

**Opening Statement of Mr. Abul Hassan Mahmood Ali, M.P.,
Hon'ble Foreign Minister of the People's Republic of Bangladesh,
Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom 2018
Washington, D.C.
July 26, 2018**

The Honorable Mike Pence, Vice President of the United States of America,
Secretary of State Mike Pompeo,
Senior Adviser to the President Jared Kushner,
Foreign Ministers, Ministers, and Leaders of Delegation from different countries,
Dignitaries, Ambassadors,
Friends,
Ladies and Gentleman,

A very good morning to you all.

At the outset, I would like to thank Secretary Pompeo for inviting me to participate in this first-ever 'Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom' in Washington, D.C. Given the challenges in this regard that exist around the world today, this is certainly a noble and timely initiative. Secretary Pompeo deserves much credit for organizing this important event in the US Department of State. The impressive profile of participation in this Ministerial from around the world demonstrates a very strong commitment of all of us to this great and common value, Religious Freedom, and advancing the same further.

Bangladesh is a land of communal harmony where over centuries, the streams of Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and Christianity have coalesced to form the intricate web of a close-knit social fabric that has nurtured the sapling of nationhood, which spread its branches basking in the rays of secular belief paving the way for a culture of inclusiveness and tolerance.

Religious pluralism is deeply rooted in Bangladesh. The religious co-existence of people from all faiths enjoys both societal and political endorsement since long. Deeply rooted in this culture of tolerance is the centuries-old traditions of non-violence and peace. Yet, the longing for freedom and emancipation and the inherent urge to uphold moral values always inspired the people of Bangladesh to fight against the colonial, fanatic, oppressive and undemocratic forces that had encroached into our existence time and again to annihilate our identity as a pluralistic society.

The centuries-old practice of peace, non-violence, social harmony and tolerance founded the very core of Bangladesh's nationhood. Our Father of the Nation, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman declared, "I am a human being, I am a Bangalee, I am a Muslim" in his iconic speech of 7th March 1971. These very words reflect the multiple identities of a Bangalee. As a "Bangalee", we believe in our secular identity as well as in our global commitment to ensuring respect for Human Rights and protecting fundamental freedoms including freedom of thought, conscience and religion.

This has taken yet another upward turn under the leadership of our Hon'ble Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. Since the present Great Alliance-Government led by **Her Excellency the Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina** came in power back in January, 2009, the people of Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, Christian and other religious communities have celebrated their religious festivals in due festive moods and great enthusiasm. In this connection, the Ministry of Religious affairs has remained vigilant and active. With a view to ensuring the constitutional rights of the people of all religious communities in observing their religious festivals and programmes, the present government has given due importance to the promotional activities of the ministry of religious affairs. To this end like Islamic Foundation, the Hindu Welfare Trust, the Buddhist Welfare Trust and the Christian Welfare Trust have been working across the country. The Honourable Prime Minister has been working relentlessly in fortifying social cohesion manifested in our founding principles, codified in the National Constitution, which is the reflection of the nation's aspiration towards building a secular, non-communal, progressive, and tolerant populace. While actively promoting non-communalism and peaceful coexistence, the Government of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina also maintains a 'zero tolerance' approach to any form of violence and discrimination against the religious minorities, under any pretext. Traditionally, the people of all religions and communities have been living in peaceful coexistence and communal harmony in the country.

The Constitution of Bangladesh has incorporated 'secularism' as a 'fundamental principle of State Policy' which "*shall be realized by the elimination of- a) communalism in all forms; b) the granting by the State of political status in favour of any religion; c) the abuse of religion for political purposes; d) any discrimination against, or persecution of, persons practicing a particular religion.*" It also states that "*the State shall endeavor to ensure quality of opportunity to all citizens.*" While the 'fundamental rights' stated in the Constitution ensure, "*all citizens are equal before law and are entitled to equal protection of law. The State shall not discriminate against any citizen on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth.*"

Thus, the provision of '*non-discrimination on the ground of religion*' is guaranteed as a *fundamental right* under the Constitution. The Constitution also provides that every citizen of Bangladesh has the freedom to adopt a religion or belief of his/her own choice. Moreover, every citizen of Bangladesh has the right to profess, practice or propagate any

religion. Every religious community or denomination has the right to establish, maintain and manage its religious institutions.

More importantly, the fundamental rights, as enshrined in the Constitution, supersede other provisions of the Constitution like that of state religion or any other laws of the land that may appear to give different interpretations. It provides all the citizens of the country with the scope to resort to the Courts on any ground of discrimination including on the ground of religion or faith.

The Constitution makes provision for the promotion of international peace, security and solidarity and supporting the oppressed peoples throughout the world waging a just struggle against imperialism, colonialism or racialism. Being guided by these principles and the moral obligation, Bangladesh has been acclaimed by the international community for playing an unprecedented and phenomenal humanitarian role in hosting over a million forcibly displaced Rohingyas fleeing violent persecution in their homeland in the bordering Rakhine State of Myanmar.

Rohingyas, an ethnic and religious minority living in Myanmar for centuries, have been facing violent brutalities in their own country, Myanmar, by their own Military and local Vigilante hate groups, only because of their racial identity and faith. The current exodus of persecuted Rohingyas into Bangladesh is nothing new. Bangladesh has been receiving Rohingyas periodically in the wake of so-called crackdowns by Myanmar security forces. The latest one, since 25th August, 2017, being unprecedented in scale and pace and thus been determined as 'Ethnic Cleansing' by the U.S. Administration, and described as 'genocide' by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights. Till date, Bangladesh has received more than seven hundred thousand additional Rohingyas, including half a million within first four weeks, which is the fastest in the recent history of mass exodus, making the total number to more than 1.1 million.

Despite the challenge of resources and land, Bangladesh has been hosting these Rohingyas for decades. It has not only been providing them with food, shelter, wash and healthcare, but also arranging informal education, life-skill training etc. with the support of international community including the UN, and friendly countries like the United States and others.

Bangladesh, with utmost patience, sincerity and intent to peacefully deal with the crisis, created and imposed on it by Myanmar, is actively engaged with the Government of Myanmar for safe, secured, voluntary and sustainable repatriation of the Rohingyas to their homeland, Myanmar. In this regard, Bangladesh has engaged with international partners and UN agencies including UNHCR.

It is often said that Bangladesh, a great mosaic of cultural accommodation, is the home to the fourth largest Muslim population in the world. But what is not usually said is, Bangladesh is the home to the third largest Hindu population in the world, and also home to thousands of Christians, Buddhists, and several Small Ethnic Groups, the latter being migrants from the neighboring countries and region mostly between the 16th and 19th centuries. Bangladesh, which is about the size of the US State of Iowa, has a total population of more than 160 million, almost half the size of population of the US. Given this incredible proportion of people to land ratio, Bangladesh feels proud to be one of the largest democracies in the world, where people from different faiths live in peace and harmony.

Bangladesh, a leader in advancing religious freedom, respects all faiths regardless of the number of people belonging to those. It is not the quantity but the quality of spiritual messages in different religions that we truly value and accommodate, that makes Bangladesh a beautiful country, where our Hon'ble Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and we all say, believe and practice, *“Religion is for his or her own and festival is for all.”* Bangladesh is one of few countries in the world where Eids, Durga Puja and Janmashtami, Buddha Purnima and Christmas, the major festivals for Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists and Christians are celebrated with equal fervor and observed as national holidays. The President of Bangladesh hosts reception on all these occasions and the Prime Minister of Bangladesh exchanges greetings with members of all these religious communities on the days of festival. Religious freedom is intrinsic in our genes and ethos, and we advance it naturally.

Rising global terrorism and violent extremism adds a new dimension to the practice of religious freedom around the world, where minority groups remain the soft targets. Bangladesh is not an exception to this and several incidents of attack against minorities and other individuals by terrorists in the recent years have shaken our conscience. Usually the poor, uneducated, and socially isolated people fall an easy prey to radicalization. In addition to strong law enforcement measures, Government of Bangladesh has taken various community engagement and awareness initiatives, including active involvement of religious leaders from all communities to convey messages of peace and inter-faith harmony in the society, to root out extremism from the society. As a responsible country, Bangladesh is actively working with regional and international partners to curb the threats of terrorism and violent extremism maintaining due regard to the applicable human rights standards.

The Government considers civil society as an important interlocutor in maintaining the country's centuries-old tradition of religious harmony and peaceful coexistence.

The Government is committed to ensuring that no one is forced to take education on religion that is not followed by him or her. The Government understands that religious and moral education is important for building a just and ethics-based society.

The National Education Policy, 2010 provides that the Government will take measures so that suitable religious and moral education is imparted to children. The Policy also gives emphasis on further reforming the madrasa curriculum (including the Qawmi madrassas) by introducing science, mathematics and linguistic proficiency in addition to faith-based teachings with a view to deterring and countering radicalization. The Government also recognizes the rights of all religious communities to run their own religious schools.

As we approach the 70th Anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Bangladesh sincerely reiterates its commitment to the United Nations Human Rights instruments, and also declares to continue our Government's zero tolerance policy against all forms of extremism including religious intolerance and hatred and recommit to defending and advancing religious freedom nationally and globally. Religious freedom is an integral part of global civilization, and our continued efforts to advance the same would further enlighten the global humanity, of which we all are a part of, and where we all have a role to play responsibly.

I hope and believe that this first-ever Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom would contribute significantly to advancing this common civilizational and ethical value of global humanity. I look forward to working closely with all our friends and partners to take this journey forward to create a more peaceful world for ourselves and our next generations.

I thank you all.

