

A call for unity, peace and tolerance

All vulnerable groups, minority communities must feel secure

As Christians across the world celebrate Christmas and the birth of Jesus Christ, the message of peace, humanity, and compassion as preached by all major religions could not be more urgent. In the wake of the barbaric killing of Dipu Chandra Das, a member of the Hindu community, and the hate crimes committed against religious minorities, cultural institutions, newspapers, and other establishments, there is a need for deep soul-searching. Why have these incidents taken place? How did our pluralistic, syncretic, and religiously harmonious society become so fractured by vicious intolerance of the other? No doubt it reflects the global trend of majoritarian religious intolerance. But that cannot excuse us, Bangladeshis, to sink into this abyss of hatred and mindless violence.

The government's failure to stop mob violence has created a sense of impunity among criminals, a dangerous development that can spiral out of control. It is believed that most of these incidents are aimed at creating chaos and thwarting the upcoming elections. To achieve this goal various groups are weaponising religion and prejudice to inflict maximum harm to the nation.

Since the state is responsible for the security and safety of all citizens, the government's role is the most critical. Arresting the criminals directly involved in crimes such as killing, arson, and vandalism is mandatory. But more important is the need to prevent them from taking place with the help of intelligence gathering and action against those who instigate, mobilise and enable others to carry out such hate crimes. The government must realise that its image and that of the country have taken an enormous hit as a result of these incidents. Most importantly, it has created a sense of insecurity among people, especially from religious and ethnic minorities.

To restore confidence and security, the government must take decisive steps. It must use the full force of state machinery to investigate past and present hate crimes and identify the real conspirators. There should not be any careless blame game like before. The practice of catching only the foot soldiers of a crime without apprehending the kingpins, or arresting individuals merely based on their political affiliation, must stop. The same goes for allowing identified actors to be released due to political pressure.

Here, all political parties must work together and with the government to maintain the security of all vulnerable groups. We have seen, in the days following August 5 when there was no government and lawlessness was rampant, communities rose to the occasion to protect themselves. Temples and churches were protected by students of madrasas along with others. It is this sense of unity, camaraderie, tolerance of difference, and compassion that all major religions are based on, which must be garnered and spread across the country. Our aspirations of a truly democratic transition depend on this.

Poll concerns must be addressed seriously

EC must ensure proper enforcement of law and electoral code

The concerns raised by returning officers and field-level police officials at a meeting with the Election Commission should be taken as a serious warning. Among other challenges, they highlighted the use of illegal firearms, abuse of social media, indiscriminate bail for listed criminals, and weak border security. These form a combustible mix in a volatile socio-political climate, posing a serious threat to our hope for a free, fair, and inclusive election. Clearly, what's important is not only acknowledging these risks, which the top brass often seem unwilling to do, but also acting decisively on them.

In this regard, we acknowledge the chief election commissioner's assurance that the commission "will stand by" officials in charge of conducting elections, directing them to apply the law equally to everyone. Meanwhile, the inspector general of police claimed that police have sufficiently rebuilt their capacity, pledging to counter all attempts to create unrest. "If we cannot establish order, it will not be possible to provide full support to the commission during the polls," he said. These assurances, however, will mean nothing if they are not matched by visible enforcement. And right now, we need some serious enforcement on the ground.

Recent weeks have seen a disturbing spike in political and mob violence. A leader of National Citizen Party (NCP) was shot by miscreants in Khulna on Monday. Earlier, an MP aspirant from Dhaka-8 constituency, Sharif Osman Hadi, suffered a critical head injury after being shot from close range and eventually died on Thursday, which then unleashed a wave of violence and arson attacks. Around the same time, a BNP leader's house in Lakshmipur was set on fire, leading to a seven-year-old being burnt to death. These incidents have understandably heightened concerns about whether the February 12 polls can be held on time and without intimidation. The EC must remember that polls derive legitimacy not just from the ballots cast, but also from voters' confidence that their choice can be exercised safely.

When it comes to holding a fair election, the work starts much earlier, right on the campaign trail. A vital task for the EC here is to ensure proper enforcement of the electoral code. Allegations about MP aspirants, especially from major parties, spending crores of taka even before the election schedule was announced risk distorting competition and marginalising candidates without deep pockets. Such activities, if left unaddressed, could compromise the level playing field, fuel criminal patronage networks, and encourage further violence.

We, therefore, urge the EC to take the dual challenge of ensuring law enforcement and proper electoral conduct with equal seriousness. The recommendations presented by officials at Monday's meeting deserve serious consideration. The EC, the administration, and the police all must do their part properly.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

December 25 becomes Christmas

On this day in 352, Pope Liberius celebrated the first official Christmas mass in Rome. The birth of Jesus Christ had been celebrated as many as two centuries earlier, but it was this mass that ensured Christmas's place on December 25 in the Roman Catholic calendar.

Temporary solutions do little to help Rohingya women



A CLOSER LOOK

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Every so often, news reports surface to remind us of the painfully perpetual existence of the Rohingya crisis in our very own backwaters. It merely recedes from view from time to time. The headlines change, the focus areas shift, but the lives of the Rohingya at the centre of the news stories remain suspended in the same uncertain void—one shaped by displacement, abuse, repression and a future that continues to remain elusive.

The latest media reports from Al Jazeera and other international news outlets draw attention to a rise in early marriage among Rohingya girls, linking it to shrinking humanitarian aid, school closures, and the gradual dismantling of protection programmes in the refugee camps in Bangladesh. The concern is justified. The pattern is disturbing. But it is also unsurprising and predictable.

For Rohingya women and girls, vulnerability has been constant, layered, and cumulative. Long before aid reductions became the focus of international reporting, their lives were already defined by statelessness, restricted movement, limited access to education and work, and the persistent uncertainty of camp life. What we are witnessing now is not the emergence of a new crisis, but the intensification of an old one.

Early marriage, in this context, is frequently framed as a cultural practice of the Rohingya community resurfacing under pressure. It is an over-simplified explanation. By directly linking the problem to the Rohingya community, this narrative framing allows external actors to observe the situation from a safe distance with concern, while remaining unimplicated. Yet, such narratives hide more than they reveal. When families are forced to make decisions under conditions of protracted insecurity and exploitation, those decisions are rarely about culture or tradition. They are about real-life risks, survival, and the erasure of options.

When food rations are reduced and schools close, survival becomes a real

threat. For many families, marrying off a daughter is seen not simply as an economic relief, but as a form of protection: from trafficking, from uncertainty, and from sexual violence in overcrowded camps, where privacy is scarce and accountability non-existent. In spaces where adolescent girls and young women face harassment day in and day out—many avoid going to the bathroom after dark in fear of criminal gangs—marriage is often seen as a shield, which is mostly illusory. That reality becomes visible later.



Begum, a 35-year-old mother of seven children, is marrying off one of her daughters, following the funding shortage, which shuttered thousands of schools in the refugee camps in June 2025.

FILE PHOTO: REUTERS

The tragedy lies not only in the act of early marriage itself, but in the conditions that make it appear reasonable. These conditions do not emerge spontaneously. They are created through flawed policy decisions, deteriorating funding crisis, and a humanitarian response that has mostly been sluggish at best.

What recurrent news reports on the crisis of Rohingya women suggest is the broader environment in which these marriages take place. Girls who remain

Much of this unfolds quietly. Sexual abuse and exploitation are underreported not because they are rare, but because stigma, fear, and the absence of trustworthy reporting mechanisms keep them hidden. As protection services are cut, the few spaces where women might seek help shrink further and violence is often simply overlooked.

There is also a striking contradiction at the heart of the global humanitarian response to the Rohingya crisis.

Internationally, there is no shortage of rhetoric about protecting women and girls, combating trafficking, and ending child marriage. These commitments feature prominently in policy statements and development agendas. Yet in practice, they appear remarkably shallow, vulnerable to shifting geopolitical priorities and donor agendas. Protection that depends on funding cycles is, by nature, temporary. And temporariness is precisely what Rohingya women can no longer afford.

These women are often portrayed as passive recipients of aid and abuse, but this portrayal does them a disservice. When education, skills training, or livelihood opportunities have been available, women have engaged with determination and purpose. They have demonstrated resilience through daily acts of endurance and adaptation. The problem has never been proper utilisation of available agency. It has been the steady erosion of the same.

What's more troubling is that prolonged crises often erode urgency. Practices that would once have provoked outrage, such as early marriage, forced labour, sexual exploitation, begin to appear as regrettable but expected realities of camp life. This normalisation is the outcome of concern without concrete action. For Rohingya women and girls, these gaps shape their futures and life trajectories in ways that are irreversible.

What is unfolding today at the Rohingya camps is not simply the result of displacement, uncertainty, or poverty taken separately. It is the outcome of a sustained failure to provide protection that is lasting, rights-based, and sensitive to gendered realities. Temporary solutions for the Rohingya community have long outlived their usefulness. It is more than evident that piecemeal actions cannot resolve a long-standing, large-scale crisis.

More reports on the Rohingya will continue to follow, for sure. More stories will be told, documenting preventable tragedies. The question, as always, is whether they will continue to compile a laundry list of consequences while leaving root causes largely unacknowledged, or whether collectively they will force a reckoning with the uncomfortable truth that this crisis persists not because solutions are unknown, but because responsibility has become too easy to defer.

For Rohingya women, the cost of that deferral is already being paid—quietly, repeatedly, and largely out of sight.

The peace promise of ceasefire is but a mirage for Palestinians



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The bombs may have eased, but Palestinian children are still dying. This time, not by Israeli airstrikes, but from cold and collapsing damaged structures. Israel has violated the ceasefire agreement by obstructing the entry of vital services for children, and essential shelters to protect civilians whose homes were destroyed by two years of genocide. A war crime by other means: slower, less visible, but more excruciating death delivered through deprivation and exposure.

In recent weeks, heavy rains have inundated Gaza's tent camps, flooding makeshift shelters and causing damaged buildings to collapse on families inside. Adequate shelter is unavailable because Israel has blocked its entry at the Rafah crossing. At least 16 Palestinians, including infants, have died as a direct result of these storms. Amnesty International rightly described this as an "utterly preventable tragedy." It was not bad weather that killed these children, but Israel's violation of the ceasefire terms.

After more than two months of ceasefire noncompliance, Israel has killed and injured more than 400 Palestinians, and continues to severely restrict aid and critical supplies needed to repair the water and sewer infrastructure system. This persists despite an International Court of Justice advisory opinion affirming Israel's obligations as an occupying

power, and a UN General Assembly resolution demanding compliance. The reality on the ground tells a different story: the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) alone has shelter supplies for up to 1.3 million people waiting outside Gaza, barred from entry.

After repeated displacement, the destruction or damage of at least 92 percent of Gaza's structures, and the designation of most of the territory as no-go zones, most Palestinians are now living in dilapidated tents or taking shelter under dangling concrete slabs. Israel first weaponised food to break Palestinian resistance; now its strategy has turned nature into a new weapon of war.

Amnesty investigators documented buildings collapsing in Jabalia, al-Rimal, Sheikh Radwan, and al-Shati refugee camp, crushing entire families. Mohammed Nassar lost two children, Lina and Ghazi, when their damaged five-storey building crumpled under the storm. They had fled Israeli airstrikes twice. After two years of genocide, they returned to their destroyed home, believing its sagging concrete roof would be safer than a tent flooded by rain. Instead, it collapsed, crushing them beneath it. He mourned that his children had survived the bombardment only to be killed by a storm.

UNRWA had warned over a month

earlier of a harsh winter, "More shelter supplies are urgently needed for the people of Gaza. UNRWA has them outside, waiting for the green light." Those warnings fell on deaf ears, and heartless consciences.

This is what the US President Donald Trump's mediated ceasefire looks like when the blockade remains intact. Amnesty International's conclusion was unequivocal. Israel is continuing to deliberately inflict conditions of life calculated to bring about the physical destruction of Palestinians in Gaza. Israel's objectives remained unchanged, if bombs and destruction do not make Gaza unliveable, nature

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Infants freezing to death in Gaza does not upset that false 'peace' narrative. It is only Israeli Jewish lives that appear to count as a measure of instability. Death is rendered invisible when it is asymmetrically borne, and peace is redefined as the absence of discomfort, for Israelis only.

The same Zionist savagery is at work in the occupied West Bank. As Gaza drowns, bulldozers tear through Palestinian refugee camps, and Jewish mobs set fire to homes and olive groves across the West Bank. In Nur Shams camp, near Tulkarem, the Israeli military has issued new orders to demolish 25 more Palestinian homes. Palestinian leaders and UNRWA warn that hundreds face imminent forced displacement, 77 years after their first expulsion from their original homes in historic Palestine.

The demolition of Palestinian homes coincides with the approval of new Jewish-only colonies. Where are these refugees expected to go? Their land was stolen in 1948, and they have neither the financial means nor the ability to resettle elsewhere in Palestine. Meanwhile, the Israeli government continues to expropriate what little land remains for Jewish-only use, while systematically denying building permits to non-Jews.

In Gaza, displacement is enforced by siege; in the West Bank, by demolition and land theft, both carried out by the same malevolent power. In each case, only Palestinians pay the price under the so-called "peace."

International humanitarian law is clear. Israel as an occupying power must ensure access to food, shelter, medical care, and essential infrastructure. "Peace" made on the graves of frozen infants will stand as an indictment, not of the weather, but of humanity. This is not peace; this is a genocide by other means.