

Bangladesh: Protecting the Human Rights of Thought, Conscience, and Religion: U.A.B. Razia Akter Banu Prepared Testimony

April 30, 2004 American social scientists have been in the forefront of studying developing societies and there is unanimous opinion that modernization is a painful process which creates social tension and conflicts leading to the widespread social violence. This is the cost of modernization and a degree of violence has to be tolerated if the society is to be modernized. Bangladesh is no exception. Random criminal violence in Bangladesh is the result of social unrest, gross social injustice, frustrated expectations, change of value system, feeling of insecurity, competition for scarce resources, problem of over population and large scale unemployment. There is no systematic suppression or discrimination on the minority community either by the government or by the majority people of Bangladesh. Rather to avoid stigma of being communal by internal and Western media (which are usually very critical in presenting news), the Bangladesh government and the Muslim majority community are condescending and patronizing towards minority community. One reason for the benevolent attitude towards minority is Islam itself. Islam is absolutely clear on the issue of minority. Islam enjoins upon the Muslims to protect the lives, property and the rights of minority and emphasizes on toleration and justice as the basic principles of social organization. Bangladesh is not a fascist or a totalitarian country. It is by and large a democratic society and all sorts of opinions are more or less tolerated. Religious freedom is a constitutionally guaranteed human right in Bangladesh. Article 28 of Bangladesh Constitution forbids any type of discrimination on religious or other grounds. Article 41 of the Constitution elaborates the contents of religious freedom to be enjoyed by the citizens of Bangladesh. Despite religious and constitutional guarantee there are some reports of violence against minority. Recently Bangladesh has to face the dispute over the declaration of Ahmadiya as non-Muslim community demanded by certain quarter from within and outside the government. Shaikhul Hadis Allma Azizul Haque and Fazlul Haque Aminee- the two faction leaders of Islami Oikya Jote, one of the four partners of the present government, mounted pressure on the government to declare Ahmadiya as non-Muslim community. These two leaders have some influence over a small section of Bangladeshi people. As in the West the Church has some influence over at least a section of people and the church exerts pressure on the government in policy making. Ahmadiya issue is not a new phenomenon. There was a social tension among the Muslims of India since 1890. Muslim minds are not prepared to hear that some one (as Mirza Gulam Ahmed Kadian of Gurudaspur in India claimed) could claim Prophet-hood after the last prophet Mohammad. From time to time there were protest movements over this issue in Pakistan and considering the gravity of the situation, first local Martial Law was imposed in Punjab. Finally Western educated Secular Muslim Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto, the Prime Minister of Pakistan had to declare Ahmadiya as non-Muslim community. In Bangladesh anti-Ahmadiya feeling has been a low key urban movement within a very small section of people. The majority Muslim of Bangladesh often stood by the Ahmadiyas (a small community numbering roughly 130,000) despite their certain fundamentally contradictory beliefs concerning the Prophet and the Holy Qur'an. The Bangladesh government has consistently refused to yield to the pressure of religious fanatics who were demanding that the government declare Ahmadiyas as non-Muslims. Recently (in January, 2004) however the government on the face of tremendous pressure banned the circulation of some books and literature of the Ahmadiya. Possibly the government has taken this measure to quell the anger of the demonstrators and as deterrent to further conflict. The Ahmadiya can always go to the court against government order. The government must extend all sorts of protection to this tiny community and suppress firmly if there is any violence over this issue in future. Blaspheme law is another issue. The existence of such a law can be seen in Pakistan and also in The United Kingdom. Islamist's clamor for a law on blaspheme has not been materialized as the issue does neither have any public support nor government's intention to enact such an unnecessary law. The demand put forward in the early nineties was decisively defeated. Provocation of social tension by cross border incidences like destruction of Babri mosque and Gujrat massacre were also successfully mitigated. As for Humayun Azad's case, the fatal attack on his life has been condemned nation wide with strong and united voice. In protest the teachers of Dhaka University went on strike and abstained from duties for about a month. The sincerity and swiftness the government has shown in taking full responsibility of his treatment and security is unparalleled. He is still under treatment in a hospital in Bangkok. Dr. Azad is a Muslim by birth and by name. He is neither a practicing Muslim nor a liberal Muslim/ He is an atheist. His writings especially the novels are full of vulgarism. For the last 20 years or so he is hurting the sentiment of a large number of moderate as well as practicing Muslims of Bangladesh through his writings, for example, Nari (women), Pak Sar Jamin Sad Bad (the national anthem of Pakistan), the most recent one which has created severe resentment among some Islamist people. However in no way one should justify the heinous attack which nearly took his life. Language of protest should have been counter writing. Although he could not recognize his attackers, Dr. Azad has blamed Islamist extremists for this brutal action. Possibly the rationale for his accusation against the Islamic extremist is first the nature of content of the book which was extremely critical of new rajakars and secondly the critical deliberation of Azad's book in the National Parliament by Delowwar Hussain Sayeedi, a Jamaat Member of Parliament and a great orator. Some news papers and NGOs, the Bangladesh Hindu Buddhist Christian Unity Council, the Awami League have alleged post election violence against religious minorities. Attacks were mainly carried out by local gang leaders and mastans. In no way these mastans are Islamists. Thus Islam per se is not responsible for violence. Taking advantage of electoral victory these thugs became active in gaining personal benefit, mainly economic and now this is part of our political culture since 1996. Media blitz and exaggeration sometimes make dents to the parties concerned and the country. What is the assessment of Country Reports on Human Rights Practices-2002 conducted by U.S. Department of State about all those reports? "In some cases, field investigations by independent human rights organizations into incidence of alleged religious persecution of minority communities found that newspapers exaggerated

the stories and inflated common criminal incidents into stories of religious persecution. A BNWLA investigation team found that the June 4 Janakantha report of Jamaat-e- Islami supporters stripping and taking a nude photograph of a 60-year old Hindu woman could not be substantiated" (p16). However extremism in any form whether radical left or religious right should be severely dealt with. Rashed Khan Menon, the President of Worker's party and Morshed Ali complained that a group of armed miscreants under the banner of Islami Jalsha were attacking houses of their opponents and assaulting those who they considered as sinners in the northern districts of Bangladesh (The Daily Star, April 23, 2004). On the other hand, politicians, professionals and businessmen of south-western districts of Bangladesh are under constant threat from the armed cadre of leftist Communist Parties, especially they are extremely afraid of the rise of Purbo Banglar Communist Party's Janajudha faction. "Free style use of powerful explosives like hand bombs, time bombs and grenades is all common in targeted killings" (The Daily Star April24, 2004). These underground operatives and their godfathers have created a reign of terror paralyzing normal economic activities of the region. So, torture physical or mental, in the name of religion and slaughtering people in the name of class enemy, both are equally condemnable.