having been at the forefront of all democratic movements in our country's history, the most significant being its role, under the leadership of Bangabandhu, in ushering in the birth of Bangladesh through the Liberation War. It has also shown its resilience in fighting formidable odds, starting with the gruesome assassination of Bangabandhu and most of his family members, being pushed into the sidelines by non-democratic regimes and even by democratic governments. Every time it has bounced back with renewed force and vigour.

The failure to curb corruption and control certain rogue elements of Chitra League for instance, have however, become sore points marring AL's glorious legacy. People have great expectations from this party because they still believe that AL stands for the values of our Liberation movement. These include democratic practices within the party, abhorrence of corruption, social injustice and freedoms guaranteed in our Constitution. It also means a ruling party that allows for a strong play of dissent and vibrant opposition. Without these basic prerequisites that define a truly functioning democracy, no party can continue to enjoy the support of the people.

We hope that this Council will bring in the changes that will give Awami League the impetus to live up to its illustrious past.

Vicious attacks on girls

Societal and state protection a must

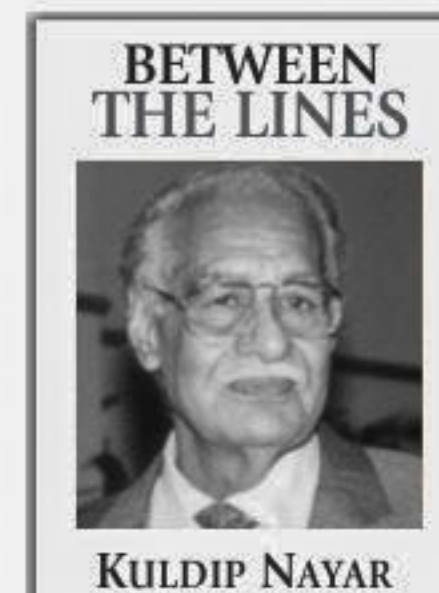
WE are horrified by the direction we are headed in regards to the security of women and, indeed, their treatment in society in general. Two 16-year-old twin sisters were indiscriminately beaten on Wednesday while waiting at the bus stand and a 15-year-old tenth-grader was hacked in the yard of her house as she was returning home. All three were minors and victims of sexual harassment. What kind of a society stands for such brutality against young girls?

The two incidents are disturbing, more so, given the spate of recent episodes of extreme violence perpetrated against women, especially young girls. One such incident was the brutal hacking of Khadiza Begum Nargis by Badrul Alam, that too, in broad daylight in the midst of numerous bystanders who refused to come to her aid initially. Then there was the stabbing of 14-year-old Zakia Sultana – a student of Class VIII – for turning down a proposal from her stalker who also happened to be the perpetrator.

And in the case of the two sisters getting beaten up, locals and witnesses again did not intervene as the man had influence in the area. Despite a clear directive from the High Court to treat sexual harassment as a punishable crime, in reality the lack of enforcement of the law has given criminals the audacity to carry out these crimes.

To save society from the dire consequences of this destructive trend, the authorities must apprehend all perpetrators of violence against women and punish them exemplarily and in quick time.

It's a Mandir again



KULDIP NAYYAR

IT is a Mandir again. The controversy over it comes to life whenever there are elections. The Babri Masjid was demolished in December, 1992. No doubt, the blame for the destruction is on the extremist Hindus, who did not even care for the Supreme Court's advice to let the status quo prevail. The controversy over it, however, was

practically over. The then prime minister Narasimha Rao connived the whole thing and promised to demolish the small temple which had come at the site in the wake of destruction. But he knew that the temple which had been built could not be destroyed because of the sentiments prevailing among the Hindus.

Today, the talk is whether there should be a park which the UP government wants or the museum that has the backing of the centre. There is no mention of rebuilding the mosque even at the distance from the temple, the compromise formula mentioned at one time. The Muslims seem to be afraid to revive the issue in the atmosphere of soft Hindutava that has come to prevail in the country.

Yet, the fact remains that the secular India cannot rub off the mark of shame from the forehead till the Muslims see a mosque in the vicinity of the temple. However, it is difficult to imagine this in the rule of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who has been a RSS *pracharak* and who believes in its ideology.

India has lived with the Babri Masjid topic, first as an issue in the shape of controversy whether the Ram temple stood there once and then in the aftermath of the Masjid's demolition by some Hindu extremists. It was a dastardly blow to secularism which the country has claimed as its ethos even before independence. There were widespread riots in December 1992 and January 1993, fanatic Hindus leading mobs. The 1993 Mumbai bomb blasts were the Muslims' vengeance against the pulling down of the Masjid on December 6, 1992.

The Justice Liberhan Commission which has took 17 years to submit its report at least put a judicial seal on what was known through mouth, print or electronic media. The report, rather late in the day tried to reconstruct the sequence of events. It brought to the fore the lesser known facts that it was the RSS which had planned the destruction at Faizabad, some 10 kilometres from Ayodhya, the site of dispute and it was not an outpouring of frenzy at the spur of the moment. It was a well planned scheme. The RSS gave the roadmap, the BJP provided the necessary help to the Bajrang Dal, a militant wing of the RSS, to execute the demolition plan to the shame of the Indian nation.

L. K. Advani, Murli Manohar Joshi and the then UP Chief Minister Kalyan Singh were some of the witnesses. One picture which appeared in most newspapers was that of the gleeful Uma Bharti, then a BJP lightweight, riding the shoulders of Joshi. Some BJP leaders shed crocodile tears when they found that the common people throughout the country had

reacted with anger and disapproval.

The most reprehensible aspect of the episode is that a small temple came up on the demolished site overnight. I recall asking Narasimha Rao certain questions about it. He had invited a few senior journalists to his residence to seek help to quell the riots. I asked him how the Centre had allowed a small temple to be built after the UP government had been dismissed and the central rule imposed.

Narasimha Rao explained that the central forces were flown from Delhi but could not land at Lucknow because the airport was engulfed with fog. I told him that he did not have to fly in troops from Delhi because there was already a surfeit of them at Ayodhya and around it. Narasimha Rao had no answer but told me emphatically

BJP leaders mentioned by the Liberhan Commission for riots in the wake of the demolition are still in the forefront of the party.

The Congress did not initiate any action against those who took the law in their hands during the emergency (1975-77) and committed the worst type of excesses. In fact, the party punished those who brought the perpetrators to justice. But there was a murder of values and institutions. Even the fundamental rights were suspended and the press gagged. The then Attorney General proudly told the judges that if some policemen were to shoot any one of them dead, they would not be able to haul them up.

My worry is that without the awareness of what is right and a desire to act according to what is right, there may be



PHOTO: AFP

India has lived with the Babri Masjid topic, first as an issue in the shape of controversy whether the Ram temple stood there once and then in the aftermath of the Masjid's demolition by some Hindu extremists.

that the temple would not be there "for long." That was in December 1992. The temple is still there. Hundreds of pilgrims visit the place daily. The government has vast security arrangements to protect the small temple. No political party has ever raised the question of removing it from there. It can be said without contradiction that if the BJP government in UP was responsible for the demolition of the Masjid, the Congress was responsible for the small temple to come up.

The Muslim psyche is hurt. The Liberhan Commission's findings have put a balm which should have healed the wounds of Muslims. On the other hand, the government has not taken any action against leaders like Shiv Sena Chief Bal Thackeray, although the Justice Srikrishna Commission named him responsible for the Mumbai riots in December 1992-January 1993. Some

no realisation of what is wrong. Over the years, the dividing line between right and wrong, moral and immoral, has ceased to exist. The tug of conscience, which was once there, has evaporated.

The Liberhan Commission provided an opportunity to set things right. The guilty, however high in office or politics, must be punished. Democracy is nothing but the independence of institutions. They must be restored to the position that the constitution has given them. The demolition of the Babri Masjid was a consequence of bigotry that took over most people in the north at that time and still lingers at some places and in some organisations. The idea of India cannot exist for long without pluralism. The institutions have to rise to the occasion.

The writer is an eminent Indian columnist.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Airport Road needs to be traffic-free

The Airport road in Dhaka is extremely important, for both commercial reasons and for travellers departing or arriving in Bangladesh. Unfortunately, there are no alternate roads to ease the pressure from this road.

We're all too familiar with the horrible traffic jams of Dhaka. Often, these traffic congestions lead people to miss their flights; often flights are delayed because technical or other airport personnel aren't able to arrive on time to the airport.

There are not enough bypass roads in Dhaka to ease the traffic. The authorities must manage traffic more efficiently in order to prevent such needless inconveniences.

Aminur Rahim
 Mohakhali

Northern Bangladesh deserves more attention

There is no doubt that the USD 24.45 billion soft loan on 27 different projects, along with the USD 13.6 billion investment on 13 joint venture agreements with China will play a great role for the economic development of Bangladesh. Most of the projects including railway - road construction, infrastructure, power development and industrialisation are centred on the south-east or south-west region of the country. But some development projects should be taken at the northern part of the country as the territory is already lagging behind in different sectors compared to others.

We can all agree that overall development will not be fruitful if some portion of the country is deprived.

Md. Rashedul Islam
 On email