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UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON  
INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM



## BANGLADESH

Since the declaration of a state of emergency in January 2007, Bangladesh has been in the throes of a political and constitutional crisis, the resolution of which will determine whether religious freedom and other universal human rights will be protected by democratic institutions and the rule of law, or whether the country will continue on a downward spiral toward authoritarianism, militarization, and intolerance. Since January 2007, previously scheduled national elections have been postponed, political freedoms severely curtailed, and human rights abused with impunity by the security forces. These deviations from democratic norms under the current “caretaker government” raise troubling questions about the future prospects for respect for a range of freedoms, including potentially freedom of religion or belief. The Commission placed Bangladesh on its Watch List in 2005 due to a number of concerns, some of which have increased in severity in the past year:

- Islamist radicalism and violence that often targets non-governmental organizations (NGOs), women, and the judiciary, as well as the previous Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) government’s initial downplaying of the problem;
- the anti-minority, particularly anti-Hindu, violence that occurred following the last general election in 2001 and the failure to investigate and hold perpetrators accountable for that violence and other instances of violence against members of religious minorities;
- the ongoing seizure of minority-owned land;
- discrimination against members of religious minority communities in their access to government services and public employment, including in the judiciary and other high-level government positions;
- the intimidation and arrest of, as well as sometimes fatal attacks against, journalists, authors, and academics for debating sensitive social or political issues or expressing opinions deemed by radical Islamists, or by the caretaker government under Islamist pressure, to be offensive to Islam; and
- the inadequate police response to the sometimes violent campaign against the minority Ahmadi religious community.

These concerns led the Commission to visit Bangladesh in February – March 2006 and to hold a public forum on Bangladesh the following October. Although the political context has been altered considerably with respect to the ongoing suspension of democracy, the Commission finds that religious freedom remains under threat in Bangladesh. If left unchecked, current trends toward greater intolerance and religiously-motivated violence, particularly toward Hindus, non-Muslim tribal residents, Ahmadis, and Christians, could further undermine human rights protections for all Bangladeshis. Accordingly, the Commission continues to place Bangladesh on its Watch List.

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Between 1991 and January 2007, notwithstanding difficult economic conditions, pervasive corruption, and devastating natural disasters, Bangladesh had a representative government, regular changes of power through free elections, a judiciary that sometimes ruled against those in authority, a lively press often critical of government policies, active participation of women in the workplace, and a functioning civil society with active human rights groups, women’s organizations, and numerous NGOs. However, democratically-elected governments in office since 1991 left untouched and, in some cases, supported overtly Islamic elements introduced in the constitution by previous military regimes, including the establishment of Islam as Bangladesh’s official religion, as described below.

Following independence from Pakistan in 1971,

Bangladesh was established as a secular state in which national identity was based on Bengali language and culture. The 1972 constitution contained strongly-worded guarantees for freedom of religious belief and practice, as well as equal treatment by the government for citizens regardless of religious affiliation. Subsequent military regimes amended the constitution, however, to introduce Islamic elements, including the affirmation that “absolute trust and faith in Allah” is to “be the basis for all actions” by the government. Although not judicially enforceable, this change in the constitution has been cited by minority rights advocates as diminishing the status of non-Muslims as equal members of Bangladeshi society. Islam was made Bangladesh’s state religion in 1988 under the military dictatorship of H.M. Ershad.

Aided by the expansion of Islamic schools (*madrasas*), charities, and other social welfare institutions, many of which receive foreign funding with varying degrees of government oversight, Islamist activists have gained significantly in political, economic, and social influence in Bangladesh in recent years. Since independence, those associated with Islamist political parties seeking to replace secular law with sharia (Islamic law) have generally been outside the political mainstream because of their support for Pakistan in Bangladesh’s 1971 war for independence. In the 2001 national elections, Islamist political parties, including the now-prominent Jamaat-e-Islami, were courted by and subsequently supported the center-right Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). Members of Jamaat allegedly then used their positions in the BNP-led government to deny funding to or otherwise disadvantage groups viewed as opposing the Islamist political and



Joseph R. Crapa and Commissioners Bansal, Gaer, and Cromartie meet with religious minority activists in Dhaka.



Commissioner Bansal greets Bishop Theotonius Gomes, Auxiliary Bishop of Dhaka (left) and Archbishop Paulinus Costa, Roman Catholic Archbishop of Dhaka.

social agenda championed by Jamaat. Although some of those who call for a more Islamist Bangladesh engaged in peaceful political and social activities, others adopted a more violent approach towards perceived opponents of Islam.

The 2001 elections occasioned the most serious episode of anti-minority violence since independence, with killings, sexual assaults, illegal land-seizures, arson, extortion, and intimidation of religious minority group members, particularly Hindus, because of their perceived allegiance to the Awami League. The new BNP-led government essentially denied the scope of these abuses and few perpetrators were brought to justice.

This lack of accountability for anti-minority violence associated with the 2001 election led the Commission, minority advocates, and many others to be concerned that Bangladesh’s next national elections would also result in anti-minority violence. Some individuals with whom the Commission met during the February – March 2006 visit to Bangladesh were themselves experiencing difficulties in becoming registered. Others claimed that locations dominated by minority voters had not been visited by registration officials or, on the other hand, alleged that non-citizens believed to favor Islamist parties were being registered. Widespread concerns regarding the registration process were underscored by a U.S. National Democratic Institute study that found 13 million more individuals on the voter rolls than would be eligible according to Bangladesh’s census.



From right, Minister of Industries and Amir of Jamaat-e-Islami Bangladesh Maulana Matiur Rahman Nizami, Jamaat-e-Islami Senior Assistant Secretary General Mohammad Kamruzzaman, and another Jamaat-e-Islami official meet with a USCIRF delegation.

On January 11, 2007, threats by the main opposition party to boycott the national elections, alongside the ongoing controversy over voter registration and the impartiality of the electoral process, prompted the caretaker government to declare emergency rule and indefinitely suspend the national elections that were scheduled for

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later in the month. President Iajuddin Ahmed resigned, under opposition pressure, from his controversial position as Chief Advisor to the caretaker government charged with administering the country during the national election period. Under the supervision of Chief of Staff

Moeen U Ahmed, the military was given sanction to enforce emergency rule, which included the suspension of the freedoms of speech and assembly, and due process, among other rights. Fakhruddin Ahmed (no relation), the head of the current caretaker government and a former World Bank official, has publicly declared his intention to hold "free, fair, and participatory" elections "within the shortest possible time," pending correction of deficiencies in the electoral process, including the voter rolls.

Although the caretaker government has undertaken some needed measures, such as the January 2007 separation of the judiciary from the executive branch and the March 2008 decision to provide mobile phone coverage to the Chittagong Hill Tracts, home to many non-Bengali indigenous tribal groups, these actions also signal the tendency of the caretaker government to take actions well beyond its role of facilitating the resumption of democracy. More importantly, despite the caretaker government's repeated public promises to uphold human rights, there have been numerous reports detailing serious human rights abuses, including suspected extrajudicial killings by the security forces, arbitrary detentions, torture, curbs on press freedom, and violations of the right of due process. Many of the reported abuses have been associated with

the high-profile anti-corruption campaign spearheaded by the military and the Anti-Corruption Commission, which have arrested thousands of individuals since January 2007, many of whom have been detained in harsh conditions without due process. Current detainees include former Prime Ministers Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia, as well as other senior members of both parties. Sheikh Hasina, current leader of the Awami League, has been incarcerated since July 2007 on charges of extortion, and Khaleda Zia, current leader of the BNP, has been jailed since September 2007 on accusations of graft.

The role of the military under the current caretaker government raises questions about the future of democracy, rule of law, and respect for human rights in Bangladesh. These institutions, important guarantors for religious freedom, could be further eroded if the country's caretaker government prolongs its tenure in office by impeding efforts to prepare for the free and fair election of a national government truly representative of the popular will, such as by refusing to lift the state of emergency. The Election Commission, a non-governmental entity charged with organizing voter registration, has maintained since April 2007 that emergency restrictions on the freedom of political assembly seriously hinder the preparation of new voter rolls. Party leaders expressed concern in March 2008 that the Election Commission was unable to meet its internal deadlines for voter registration due to these constraints, raising doubts over the legitimacy of the proposed election timetable. Elections are currently scheduled to occur at the end of 2008. On the positive side, unlike the anti-minority violence surrounding the 2001 national elections, the political turmoil that led to the postponement of the January 2007 elections has not resulted in widespread anti-minority, particularly anti-Hindu, attacks.

Bangladesh's high levels of political violence and instability have provided opportunities for religious and other extremist groups to expand their influence. Due to a weak legal system and corrupt law enforcement, gangs employed by politicians and armed groups of Islamist or freelance vigilantes have engaged in criminal activities, particularly in rural areas, with relative impunity. Authors, journalists, and academics expressing opinions allegedly offensive to certain interpretations of Islam are subject to violent, sometimes fatal, attacks. Extremists oppose NGOs that promote the economic betterment of women and protection of women's rights. Some such

organizations have been bombed, presumably by these extremists.

Since the onset of the state of the emergency, Islamist groups have risen in political prominence and public visibility. In September 2007, restrictions on assembly under the emergency rules were apparently waived to allow Jamaat and other Islamist group supporters to burn effigies and stage widespread public protests against the publication of a newspaper cartoon they believed mocked an element of Bangladeshi Islamic culture. The newspaper *Prothom Alo* was pressured into firing a deputy editor, and the cartoonist, Arifur Rahman, was jailed without charge until his March 2008 release, following a global campaign by human rights and legal activists. In March 2008, restrictions on assembly were again lifted to allow protests by Islamic groups against a policy proposed by a consortium of women's organizations to strengthen the constitutional provision for the equal rights of women.

Bangladesh has the unusual distinction of having its two major parties, the BNP and the Awami League, led by women, both whom have served as Prime Minister, yet religious extremism, mostly among Muslims, victimizes Bangladeshi women of all faiths. Some Muslim clerics, especially in rural areas, have sanctioned vigilante punishments against women for alleged moral transgressions. Rape is also reportedly a common form of anti-minority violence, and incidents regarding Hindu women were reported in 2007. The government commonly fails to punish the perpetrators of these acts against women, since the



The Supreme Court of Bangladesh, a frequent site for protests and target of threats in recent years.

law enforcement and the judicial systems, especially at the local level, are vulnerable to corruption, intimidation, and political interference.

Politically-motivated bombings, assassinations, and

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other terrorist acts, often ascribed to Islamist militants, have exacerbated partisan tensions and increased the vulnerability of minority communities. In August 2004 and January 2005, such attacks resulted in the deaths of prominent opposition political figures. In February 2005, the government banned two militant groups implicated in a series of bomb attacks on NGOs. Militants have been blamed for a coordinated wave of almost simultaneous bomb attacks, numbering in the hundreds, carried out in all but one of Bangladesh's 64 districts on August 17, 2005. Militants were also implicated in a series of bomb attacks on Bangladesh's judiciary in October-November 2005. Among the victims was one of the country's few judges from a religious minority community, a Hindu. The bomb attacks were accompanied by militant demands to substitute sharia law for Bangladesh's current system of secular jurisprudence, and by threats against courts and judges who do not apply sharia. The then-government of Prime Minister Khaleda Zia responded with a campaign of arrests of militants suspected of involvement in the bombings and in other violent incidents. As a result of arrests made during this campaign, more than 30 suspected militants were detained and later sentenced to death. In March 2007, six members of the Islamist militant group Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB), including JMB leader Sheikh Abdur Rahman and notorious Islamist vigilante Siddiqul Islam, better known as "Bangla Bhai," were

executed for their involvement in bombings that took place in 2005.

Despite constitutional protections, Hindus and other non-Muslims in Bangladesh face societal discrimination and are disadvantaged in access to jobs in the government, armed forces, and police, as well as public services and the legal system. Religious minorities are also underrepresented in elected political offices, including the national parliament. Minority group advocates claim that religion plays a role in property and land disputes, pointing to expropriations of Hindu property since the Pakistan era and the gradual displacement of non-Muslim tribal populations by Bengali Muslims in the Chittagong Hill Tracts and other traditionally indigenous areas. Such disputes occasionally result in violence.

The Commission was told on its visit to Bangladesh that Hindus have left the country in large numbers in recent decades because of the atmosphere of uncertainty and fear under which religious minorities must live. Hindus, Christians, and representatives of other minority religious communities continue to express concerns regarding the safety of their co-religionists, citing the growth in Islamist radicalism and instances of violence, including fatalities, in which the victims' religious affiliation or activities may have been factors. In June 2005, there were arson or bombing attacks against Ahmadi mosques in three locations. In July 2005, two Bangladeshis working for a Christian NGO were murdered, allegedly for showing



Homes belonging to indigenous tribal residents of Bangladesh (known collectively as Adivasis, Paharis, or Jumma) burned as a result of military-backed encroachment of tribal lands in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (photo taken in Sajek by Udisa Islam, April 2008).

a film depicting the life of Jesus. There are also occasional reports of violence by members of the majority religious community against individuals who convert from Islam to Christianity

In addition to incidents of violence, the Vested Property Act (VPA), a pre-independence law enacted in 1965 in the wake of the India-Pakistan war, continues to be used as justification by some Muslims to seize Hindu-owned land. The 2007 report of the prominent Bangladeshi human rights organization Ain O Salish Kendra (ASK) stated that in 2006 there were 54 seizures by Muslim individuals of Hindu-owned land and 43 attacks against Hindu temples by Muslims. The VPA's implicit presumption that Hindus do not really belong in Bangladesh contributes to the perception that Hindu-owned property can be seized with impunity.

The most serious and sustained conflict along ethnic and religious lines has been in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, located on Bangladesh's eastern border with India and Burma. The varied but non-Bengali/non-Muslim indigenous peoples in this formerly autonomous area (often referred to collectively as *Adivasis* or *Paharis*) had opposed inclusion in East Pakistan during the partition of 1947, due to their identification with other tribal groups in northeast India. After Bangladesh won its independence in 1971, Bangladeshi authorities ignored appeals for restoring local autonomy in the Hill Tracts and indeed promoted an acceleration in Bengali settlement. The resulting armed indigenous people's insurgency ended in December 1997 with the signing of the Chittagong Hill Tracts Peace Accords. Resentment remains strong, however, over settler encroachment, human rights abuses by the Bangladeshi military, and the slow pace of the government's implementation of the peace agreement. Muslim Bengalis, once a tiny minority in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, now reportedly equal or outnumber members of indigenous groups. In 2007, Bangladesh human rights organizations reported a surge in Bengali settlements on tribal land in the Chittagong Hill Tracts.

Islamist extremists in Bangladesh have also engaged in a public campaign against the Ahmadi community, which is viewed as heretical by many Muslims. The Ahmadis, also referred to as Ahmadiyya, are estimated to number about 100,000 in a population of 150 million. Anti-Ahmadi demonstrators have called on the government of Bangladesh to declare Ahmadis to be "non-Muslims," as



Commissioners Bansal and Gaer meet with leading women's rights activists.

was done in Pakistan, and subsequently used in Pakistan to justify a range of legal limitations on the Ahmadi community and individual Ahmadis. The demonstrators have also called for curbs on Ahmadi missionary activity to the broader Muslim community. Although Bangladesh has thus far refused to declare Ahmadis to be non-Muslims, in January 2004, the then BNP-led government bent to militant pressure and banned the publication and distribution of Ahmadi religious literature. Police seized Ahmadi publications on a few occasions. The ban was stayed by the courts in December 2004, with further legal action still pending. Although the ban is not currently being enforced, it was not withdrawn by the BNP-led government before leaving office in October 2006, or by the subsequent caretaker government.

Anti-Ahmadi activists object to Ahmadi houses of worship being called "mosques" and on a number of occasions have organized mass demonstrations in order to occupy or attempt to occupy the sites. In several instances, anti-Ahmadi activists have forcibly replaced signs identifying Ahmadi places of worship as mosques, putting in their place anti-Ahmadi signs warning Muslims away, sometimes with the assistance of the police. In some instances, the anti-Ahmadi agitation has also been accompanied by mob violence in which Ahmadi homes have been destroyed and Ahmadis held against their will and pressured to recant. Although the campaign against the Ahmadis has continued, the violence has diminished due



Commissioners Gaer, Cromartie, and Bansal along with USCIRF Senior Policy Analyst Steve Snow and former Executive Director Joseph R. Crapa meet with Habibur Rahman, former Chief Justice and head of the caretaker administration during the 1996 national elections.

to improved and more vigorous police protection. In February 2007, Ahmadi in Brahmanbaria were able to hold a major convention, which they had been unable to do for over a decade because of hostility from anti-Ahmadi militants.

The Commission visited Bangladesh February 26 – March 2, 2006 at the invitation of the government of Bangladesh. The Commission delegation met with a broad range of individuals, including government officials, political leaders, human rights monitors, journalists, women’s rights advocates, Muslim religious leaders, leading members of the Ahmadi, Hindu, Buddhist, and Christian communities, and civil society representatives. The government of Bangladesh received the delegation at a high level, including individual meetings with four members of the Cabinet: the Foreign Minister; the Minister for Law, Justice, and Parliamentary Affairs; the Minister of Education; and the Minister of Industries, who heads Jamaat-e-Islami Bangladesh. The delegation also met with the Minister of State for Religious Affairs and with the Secretary for Home Affairs, whose responsibilities include

law enforcement.

The Commission also has met on a number of occasions during the past year with human rights monitors, representatives of religious communities, Bangladeshi diplomats, and others to discuss religious freedom in Bangladesh. In October 2006, with the participation of the International Republican Institute and the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs, the Commission held a public forum in Washington, D.C. on the topic “The Bangladesh Elections: Promoting Democracy and Protecting Rights in a Muslim-majority Country.” Coincident with the forum, the Commission issued a *Policy Focus* on Bangladesh that included several policy recommendations. In April 2004, the Commission, together with Congressman Joseph Crowley, a member of the House Committee on International Relations, held a public hearing in Flushing, New York, on “Bangladesh: Protecting the Human Rights of Thought, Conscience, and Religion.”

With regard to Bangladesh, the Commission makes the following recommendations.

## 1 Urgent Measures to Prevent Anti-Minority Violence in the Upcoming Elections

In light of Bangladesh's upcoming national elections, currently scheduled for December 2008, the Commission recommends that the U.S. government should:

- urge Bangladesh's caretaker government to adhere strictly to the publicly announced timetable for undertaking all necessary actions to safeguard the voting rights of all Bangladeshis in the national elections, and to ensure that those elections are held freely and fairly and at the earliest practical date by:
    - restoring public confidence in the non-partisan and independent character of both the Election Commission and the caretaker government;
    - making every effort to prevent violence before and after the election, including instructing law enforcement bodies to ensure the security of all Bangladeshi citizens throughout the voting process;
    - ensuring that the registration process will facilitate the enrollment of the maximum number of eligible voters before the election, in a manner that does not discriminate on the basis of perceived religious or political affiliation or ethnic background, deleting names of extra or ineligible voters, ensuring the inclusion of minority voters, and investigating and resolving complaints about the registration process fairly, promptly, and well in advance of the actual election; and promptly and thoroughly investigating any claims that registration efforts carried out thus far have not met such criteria;
  - using all practical technical means of ensuring the security of the ballot, including the use of "transparent" and numbered ballot boxes;
  - permitting and facilitating international and domestic non-governmental monitoring of the entire electoral process; Bangladesh should be encouraged as a member of the United Nations and of the Commonwealth to use the resources of these and other international organizations with experience in assisting member states in conducting credible elections;
  - satisfying the requirements of monitors from the U.S. National Democratic Institute, the U.S. International Republican Institute, and the European Union, as well as election experts from the UN, all of whom refused to offer legitimacy to the severely flawed election scheduled for January 2007; and
  - investigating fully the acts of violence committed in the aftermath of the 2001 elections and holding the perpetrators to account, with the aim of preventing similar recurrences in 2008 and during any other election period in the future;
- encourage Bangladeshi authorities, and in particular the caretaker government overseeing the election period, to ensure that the elections are not marred by violence by:
    - deploying security forces to work to identify and prepare against specific threats to vulnerable localities and communities, including religious and ethnic minorities, such as residents of the Chittagong Hill Tracts region;
    - publicly ordering that the security forces undertake a maximum effort to prevent and punish election-related violence, particularly violence targeting members of minority religious communities, whether during the election campaign, on election day, or in its aftermath; and
    - publicly condemning, outlawing, and swiftly responding to anti-minority violence and discrimination in advance of the election and ensuring, through legislation if necessary, that election-related violence will be thoroughly investigated and that those responsible will be brought to justice;
  - prepare and publicize a comprehensive pre- and post-election analysis of the election process with recommendations for needed reform;
  - provide for official U.S. government monitors in advance of, and in connection with, the upcoming elections in addition to those already planned by the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs

and the International Republican Institute; and

- urge other states and international organizations to work together to increase monitoring and other efforts to forestall violence, with the assistance of indigenous human rights and other civil society organizations, and coordinate actions in support of a peaceful, free, and fair election in Bangladesh with other countries and international organizations.

## 2 Urgent Measures to Protect Those Threatened by Religious Extremism

The Commission recommends that the U.S. government should urge the government of Bangladesh to:

- investigate and prosecute to the fullest extent of the law perpetrators of violent acts, including future acts and those already documented, against members of minority religious communities, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) promoting women's human rights, and all those who oppose religious extremism;
- rescind the January 2004 order banning publications by the Ahmadi religious community, continue to reject extremist demands to declare Ahmadis to be non-Muslims, protect the places of worship, persons, and property of members of this religious community, and fully investigate and promptly bring to justice those responsible for violence against Ahmadis; and
- protect women from vigilante or anti-minority violence, combat claims of religious sanction or justification for violence against women, and vigorously investigate and

prosecute the perpetrators of such violent incidents.

## 3 Urgent Measures to Condemn the State of Emergency

The Commission recommends that the U.S. government should call on Bangladeshi authorities, particularly the caretaker government and the military, to:

- lift the state of emergency;
- cease harassment of journalists and academics and ensure due process and equal treatment under the rule of law for all suspects, witnesses, and detainees; and
- lift restrictions on political activity both in and outside Dhaka, including undue restrictions on the location, type, and size of political gatherings, to promote accurate and thorough voter registration and to ensure that all parties have access to the right to assembly that has been implicitly granted to Islamist groups that were allowed to participate in protests and other gatherings in the past year. At the same time, security must be maintained for all of Bangladesh's citizens, especially the vulnerable members of Bangladesh's religious minority communities.

## 4 Longer-Term Measures to Protect Universal Human Rights

The Commission recommends that the U.S. government should urge the government of Bangladesh to:

- ensure that decisions on public employment in national institutions such as the civil service, the military, law enforcement agencies, and the judiciary, including at the

highest levels, do not discriminate on the basis of religious affiliation, belief, or ethnic background; conduct and publicize the results of a comprehensive survey of minority representation in the public service;

- establish effective, legally transparent mechanisms for handling complaints regarding discrimination in public employment;
- ensure that law enforcement and security services are equally protective of the rights of all, regardless of political or religious affiliation or belief, including due process for those accused of crimes, according to Bangladesh's own constitution and relevant international standards;
- continue to support the independence of the judicial system from the executive in order to prevent political interference in the judicial process and to ensure that the courts afford equal access and equitable treatment to all citizens;
- include in all school curricula, in school textbooks, and in teacher training for both public schools and government-regulated *madrasas* information on tolerance and respect for human rights, including freedom of religion or belief;
- promote the use of history and social studies texts in public schools that reflect the country's religious diversity and are reviewed by an independent panel of experts to exclude language or images that promote enmity, intolerance, hatred, or violence toward any group of persons based on religion or belief;
- repeal the Vested Property Act, discriminatory legislation that has been used unjustly to seize Hindu-

owned property in the decades since Bangladesh's independence and has continued to be used under successive governments to reward well-connected members of the majority community in Bangladesh;

- ensure that publicly-funded support for domestic faith-based charitable, humanitarian, developmental, or educational activities be awarded on a non-discriminatory basis;
- permit NGOs to conduct legitimate humanitarian and developmental activities without harassment, undue interference, or discrimination and ensure that they are protected from extremist intimidation or violence;
- guarantee the right of human rights defenders to receive funding from foreign sources, as set forth in the relevant UN instruments<sup>1</sup>, without harassment, unless such foreign funding incites or supports religious extremism, hatred, or the destruction of the rights and freedoms guaranteed to Bangladeshi citizens.

### 5 U.S. Assistance to Promote Human Rights, Including Freedom of Religion or Belief

The Commission recommends that the U.S. government should:

- make greater use of existing avenues of public diplomacy, including international exchange programs, to bolster the position of Bangladesh's voices of moderation and of those reformers who respect and advocate respect for internationally recognized human rights, including the rights of women and of members of minority religious communities;
- assist Bangladeshi educational authorities in improving and expand-

ing public education in order to enhance the availability and quality of education of all Bangladeshis, regardless of faith, gender, or ethnicity, and support non-governmental review of curricula and textbooks of public schools and *madrassas* in particular, as many *madrassas* receive foreign funding and are subject to little or no government oversight;

- support efforts to improve the human rights performance and professional competence of the security forces so that they can better protect all Bangladeshis from violence and intimidation by extremists;
- act to counter the extremist assault on Bangladesh's secular legal system, including by (1) strengthening U.S. assistance to promote the rule of law and to enhance access to the legal system by women and members of religious minorities, and (2) informing Bangladeshis, through educational and cultural exchanges, broadcast and print media, and other means of public diplomacy, on the universality of human rights and the compatibility of Islam and universal human rights, including freedom of religion or belief; and
- support, and provide technical assistance for, the creation of an independent national human rights commission in Bangladesh able to investigate, publicize, and bring to the courts all categories of human rights abuses, including violence and discrimination against religious minorities, in accordance with international standards<sup>2</sup> for such organizations, i.e., independence, adequate funding, a representative character, and a broad mandate that

includes freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief.

### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Article 13 of the Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, passed in 1998, states that "Everyone has the right, individually and in association with others, to solicit, receive and utilize resources for the express purpose of promoting and protecting human rights and fundamental freedoms through peaceful means..."

<sup>2</sup> Principles Relating to the Status and Functioning of National Institutions for Protection and Promotion of Human Rights, found in the Annex to *Fact Sheet No. 19, National Institutions for the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights*, Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (<http://www.unhcr.ch/html/menu6/2/fs19.htm>, accessed April 3, 2008).

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