

## Bangladesh: Protecting the Human Rights of Thought, Conscience, and Religion: Felice Gaer Opening Remarks

April 30, 2004 It is my pleasure to formally welcome you to the Commission's hearing "Bangladesh: protecting human rights of thought, conscience, and religion." The Commission was established by Congress as an independent agency to monitor the status of religious freedom around the world and to make recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State, and the Congress to ensure that the promotion of religious freedom is a key element in American foreign policy. The Commission is not part of the Department of State or of the Executive Branch. In order to fulfill its mandate, the Commission conducts an on-going dialogue with interested individuals and organizations, undertakes fact-finding missions abroad, and holds public events such as tonight's hearing. Since the Commission's establishment in 1999, we have conducted similar hearings on a number of countries, including hearings on both India and Pakistan. The fact that this Commission has held hearings on other South Asian nations with which the United States has important bilateral relationships underlines the point that these hearings are not adversarial in nature. The United States and Bangladesh have had friendly relations through successive changes of government in both countries over the past three decades. Since Bangladesh's independence in 1971, U.S. economic assistance, food aid, and disaster relief have totaled over \$4.5 billion. Bangladesh and the United States have also developed a cooperative relationship in the security area, both in the war against terrorism and in a number of international peacekeeping operations. In keeping with this spirit, tonight's hearing will examine recent trends regarding the individual right of freedom of religion and belief for every person in Bangladesh, including Muslims as well as members of religious minority communities. I would emphasize that in all of the Commission's work our standard is an international one, enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which both the United States and Bangladesh are parties. In the language of Article 18 of the Universal Declaration: "Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public and in private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance." The Commission has spent considerable time in the past year advising the U.S. government on the progress of new constitutions for Afghanistan and Iraq. In that work, we have held up the constitution of Bangladesh as a model for guarantees of human rights, including freedom of religion, for all individuals. In recent years, however, there have been signs that the values of tolerance and respect for religious differences enshrined in Bangladesh's constitution may be threatened. The Commission has received numerous reports of severe abuses targeting members of religious minority communities, particularly Hindus, at the time of the last national elections, in October 2001. We are, of course, aware that, as in many new democracies, political violence has been all too common in Bangladesh, and clearly has not been restricted to members of religious minorities. Recently there has been agitation against members of the Ahmadi religious community, resulting in restrictions that reportedly have been placed on their publication of religious literature. There have also been calls to have the government officially designate Ahmadis as "non-Muslims," as has happened in Pakistan. In addition, according to the State Department, there is widespread violence against women, violence that is sometimes led by religious leaders, particularly in rural areas. There is concern, both in Bangladesh and abroad, that growing religious extremism in Bangladesh could have a negative impact on the rights of all citizens. These are some of the issues our distinguished panelists will be discussing tonight. Please let me take this opportunity to introduce them: Justice Latifur Rahman, former Chief Justice of Bangladesh and the head of the caretaker government during the last national elections; Professor Razia Akter Banu, professor of political science at Dhaka University and an expert on the role of Islam and Islamic movements in Bangladesh's domestic politics; Mr. Abbas Faiz, expert on Bangladesh at Amnesty International's world headquarters in London; Amnesty International, currently under the leadership of General Secretary Irene Khan, herself a Bangladeshi, has reported extensively on the violence of recent years and on other human rights issues in Bangladesh; Ms. Rosaline Costa, a veteran human rights monitor and campaigner and Coordinator for the human rights newsletter Hotline Bangladesh; and Ms. Aroma Dutta, a veteran activist in promoting the development of civil society and non-governmental organizations in Bangladesh and Executive Director of the PRIP Trust. Although he needs no introduction to an audience here in Queens, I would also like to introduce to our visitors from abroad Congressman Joseph Crowley, representing New York's 7th Congressional district. This district, where we are now, includes the second largest South Asian community in the United States. Congressman Crowley, who chairs the Congressional Caucus on Bangladesh, visited Bangladesh in January and has spoken forthrightly on human rights. He has graciously agreed to share with us some of his thoughts on the subject of tonight's discussion and to join with us in asking questions of tonight's witnesses. In holding this evening's hearing away from our more usual venues in Washington, D.C., the Commission worked closely together with the CUNY School of Law, to which we extend particularly warm appreciation. We are also deeply indebted to the American Institute of Bangladesh Studies (AIBS) and to its President, Professor Syedur Rahman. I also wish to acknowledge the presence of another distinguished Bangladeshi: former State Minister for Foreign Affairs Abul Hasan Chowdhury. Before I turn to Congressman Crowley, let me ask that members of tonight's audience refrain from applause or other interruptions. It is important that the audience maintain an atmosphere conducive to civil discourse on these important issues. There will be an opportunity at the end of the session for the audience to send forward their written questions. "Three by five" cards have been provided for this purpose. Members of the Commission's staff are available to receive the cards. We shall endeavor to ask as many of your questions as possible in the time allotted.