

October 17, 2006: USCIRF Releases Policy Focus on Bangladesh Examining What is at Stake in Country's National Elections

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(202) 523-3240, ext. 14 WASHINGTON-The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), an independent, bipartisan federal agency, today at a Capitol Hill event released its new Policy Focus on Bangladesh, which explores the country's human rights situation ahead of its next national elections in January. As a functioning democracy with a vibrant civil society and a constitution that enshrines internationally recognized human rights, including freedom of religion or belief, Bangladesh could be a model for other emerging democracies with majority Muslim populations. "That model is in jeopardy, however, as a result of growing Islamist militancy and the failure to prosecute those responsible for violent acts carried out against Bangladeshi individuals, organizations and businesses perceived as 'un-Islamic,'" said USCIRF Chair Felice D. Gaer. A Commission delegation visited Bangladesh in February-March 2006, meeting with senior government officials, political leaders, human rights monitors, members of various religious communities, civil society representatives and journalists. Due to ongoing concerns that constitutional guarantees of freedom of religion continue to be threatened by the growth of religious extremism, the Commission decided in May to keep Bangladesh on its Watch List. In the new Policy Focus, the Commission recommends a series of measures needed to ensure that Bangladesh's democratic electoral process takes place without violence, and to promote universal human rights, including religious freedom. Among these recommendations, the Commission calls on the U.S. government to urge the government of Bangladesh to make every effort to prevent violence before and after the election, including by ensuring that the caretaker government that will take over later this month has authority over the Ministry of Defense and power to instruct law enforcement bodies, and by instituting a registration process that will facilitate the enrollment of the maximum number of eligible voters before the election.

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