

Addressing the Rohingya crisis: whose responsibility is it?

All we see is needless delay

Break the impasse preventing new VAT law's enactment

THE Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industries (FBCCI) has, rather belatedly, raised objections about the proposed VAT law. It would have helped us all if the apex trade body would have thoroughly explained its objection instead of giving vague reasons such as the rise in inflation and social unrest.

The revised VAT law with its four-layer slab comes at the insistence of the business community who wanted a change of the flat rate of 15 percent. The National Board of Revenue (NBR) accepted this idea and invested a huge amount to ready itself technologically to collect VAT under the new law.

We agree with the FBCCI's argument that given the four-layer structure of VAT, the scope for rebate should be more specifically spelled out.

The crux of the issue is the use of a specific piece of software which businesses will have to use, which will greatly increase the capacity of NBR to streamline tax collection.

This VAT law was first made in 2012 with the proposal to implement it by 2015. After several delays, we should now be able to implement it. We also cannot understand why FBCCI had to wait till May 5, 2019 to raise its objection without working it out with the NBR. We do not want to see further delay in implementation of the new VAT law.

International Mother's Day should mean more

Accord women their rightful place

IN many countries, as in Bangladesh, International Mother's Day was observed yesterday. In honouring our mothers, we honour all mothers and all women. However, on this occasion, we must ask ourselves, should we restrict our remembrance of mothers or acknowledgement of their contributions in our lives to a particular day only? For mothers are to be remembered, revered, thanked and celebrated—not formally once a year but every day of the week and every week of the month—for nothing can repay our debt to them individually or as a nation.

What we must, therefore, remember is that if we want to give proper respect to mothers, we must respect every girl and every woman. Regrettably, in this regard, the picture in our society is dismal. Women by and large remain marginalised and discriminated against. Although women in our society are striving to stand on their own, and compete side by side with men, the opportunities for this are very limited. Women still get paid half for the same work than their male counterparts. The state has failed to acknowledge their contribution to national growth by not yet monetising their work related to looking after the house and bringing up the children. They are subjected to sexual violence as well as physical and mental abuse at home and outside. Many young mothers are deprived of basic maternal healthcare. Women's workplace remains as hazardous as travelling in public transport.

If we want to change the society, we feel that change must start from home. We must bring an end to the discrimination faced by girl children, teach our sons to respect girls and women so that they grow up with the same values. Unless all women are treated as equal citizens and supported by their family, society and the state, we can never truly give our mothers the recognition they deserve.



MACRO MIRROR
FAHMIDA KHATUN

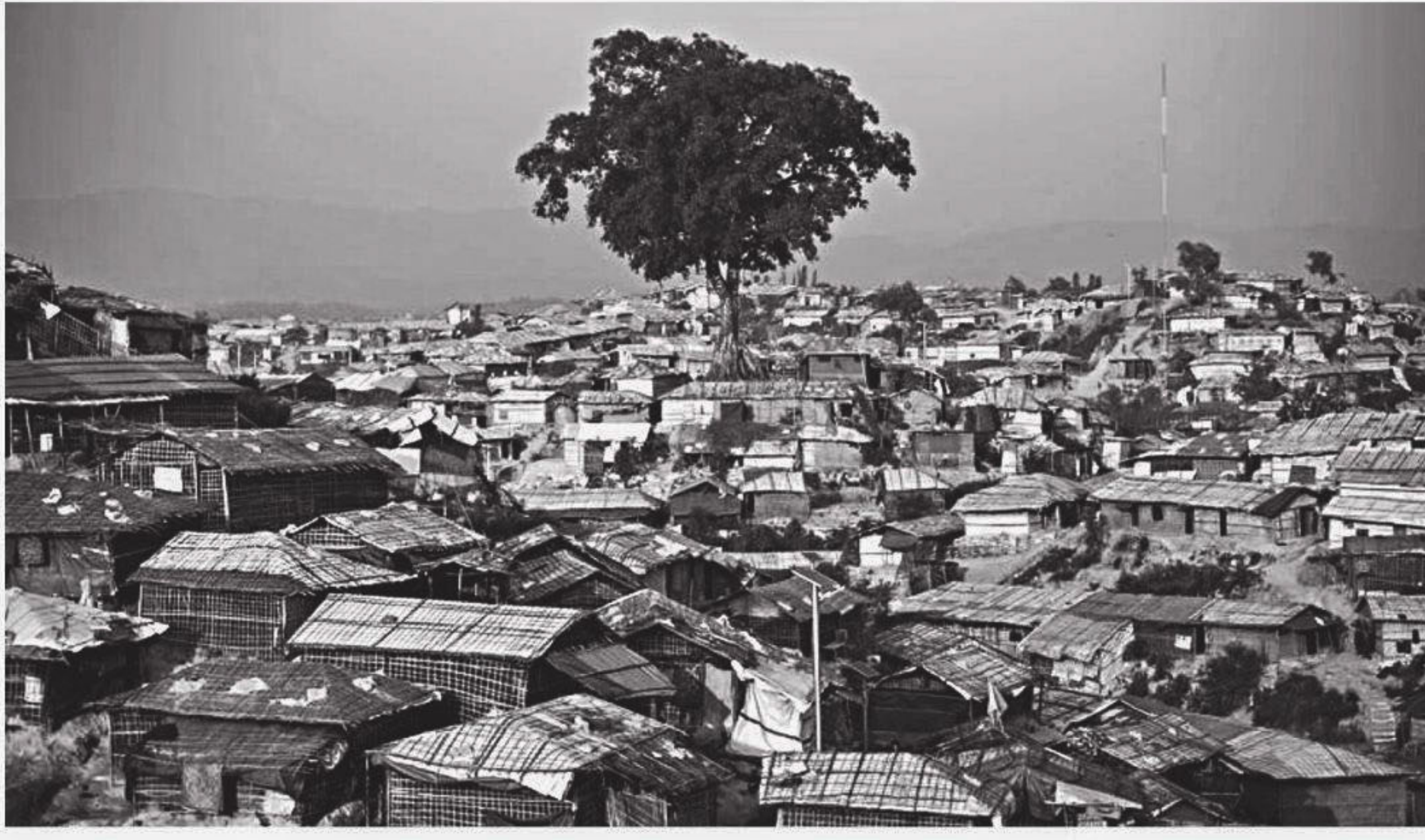
IT has been almost 21 months since the influx of about 750,000 Rohingyas to Bangladesh began in August 2017. Gradually, it is becoming clear to us that the Rohingyas are here to stay for a protracted period of time. Their prolonged stay has serious implications for Bangladesh. Already, massive deforestation in the lush hilly land around Cox's Bazar has made the whole area barren. The ecosystem is being destroyed. There are also social problems that are affecting the host communities.

The financial implication of hosting the Rohingyas is also huge. Though a Memorandum of Understanding between the governments of Bangladesh and Myanmar was signed in November 2017 for repatriation of the Rohingyas, it did not materialise due to unwillingness on the part of the Myanmar government. The global experience shows that the refugee repatriation time is 10 years on average. Our estimation shows that if the Rohingyas stay for five years from the fiscal year (FY) 2018-2019 onwards, the cost to maintain them will be USD 7,046 million till FY2023. With population growth and inflation adjustments, this cost will continue to increase. Thus, if they stay for 10 years, the cost will be USD 17,204 million.

Who is going to bear this cost? The international community has extended great support in tackling the problem. Not only have they come forward with financial assistance, they are also providing moral support to Bangladesh by raising the issue at international forums. Thanks to the proactive role of the government of Bangladesh, international donor agencies, international and local non-government organisations (NGOs), and many other organisations, the humanitarian activities have been going smoothly. But there will come a time of donor fatigue. This is not only because they may run short of resources, but also because their priorities could shift. We live in a time when crises arise every other day somewhere in the world. International security and cross-border terrorism have become a serious matter of concern. So, everyone rushes to attend the competing priorities on a continuous basis.

Hence, the ultimate burden of the Rohingyas will fall on Bangladesh. Clearly, the policymakers will have to plan for this even though there may be a denial syndrome among them about the length of stay of the Rohingyas. So far, the government of Bangladesh has extended all-out support to the Rohingyas by providing them with shelter and other support. It is unthinkable for any country in the world to do what Bangladesh has done for the Rohingyas. Who doesn't know the fate of the refugees crossing borders to the developed countries? Haven't we seen the inhumanity and cruelty of the wealthy and powerful countries even towards the children from poor, war-affected nations? But Bangladesh, despite being a densely populated and lower-middle-income country, has shown such generosity which has put the developed world to shame.

However, when the flow of support for the Rohingyas dwindles, how will the government meet the requirements of the Rohingyas? This is an issue that the government needs to ponder on moving forward. In this regard, an action plan should be in place. There could be a three-pronged approach: first, international dialogues should be continued, and Bangladesh has to pursue more energetic diplomacy at the global level; second, bilateral talks with Myanmar should also be continued. The issue should also be raised continuously at regional forums such as the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic



Balukhali camp in Cox's Bazar, November 16, 2018.

PHOTO: REUTERS/MOHAMMAD PONIR HOSSAIN

Cooperation (BIMSTEC) and Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar (BCIM) Economic Corridor. Third, while the dialogues go on, the Rohingyas should be looked after, and their economic and social safety has to be ensured.

Shockingly, some international organisations have come up with the suggestion of forming a solidarity compact. They cite examples of Jordan, Lebanon and Ethiopia which had opted for such a compact in dealing with refugees in their countries. In a nutshell, advocates of such a solidarity compact promotes the idea that the host country should keep the refugees in exchange for facilities such as duty-free market access for its products, migration of its labour force and foreign direct investment into the country.

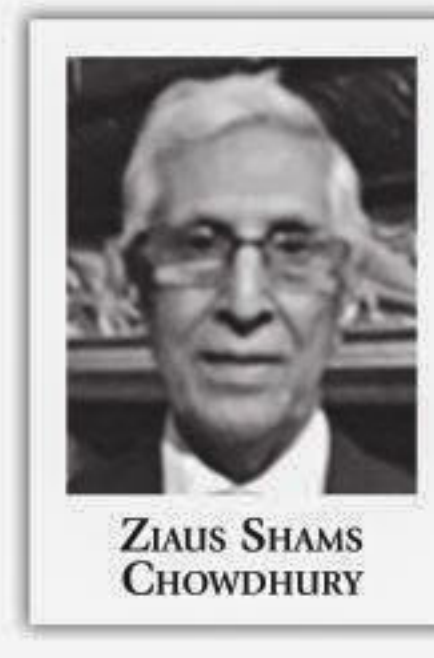
This is an out-and-out unacceptable and meaningless proposal. Currently, Bangladesh as a least developed country (LDC) gets duty-free, quota-free (DFQF) market access to many countries including the European Union markets. When it graduates from the LDC group, initially in 2024, and finally in 2027 after the three-year grace period, Bangladesh will lose the DFQF market access in any case. Besides, with not so promising global economic outlook and with increased protectionism in the horizon, the desire to have DFQF in exchange for keeping

the Rohingyas is wishful thinking. In fact, this whole idea is based on the political economy of the refugee problem. It is also the reflection of a parochial mindset that thinks that the southern countries will host refugees while the northern countries will provide some token support to show their sympathy.

After the initial humanitarian support, now there is a need for developmental interventions for the Rohingyas in terms of access to education and skills development. Developing human capital is a good idea in giving them the opportunity to earn a living. However, that doesn't imply that the Rohingyas should be integrated into the host society. The host communities are already stressed due to the massive environmental damage and shrinking livelihood opportunities as a result of competition from the Rohingyas who are available at a lower wage. It is time to step up pressure on the Myanmar government for repatriation of their people. The global community also has to accept the fact that the Rohingyas are not only Bangladesh's responsibility. It is their responsibility, too. The international community has to play a proactive role to support Bangladesh and create pressure on Myanmar for repatriation of the Rohingyas at the earliest.

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Deteriorating civility in the Indian elections



ZIAUS SHAMS CHOWDHURY

INDIANS can feel proud that they have been able to nurture democracy since the inception of their independence. Today after the nation has practiced democracy

practically unbroken for seven decades, the democratic institutions remain entrenched and people's commitment quite firm. In every election season, people, regardless of their social and economic standing, suddenly become empowered.

This year's high-spirited Lok Sabha election makes it absolutely clear with what desperate urgency politicians supplicate voters. The amount of toil, sweat and tactical spin that is invested by political parties and leaders to win their support is quite fascinating.

In my three decades long diplomatic career, I have had the opportunity of serving in five countries practicing genuine democracy. Two of them were western industrialised nations—USA and Australia. The third was Japan, an Asian nation that firmly embraced parliamentary democracy following the Westminster model after it was forced to adopt a new constitution in the wake of its defeat in the Second World War. The two others were in our region, India (where I served twice) and Sri Lanka. I can say with total conviction that the zeal, excitement and suspense that mark Indian elections are not surpassed by electoral enthusiasm in any other country.

Yes, there is a sharp asymmetry of literacy, awareness of complex issues, levels of political insight between the urban and rural communities. But even among the least advanced rural segments of the population, they will carefully, and jealously, weigh what the ruling party gave them, where it fell short of or neglected their electoral promises. They will ponder how justified it is to give a chance to other parties. I was recently amazed to observe with what prudent common sense even very humble rural folks were responding to an NDTV reporter's questions about which party they will support in this

election and why. If one carefully examines the ruling BJP's campaign strategy this year, it becomes obvious that Mr Modi's government knows where it failed. Its shift of focus from jobs, economy, farmer's miseries, etc., where it has been lacklustre, to artificially inflated security concerns is a device to hide its failures.

Unfortunately, one feature of this election is how Mr Modi, driven by desperation, has resorted to a style of rhetoric that has degraded the level of civility. His abrasiveness, hubris, and trampling of very rudimentary decencies have constituted a potent factor in uniting his opponents around one object: that Modi must be removed from power.

One gets an impression that the political leaders are putting the goal of ejecting BJP from power above their

Reacting to Rahul Gandhi's criticism of the Rafale issue surrounding the purchase of aircrafts from France, he breached the universally honoured rule not to abuse a dead person. He needlessly dragged the deceased Rajiv Gandhi into political discourse: "Your father was termed 'Mr Clean' by his courtiers, but his life ended as Bhrashatchari No 1." Modi said Rahul was trying to tarnish his image. Senior Congress leader P Chidambaram responded that Modi's remark showed his "desperation" and "fear of defeat". "Does any religion allow anyone to speak ill of the dead?" he asked.

For the sake of argument, one might think that the criticism of an adversarial figure like Chidambaram may be partisan. But can one take issue with LK Advani, a BJP veteran with stellar legacy? Reacting sharply to Mr Modi's characterisation of

essentially a state for the Hindus, and other communities may seek their own devices for survival or perhaps take refuge out of India.

It is pertinent here to recapitulate a central tenet of India's avowedly secular constitution. The term socialist and secular were added by the 42nd amendment of the constitution. The basic aim was to assure unity and integrity of the multi-religious society.

Those who take politics as a profession—let alone act as a country's head of government—are supposed to have read the constitution. Nay, a prime minister is expected to have a solid understanding of the core spirit of the constitution and its guiding principles. Has Mr Modi read and pored carefully over the constitution of his country?

It is a historical fact that a fundamental argument of India's top leaders—such as Gandhi, Nehru, Azad—against partition was that India would be a secular state where followers of all religious faiths would have equal rights and treatment. Indeed, the father of the nation Mahatma Gandhi gave his life for his fight against communal hatred and violence!

Is Mr Modi contriving to upend the very character of the country's constitution in which so much constructive thinking and ideas were invested by so many of India's wise founding figures? The political philosophy that Mr Modi is promoting has dark implications for India as much as for the subcontinent's peace and stability.

A special point that needs to be made is that when there is such urgency to address terrorism both by ideas and security related intelligence and actions, the brand that Mr Modi is preaching fuels the motivation of the terror outfits. Has he abandoned every iota of idealism and embraced a purely cynical political opportunism?

It seems that the interest of peace and harmony in the sub-continent will be best served if a coalition government comes to power in this election in India. Indeed, India's own traditional inclusive orientation, defined by such vast diversities, will also benefit by such an outcome.

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India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi addresses a rally in Bengaluru, India.

PHOTO: REUTERS/ABHISHEK N CHINNAPPA

personal ambitions. The Andhra Pradesh CM Chandrababu Naidu is talking with Rahul Gandhi and Mamata Banerjee to meet in Delhi on May 21, two days before results are known, to unite 21 parties to configure a path to power.

The Trinamool Congress leader Mamata Banerjee and Congress Party President Rahul Gandhi both have disavowed any ambition to become prime minister. In UP, the largest and most coveted of states, regional parties have formed alliance with the sole object of defeating BJP.

Some of Modi's egregious examples of arrogance need to be discussed.

those who disagree with him as "enemies" and "anti state", Advani expressed deep unease. "BJP never regarded those who disagree with us as our enemies...or as anti-national," Advani said.

Another contentious remark Modi made was his jibe that Rahul was contesting in a state (Kerala) where most of the community is made up of minority groups. This was in effect a contention that to be regarded as a legitimate winner, you must have the preponderant support of the majority community. The minority communities are trashed to a lower status by Mr Modi. This is an extension of Mr Modi's political ideology that India is

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Ensuring safety for women and children

Despite Bangladesh progressing in various sectors, it is failing to provide adequate security for women. Whenever we open our newspapers or scroll through our newsfeeds on social media, we see the brutal severity of the situation. There is a new name every day, with no age group being immune to the barbarism of sexual violence.

According to a recent report published by *The Daily Star*, 41 children were raped in 8 days. Statistics like these make one think twice about the competence of our law and its enforcers.

The level of ease with which sexual predators commit these abominable acts brings to doubt the security of all females in this country and this just goes to show the moral depravity the nation is currently suffering from.

These cases should be dealt with the highest of priority, ensuring that the perpetrators in question are handed down the severest of punishments. Besides this, the authorities must delve into the matter more than just superficially and work towards preventing the development of such mentality in the first place. Otherwise, the future of this country looks bleak with half of its population suffering due to this complete absence of security and safety.

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