

Bangladesh: Protecting the Human Rights of Thought, Conscience, and Religion: Aroma Dutta Prepared Testimony

April 30, 2004 I have responded to the invitation to signify the importance you attach to the invitation and process of the Commission's work and that of international community in this context. By Religious Freedom, I mean all my rights are ensured and protected by the State. The question remains, do the other religious minorities enjoy equal status as CITIZENS in their private as well in their public life? Whether they are given proper dignity as deserving Citizens. It is also to be ensured whether my right to my property, my body, my security is preserved and protected by the State. In truest sense Religious Freedom means despite my religion, I will be treated equally in every respect, socially, economically, and culturally by the State by Constitution, and by implementation of the constitution in reality. In theory, there is Religious Freedom, but in practice, we all have to admit, towards making a harmonious state there has been always a problem. It is not because of the Religion itself. It has a political dimension too, and practice of political will. We are not in favour of using RELIGION for POLITICS, which is basically POWER CENTERED. This trend has crossed borders and has become an international phenomenon. It is creating more and more new tensions between different groups, who are using religion, and dividing the citizens into confrontational units, and particularly making the minorities suffer. We are demanding transparency in the international policies, so that they don't influence using Religion in Politics. Bangladesh has always cherished the dream of a Secular Democratic country. We, at the moment are labeled as a "Moderate Muslim Country." The moment it is labeled, certain ideologies get identified with our national entity, which definitely discriminates the other religious groups automatically. The society becomes divided in an atmosphere with confrontational politics, and the tension between "US" and "THEM" escalates. This has a very serious implication on WOMEN, and especially on the Minority Communities. It is the State, who is primarily responsible for protecting people's human rights. But whenever any individual or any civil society organizations raises voice against the violation of human rights, the State instead of assuming the role of the PROTECTOR, itself becomes "PARTISAN" and in turn accuses the individual or the organization, as "PARTISANS," and "ANTI-STATE," and are persecuted. Instead, the State taking a role of a Protector tends to become a party in the conflict, and the State loses its objectivity and Neutrality. To the State, all Citizens are equal, and must be treated with trust and dignity. Minorities are the Citizens of the country with the same right. The discrimination against them is more unfair, and is the violation of fundamental and constitutional rights. Minorities are the original nationals of the country, children of the same soil as much as the others. In article 10 of the constitution in Bangladesh "All are Equals." And in Article 42, everyone has the right to practice and preach their own Religion. Basically, people of Bangladesh are secular and tolerant. Only a particular section of the community is involved in the violation of the rights of the other Religious Minorities. They are more or less identified groups and enjoying impunity or patronized by some influential quarters. State has the responsibility to listen to any problems in relation to human and women rights violation, and to listen, and to take the issue in cognizance, and not by ignoring and dismissing, and denying the reality. The Citizens of Bangladesh demanded "Inquiry Commission, which should be formed as a process of accountability transparency, for establishing "Good Governance" The Minorities living in the various parts of the Districts require special attention and protection by the State Local Thanas are not taking cases on the violation of women, human and minority rights Political Will is a must for protecting all the Citizens, where people will be free from fear and insecurity As a Nationalist, a Patriot and a Conscious Citizen of the Country, I would like to take equal stand and a position, and stand by all human beings, of all caste, creed and religion particularly women without any fear of persecution, and stand on behalf of the disadvantaged and the oppressed, towards making a just society, like all the citizens of the State, with an equal footing to exercise they right Ownership.