

## Bangladesh: Protecting the Human Rights of Thought, Conscience, and Religion: Joseph Crowley Opening Remarks

April 30, 2004 I would like to thank Commissioner Felice Gaer for her opening remarks and thank the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom for granting me the privilege of participating in this field hearing on Bangladesh. As many of you know, I represent the largest concentration of Bangladeshi Americans in the United States and I am the founder and Chair of the Caucus on Bangladesh in the United States Congress. I have always been fascinated by Bangladesh going as far back as my childhood. My interest in Bangladesh has stuck with me throughout my life and my position as a member of Congress has granted me the opportunity to provide my friendship and assistance to Bangladesh. My strong ties with my Bangladeshi constituents enabled me to make my second trip to the country this past January. When I arrived, I received a warm greeting from many of my constituents and friends who made the journey to their homeland to welcome me. These men and women who greeted me - my friends who greeted me in the airport have not only made incredible contributions to their adopted homeland, the United States, but also continue to support their homeland. They send remittances back home and in one case, moved back to Bangladesh to successfully run to become a Member of Parliament. He wanted to give something back from his experiences of living in the United States. And now he is a Member of Parliament working to help along the development of Bangladesh. These are the people I am proud to represent in Congress. But the Bangladesh I visited during my second trip had begun to change. While I saw positive signs of development in the infrastructure and the living conditions of the population, I also saw some things that gave me pause. Two days before I arrived in Dhaka, the Government of Bangladesh announced in a press release that the publications of the "Ahmadiyya Muslim Jamaat" community would be banned. I was troubled to see that Bangladesh, which has been known as a majority moderate Muslim secular Democracy, has taken a step backward by banning the publication of this sect. Limiting the rights of individuals is not a positive step to take as the government struggles to fight the perception of being one of the most corrupt nations in the world. I believe the ban openly defies international human rights safeguards guaranteeing freedom of religion. Not only does it go against international human rights standards but it also violates Bangladeshi law. The freedom of religion is guaranteed in the Constitution of Bangladesh. I was also saddened to see that on July 28, 2003, the Government of Bangladesh banned the sale and distribution of Newsweek, saying that the magazine contained "misleading and objectionable" comments about the Koran, Islam's holy book. A government statement said these comments might hurt the religious sentiments of the country's Muslims. It added that all copies of the magazine's July edition in Bangladesh had been confiscated. The Government of Bangladesh is taking a step back by restricting a group of their citizens "to profess, practice or propagate any religion", which is specifically protected under the constitution of Bangladesh. These are not the proper steps for the Government of Bangladesh to take while they continue to go through some growing pains. While I was in Bangladesh this past January I had the opportunity to attend Church services and had a chance to speak to the parishioners. They were very concerned about the change in the atmosphere towards the religious minorities living in Bangladesh. I also experienced similar concerns when I visited one of the oldest Hindu temples in Dhaka. The message was clear from all the minority groups I met whether they were Christian, Hindu, Buddhist, or Muslim - the rights of minorities are deteriorating in Bangladesh. I will repeat to you all what I said during my last trip to Bangladesh - the job of the majority is to protect the minority. The people of Bangladesh must stand strong against some of the more extremist elements within its society. And the political parties must put aside their differences to work together to benefit the people of Bangladesh. Calling for the fall of the government by a specific date is not in the interests of the people. When you live in a Democracy, you must let the rule of law govern your responses and let the system work instead of holding the process up. I want to be clear that I am not taking sides on the political issues that exist in Bangladesh. I am a friend to the people of Bangladesh. I am pleased to see positive changes occurring on other fronts in Bangladesh and that is why I am so concerned about these new policies being instituted. Last week the President of the World Bank, James Wolfensohn, congratulated the government of Bangladesh on its achievements in the fields of overall economic growth and poverty reduction as well as further improvement on human development. The press is reporting the World Bank will approve \$600 million in the areas of Development Support, Education, and Bank Modernization and Enterprise Growth. An additional \$400 million are expected to be approved in five other areas as well. This positive step must be met by the people and the Government of Bangladesh. I believe a strong relationship with the United States could be the medicine Bangladesh needs to get over the hump. As a moderate Muslim country with a secular democratic government, Bangladesh is the kind of country whose partnership the U.S. should work hard to develop. I have been working hard in Congress to achieve this by working to increase the bilateral relationship between Bangladesh and the United States. As the United States fights its war on terrorism Bangladesh would be a natural ally. My hope is that as our cooperation on security matters increase, so can other areas of our relationship. The United States must start paying more attention to Bangladesh and provide assistance where it is needed. I believe that assistance is needed to help promote the public school system in Bangladesh. It is important for children to receive a well-rounded liberal education that focuses on math and science. We must not let the extremists around the world dominate the minds of our children. As a nation we must make sure that Bangladesh stays on the path of an emerging secular Democracy. I would like to thank the commission for providing this forum. I would like to now close because I am very interested in hearing what the witnesses have to say. Thank you.