

November 9, 2006: Bangladesh: USCIRF Releases Transcript of Forum on Upcoming National Elections

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WASHINGTON-The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), a bipartisan, independent federal agency, released a new Policy Focus and recommendations on Bangladesh last month at a roundtable on Capitol Hill, particularly relating to national elections scheduled to take place in January. A transcript of the event will be available today at www.uscirf.gov.

The Commission recommended at the event, titled "The Bangladesh Elections: Promoting Democracy and Protecting Rights in a Muslim-majority Country," that the U.S. government urge the government of Bangladesh to safeguard the voting rights of all Bangladeshis and to ensure that the elections are free, fair, and peaceful by:

- restoring public confidence in the non-partisan and independent character of both the Election Commission and the Caretaker Government;
- preventing violence before and after the election, including violence against religious minorities;
- instituting a voter registration process that will facilitate the enrollment of the maximum number of eligible voters in a manner that does not discriminate on the basis of perceived religious or political affiliation or ethnic background;
- using all practical technical means of ensuring the security of the ballot; and
- permitting and facilitating international and domestic monitoring of the entire electoral process.

Furthermore, the Commission calls on the government of the United States to:

- prepare and publicize a comprehensive pre- and post-election analysis of the election process with recommendations for needed reform;
- provide official U.S. government monitors in addition to those already planned by the International Republican Institute and the International Democratic Institute for International Affairs; and
- work with other interested states and international organizations to increase monitoring and other efforts to forestall election-period violence, with the assistance of indigenous human rights and other civil society organizations.

The Oct. 17 forum was moderated by Commission Chair Felice D. Gaer, Commission Vice Chair Michael Cromartie and Commissioner Preeti D. Bansal, all of whom visited Bangladesh in February-March of this year as part of a Commission delegation.

Featured speakers were retired Ambassador A. Tariq Karim, former Ambassador of Bangladesh to the United States and a Harrison Fellow in the Department of Government and Politics at the University of Maryland, Mr. Selig S. Harrison, director of the Asia Program at the Center for International Policy and a senior scholar at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, Ms. Cynthia R. Bunton, regional program director for Asia at the International Republican Institute (IRI), and Mr. Patrick Merloe, senior associate and director for election programs at the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI).

Ambassador Karim said that Bangladesh's image as a secular and democratic Muslim-majority nation has been assailed in recent years by a resurgence of Islamist militancy. Ambassador Karim cautioned that the next elections may well determine whether the country will further consolidate democratic institutions and practices and the nation's secular tradition with tolerance for all faiths, or be swept toward increasing authoritarianism and religious intolerance.

Mr. Harrison argued for urgent U.S. action to counter the Islamist threat in Bangladesh. He took the U.S. government to task for not recognizing the growing danger of Islamist extremism and authoritarianism to Bangladesh's young democracy and proposed that the United States use the leverage provided by foreign assistance and economic ties to promote free and fair elections.

Ms. Bunton and Mr. Merloe reviewed IRI and NDI's respective programs in Bangladesh, with a focus on the upcoming elections, and emphasized the importance of restoring public confidence in an electoral system threatened by political violence and excessive partisanship.