

Bangladesh: Protecting the Human Rights of Thought, Conscience, and Religion: Rosaline Costa Prepared Testimony

April 30, 2004 Most Honorable Members of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, Honorable Congressman Joseph Crowley, ladies and gentlemen, Good evening. I am grateful to the Commission on International Religious Freedom for inviting and giving me this opportunity to share our national concerns. I have been involved in human rights work in Bangladesh since 1986 and worked for all irrespective of religion, caste or class. I have worked to protect the rights of the people in general, the rights of the religious and ethnic minorities Hindu, Buddhists, Tribals for many years. But I have not seen the Christians to be persecuted or discriminated against by the state-sponsored terrorists as I see today. Dear Madame, Bangladesh, once a secular peaceful country, has become a "Cocoon of Terror," a "Country of Shame," and top-most listed corrupt country in the eyes of the world today. It was a country, not long ago, where people of different faiths and opinions lived side by side in peace and harmony, shared their life and culture, and celebrated their religious feasts sharing with each other. But today, in the 21st Century, when the whole world is growing in development, awareness, education and mutuality, today we have to celebrate our religious feasts under police protection. Police guard not the people but the places of worship. Instead of controlling and arresting the criminals or perpetrators, who are involved in destroying the religious peace and harmony and whose number is still very small, who are well known to the local community, government machinery does not control them. But it does protect the religious and worship places, especially in the cities. Dear Madame, in a very nutshell I want to highlight the chronology of the facts as to why today we have such a situation in Bangladesh: In 1941, there were about 33 percent religious and ethnic minorities and the rest were Muslims in Bangladesh. -In 1947 during partition, many Hindus left Bangladesh for India and willing Muslims came to Bangladesh (East Pakistan). Pakistan was created.

- In 1964-65 during a communal war between Muslims and Hindus, thousands of Hindus left for India leaving their lands properties behind. These lands were enlisted as "Enemy Property" under the Enemy Property Act.

- In 1990 and 1992, thousands of Hindus left the country for India when Babri Mosque was attacked by the Hindu Fundamentalists in Ayodhya, India. The innocent Hindus in Bangladesh had to face persecution by the state sponsored terrorists under the regime of General H. M. Ershad and under Prime Minister Khaleda Zia respectively. After Bangladesh was created in 1971 through a bloody war against Pakistani Juntas, a secular constitution was presented to Bangladesh Nation in which secularism and nationalism were two main pillars out of four. In 1978 Secularism and Freedom of religion were abolished by Article 12 of the Constitution and the seed of Islamization was sown by introducing "Bismillah-er-Rahmani Rahim" (Second Proclamation Order No. IV of 1978). By this the process of killing secularism and promotion of hard-line Islamic values began. This was done by the then President Ziaur Rahman who took up power after the assassination of the Great Leader and Founder of Bangladesh, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in 1975. President Ziaur Rahman was assassinated in 1981 and General H. M. Ershad took up power of the state. He went one step further to establishing Islam and made Islam as "state religion" in the Constitution in 1988 to get cheap political support of the general citizens who are mainly illiterate and simple Muslims. Though the Constitution grants equal rights, dignity and opportunity to all other religions, but it remained in the papers only. His main purpose was to get the political support from the majority Muslim community by using religion taking the advantage of the illiteracy, poverty and god-fearing sentiments of the huge Muslim population. The amendment was widely misinterpreted by the vested politicians that Bangladesh was made an "Islamic country." The worst situation began from 1990. I have documented after investigating the following incidents: a) Destruction of Babri Mosque in India and the destruction of Hindu houses and temples in Dhaka, Bangladesh in 1990 and 1992 respectively.

b) Logang massacre in Khagrachari Hill district where more than 1200 Tribal Buddhist were killed by the Bengali settlers under the supervision of army on 10 April 1992.

c) Khasia and Garos (most of them Christians) are persecuted in greater Mymensingh and Sylhet districts by the Bengalis, Forest guards and police. The Garos in Mymensingh also are the victims of the "Vested Property Act" under which they lost their vast ancestral land properties. Killings of Garos, kidnapping and forced conversion to Islam by forced marriage, numerous false cases against Garos and Khasis in those areas are to be mentioned in particular. Apparently all these prove that a secret agenda is being implemented to evict the ethnic and religious minorities by state-sponsored machinery. A number of tribal people were killed without any solution or due compensation to the victims by the government.

d) Attacks on Christians on the basis of "The Satanic Verses" in 1995 and onwards affecting deeply the confidence of the Christians in the government.

e) Attack on St. Xavier's Girls High School and two other Christian churches in 1998 by the Islamic fundamentalists for the purpose of grabbing more land from the School in Luxmibazar, Dhaka was one of the first incidents of Christian persecution. But the government did not come to help the school authority to compensate or do justice to the Church.

f) In June 2001 Baniarchar the fundamentalist Muslim damaged Catholic Mission Church killing 11 persons during Holy service on Sunday by powerful explosive bomb. The incident left 25 people seriously injured.

When the coalition government came in power after the national elections in October 2001 headed by Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and in collaboration with the two major Islamic hardliner parties Jamaat-E-Islami and Islami Okkyo Jote (Islamic Unity Council), all religious minorities began to face hell in their homeland Bangladesh. I have visited Bhola, an Island in the south and rescued three children including 8-year-old Rita Das who was raped by six people. She did not know exactly what had happened to her but she knew only that something grave had happened to her. About 98 percent women with whom I spoke in Bhola were raped and gang raped. But due to insecurity a home and in the society,

fear of further harassment and eviction by the police and Bengalis, they kept silent. "Give your daughter or give money" is a demand by the local terrorists (who are direct activists or supporters of the coalition government). This trend continues till today which began from the time of the caretaker government in July 2001 in almost all over the country, particularly in the areas where the Hindus and Christians live. This is still going on in the rural areas where the administration and police are weak and insufficient. Many people of the minority community are facing hardships and difficulties in protecting their lands and women (young girls) from grabbing the land or forcefully taking away their women or rape and false cases in the court. Rape and filing false cases are used as instruments to evict the minorities from their land properties. Kidnapping and conversion by forced marriage are rapidly increasing in the tribal and Christian areas. Of course there are a number of rapes and dowry deaths everyday published in the national dailies. But the difference between rape of a woman belonging to majority community and to that of minority community is that when the victim of rape is of the minority community, she or her family is asked to leave the country and not to take any legal action against the criminal. Ahmadiyahs, the small Muslim minority also are victims of religious persecution and discrimination. The question here is, what authority does a government or the political parties have to call for a ban on practicing religion? Where is the constitutional guarantee for religious freedom? How can a political party demand a ban on the publications and practices of a religion and the government do according to that demand? A democratic country/government cannot and should not do that. But it happened in Bangladesh to the Ahmadiyah community. As proof of minority cleansing and the systematic persecution, discrimination and human rights violations of minorities in Bangladesh, I would like to cite here that, no minority representation can be found in any state-level policy-making mechanisms. In Public Service Commission, even the most brilliant candidates, belonging to minority community, are discriminately rejected during oral test to enter into the government services. It is a secret state policy to cleanse minority from the mainstream. Intolerance, lawlessness, rape, mass-rape, corruption, illegal occupation and eviction of minorities, communal violence, etc. have invaded our once-peaceful country without prevention from the government. In most cases government is the patron of these atrocities and this is continued. The ordinary poor rural people act under the influence of the rural politicians and Muslim religious leaders who misinterpret and misguide them against the minority communities. The administration, judiciary and public service commissions have become imbalanced, underrepresented and partisan due to which no truth can come out of the government. The journalists, writers, civil society leaders and human rights defenders, the voices of the voiceless, face tremendous pressure from the government not to publish the truth. Journalist Manik Saha, writer Shahriar Kabir, Muntasir Mamun, journalist Saleem Samad, etc. had to undergo severe torture in detention under army custody for months. They investigated, published reports and protested the persecution of the minorities in Bangladesh. Two foreign journalists from Channel 4 from the United Kingdom also had to suffer imprisonment for the same cause in Bangladesh. The numbers of the perpetrators, criminals and persecutors are still small and controllable if the government sincerely wants to do that, instead of denying the facts. Bangladesh government should work in cooperation with civil society, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), professionals, donor countries and donor agencies for the integrated development of the country. Islamic hard-liners and the Muslim fundamentalists are the most beneficiaries under the present coalition government. Bangladesh is our country. We want to live in peace and harmony, not face discriminations, or persecutions on the basis of our faiths or belief by the state machinery. We want to survive with equal rights, dignity and human rights as citizens of this country, Bangladesh.

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